

***Modernity as a Stimulus of Reconciliation  
Between American Evangelicals and Catholics<sup>1</sup>***

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***I. An Old Argument***

In my day in the New York Archdiocesan seminary there was a room in the library dedicated entirely to anti-Catholic literature, with four walls, ceiling to floor, of books and pamphlets exposing the various shortcomings and infidelities of the Romish Church. That collection in the New York seminary was more extensive than the collections I found in the Buswell Library at Wheaton College and the Billy Graham Center and in the library of Westminster Theological Seminary forty years later. In the last ten years I have closely studied only a small fraction of the extant material.<sup>2</sup> Even so, the literature I have plowed through is huge, and the literature of evangelical criticism and Catholic response which I will never get to study is vaster still.

While all of the material belongs in a collection of some sort, not much belongs on a library shelf. Much of it is literary and historical junk. Some of it borders on the savage: for example,

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<sup>1</sup> The original of this paper was read at the Wheaton College Conference on Evangelicals and Catholics in April 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Many an afternoon study period, when I needed a release from the blinding truths of my scholastic theology manuals, did I spend hunched over these dark tomes. The child is father to the man.

H. G. Wells= *Crux Ansata* with his suggestion that the allied bombers in World War II obliterate the Vatican.<sup>3</sup> Wells and Jack Chick will sit in the same circle of Purgatory. But some of it is Intellectually respectable, even if panic-ridden.<sup>4</sup> Some of it is serious and responsible in its attempts at theological and historical criticism.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, I have found the Catholic materials on Protestantism to match the Protestant on Catholicism: angry and resentful pamphlets, arrogant

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<sup>3</sup> H. G. Wells, *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church* (NY: Agora Publishing Co., 1944); and see the many books of Paul Blanshard=s British counterpart, Avro Manhattan, prominent among them *Vatican Imperialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House., 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Lyman Beecher, *Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1835) and Josiah Strong, *Our Country*, ed. Jurgen Herbst (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1963. 1886) are good examples of well-intended popular propaganda flavored with a dollop of paranoia.

<sup>5</sup> The prime example is Loraine Boettner=s *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 1962). Boettner undoubtedly worked hard on this book over many years and gave what he thought was a measured critique of Catholic doctrine and political practice. He is dealing with real theological problems that remain dividers between the communities. Samuel Morse=s *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States* (NY: Arno Press, 1977.1835), on the other hand, is based on a fantasy. It is a classic in the genre described by Richard Hofstatter as Athe paranoid style of American politics. @

denunciations, righteous dismissals, most of it driven by pastoral concern. Like the Protestant, some of the Catholic material is vital and worthwhile for historical and theological reflection.<sup>6</sup>

On both sides authors rely on the long tradition of polemic and apologetics, with its stock arguments. Precious little of the product of this ideological meditation reflects original scholarship, most of it is bent by the fire of controversy, little of it is beautifully and movingly written, much of it is funny if you have a mind as perverse as my own, too much of it is simply a way of making money (one suspects). Occasionally the rank boredom of the literary junk is broken by a flash of language and personal insight, and this one finds especially in the great public debates, viva voce or in print, between the likes of Alexander Campbell and Archbishop Purcell (1836), John Breckenridge and John Hughes (1832), Nicholas Murray and Hughes again (1850), Charles Marshall and Al Smith (1927), and James O'Neill (1952) or J. M. Cameron (1963) or Paul Blanshard. These are people who were thinking on their feet or in their study, huffing and puffing to defeat their intellectual equals. Some of them even took criticism seriously, though I don't recall that anyone of them ever ceded an inch to an opponent. We live in an age in which the likes of Billy Graham, the pope and bishops, and even corporation presidents apologize. Evangelical and Catholic antagonists did not. For them apology was another word for unhorsing the enemy while trying to look like a Christian.

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<sup>6</sup> Among them: Bishop Francis P. Kenrick's *The Primacy of the Apostolic See Vindicated* (Philadelphia: M. Fithian, 1845); Bishop John England, "Address Before Congress" in Sebastian G. Messmer, *The Works of the Right Reverend John England, First Bishop of Charleston* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1908), VII: 9-43; James Gibbons, *Faith of Our Fathers* (Baltimore: J. Murphy and Co., 1876).

