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WE ARE MODERN AND WANT TO BE MODERN

Among contemporary cultural historians, political theorists Brad S. Gregory, Pierre Manent, and Rémi Brague, each in his own way has addressed the transformation of what was formally known as "Christendom" into its modern present. No one needs to be told that the repudiation of an inherited culture has left individuals as well as societies without a moral compass. The evidence is too great. Some saw it coming a generation or more ago. We could cite the English historians, Hilaire Belloc and Christopher Dawson, and their French contemporary Paul Valéry, as well as the American George Santayana.

I begin with Santayana. Some may recall Santayana's often quoted judgment: "The shell of Christendom is broken. The unconquerable mind of the East, the pagan past, the industrial socialist future confront it with equal authority. Our whole life and mind is saturated with a slow upward filtration of a new spirit—that of an emancipated, atheistic, international democracy."[1]

Writing more than a hundred years ago, Santayana, in Volume Two of his five-volume study, *The Life of Reason*, draws a distinction often missed between "social democracy as an ideal" and "democracy as a form of government" in which power lies more or less directly in the people. Social democracy, he claims, "is a general ethical ideal, looking to human equality and brotherhood, and its radical form is inconsistent with such

[1] George Santayana, "Winds of Doctrine," in *The Works of George Santayana* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1937), 3.

institutions as family and heredity property."[2] Democratic government, by contrast, is merely a means to an end, an expedient for better and smoother government in certain states at certain times. "A government is not made representative," he warns, "by the mechanical expedient of electing its members by universal suffrage. It becomes representative only by embodying in its policy, whether by instinct or intelligence, the people's conscious and unconscious interests."[3]

No friend of social democracy, Santayana finds its spirit deadening, given its attempt to unite whole nations and even all of mankind into a society of equals, admitting of no local or racial privileges by which a sense of fellowship may be stimulated. The spirit of social democracy is deadening, he maintains, for it is "to ambition, to the love of wealth and honor, to the love of a liberty which meant opportunity and adventure, we owe whatever benefits we have derived from Greece and Rome, from Italy and England."[4] "Civilization" he continues, "has hitherto consisted in the diffusion and dilution of habits arising in privileged centres."[5] One may think of Vienna, Paris, and Oxford, or Palermo, Munich, and Cambridge, among others. Civilization has not sprung from the people, he claims. "To abolish a natural aristocracy would be to cut off the sources from which all culture has hitherto flowed."[6] And then this powerful condemnation, "The one way of defending the democratic ideal is to deny that civilization is a good."[7]

Brad S. Gregory, in search of what makes us what we are, looks to the 16th century, convinced that modernity dates to the Protestant Reformation. In Gregory's judgment the Reformation succeeded in the sense that it provided an alternative way of grounding Christian answers to life questions and thus provided a basis for living a Christian life, ideologically and socially separate from the Roman Catholic Church.

> On the eve of the Reformation Latin Christianity had achieved a comprehensive, sacramental world view based on truth claims about God's action in history, centered on the Incarnation, life, teachings,

[2] George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: or the Phases of Human Progress*, vol. II: "Reason in Society" (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), 116.
[3] Id., 121.
[4] Id., 134.
[5] Id., 125.
[6] Id.
[7] Id., 125–126.

> death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Intellectual life was vibrant, if sometimes contentious, variously institutionalized not only in universities but also in monasteries, at princely courts, and among participants in the religious Republic of Letters.[8]

The unintended problem created by the Reformation became the problem of how to know what true Christianity is, given the open-ended range of rival truth claims that followed diverse exegetical interpretations of sacred scripture. Reason alone in modern philosophy, Gregory holds, like scripture alone, has proven incapable of discerning or devising consensual persuasive answers to life's large questions. There is no shared, substantive common good, nor are there any prospects for devising one. A centrally important paradoxical characteristic of modern liberalism, Gregory finds, is that it does not prescribe what citizens should believe, how they should live, or what they should care about.

