

## **Catholic Philosophers and Present-Day Modernity**

for the COMIUCAP session at the American Catholic Philosophical Association, St. Louis, Missouri, Friday 28 October 2011

I wonder how I ever agreed to speak on the topic “Philosophy and Catholic Modernity.” I could easily spend my fifteen minutes explicating the title and never get around to the topic itself. So let me revise the title to read “Catholic Philosophers and Present-Day Modernity.”

I am going to sidestep the question about the nature and possibility of a specifically Christian or Catholic philosophy, which Prof. Blanchette has handled with such finesse. I am going to be talking about Catholics who identify as philosophers and leave it at that, while acknowledging that some Catholics who identify as philosophers also work, at least some of the time, as theologians or at least as critics of theology.

I am not going to assume that there is a specifically Catholic form of modernity, distinguishable from, say, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, and secular modernities. Nor will I argue that there is a specifically Catholic take on modernity. On the contrary, I will argue that there is more than one Catholic take on modernity and that the differences among Catholics about modernity are matters of high importance

By modernity I mean both the general intellectual movement that has dominated Western Europe and North America from the 17<sup>th</sup> century

onwards and its practical ethical and political consequences in the present day. I put it to you that Catholic philosophers need to meet modernity not only in the texts and theories of the classical modern thinkers and their contemporary (postmodern?) followers, but also in the struggles and debates of contemporary American civilization. Let me explain.

When our Catholic universities consider how they will respond to the model of the American research university with its privileging of the natural sciences, they are confronting one of the central issues of modernity: is natural science the paradigm case of knowledge? When those same Catholic universities try to determine the place of theology within their intellectual communities, they confront another central issue of modernity: is theology, as distinct from biblical philology or church history or comparative religion, even a form of knowledge at all?

When Catholic hospitals consider how they will respond to the mandates of American health care law, they confront yet another central issue of modernity: how to reconcile respect for the individual conscience and the conscience of communities with the claims of the common good or the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Please pardon my deliberate sloppiness in confusing those terms, but our situation is such that it has become increasingly difficult, even within the Catholic community, to mark the difference between the classical and Catholic concept of the common good and the modern utilitarian or consequentialist concept of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. And this too is an aspect of modernity.

Mention of the common good takes us into the public square. Consider the periodic flare-ups between various bishops and Catholic politicians over what the bishops at least perceive as the politicians' acquiescence, if not complicity, in a state of affairs in which abortion is for the most part legal. Or take the perception or misperception — I cannot say how widespread it is, but there is certainly a perception in some Catholic quarters — that our bishops' drive to re-criminalize abortion is leading them to neglect the broader common good. This is really a dispute about what kind of modernity Catholics can accept and embrace and what kind of modernity we should reject and resist.

The debate about the legal status of abortion (whether to prohibit it, restrict it, or on the contrary protect it and even fund it) is a debate being carried on within the context of contemporary American modernity. So is the debate about the morality of abortion itself (these are two distinct debates). So is the debate — if I may call it a debate rather than a shouting match — about how to understand the phenomenon of homosexuality. So is the debate about what the law should say about homosexual activity (whether to forbid it, discourage it, say nothing about it, recognize it, or protect it).

Or consider the debate within the Catholic community over the legacy of the late Pope John Paul II. Isn't this at its root a debate between Catholics who agree with John Paul's embrace of many positive aspects of modernity but also with his significant and forthrightly expressed reservations, and other Catholics who wish that John Paul had embraced modernity more wholeheartedly? I am thinking of the difference between Catholics who find John Paul's depictions of the culture of life and the culture of death to be a

supremely insightful description of the central problem of our age and Catholics who on the contrary find these depictions to be caricatures that oversimplify the moral complexities of our times. I am thinking of the difference between Catholics who embrace John Paul's centralizing vision of the Catholic Church and Catholics who wish the church would embrace modern conceptions of democracy, transparency, and due process. And if there were time we could go on to the debate about what the Second Vatican Council really meant, or really means, or at all events should mean.

