

*America, Modernity and the Culture of Death:
A Symposium*

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The essays in this symposium address the relationship between America's founding principles and what Pope John Paul II has called the "culture of death" that pervades Western democracies. The articles are written by American Catholics who possess a deep love for their faith and their country, and who are willing to point out the defects of their beloved homeland as these faults have been exposed by faithful reflection and scholarship.

Introduction

-by Gary D. Glenn

America

These essays address the relationship between America's founding principles and what Pope John Paul II has labeled "the culture of death" which he attributes to the Western democracies. They are trying to understand whether the growth of the culture of death in the late twentieth century is a consequence of seeds already sown in those principles or whether it constitutes a departure from them. Much is at stake here for Catholics and not only for Catholics. What is at stake is whether "the culture of death" is a legitimate and even necessary consequence of our founding principles. If so, then Catholics' relationship to America is more deeply problematic than any American Catholic thinker has hitherto noticed, or at least said. If not, if "the culture of death" is a corruption of, an illegitimate departure from, those principles, then perhaps we can still in good conscience, be good Catholics and good Americans, notwithstanding the culture of death that grows around us.

The symposiasts are all students of the history of political philosophy, of Catholic social teachings, and of American political thought. One of them is a student of their confluence with common law. They see America as decisively influenced by "modernity." The modern political philosophers of special importance for them in forming America as a political order, and thus eventually as a culture, are Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke. The preeminent philosophic interpreter of America as a peculiar combination of modern political ideas and Christian religion is Tocqueville who also noticed that though the Americans "never read Descartes's works" nevertheless, of all nations in the world, they "best followed" him.¹ This is relevant because in philosophy departments Descartes is said to be the founder of modernity. In contrast, in political science departments that is usually attributed to Machiavelli or Hobbes.

The following essays see America as a particular working out of modern political philosophy. I hasten to add that the authors do not assume that there is nothing more to America than modernity. But they all seem to share the view that what America is, is most deeply thought through by its founders and by those whose thought is somehow grafted onto the founders in such a way as to preserve the founders' regime, namely, Tocqueville. They think that these founders' thought is more modern than Christian, more philosophic than religious, and that they took their bearings more from the modern substitution of citizens' money-makers and the preventing of injustice for the ancients' cultivation of moderation, virtue, and promoting justice. At the same time, they all see more than modernity in America's founding and thus in America.

Modernity

Modernity is the indispensable background but not the primary focus of these essays. For these authors, "modernity" means not merely the actions of men and nations since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but the ideas of modern political philosophers which somehow gave rise to and fashioned the peculiar characteristics of the modern world. Modernity as a distinct view of how human beings ought to live is contradistinguished from both the thought of classical antiquity and of medieval Christian political philosophers such as Augustine and Aquinas. (The relation of Christianity to modernity emerges here not as an historical question but as a present and future question.)

Modernity's distinctiveness appears from the slogans of its philosophers: "one's own arms", "knowledge for the sake of power", "conquer chance", "the relief of man's estate," "increase the bounds of human empire to the effecting of all things possible," (all hostile to the classical view that nature provides for man and to the believers' trust in God's providence, to the classics' knowledge for the sake of intelligibility, to awe, and to contemplative reason as the highest human perfection); "might equals right" (hostile to the moral law's restraints on our power whether that law is known by revelation or by unaided reason)

and “every man has a property in his own body” (we own and are not merely stewards of our bodies and lives); and of course, “I think therefore I am” (radical scepticism and absolute certainty rather than either openness to revelation on the one hand or to common sense and moral certainty on the other).

Modernity’s power seems to come from its apparent ability to control nature for the relief of man’s estate, much of which we Christians applaud especially in medicine and food production, and even air conditioning. Have we thereby bought into the hedonism which was modern political philosophy’s goal from the beginning and which absolutely dominates modern political practice?²

The Culture of Death

This phrase, coined by Pope John Paul II, is largely unknown outside of Catholic circles. When professional colleagues ask what panel I am on at the SCSS meeting, and I respond with the title of this symposium, they find “culture of death” puzzling and strange to the ear.

