SEPTEMBER 11, OR *QUID SIT HOMO*?

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Abstrak:
Artikel ini memiliki nuansa "eulogia". Tetapi, bukan kata-kata yang mengharukan yang diajukan. Melainkan, sebuah refleksi kritis atas peradaban manusia yang didominasi oleh fenomen "11 September", sebuah fenomen dehumanisasi. Peristiwa 11 September merupakan peristiwa beruntun runtuhnya bangunan-bangunan World Trade Center di New York, Pentagon, dan pembajakan pesawat oleh para teroris. Tulisan ini menyimak peristiwa itu dalam suatu cara pandang filosofis yang mengatasi fakta runtuhnya aneka bangunan plus sekalian dengan korban manusia yang tak terbilang jumlahnya. Tulisan ini memandang peristiwa itu sebagai suatu deklarasi "dehumanisasi." Maka, pertanyaan dasarnya ialah *quid sit homo?* Siapakah manusia? Refleksi tentang manusia juga dapat dilansir dari terminologi "perang". Manusia ternyata bukan hanya cinta damai, melainkan juga "self-destructive". Diperlukan kesadaran-kesadaran yang humanis dari keterpurukan hidup manusia sendiri.

Keywords: 11 September, *quid sit homo*, war-time, man.

Our country is at war. Do we in the academy have any responsibility to address this fact? As teachers of philosophy we claim we love wisdom. Do we have any duty or desire to seek it in this situation? Do we have any special duty to each other and to our students to try to better understand what we are in the midst of?

In his essay "Learning in War-Time," C.S. Lewis points out that war is not an utterly unique situation.[1] Rather, war presents, in a way we cannot ignore, a reality about every day life: we are mortal. One hundred percent of us will die, and of this we can be one hundred percent certain. Lewis goes on to say that "the only reason why cancer at sixty or paralysis at seventy-five do not bother us is that we forget them. War makes death real to us, and that would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. They thought it good for us to be always aware of our mortality."[2] Lewis' essay was delivered as a sermon to students at Oxford in 1939. The students, safe in school, apparently felt some pangs of conscience knowing that so many their own age would soon be dying in Britain's

1 C.S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 47-63.

2 Ibid., p. 62.

armed forces. For these students the questions were: Why study in wartime? Why not join the army? When your country is under attack, surely that is the more urgent task? If they were not asking such questions, Lewis was suggesting they should be.

Today, though we lack a declaration of congress, we are de facto at war, and whatever questions the students of our day face, "Should I enlist in the Army?" is not one of them. There has been no increase in military enlistments. Thanks to an all-volunteer army most citizens now regard soldiers as their paid employees. What was once seen as "military service" is now seen as "a job" to which everyone ought to have equal opportunity but to which no one has a duty. Nor are we threatened in the same way as was Britain in 1939. Lewis spoke of the very survival of Europe. None of our leaders today suggests we face a similar danger. Although American soldiers have died in Afghanistan, the only price most citizens will pay during our "war-time" will be annoyance and inconvenience during airport security checks. For most of us, this war will not make "death real to us" any more than Bosnia or Kosovo did. That war in our day can be approached with such calm detachment is in itself disturbing. But that is not the issue I wish to raise here. Rather, I suggest there is another question Lewis posed to the students at Oxford that we should confront.

Lewis' deeper question was, given what a Christian knows about what is at stake in a human life, why should we *ever*, under any circumstances, do anything other than work out our eternal salvation? Never mind study. Why does the human animal secretly write novels in prison, compose poetry in the trenches, or make jokes on the scaffold? The real question for Lewis was, "How can you be so frivolous and selfish as to think about anything but the salvation of human souls?"[3]

In our own case, more prosaically, why study philosophy? Given our vocation as priests, why aren't we all engaged in theology or scriptural studies? Or, for that matter, why aren't we on our knees every waking moment, since any moment could be our last? We should not answer this question too quickly. Who among us is truly free of the lure of professional success? Are we not often more moved by the praise of our own deeds than by praise of Him who makes all our action possible?

As teachers we each have our own story as to why and how we ended up teaching philosophy. But surely when we are at our best, we are trying to hand on to our students something we have received from the best of our own teachers. In my own case some of those best teachers were Jesuits. They were living examples of lives moved by the awe and wonder of contemplating what it means to be a human being. Their lives proved their conviction that because the intellect is a gift of God, thinking well is a Christian activity—indeed, an obligation of gratitude.

Perhaps the most useful thing we can do as philosophers is not to try to be too useful. There is a danger in this suggestion, for it could serve as a warrant for incompetence. But this is hardly the greatest danger. Our students are so bombarded by arguments for what they should "do" to make their lives "useful," that they have

3 Ibid., p. 50.

little time and even less encouragement to attempt to understand what or who they "are."[4] Among the practical responses to September 11 now found on campus are new course offerings in Islamic studies, world religions, and conflict resolution. Christian students, before they can with any assurance identify the Sermon on the Mount as belonging to the New, rather than the Old, Testament, will now be required to read the Qur'an. They are being told to have empathy for "the other" before they have even begun to understand themselves. This is less education than it is emotive therapy.