I don't intend to dwell on the long and bitter argument here. A book I have written deals with that argument and my view of it. The religious and theological argument on the Protestant side reached the end of the line with Loraine Boettner's *Roman Catholicism* in 1962. He wrote it on the cusp of the Vatican Council's documents on ecumenism and so got little Catholic response. The highpoint (or low point) of the political exchange was reached by Paul Blanshard in *American Freedom and Catholic Power* in its 1947 and 1958 editions. The Catholic responses to Blanshard were vigorous, with help from a good number of scholars like Will Herberg who were not Catholics.<sup>7</sup> Of course the political and religious criticism of the Catholic Church will never end, but there really isn't anything more to be said so far as I can see. There will always be devout Reformation Protestants, devout Tridentine Catholics, and devout Enlightenment liberals I suppose. You can find examples up to the present moment. Richard Neuhaus may announce that the Reformation is over and jump the Lutheran ship to the bark of Peter, but the true children of the Reformation haven't gotten his message.

## *II. Explaining a Change in Catholicism*

But the sea has changed, and that is the point here. I wish the change had to do with Christian charity, but I think it has to do more with cultural politics. I would like to offer an explanatory hypothesis in two parts, one for the change in Roman Catholics and the other for the change in evangelical Protestants. Both suggestions have to do with modernity rather than charity. Let me deal with the less controversial first, the change in the Roman Catholic Church.

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<sup>7</sup> See a list of reactions and a summary of their content in James M. O'Neill, *Catholicism and American Freedom* (NY: Harper Bros., 1952), 224ff. On the current crop of apologists for the Catholic Church, many of them converts from evangelicalism, see Peter Huff, "New Apologists in America's Conservative Catholic Subculture," *Horizons, The Journal of the College Theology Society* 23/2 (1996), 242-60. On Archbishop Lefebvre see William Dinges, "Quo Vadis, Lefebvre?," *America* (June 18, 1988), 602-606.

European Roman Catholic leaders, long after the situation called for it, tied their convictions of the church's uniqueness, its universality, its divinely willed hierarchical organization to its role in Europe's social and cultural order. However one may evaluate the Constantinian solution to the

Church's place in society and culture, it seems evident that the ideal of Christendom, of a single true church in a single just state, distinguishes imperial Catholicism from its predecessor, the so-called early church. This is, admittedly, a commonplace.<sup>8</sup> Christendom, inaugurated by Constantinian bishops, ended in fact with the Reformation. It was buried by modern national states and the Enlightenment.

But beyond question Christendom haunted Catholics as a ghost, a romanticized memory and even as an imperative for restoration. This is not to say that the Catholic Church and its leaders were not doing their job religiously and politically B they manifestly did so, otherwise how explain the church's survival, its public rehabilitation, and its fabulous modern growth rather than decline. But they went about their job and conducted their pastoral administration haunted by the notion of one true church in one just state. They believed that things had gone wrong. It wasn't that sin occurred B Catholics don't have an excessive bother with the fact that sin occurs. It was that the entire social order itself, including religion, politics and the economy, was screwed up and wouldn't be put right until the ideal of Christendom became once again the ideal of Western culture. To put the matter with no subtlety whatsoever, they wanted a society and culture cheek and jowl with the Bishop of Rome, ordering everything and everyone in line behind them. This

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<sup>8</sup> See Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); James Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13-38; and Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (NY: Doubleday, 1990.1976).

seems to me the specter that haunted the modern popes until John XXIII <sup>9</sup> *For good or ill he let go of the dream.*

In the American context John Courtney Murray gave Catholics a theoretic escape from the crucial issue in the political critique of the Catholic Church, namely religious liberty. No one who denies this basic liberty can raise his or her head in contemporary discussion. In Christendom, however, only the truth had rights, heresy and heretics did not, and neither did unbelievers. Murray showed that the dream of the one true church should not have priority over conscience and human dignity. In Murray's upended Catholic world, persons have rights and dignity, even heretics and unbelievers.<sup>10</sup>

But he was merely giving theoretic expression to what Bishops John Carroll and John England knew and proclaimed early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: everything works better, including the church itself, when the church respects the religious freedom of others. In effect the American bishops had given up the dream of Christendom, or at least recognized it as a dream, a century and a half

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<sup>9</sup> It was certainly my specter, and I know I didn't make it up. I absorbed it in parish grammar school and diocesan high school as World War II raged and the Cold War heated up, while Pius XII reigned.

