

THREE SOURCES OF THE SECULAR MIND

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Everything that lives
Lives not alone, nor for itself.

—William Blake

Allen Tate defined secularism as the state of a culture in which means have replaced ends.¹ Such a definition is worth exploring, I think, at length. In every area of life, not least of all in academia, one hears the complaint that time is wasted in speculation and the theoretical contemplation of the world when, as Marx said, “the point is to change it.” Even in seminaries, where ministers are trained for the more or less specific purpose of helping people to think about life in view of the end—the purpose or goal of life—there is heard the cry that studies should become ever more “practical.” I even witnessed an impassioned plea from a trustee that ministers should take a course on reading a balance sheet.

That the practical task should not be abandoned or neglected is clear. What is less clear, however, is that our world—perhaps especially in North America—suffers from a loss of pragmatism and a surfeit of pastors trained in theology, lawyers trained in the philosophy of law, teachers well equipped to think of the ethics of their tasks, and church members whose minds soar in contemplation of the eternal mysteries of the God they profess to believe in. I am afraid that just the reverse is true. We have gradually lost the vocabulary and syntax necessary for speaking meaningfully, even to our own children, about nonmaterial values, nonpragmatic affections, and aims in life that exceed life itself. We speak instead of means, not ends. Why?

A brief review of three trends that have enjoyed a long pilgrimage in the west reveals a common core of sentiment, one that illuminates the habit that Tate refers to: the growing resistance to talk about ends and the replacement of that talk with discussion of means. The first trend is philosophical, the second is moral, and the third is theological. Laying these side by side, we find that it becomes a simple matter at the end to disclose what is the common core and the common motivation among them all.

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¹ A. Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow, 1968) 6.

I. THREE MOVEMENTS AGAINST TRANSCENDENCE

How should we speak of these trends, which in many ways will appear abstract and therefore irrelevant to the opinion makers of our day? One might begin with three well-known, and often commented upon, results of the trends. As they stand, they will sound familiar and even self-evident to almost everyone. But few recognize the inner core of intimately connected thought or sentiment. On the surface they appear, indeed, to be three entirely different ways of explaining what has happened in secular thought. In fact, as I believe I can show, they are three ways of viewing the same essential movement in modern thought, even though each one concentrates on a distinct result of the movement. The three results of a secular culture, or rather one that has refused to think about its ends, are (1) the loss of authority, (2) the hatred of distinction, and (3) the love of power.

These three results actually give us a good summary of the kind of destructive winds that blow through a culture that has rejected its vision of transcendent ends. What I say here will only be a brief overview. For any one of these approaches to the question, the works that I cite will yield a much more complete treatment of the question involved. My purpose here, however, is not to explore each trend thoroughly but to show that on every side we are dealing with the same problems and the same questions—and they are questions to which the Christian hope gives an enormously satisfying answer. It is an answer that meets the human need not only in terms of intellect but also in terms of the affections: what we love and what we value. Yet because it is an answer that requires surrendering to the facts of human finitude and moral liability, the modern spirit has typically rebelled in these three predictable ways: against authority, against the limits of self (distinction), and against the limits of will.

II. THE DECLINE OF LOGICAL REALISM

Richard Weaver made perhaps the liveliest and most far-reaching case for seeing the cultural decline of the west as being strongly tied to the nominalist-realist controversy of the late fourteenth century. He proposed that the widening circles of disorder in western life can be traced back to a philosophical choice to abandon the idea that universals have a reality that is independent of and higher than the particular existence of things. "Have we forgotten our encounter with the witches on the Heath?" he asks. It was there—in that medieval controversy—that the evil choice was made: "What the witches said to the protagonist of this drama was that man could realize himself more fully if he would only abandon his belief in the existence of transcendentals."²

The realists in this controversy—followers of Duns Scotus, for instance—held to ideas that general and abstract categories of things are real, whereas

² R. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago) 2–3.

particular things are examples that manifest reality. For example, the idea of a tree and the reality of a particular pine tree do not exist on the same level. Particulars come and go. They are only the temporal manifestation of something that is lasting and does not come into existence and disappear from existence.

The emerging nominalist position, however, insisted that the idea of a tree rises from the particular and concrete existence of trees, to which we assign names. The nominalist assertion, notwithstanding its common designation, runs deeper than the phenomenon of language. It is not simply the idea of giving names to things that is implied. It is that the concept of the world, the vision of the world—including categories, names, principles, virtues, and the like—are generated by the human imagination or reason and projected upon a reality that only consists of the concrete and particular things.