Even within Catholic circles there is a tendency to think the Pope means only a culture which permits abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, including what is now called assisted suicide. But this seems a more narrow meaning than the Holy Father gives it. This narrow meaning, while clear and concrete, does not capture the coarseness and brutalization of our spirit which it fosters.

The culture of death is not merely, perhaps not even primarily, one in which the foregoing evils occur. They perhaps occur in every culture. Rather it is one in which they are permitted by the central legitimating institutions and approved by those who carry that culture’s self-understanding. By the central legitimating institutions in Western and “developed” cultures, I mean government, while Tocqueville could once say, and truly, “religion is the first of the Americans’ political institutions”³ The carriers of these cultures are the educated elites who instruct the ordinary citizens about their history and the meaning of central cultural values such as liberty and equality. “The culture of death” is one in which governments and the carriers of culture believe that choosing to kill ourselves or others, is regarded as equally choice worthy as to “choose life”.⁴

Once the institutions and carriers of Western culture regarded “to be” as better, and hence more choice-worthy than, not “to be.” Even the Biblical admonition to “lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” of which there is said to be no greater love, is “greater” partly because of the enormous loss it involves, notwithstanding that the ultimate outcome of that loss is eternal life.⁵ Such a laying down was called a “sacrifice”, i.e., a giving up of something good for the sake of something better. Thus the way of life coming to us from Jerusalem teaches that while our life is a good, a life of self-sacrificing love in behalf of our friends is still a greater good. Athenian political philosophy, the other great root of Western culture, agrees that friendship is a greater good than mere life.⁶ Even the non-philosophic Greek and Roman traditions taught the perfection of

human goodness as heroic for those who laid down their lives for the city. “We who are about to die salute you.” “We die here in obedience to your will.” The West’s strongest proof that “to be” is better than not “to be” is that it views the greatest sacrifice to be of one’s own earthly being for the sake of the good of others, one’s friends, one’s city.

But the culture of death rejects the metaphysics of being on which Jerusalem and Athens agree. Instead the culture of death regards non-being and being as equally choice worthy. In that culture, one is supposed to be free to choose death for ourselves, our unborn children, our aged and suffering parents. This choice is not justified as a sacrifice of something good but rather as an indicator and a *sine qua non* of our freedom. In the language of an apparently Catholic Supreme Court Justice, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State.”⁷⁷

Nothing in the culture of death provides grounds for believing it to be true, and no one speaking from within that culture is able to say that friendship is a greater good than life. For if it was, then we would have a moral duty to our friends not to kill ourselves or them or our incipient child or their incipient grandchild or niece or nephew. In the culture of death, nothing is more important than me and my choice unfettered by friendship.

But if “the culture of death” is neutral between the choice-worthiness of life as against death, then it is also the culture of life. Why then does the Pope call it by only one side of its self-understanding? I think the answer is that he regards death as the fundamental tendency of that culture and he does so because he regards such neutrality as impossible in practice, as an intellectual error which issues, and is daily issuing evermore, in the choice of death. He suggests that to try to stand in the middle between the choice-worthiness of life and the choice-worthiness of death, is to try to stand where there is no place to stand. I am reminded here in the midst of this discussion of such wickedness, of something light, a comment Gertrude Stein once famously said of Oakland: “There is no there, there.”⁷⁸ Neutrality between the goodness of being and of non-being leads a culture, willy-nilly, towards non-being; not so much into *choosing* non-being but in *being driven or dragged into* it. Not only the choice of death, but the choice to be neutral between life and death, tends to end all choice.

The Essays As a Whole

Anyone who reads these essays will see them suffused by a love of their country. This is not an indiscriminate love of everything American. Each makes a concerted effort to articulate what is and is not lovable about our country.