Rather than enumerating our differences in a value-free, non-judgmental, view from nowhere, why not try to understand what we have in common as human beings? And why not let the greatest minds from the past have a voice? The classical philosophic question has always been, What is man—*Quid sit homo*? This is a theoretical, contemplative question. Such "what" questions refer to nature. Our postmodern world, however, tells us there is no fixed human nature, and failing to see this merely demonstrates that one is still a prisoner in the cave of foundationalism. Because we are free, self-actualizing potencies, we can't know what or who we are until we have fulfilled our "life plan." History, as a product of human willing, has now replaced nature as the key to understanding ourselves.[5] History is the realm of human freedom; nature, mere necessity. But September 11 calls much of this into question. It is difficult to even describe "what" happened without also raising questions about human nature.

Plato sought justice first in the city because justice in the soul is too small to see clearly. Or rather, we are often too small to look honestly at our cramped souls. Therefore, Plato starts with opinions about the city, which all of us, whether virtuous or vicious, do have. Looking at just one city, on one day, provides us an opportunity to view human nature at both its best and worst.

What happened in New York on September 11 was not, in the language of insurance companies, an "act of God." No, it was a result of human will. Perverted human will, yes, but nonetheless the human will of someone made in the image and likeness of God. Animals kill with violence. Only human beings can kill with cold, calculating cruelty. It is precisely because we are made in the image and likeness of God that we are capable of more than mere moral mistakes: we are capable of evil. But that same day this same city also showed human beings at their best. Though heroism may be revealed in a day, it is formed through the cumulative, daily decisions of a lifetime. Firemen entered the World Trade Center on September 11 because they do dangerous work every day. It was not firefighter "values" on display that day; it was virtue. Two unknown men carry a women in a wheelchair down forty flights of stairs. Those who know they are about to die telephone those who will survive them to leave a final expression of love. Passengers on a flight over Penn-

4 The "who" and the "what" are used deliberately. It is a question of nature *and* person.

5 For an excellent discussion of these issues see Peter Augustine Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

sylvania risk all to save fellow citizens they have never met. Does fashionable postmoderniism, or "pomo," have anything to say that can help us understand this? Does the free subject behind his veil of ignorance have anything to say that is even mildly interesting, let alone helpful? Is it not true that an Aristotle or an Aquinas gives us far more insight into "what" happened than any explication, no matter how nuanced, of the theories of Lawrence Kohlberg, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, or John Rawls? Do any of these thinkers have anything useful to say when it comes to facing death?

If, as Plato says, philosophy prepares us to die well, then many of September 11th's heroes were living a more philosophic life than they were aware of. Trying to understand the nature of the good human life is not a new task for philosophy. Philosophy always finds itself in the midst of a milieu that says, "The unexamined life *is* worth living." The pleasing life will always have more advocates than the good life. Thus the most "helpful" thing we can do for our students is to free them from the tyranny of prevailing opinion, be it Catholic or secular. And this is unlikely to be a possibility for the student unless it has first occurred in the teacher.

Any honest search for truth will contribute to this liberation. This is so because insight—understanding itself—is ultimately free. We can seek insight, we can provide conditions favorable to its occurrence, but we can neither control nor prohibit it. Insight comes when we least expect it and often when we'd rather not have it. This basic fact about human beings—that the most divine part of us is the most free—is what has always made philosophy dangerous to the community in which it occurs, from Socrates to our day.[6]

I encountered an example of this some years ago while teaching in Vietnam. The Jesuit superior told me that there were only two subjects the communist government really feared: history and philosophy. History would teach students to remember, and philosophy would teach them to think.[7] Both activities were dangerous for the government in power.[8] There is a sense in which the Vietnamese church, hunted, persecuted, constantly in danger of arrest, is actually in a healthier state than are we in the United States. The Vietnamese have no illusions about who their allies and enemies are. They know who wishes them well or ill. We no longer do. How many American Catholics have convinced themselves that the Christian faith has no better friend than American democracy? Furthermore, as we prepare for a wider war in the Middle-East we hear and read ever more often that the "solution" is less religion. We are told in a variety of ways that the western liberal democratic separation of church and state, making all matters of religion merely private concerns, is the answer. The Muslim world seems not to agree. There was a time when Christians, too, rejected this "solution."

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6 See Ernest Fortin, "On the Political Mode of Philosophy," chp.1, in *Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Dante and His Precursors*, translated by Marc LePain (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), pp. 7-22.

7 Lewis, *Learning in War-Time*, pp. 58-9, also mentions the special role of philosophy and history.

8 See also Jane Kramer, *The Politics of Memory: Looking for Germany in the New Germany* (New York: Random House, 1996), and Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (London: Granta Books, 2000).