I must admit, however, that to state this controversy in such stark contrasts is not entirely fair. There was not a single nominalist position. There were a number of nominalist systems that ranged along a scale from moderate to radical. And though nominalism stated in such stark terms may sound like a preamble to materialism, it certainly was not the case in the minds of its earliest proponents. William of Occam in England and Gabriel Biel in Germany were leading intellectuals in this revolution in worldview. But they were also leading Christian thinkers who believed deeply in a transcendent reality. It was a long time before the full implications of a nominalist position would appear in discussions among intellectuals, and even longer before the impact of such thought weighed heavily in ordinary public life and discourse.

But it was, as Weaver points out, the first faint shadow of something ominous that was to bring about a change in the western concept of reality. The issue that comes to light, however, is of huge importance in the ordering of human life. The issue is no less than “whether there is a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man.” As Weaver pointed out: “The practical result of nominalist philosophy is to banish the reality which is perceived by the intellect and to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses.” Thus “the question of what the world was made for now becomes meaningless because the asking of it presupposes something prior to nature in the order of existents.”³

Among the results of this intellectual change stands one of central importance. The articulation of values implies an abstract ordering of things. One action is seen as more virtuous than another. One thing is more valuable than another. One mode of art is sublime, another is worthless and ugly. One boy knows his mathematics, another needs improvement, a third has failed. The sluggard is foolish, the industrious is wise. We cannot speak of human action, social order, justice, beauty, virtue without implying a hierarchy. The moment we attempt to pretend that everything is on the same

³ *Ibid.* 3–4.

level and that evaluation is impossible we find ourselves caught up in every possible contradiction. Because the truth is that we do imply that one action is preferable to another, and one thing is of greater value than another, whether we wish to do so or not. Otherwise all things and all actions are meaningless, and the most sensible thing is to lapse into silence.

But the point raised by the trend toward nominalism is whether in fact these hierarchies of value have any intrinsic meaning, or whether they are actually arbitrary constructions of the human will. Are these generalities and abstractions of value rooted in a reality apart from the world of particulars, or are they simply projected upon the world as human conventions? It is the tendency of nominalism to convince us that such evaluations are arbitrary and are imposed upon a world of undifferentiated particulars.

The moral confusion this state of mind could cause is obvious. (It is with some indebtedness to the human being's stubborn attachment to reality that the full implications of this thinking seldom appear.) For example, several years ago I was involved in a panel discussion on the subject of ethics and the environmental crisis. The speaker before me on the program tried to base his argument against human exploitation of nature on the notion that, as he said, "human beings have no more right to live than bears." This is a popular and very modern theme, and I imagine that the audience and the media responded to it favorably.

But I thought that it was also a seriously wrongheaded approach to saving the environment. Granted, bears have value—and one that even transcends their value to humanity. As I tried to show however, if everything is of equal value, then there is no hierarchy of values to appeal to when one is trying to save the bear. And if one thing in nature is not inherently more important than another, then the survival of one species or another, and the question of whether bears are not of more service as bear rugs, becomes a question that can only be resolved on the level of power and conflict.

III. THE LOVE OF POWER

A second attempt at ordering life without transcendence is by appeal to power. There is something present in modern thought, as Jürgen Moltmann has pointed out, that identifies God with simple, direct, coercive power. And in the same way that theologians identify God with power, the world at large has been drawn to a worship of power.

This "apotheosis of power," as I have called it, has brought on what Moltmann calls the "crisis of domination." In terms of the ecological crisis he says that human beings have learned that their proper relationship to nature is one of domination and exploitation.

Where did this originate? Some would say it comes from the Bible, where the Genesis creation story tells us that man was given domination over all that God has placed on earth. Moltmann denies that this is the source. In the first place, the idea of dominion in the OT involves the idea of protection as well as ordering, and it was only at a much later date that the role of

humanity was seen as that of exploiter, as one who uses power for the purpose of domination and to serve selfish ends.⁴

Instead, Moltmann says, we see this notion arising about four hundred years ago. With the coming of greater and greater possibilities within the realm of science and technology, he explains, there was also a tendency to see God's preeminent attribute as *potentia absoluta*—absolute power. He continues:

Power became the foremost predicate of deity, not goodness and truth. But how can the human being acquire power, so that he may resemble his God? Through science and technology; for "knowledge is power," as Francis Bacon exultantly proclaimed.⁵

Of enormous influence in the emerging experience of science was the thinking of René Descartes. He states that the aim of science is to make men "masters and possessors of nature."⁶ Thus nature becomes an object to be analyzed—not to be contemplated for its own sake but to determine how it might yield to human purposes and designs. The object of science comes to be to divide and conquer. Thus human beings come to live not as members of a created order in community with nature, though in a unique role. Instead they come as its lord and owner. Science becomes the instrument by which this relationship is made possible—if not in fact, at least to the imagination. For that reason the vision that has dominated so much of the past four centuries, encouraged by undeniably spectacular gains in science and technology, has been one of man dominating nature.