Pierre Manent would not disagree. In his discussion of modernity he too looks to its origins: "We have been modern now for several centuries. We are modern, and we want to be modern."[9] If so, in what century did modernity really begin—the 16th, 17th, or was it the 18th century? Origins are bound to be obscure, but whatever the case, in Manent's judgment, modernity is a project, formulated and implemented first in Europe, but nevertheless intended from the beginning for all of humanity, a movement that is destined never to arrive at a term.

Developing a theme from an earlier work, *The City of Man* (1995), Manent probes deeply into Western history:

> If we want to understand the modern project, we must begin with the city, for it is in the city that people deliberate and form projects for action. It is in the city that people discover that they can govern themselves and learn to do so. They discover and learn politics . . . The city is the shaping of human life that makes the common thing and the execution of the common thing in a plurality of cities hostile to each other and divided within.[10]

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[8] Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 189.
[9] Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1.
[10] Id., 5.

The political form that succeeded the city was the empire. With the coming of Christianity, add a third form, one created by the Church that is at once a city and an empire. Europeans soon found themselves confronted by competing authorities. "They were assailed by prestigious and contradictory words—the words of the Bible, the words of the Greek philosophers, the words of the Roman orators and historians—and they did not know which to retain."[11] With Luther's revolt, the authority of the Word of God itself became divided between that of the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. Ironically, the Scriptures themselves were accessible only through the mediation of the Church and in the first instance in the language of the Church, Latin. By all accounts, Luther's Reformation created a spiritual upheaval, but it was also and inseparably a political revolution, indeed, a national insurrection. Different European nations selected the Christian confession under which they chose to live and imposed it. Thus, says Manent, the confessional nation became one of history's political forms.

Europe produced modernity, and for a long period of time Europe was its master and owner. Today Bacon and Descartes reign in Shanghai and Bangalore at least as much as in Paris and London. Within Europe, in spite of the multiple treaties that created the European Union, Manent finds that civic cooperation is feeble and the religious word almost inaudible.

> Europe finds itself militarily, politically and spiritually disarmed in a world that it has armed with the instruments of modern civilization. It soon will be wholly incapable of defending itself. By renouncing the political form that was its own, Europe has deprived itself of the association in which European life had found its richest meaning.[12]

Manent's emphasis on the city follows his recognition that a degree of cultural unity is required as the foundation of a body politic. One cannot be a citizen of the world, he maintains, nor even of Europe. An identifiable common good can only be the fruit of a coherent, sustainable tradition within a homogenous population.

In addressing the political development of the West, Manent finds it necessary to pause in order to take stock of the tools of knowledge appropriate for his investigation. Like Santayana he finds that there are two versions of modern political theory, with one emphasizing "science" and the

[11] Id., 6.
[12] Id., 13.

other "experience." There is the political science of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke, whom Manent calls "the architects of the modern state," and "the guiding spirits of modern politics."[13] Arguing not from experience, modern political science, says Manent, takes its inspiration from Hobbes's fictional individual, postulated in a state of nature in which all war against all. From that postulate Hobbes derives the mythical social contract theory and all that it entails, including the scope of human rights. In Manent's judgment,

> Modern political science in its founding moment, overcomes the grave deficiencies of modern political experience, the absence, so to speak, of an authentic political experience in the Christian world, by forging access to a pre-political human experience on the basis of which it will be possible to construct a new political order.[14]

Lost is the experience of those living in what was formerly called Christendom.