Shankman and Stack focus on our regime principles. Shankman defends the view that the Constitution is not properly interpretable without natural law

rightly understood. Hence, she defends natural law constitutionalism against both the positivistic interpretation which denies any appeal to transcendent natural law and against appeals to natural law wrongly understood. She attributes the Court decisions promoting the culture of death to its adoption of a form of judicial review that, by explicitly abandoning any appeal to natural law, has freed judges to invent morally arbitrary interpretations of constitutional goods, such as privacy, that are sound in the context of natural law proper. Counterintuitively, she thinks a return to a proper natural law constitutionalism will constrain, rather than further license, the judges.

Stack takes his bearings from the regime principle that promotes commerce. Relying on Alexander Hamilton, the leading advocate of a commercial way of life among the founders, and Montesquieu, he argues that a republic whose life blood is commerce (hence money-making) promotes a culture of life (or perhaps wards off the culture of death) better than a way of life based on agriculture. Hence, modern commercial societies are superior to ancient agricultural ones respecting the virtues associated with money (moderation), sexual desire (disapproval of homosexual relations), and population policy (growth rather than limitation). In a word, commercial societies either *are* more humane or *make a more humane society possible* than do their alternative. Eschewing an overall judgment as to the superiority of the ancients (who thought an agricultural life morally superior because it fostered moderation of bodily desires and discouraged avarice) or the moderns (who are far more hospitable to commerce) in this one respect Stack sides with the moderns.

Holloway does not take his bearings from American regime principles but more broadly from the modern political philosophers. He contrasts these philosophers basing political life on “material self-interest” with *Evangelium Vitae*’s basing the culture of life on sacrificial love. He concludes that the principles of modern political philosophy already are “the culture of death” and that that which we see now before us, in America as well as the rest of the “developed” world, is a development of, not a deviation from, those principles. “All errors of practice are first errors of thought.” This argument is powerfully presented and frightening in its implication that modernity, of which we (as both Americans and Catholics) are very much a part, even if we are not fully of it, looks like a kind of deal with the devil: at the end of many years of freedom and abundance we may have to give him our souls. I hope that implication is mistaken and, at the end, I will try to show why.

Robert Phillips provides a fine and thoughtful critique of each paper and acquits himself above and beyond the call of duty, and certainly of reward, in his role as discussant. His remarks are characteristically closer to practice than to theory. He is the Xenophon of this circle, which, as he knows, I consider high praise indeed.

Notes

1. J.P. Mayer ed. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) p. 429.

2. The definitive study here is Frederick Vaughan, *The Tradition of Political Hedonism From Hobbes to J. S. Mill* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

3. Tocqueville, 1969, p. 292.

4. "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live." Deuteronomy 30: 19.

5. John 10:17-18; 13:37;15:13. 1 John 16.

6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books 8 and 10 passim but especially "Among friends there is no need for [even] justice" Book 8, 1154a27. Cf "For we suppose friendship [affection] to be the greatest of good things for cities. . . . Book 10, 1262b7-10.

7. Justice Anthony Kennedy, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* 505 U.S. 833 at 851 (1992). This passage is relied on by subsequent federal courts to justify a right to assisted suicide. See *Compassion in Dying v. Washington* (1996) 79 F.3d 790 at 813, 848 and 850 (1996).

8. I apologize if this feeble attempt at humor offends. Partly, it helps me deal with the feeling that, in writing about these matters, I come too close to "the world rulers of this darkness . . . the spiritual forces of wickedness in high places." I consider this "whistling past the graveyard" humor as part of "the armor of God", about which St. Paul speaks, that may help us "be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11-13). I hope too that this explicit acknowledgment of my fear of this wickedness reassures the member of the audience at the 1999 SCSS meeting where this panel was presented, who objected that we discussed these matters in a cool and rational manner rather than in terms of fear, anger, and indignation. Cool rationality is our scholarly duty. But we should not fail to acknowledge the depth of our moral revulsion at the culture of death.