

# *The Only Answer to Modernity's Impiety*

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RAISED UNCHURCHED, I had by the time I entered graduate school become an Ayn Randian libertarian and atheist who viewed man as a rational animal. I was also “conservative” in the conventional sense of favoring free enterprise, sound public finance, a robust foreign policy, and opposing statist liberal social engineering. My economics education taught me that man is a utilitarian calculator maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, responsive to economic incentives.

But writing my doctoral thesis on Rand's economic thought disclosed crippling inadequacies: her argument for free will, for instance, was incoherent and untenable. Moreover, it became clear to me that the secular, rationalist vision of human nature fails to explain the arts, music, philosophy, religion, love, or the self-transcending conduct commonplace in war. This accumulated evidence of explanatory failure also pointed to a reality beyond that accessible to the senses. I came to realize that man is neither rational animal nor utilitarian pleasure-maximizer, living in a purely material world. He is an embodied soul with a will to transcend both himself and the limits of his condition, and with a craving for

meaning and significance.

Meanwhile, I was shedding my atheism, partly due to the Christian witness of friends, and C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, which one had given me. By the winter of 1991 I had decided to become a Christian, and began attending Mass that May. I arranged to enter the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the fall, with a view to receiving Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion on Holy Saturday 1992. My intellectual development now took a decisive and providential turn.

In the fall of 1991 I discovered the Marquis de Sade. While browsing in the Ann Arbor public library, I came upon a copy of *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*. Having already absorbed some folklore about Sade, I was curious. Struck by the philosophical speechifying of the libertines in Sade's novels, I borrowed the book.

One day, while I was reading it, the realization struck me like a thunderclap that modernity is all about rebellion: against God, against restraint, against the limits of the human condition, and even against reality itself—and that Sade, the personification and most radical philosopher of that revolt, is the apotheosis of modernity. Sade's libertines proclaimed seething hatred of God and Christianity, a hatred motivated by rejection of religion's fetters on appetite and con-

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duct. The rejection of God reduces existence to a material, determinist Nature, and reduces man to a material, determined being, who in effect has no moral responsibility for his conduct. Man, Sade also preached, is an extreme egoist, naturally cruel, isolated from others, bent on his own gain and enjoyment. To such beings in such a universe, good and evil are meaningless. *Nihilism liberates*: this is the point, and the motive, of Sade's outpourings, and indeed of all modern nihilism and hatred of religion.

It was reading Sade that made a Christian reactionary out of me. Sade showed that the Christophobic, secular, corrosively skeptical, determinist, materialist Enlightenment, and rebellious, expansive, egocentric Romanticism, when combined and taken to their most extreme formulations, end up in a realm where all checks on conduct are argued away, all misconduct is permitted, and the expansive ego is liberated to seek transcendence of creaturehood through transgression—in short, in the demonic. Dostoevsky's famous formulation, "If there is no God, all things are lawful," summarizes Sade's position. Sade disabused me not only of my libertarian belief that the First Amendment protects pornography, but also of my pro-choice position on abortion. Fervently pro-abortion, he made its nihilism unarguably clear. Just as Hume shook Kant out of his "dogmatic slumber," Sade cracked open my awareness, wrenched me away from libertarianism, and made possible my receptivity to writers such as Richard Weaver, Russell Kirk, and Irving Babbitt.

Sade and these seminal conservatives led me to realize that the conventional framings of the issue defining our time are shallow, undiscerning, and unilluminating. Modernity's fundamental crisis is metaphysical—not a struggle between market and state, change and stasis, individual and group, or even freedom and virtue. Rather, it is between

piety, which Weaver defined as "a discipline of the will through respect," which "admits the right to exist of things larger than the ego, of things different from the ego,"<sup>1</sup> and impiety, that is a disregarding egoism unleashing will and appetite. Modernity's radical renovators (whether promoting sexual perversion, feminism, economic globalization, Deweyite or politically correct "education," open immigration, or omnipotent government) are impious. The clash between two "metaphysical dreams," one pious, the other impious, is manifested in a struggle between an existing civilization and an assaulting egoism.