It has been noted that the Muslim world has yet to work out a livable solution to the "theological-political" problem. This may be true. How will the Muslim world deal with the competing claims of faith and reason, the common good of the political order and the response of religious obedience in faith? But might there also be some danger in assuming that the way the Western democracies have supposedly solved these problems is correct, salutary, and beyond any criticism? If the modern, western, liberal, secular democracy is the best of all orders, why is it that not one of these governments can now offer reasons why their citizens should risk their lives to insure its survival? The leaders of the western democracies are no less astute at determining what serves their survival than is the communist gerontocracy of Vietnam. The one thing they dare not ask of their citizens is genuine sacrifice for the good of their own political order. They can offer no account of the good life their citizens would consider worth dying for. Does this sound like a healthy political order?

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether our society is truly postmodern—or perhaps in some ways even post-Christian—we can take a closer look at the modern political project, for it was a program. The modern project sought a liberation not from sin, but from the necessity of nature. Modern natural science would achieve this. The modern political project was to be based on the sovereignty not of God, but of the individual will: no one could be obliged unless he had first consented to be commanded. In other words, we command ourselves. This eventually became the regime justified by the interlocking theories of the state of nature, social contract, and natural rights, a system that now seems so self-evidently true that many Christians can not even imagine an alternative. It was not always so.

From at least the time of Socrates it has been recognized that religion is what most unites us, but can also become what most divides us. The modern solution historically went from empire to Christian empire, from national monarch to the nation state. The tension between throne and altar was supposedly resolved by making the claims of the throne public, and those of altar private.[9] But the tension between throne and altar is one that runs through the heart and soul of each citizen, and thus is ultimately intolerable. The modern nation state's separation of church and state seemed to resolve the tension, but never to the satisfaction of the church. The church had to make a compromise with modern democracy and the sovereignty of the individual will. The church may be forced to live with, but cannot accept as ultimately true, the claim that faith is merely private. But neither could the church adequately govern in the political realm. After a battle of nearly four centuries between the church and the modern nation state, it is clear that the modern liberal democratic state has won, though the victory was not really acknowledged by the church until the Second

9 For a more detailed discussion see Pierre Manent, "Christianity and Democracy: Some Remarks on the Political History of Religion, or, on the Religious History of Modern Politics," in *Modern Liberty and Its Discontents: Pierre Manent*, edited and translated by Daniel Mahoney and Paul Seaton (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), and Ernest Fortin, "The Regime of Separatism: Theoretical Considerations on the Separation of Church ans State," in *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good*, vol. 3 of *Ernest L. Fortin: Collected Essays* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), pp. 1-18.

Vatican Council. It is worth hearing at length one of the most perceptive contemporary thinkers on this problem. Pierre Manent says of the post-conciliar church, that

> It no longer presents itself as the most necessary and most salutary *government*, doing its best in a political situation contrary to the good of souls. It becomes simply the *critic* of all governments, including that which was for centuries the government of the church. It becomes the "collective beautiful soul," presenting itself to men as "the bearer of ideals and values." An "ideal" or "value," in contrast to law, cannot be commanded but is left solely to the free initiative and "creativity" of each individual—because man is the "creator of values." The church escapes from the discomfort of its political situation by substantially transforming the character of its message. For the past generation, the churches propose "Christian values," which, unlike the old Decalogue and also unlike democratic law, are impossible either to obey or to disobey. The church repeats, in a more emphatic way, what democracy says about itself. Under the rubric of "values," it is hopeless to make "the gospel message" listened to, or at least heard, except by engaging in humanitarian and egalitarian overbidding.[10]

Or, to put it another way, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is seen as a lobbying group because it acts like one. Its main task is neither teaching nor governance; it merely engages in the "humanitarian and egalitarian overbidding" to which Manent refers. Is there any doubt that for some time now the American Catholic Church has had administration rather than governance?

The modern nation state so thoroughly won its battle with the church that it even took on the attributes of the church. Modern political terms are largely secularized theological terms—none more so than the concept of sovereignty. While the modern nation state may have won, it is also exhausted by its victory. It can no longer give a convincing account of itself, and hence can demand ever less of its citizens. Pierre Manent, however, sees in this state of affairs a new opportunity.

> Thus, the political submission of the church to democracy is, perhaps, finally, a fortunate one. The church will-nilly conformed herself to all of democracy's demands. Democracy no longer, in good faith, has any essential approach to make against the church. From now on it can hear the question the church poses, the question it alone poses, the question *Quid sit homo*—What is man? But democracy neither wants to nor can respond to this question in any manner or form. On democracy's side of the scale, we are left with political sovereignty and dialectical impotence. On the church's side, we are left with political submission and dialectical advantage.[11]

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10 Manent, Ibid., p. 114.

11 Ibid., p. 115.

The dialectical advantage to which Manent refers is not rhetorical advantage. Rather it concerns an answer to a question posed by a restless heart, the question about who we are, in relation to all that is. The only adequate answer will come from God, but it will not be recognized as an answer unless philosophy has first raised the question in a way we can understand.

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