Perhaps the most up-to-date version of Hobbes's starting point is that of John Rawls, whose "original situation," Manent suggests, is "the postulation of a state of nature without nature."[15] As in the case of Hobbes, Rawls's theory of justice trumps experience, and facts do not matter in a theoretical construct. Perhaps we should contrast Hobbes and Rawls with Machiavelli, who, Manent says, "wrote about how men actually lived, not the way they behaved in those imaginary republics and principalities."[16]

In *Metamorphoses of the City*, at the end of the discussion "Empire, Church and Nation," Manent identifies Jewish law, Greek philosophy, Christianity, and Democracy as four great moments in the history of humanity. The four great spiritual determinations of Western humanity, he maintains, not only form a chronological succession but also mark the major stages on the gradient of increasing universality. In drawing his study to a conclusion, Manent is wistful: Is it possible, he asks, to imagine a new stage, the result of a mediation of Christianity and the modern conception of humanity? By way of an answer, he finds the building blocks in a certain solidarity between Jewish law and Christianity, and between Christianity and the gods of the Greek philosophers, insofar as those accounts provide a rational conception of divinity. But the "Religion of Hu-

[13] Id., 23.
[14] Id.
[15] Id., 26.
[16] Id., 7.

manity" understood from the modern perspective has left behind Jewish, Christian, and even Greek philosophical notions of the divine. "Modernity by embracing Humanity," writes Manent, "has expelled the highest idea to embrace the largest idea which is the idea of humanity itself."[17]

It is true, as Brad Gregory has ably pointed out, that the Reformation in rejecting the mediation of the Church as a separate and visible institution weakened Christianity to the detriment of its social influence. In the aftermath of the Reformation, "The believer," writes Manent "instead of being saved by partaking in the sacraments of the Church, instead of being part of the Church, is instructed by Luther that he is saved by faith in the Word of God alone."[18] What happens, Manent then asks, when the Church is set aside? "The spiritual ministry is appropriated by every Christian in what is called the universal priesthood."[19] Lost is the mediation of the Church between man and God. Relieved of the burden of the ecclesiastical order, the Christian community inevitably falls under the state, as it soon did in Luther's Germany. "However unsatisfactory or disappointing the mediating institution may be—Yahweh is forever reprimanding or chastising his people—it is the bridge over the abyss that separates the Immense from the lowly. What Christianity brings is mediation, not distance."[20]

Rémi Brague, in the company of Paul Valéry, insists on the recognition of another dimension of Europe that is sometimes not given due weight or is overlooked, namely, the contribution of Rome, not only for its sense of law but as transmitter of the Hebrew and Greek contribution to European culture. Rémi Brague, in his insightful work published in an English translation as *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, argues that Europeans have failed to recognize, value, and defend what is a unique culture with consequences for the rest of the world.

Brague begins his treatise in an attempt to define what are we talking about when we speak of "Europe." It is a geographical entity to be sure, and as a place, Europe precedes Europe as a Continent. As to its "content" or character, Europe is the whole set of historically identifiable facts that have taken place within that geographical space we call Europe. Thus Husserl can speak of "European sciences" and Heidegger of "Occi-

[17] Id., 304.
[18] Id., 311.
[19] Id., 319.
[20] Id.

dental metaphysics."[21] Obviously mere residence on the Continent does not make one a European. Confronting the fact that many immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa refuse to assimilate, choosing instead to retain their own culture and even live under their own law, Brague concludes: "A European is one who is conscious of belonging to a whole. One is not a European without wanting to be one . . . The frontiers of Europe are solely cultural."[22]

Continuing his analysis, Brague argues, "A culture is defined in relation to the people and to the phenomena it considers as its other." Europe to the extent that it is Occidental is the other of the Orient. As Christendom, Europe is the other of the Muslim world. To the extent that it is Latin Christendom, Europe is the other of the Byzantine world. "Byzantium," says Brague, "never thought of itself as European. It always thought of itself as Roman." The cultural realities that one designates in this way do not limit themselves to the European space, neither in their origin nor in their ultimate expansion.[23] Considering the question, "Who are we as Europeans: Greeks or Romans, or Jews, or Christians, or in a sense a little of each?" Brague is convinced that Europe is essentially Roman. The Roman character of Europe is found in its sense of order, in the patriarchical family, in its sense of fatherland. "To be Roman is to perceive oneself as Greek in relation to what is barbarous, but also barbarous in relation to what is Greek. It is to know that what one transmits does not come from oneself."[24] Roman culture is essentially a passage, a way, an aqueduct. The relation of Europe—as Christendom—to the Old Testament is in a sense a "Roman" relation. "The Christians themselves are essentially 'Romans' insofar as it is from Rome that they have their 'Greeks' to which they are tied by an invisible hand." In the light of this somewhat fanciful analysis, Brague can say, "Christianity is to the Old Covenant what the Romans are to the Greeks."[25]