The scientific ideal, along with its attendant notion that knowledge is power, is not confined of course to the natural sciences. Auguste Comte envisioned the potential of science as a basis for a new society. Karl Marx envisioned scientific socialism. Sigmund Freud wished his psychoanalysis to be seen as a science, with some effective power in the realm of the psyche. War has increasingly become a contest of technologies. Businesses, bureaucracies and churches depend upon the analysis of society, made believable by reams of computerized data—all giving the impression (whether or not it is more or less illusory) that the possessors of such knowledge stand in a power relationship to the populations they wish to influence.

The difficulty with such a relationship and such a vision is that it implies the exertion of the will over something or someone. That thing—so moved by the will—becomes no longer a subject with which one enjoys companionable mutual relationship. It becomes an object. And the more perfectly an object obeys the will, the more it becomes a mere extension of the self. Relationship requires otherness. Power overcomes otherness, it eliminates relationship.

⁴ Genesis 2:15, Moltmann points out, "talks about 'the Garden of Eden' which human beings are 'to till and keep.' So human mastery over the earth is intended to resemble the cultivating and protective work of a gardener. Nothing is said about predatory exploitation" (*God in Creation* [San Francisco: Harper, 1985] 30).

⁵ *Ibid.* 27.

⁶ R. Descartes, *Discours de la Methode* (1692), in *Oeuvres Philosophiques I* (ed. F. Alquié; Paris, 1963) 634 (cited by Moltmann, *God in Creation* 27).

Students of the NT will recall that Jesus is remembered as one who resisted the use of power to accomplish his purpose. That offer to exercise power—as Messiah or King—was seen as the peculiarly Satanic temptation (cf. Matt 4:8–10; 16:21–23).

It is in the NT more than anywhere else that we see power as in the first instance a destroyer. Service, suffering and love imply respecting the subject, the otherness, the Thou (as Martin Buber expressed it) in the ones to whom we relate.

Thus Paul described the husband's role as "head of the wife" precisely as "Christ is head of the church." This means that he sacrifices self-interest for her in imitation of Christ, who "loved the church and gave himself for it" (Eph 5:25). And Jesus told his disciples not to follow the example of the Gentiles whose princes "exercise dominion over them, and . . . excessive authority upon them" (Matt 21:25). Instead, if any would be great, that one must be a servant of the rest. That was in Jesus' teaching the nature of the kingdom. It was in fact the nature of life itself—because power, though necessary within limits, has this inevitable quality about it: It destroys.

A pediatrician whom I know is widely appreciated for his lectures on childrearing. The parent, he points out, has two important assets from the very beginning of the child's life: (1) Obviously the parent is bigger and stronger than the child, so the mother or father can and must force the child to do the parent's will. (2) The child wants the parent, and this asset is easily transformed into wanting to please the parent. The doctor goes on to explain that the object of childrearing is to bring children to the point where they go the right way as a result of their own free will. Often—and if things go well, less and less often—the parent resorts to the use of his size and might in order to force the child to go the right way.

However—and here is a major point of parental wisdom—the parent must recognize that to employ force is always done at the expense of the second asset. The child's natural attraction to the parent is diminished to the extent that the parent must use force. It creates a barrier of resentment: It is perhaps only temporary, but it is there. So the point the doctor makes is this: Use this remedy when necessary, but remember that it is expensive medicine. Power always diminishes relationships. This lesson applies to all areas of life: Domination destroys, love makes alive. In a fallen world, one cannot exist without the other. Love is given a space in which to grow only where law, domination and force impose a certain order. But power must always be seen as the means (and a costly means at that) and not as an end.

IV. THE HATRED OF DISTINCTION

A third fashion in modern thought is theological in nature, and it is one that in a way summarizes the other two and has an enormous bearing on modern life. It is properly called pantheism. If nominalism promised relief from metaphysical absolutes, and if power provides freedom from circum-

stances that frustrate the will, then pantheism combines the promise of toppling absolutes and dissolving individual limits.

To the popular mind, pantheism relates to eastern religions and to the western adoption of Vedanta Hinduism. Pantheism simply means, however, an identification of the world with God: The “all” of the world is God, and God is all. A case can be made that philosophical pantheism has played as large a role in western thought as it ever did in the east. While Hinduism is often described as pantheistic, one will seldom find that form of philosophical Hinduism in practice in Indian communities.

