

Understanding Our Secular Era

Matthew Hanley

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When previously on this site I wrote about the first book ^[1] by the Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce (d. 1989) to be translated into English, I wanted to include his almost offhand remark: “There is no family if there is no ideal heritage to hand down.” He was making larger points about the unprecedented assault on tradition and authority that characterize modernity.

Even in isolation, this observation helps explain the fact that the West, along with cultures as disparate as Iran and Japan, are in the throes of severe demographic implosion. That crisis cannot easily be assigned to a specific religion, given the global nature of the phenomenon, but does point towards a widespread metaphysical crisis.

Explaining the ongoing crisis of meaning occasioned by the breakdown of common ideals and permanent values is Del Noce’s strong suit. Thankfully, there is now another compilation of his work available for the Anglosphere: *The Age of Secularization* ^[2] consists of essays and lectures Del Noce delivered between 1964-69, translated – and splendidly summarized – by Carlo Lancellotti.

[3] With the collapse of metaphysics, only science and religion remain as valid categories of thought, with one necessarily pitted against the other. (No points for guessing which is in the driver’s seat.) Powerful prophets of science, celebrated in their own hometown (especially here in Silicon Valley), say it must increase, while religion must decrease.

Science has established itself as an idol because we have made political and historical decisions (think forward not just backward) that “branded the traditional ideals as dis-values.” Progress is simply its twin idol.

Modernity itself is regarded *axiomatically* as a positive value. It definitively casts old ideals aside but is not capable of establishing new ones, since the category of absolute value itself is deemed absurd.

As a result, we now inhabit a technocratic society that is radically irreligious: any thought of matters pertaining to the divine in man, to his interiority, is deemed meaningless – totally irrelevant. Del Noce would not have been the least bit surprised by the recent revelations that social media giants are censoring “traditional” (i.e., mainly Christian) viewpoints; this is only the

culmination of the broad pattern he saw emerging.

Del Noce was, in essence, writing about the rise of "Nones" decades before that term was on the horizon. He is careful to say that it is not just Catholicism that is threatened by the modern technological mindset, but religion itself – the whole "religious dimension" in man.

He is also careful to say this mindset is not a direct byproduct of technological development but has its ultimate origins in "a religious deviation." The nature of our modern crisis, he stresses, is above all religious in nature. Religion can only be tolerated (like some drugs) as a stimulant, but never as a sincere means of pursuing truth; this he regards as the "essence of blasphemy."

Indeed, he says the ongoing process of secularization is chiefly characterized by the expansion of atheism. Our world is one that accepts the essential Marxist negations of transcendence; specifically, we reject both Platonism and Christianity, even if we have simultaneously abandoned the religious (messianic) and eschatological dimensions of classical Marxism.

In this way, Marxism prevails even as it delivers disintegration: any sense of the sacred is obliterated – replaced by technological progress and individualism in its purest form, understood as complete separation from God.

With this metaphysical orientation, the future displaces the eternal; original sin is turned into a myth rather than, as Chesterton quipped, viewed as the easiest doctrine to prove (just take a look around).

Modern man insists upon his innocence, whereas Christians presuppose the need for forgiveness. Modern man also insists that freedom necessarily requires the power to create, however capriciously, one's own reality – chiefly one's own moral code. The transgender craze is but the latest, most visible extension of this metaphysical outlook.

Del Noce identified many other trends that have become much more pronounced today: the

Augusto del Noce

intolerance of the tolerant, and the false compassion that exonerates blatant transgressions as if they were not transgressions (i.e. "an absolute refusal to be scandalized"). He warned that those who are faithful to "old values" in opposition to the "new" will become "social outcasts," even "regarded as members of an inferior moral race, destined to disappear."

He recognized way back then that we aren't really a Christian people anymore. But he also recognized that this isn't an entirely new phenomenon in that, "at least since the French

Revolution, Catholics determined to be really Catholic have been, generally, de facto, persecuted.”

Progressive Catholics, whom he analyses in great depth, have much more in common with secular progressives than they do with regular (orthodox) Catholics. In today’s parlance, they are “liberals first.” They downplay glaring metaphysical differences between Catholicism and modernism, and ultimately reject Greek thought, specifically belief in an “absolute and meta-historical order of values.”

They are all too disposed to welcome what they view as the “true part” of Marxism; these “new Catholics,” he writes, “are Marxists *in via*,” who stand “irreparably contrary to tradition,” thereby contributing to the grand project of dissolution.

They are enamored with efforts to bring Christianity into harmony with modernity – tinkering with it here, updating it there. They see Vatican II, in his trenchant turn of phrase, as “the Church’s act of contrition with respect to her past.” This is ultimately a self-defeating proposition. Indeed, the whole idea that Christianity can be surpassed – edified by certain mental maneuvers to suit modern sensibilities (what he terms “meta-Christianity”) – is bound to lead to radical anti-Christianity.

This is high stakes stuff; the only way to avoid catastrophe, he concludes, is to recover genuinely truthful religious instincts. This means that the Catholic Church will have to overcome its own crisis – and reject “the progressivist and Modernist invasion” that ineluctably and “fatally” leads to “a death of God theology” and a thoroughly secularized milieu.

The odds have become even longer since Del Noce wrote, but the cards he laid on the table still seem like the only winning hand.

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[1] I wrote about the first book:

<https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2016/07/28/modernity-as-metaphysical-collapse/>

[2] *The Age of Secularization*: <https://amzn.to/2Lnwzsp>

[3] Image: <https://amzn.to/2OhG8Ha>

[4] Image: <https://icucourses.com>

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