Christianity played a major role in the early stages of the formation of the European Community following World War II due to the influence of Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schumann, and Alcide de Gasperi. That influ-

[21] Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, trans. from the French *Europe, la voie romaine* by Samuel Lester (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2012), 20.
[22] Id., 6.
[23] Id., 21–22.
[24] Id., 40.
[25] Id., 54.

ence has waned as time has gone by, and today the European Union is little more than a set of trade agreements. As to the future of Europe, Brague is convinced that the cultural task awaiting Europe consists in becoming Roman again. Europe must also become conscious of its intrinsic and even global value, that is, of its exceptional nature, of its "eccentric" character, as it faces both internal and external barbarism. It must again become convinced of its worthiness in relation to which it is only the messenger and servant. "It must regain or become once again the place where one recognizes an intimate relationship of man with God, a covenant that descends to the most carnal dimensions of humanity, that must be the object of unfailing respect."[26] Amplifying that judgment, he writes, "For Europe to remain itself, it is not necessary that everyone who inhabits it recognize explicitly that they are Christians."[27] As to its future, Brague hopes that, in spite of the cultural problem created by its immigration policy, Europe will remain a place that recognizes the separation of the temporal and the spiritual, where each recognizes the legitimacy of the other in its proper domain.

Pierre Manent and Rémi Brague are not alone in taking a dim view of Europe's future. Charles Murray, in promoting his book *Human Accomplishment*,[28] summed up his conclusion for a promotional blurb when he asserted, "Europe's run is over." Pierre Manent, although pessimistic, stops short of Murray's conclusion. Rémi Brague calls for a "Counter Enlightenment." Viewing Europe in the light of its modern history, it is difficult to believe that the philosophical skepticism introduced in the 18th and 19th centuries has so undermined the self-confidence of a civilization that has given so much to the world, such that it is not able to defend itself. Christianity may be on the defensive in some self-blinded intellectual circles, but the empiricism of Hume and the fideism of Kant are easily challenged. Yet, Jurgen Moltmann stands to remind us that traditions once challenged are all but lost.[29]

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[26] Id., 189.
[27] Id.
[28] Charles Murray, *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences: 800 b.c.–1950* (New York: Harper, 2003).
[29] Moltmann was especially conscious of the role that tradition plays in preserving equilibrium within a people, grounding hope and mitigating fear. "Traditions," he writes, "are alive and binding, current and familiar, as long as they are taken as a matter of course and as such link fathers to sons in the course of generations and provide continuity in time. When this unquestioned familiarity and trustworthiness becomes problematical, an essential element in tradition is already lost. Where reflection sets in and subjects the tradition to critical questioning, with the result that accepting or rejecting of them becomes a conscious act, the

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SUMMARY

The author traces the thought of George Santayana, Brad S. Gregory, Pierre Manent, and Rémi Brague, who addressed the transformation of the West into its modern present. They all show that by being cut off from its cultural and political inheritance in modern times, Western Civilization presently finds itself in a burning need of recovering its identity. To save its identity, the West is to challenge the errors of modernity. We used to have the example of Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle in the darkest hours of World War II, and the remarkable example of John Paul II who through his leadership of the Solidarity movement inspired hope not only in his own people but also for others in the Soviet bloc at the time. "The cultural task awaiting Europe," to use a phrase of Rémi Brague, challenging though it may be, may in time find its voice in another Churchill or John Paul II. At present, with no remedy in sight, all we can do is to hope.

KEYWORDS: West, civilization, Europe, Christendom, democracy, culture, politics, George Santayana, Brad S. Gregory, Pierre Manent, Rémi Brague.

traditions lose their propitious force" (Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 291).