In the west, by contrast, beginning with pre-Socratic Greek philosophy one can find in pantheism a constant possibility among the range of philosophical and theological options. And in many instances it has been among the strongest intellectual influences in society. Such was the case, for instance, during the several centuries (from about the third century BC until the rise of Christianity) that the stoic philosophy filled the vacuum left by religious cynicism and skepticism in the Greco-Roman world. As Robert Pattison has pointed out, “pantheism is as old as philosophy, and every age has had its believers.”⁷ From El Hallaj of the Islamic Sufis to William Blake in the Christian tradition, from every religious camp there has emerged the possibility of a pantheistic vision of reality.⁸

Aristotle assumed that Xenophanes’ (c. 570–480 BC) idea of God included his quality of being coextensive with the universe—what we would call pantheism. Mellissus of Samos (c. 450) was certainly a pantheistic philosopher, as was Heraclitus (c. 536–470), who thought that all opposites are absorbed into a cosmic whole. “Things taken together are whole and not whole. . . . Out of all there comes a unity, and out of unity all things.”⁹ Naturally, then, the theological conclusion is that “God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger.” He is the dissolution of opposites, the end of distinction, the abolition of limits.¹⁰

It seems that pantheism is not a particular religious system of belief. Rather, it is a theoretical tendency whenever a religion begins to reach out beyond the grossly material, the particular, and the provincial expression to one of universal and therefore more abstract concepts. Thus Hinduism, the

⁷ In a book on rock music, *The Triumph of Vulgarly* (New York: Oxford University, 1987), R. Pattison points out that the popular expression of pantheism is manifest as a preference for vulgarity—that is, things that are common and unrefined by attention to forms, convention, morals and manners.

⁸ C. J. Kraus pointed this out when he commented on the ubiquity of pantheism: “Pantheism confirms itself as an authentic natural product of the human mind by the fact that it has arisen on the Ganges as on the Rhine, and in the age of Xenophanes as in that of Spinoza, and among Brahmins, Cabalists and mystics, theologians and philosophers—in short, everywhere and always, and in all kinds of intellects” (“Über den Pantheismus,” *Vermischte Schriften*). Like the other two developments I mentioned, pantheism does not necessarily spread outward from a philosophy or religion so much as it represents a central tendency in the human heart and mind that is so universal that its expression is inevitably found from time to time and necessarily feeds that hunger for asserting the self-will over the environment.

⁹ Cited in G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophies* (Cambridge, 1971) 191.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 192.

religion of the Indus Valley, became pantheistic only at that stage when it emerged from its mythic expression to the more theoretical attempts at universal wisdom in the Upanishads and in Vedanta ("end of the Vedas") Hinduism in the first century BC. Stoicism, a western pantheism, gradually replaced the declining polytheistic Greco-Roman religions under the reforming influence of philosophy. It seems that whenever there is an attempt to reconcile the world of multiple things with the unity and oneness of the world, there is the option of short-circuiting that difficulty by declaring the multiplicity as *maya* (illusion). The temptation to resolve the question in this manner, however, is no more eastern than it is western, and it has made its appearance in every society of advanced culture with a highly developed need for abstract thought.

The only reason such a tendency feels alien in the west is that theism—in the form of Christianity, Judaism and Islam—has so long resisted the pantheistic alternative. For several reasons, theists have detected a grave threat to their understanding of God and their understanding of human life in the pantheistic alternative. They have accurately sensed that a faith that relies upon the kind of discipline (in moral and devotional life) that calls for self-giving love cannot long endure where distinctions are seen ultimately as illusions.

V. THE PAIN OF LIFE AND THE "HAPPINESS" OF DEATH

In these three modern trends—the rejection of absolutes in nominalism, the pursuit of power in science, and the loss of distinction in pantheism—we have three trends that are, in effect, aspects of the same trend. Each of these trends appeals, in a certain way, to what I will call the imperialistic self. They respond to a metaphysical threat, one that every human being suffers in one way or another. This threat is directed against the self. It says in effect, "You are limited, you are finite." You are limited, first of all, by the otherness of existence—by other persons, other things. These are not simply extensions of your own self-consciousness, but they exist apart from you and without regard to you. Moreover the fact of death is the final irrefutable statement of human finitude. It is its ultimate expression and the final insult to the self that imagines itself the center from which all reality radiates.

An aspect of that metaphysical insult is that the individual and his society must respond to an outside reality. The world will not yield to the vagrant wishes and vain desires of the human being. The development since the Renaissance in rejecting realism (by the rise of nominalism) has increasingly allowed us to believe there are no absolutes. It has promoted the notion that society yields to the unfettered imagination, that only freedom is absolute.

Thus the assurance (via nominalism) that there are no transcendentals, no universals, no absolutes, comes as a relief. The imperialistic self imagines it is free from moral contradictions and thus from guilt. Science likewise can be imagined as the source of unlimited domination in the physical realm.

And pantheism takes away the fear of God, for if the boundary between me and God has been repealed, then who is to say whether I have been taken up into God, or God has been taken up into me?

Thus theology becomes psychology. Talk of ultimate ends becomes meaningless, for the horizon beyond the limited self has disappeared. We can only speak of operations, of practice, of techniques. As the Cheshire cat advised Alice in Lewis Carroll's fantasy, if you do not know where you are going, then the direction really does not matter. Under such circumstances, secularism has become complete. The world must discover all over again how to speak about ends. And once again the gospel becomes required reading.