I hope I have said enough to indicate that a number of the most pressing and practical debates of the present time are at the same time debates about modernity. I do not mean to say that we can line up all the people and positions and place some in the modern column and others in the anti-modern column. The situation is not that simple. The parties to these debates are already situated within modernity. It is not up to them whether to accept modernity or to reject it. If they are clear-sighted, they see that. Rather it is a question of what kind of modernity to accept, or what aspects of modernity to accept, or of how to shape or re-shape modernity.

I am not aware of any Catholic philosopher whose verdict on modernity is entirely positive or entirely negative. But some Catholic philosophers take a view of modernity that is more negative than positive, more pessimistic than optimistic, more oppositional or confrontational than conciliatory, while other Catholic philosophers take a view of modernity that is more positive than negative, more optimistic than pessimistic, more conciliatory than confrontational.

As an example of the first approach I would cite Prof. Alasdair MacIntyre of the University of Notre Dame. Of course any attempt to summarize MacIntyre's thought in brief compass is doomed from the start. But let us at least recall some of his main theses. The modern period discarded the teleological understanding of nature and of human nature that had informed ethical thinking from Aristotle through the Middle Ages. Discarding that teleological understanding left the inherited body of ethical thinking without foundation. That led to a series of mostly negative modifications to that body of ethical thinking, to the loss of the traditional conceptions of virtue and of common good, to the futile Enlightenment project of trying to find a non-teleological justification for morality, to Nietzsche's unmasking of that project, and to the modern moral wilderness in which we find ourselves today.

As an example of the second approach to modernity I would cite Prof. Charles Taylor of McGill University. Of course any attempt to summarize Taylor's thought in brief compass is also doomed from the start. But let us at least recall some of his main theses. Modernity is not all of a piece. On the contrary, modernity is riven by a continuing struggle between two competing hypergoods: the good of detached reason, with the host of other goods that it makes possible, the legacy of the Enlightenment, and the good of expressive fullness or self-expression, the legacy of the Romantics. Modernity is not a simple rejection of the preceding Christianity. On the contrary, both the good of detached reason and the good of expressive fullness have their roots in Christian soil. And Christianity is not all of a piece. On the contrary, Christianity is marked by an internal debate between what Taylor calls the Erasmian humanists and the hyper-Augustinians, with

the humanists focusing on what is positive in the modern world and the hyper-Augustinians focusing on what is wrong with it. In his more recent work Taylor has argued forcefully that the secularizing interpretation of modernity, i.e., the view that the decline of religion and of belief in God is a simple and inevitable consequence of the increase of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, is a myth that we can well afford to do without.

There are also Catholic thinkers who try to hold together in something like a balance both the positives and the negatives of modernity. One example is Prof. Robert Spaemann, whose work deserves to be better known in North America than it is. Prof. Spaemann expresses admiration and gratitude for such achievements of modernity as the awareness of human dignity and the acknowledgement of universal human rights. At the same time, he finds that modernity tends towards reductionist understandings of the human person, towards unrestricted consequentialism in ethics, and ultimately to conduct that is barbaric. In a phrase that deserves to be pondered, Spaemann says that modernity needs to be taken into a kind of protective custody that will conserve its positive achievements and keep its negative tendencies in check. But there is someone here who knows Spaemann and his thought far better than I do: Prof. Holger Zaborowski.

I wish that these distinguished Catholic interpreters of modernity would let us have more of their counsel on the pressing practical issues in society, the academy, and the church that I have so inadequately outlined above.

MacIntyre's "The Only Vote Worth Casting in November" is an example of this kind of counsel. So is the second part of Spaemann's remarkable book *Grenzen*. We could use a good deal more. Not that I would limit the

discussion to MacIntyre and Taylor and Spaemann. Father John Kavanaugh, S.J. of our host Saint Louis University has spoken to many of these issues, and so have many others. But what I think is essential is to bring together Catholic philosophers with different readings and evaluations of modernity, to clarify, even through their disagreements, the philosophical issues that underlie our painfully practical debates.

Prof. Blanchette has shown us how Blondel addresses fundamental problems in the philosophy of religion and how he transcends the limitations of a number of other positions. I am tempted, in closing, to ask him how Blondel and Blondel's reading of modernity could help us address our present-day practical debates. *L'Action* is, after all, "An Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice." Thank you!