Civilization is not about affluence, economic growth, equality, opportunity, or even liberty. It is essentially about enabling people to coexist in safety and order and thus to insure the survival and continuity of a population and its culture. Civilization rests on mutual self-control that springs from inner checks on conduct and appetite, which flow from a shared moral vision. In turn, it rests on a shared understanding of human nature, which necessarily flows from a shared understanding of the nature of existence, and which entails a shared religion. Indeed, the first societies were united by ties of blood and shared faith.

Religion is the ontological foundation of civilization. Righteous atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists do *not* disprove this; tracing their righteousness to its source invariably yields religious exemplars; several, such as Clement Attlee, accepted Christian ethics while professing inability to believe in God, miracles, or Christ's divinity; and even Voltaire and Diderot admitted the necessity of religion for social control. The notion of the sacred infuses existence with meaning and value, imposes fetters on the will, and makes civilization possible. When religion is devalued existence is desacralized; and as checks on conduct vanish, civilization collapses.

If modern conservatives, engrossed in political and economic matters, do not understand this, civilization's enemies do. All of the West's impious efforts to destroy an existing civilization and create a secular utopia—the French Revolution, the Soviet tyranny, the Nazi tyranny—delegitimized and persecuted Christianity. Two aspects of human conduct, in which the conflict between piety and impiety is crucial, are crime and sexuality. Minimizing crime and imposing social controls on sexual conduct are vital to civilized life. The evidence is clear that thinkers promoting leniency for criminals and accepting sexual transgression and perversion realized, like Sade, that religion was *the* obstacle to their aims, and attacked it relentlessly.

Defense attorney Clarence Darrow, who made it his business to malign and ridicule Christianity, denied in *Crime: Its Cause and Treatment* (1922) key aspects of Christianity's view of man—free will and the existence of the soul—and argued that criminals are totally determined by heredity and environment, cannot help their conduct, and have no moral responsibility for it. The sexual revolutionaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries denounced Christianity as a fetter on sexuality, and called for rejection of the idea of sin so as to permit a libertine brave new world—e.g., Edward Carpenter (*Civilisation—Its Cause and Cure*, 1891), Dora Russell (*The Right to be Happy*, 1928), Bertrand Russell (*Marriage and Morals*, 1929), V. F. Calverton (*The Bankruptcy of Marriage*, 1929), and Robert Briffault (*Sin and Sex*, 1931). Current efforts to legitimize abortion and sexual perversions are accompanied by efforts to persecute Christianity or to foist on it a creed of nonjudgmental liberalism.

If civilization is not about economics and politics, neither is conservatism. A conservative's true task is to be a conservator of his civilization. A visceral, populist conservatism springing from fidelity to an existing community or way of life can win local political victories against, say, an overweening state, social engineering in the schools, or an economic order sacrificing all noneconomic values to the imperatives of greed capitalism. But a conservatism which would comprehend and oppose the demonic impiety that drives modernity must be inspired by deeper fidelities: to the ethical orientation, vision of human nature, and understanding of existence informing that civilization and making its continued existence possible. This necessarily means affirmation of, and fidelity to, the underlying "metaphysical dream": religion.

In Sade's novels, where people are reduced to utilitarian objects, the libertines grow increasingly murderous and incessantly rationalize murder. Modernity replicates this dynamic, with its legitimization of abortion, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide. Clearly, undiscerning, pragmatic modern conservatism, without grounding in religion, has proven incapable of resisting demonic impiety. Demonstrating that our choice is between piety and oblivion, observable reality vindicates George Panichas's grim observation that "We must either accept our religious ground of being or wallow in a spiritual swamp."<sup>2</sup> A reading of modernity penetrating to its impious, increasingly Sadean core admits of only one answer to this symposium's question: *Yes*.

1. Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948), 170, 172. 2. George A. Panichas, *The Critic as Conservator* (Washington, 1992), 223.