<sup>10</sup> J. C. Murray, "Governmental Repression of Heresy" in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (1948), 260ff. Murray was ordered silent for several years because of his abandonment of the ideal of Christendom. See Joseph A. Komonchak, "Crisis in Church-State Relationships in the U. S. A.," *Review of Politics* 61/4 (Fall 1999), 675-714; "The Silencing of John Courtney Murray," in *Cristianesimo nella Storia: Saggi in onore di Giuseppe Alberigo*, ed. A. Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 657-702; and "The Catholic Principle and the American Experiment," *U. S. Catholic Historian* 17 (1999), 28-45.

before Vatican II declared its end and released the whole church from it. That is why Catholics and mainline Protestants in the USA have been able to talk with one another and work with one another over the past forty years. In practice and in doctrine, Protestants could then proceed under the assumption that the One True Church is not out to clean up the religious languages of humankind. Although one cannot say that the church has now canonized modernity=s ideals and *Political arrangements in toto* (John Paul II discriminates among them quite sharply), it certainly declared religious liberty a basic and inalienable human value and right.<sup>11</sup> It was a matter of both realism and wisdom to stay in the game, and Vatican II put the church back in the game.

### ***III. Explaining a Change in Evangelicalism***

The second part of my hypothesis is a good deal riskier: it involves an analogy between Vatican II and the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1943. Admittedly this is a closely limited analogy but an analogy nonetheless and an illuminating one. Protestants in America had their own dose of the Christendom demon. They thought they could separate

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, "The Sources of Rights Talk," @ *Commonweal* (October 12, 2001), 11-13.

church from state but still control society and the culture. Homogeneity without hierarchy was the aim. The Puritans were happy to distinguish the minister and the magistrate, but they threw out Roger Williams who understood *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* in Christendom when they did not.<sup>12</sup> John Cotton prized the autonomy of the local congregation against all popery, but was not about to put up with an autonomous individual, and so he tossed Anne Hutchinson, her family and her Spirit-enraptured conscience to the wolves. One after another, from Mayhew, Morse and Strong to Boettner, evangelicals wanted a society which remained *evangelical* in culture. Catholics were the chief threat, especially when they started to multiply in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The nightmare of a Catholic infection of the American body politic haunted Protestants while their own ambivalent feelings for Christendom constantly confused them: did they want freedom of conscience for all, or did they want an evangelical America? They took the simple way out and identified the two.

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<sup>12</sup> Roger Williams *The Boudy Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience....* in *Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, ed. Samuel Caldwell (NY: Russell and Russell, 1963), vol. III and *The Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy by Mr. Cotton=s Endeavor to Wash it White...* IV.

But America was not destined to remain evangelical. For one thing, the Catholics did what evangelicals feared: they over-immigrated and outbred them. For another thing, from the third Great Awakening to the Scopes Trial evidence poured in that the culture was subject to secularization rather than evangelical homogenization. One huge symptom of this was the loss of the colleges and the universities by the evangelical churches and the failure of evangelicals to populate the growing secular faculties.<sup>13</sup> But the process involved politics, publishing, entertainment, art and law as well.

For all the temporizing work of the evangelicals who came to be called moderates and modernists, American culture was being lost by evangelical Protestantism as northern European culture and politics had been lost by the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, and most of Europe by Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth. Even the major denominational churches no longer adhered to what Princeton's J. G. Machen understood as orthodox Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> George Marsden chronicled the process and the reaction of conservative evangelicals, first in reference to the culture in *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1980) and then with regard to the schools in *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994). For other comments on the schools, see the essays in Marsden and Bradley Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992). Mark Noll's view of the unfortunate side of the evangelical reaction to modernity, see *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981.1923). Machen here and in his exegetical masterpiece, *The Virgin Birth*, expressed some admiration for Catholics and their church. Machen followed in the footsteps of Charles Hodge. See Mark Reynolds, "Charles Hodge's Ecclesiastical Elements: His Response to Catholicizing Tendencies in the Churches, 1837-1860", unpublished dissertation, Saint Louis University, 2000. See a

Modernity, with its own ideas and ideals, had triumphed even in the churches. There was very little option for men like Machen than to pull out of a church so compromised that they could no longer see Christianity in it. The glorious day when Machen=s new and pure Presbyterian church Met evoked from him a cry of joy for a community where once again he could breathe Christian air.<sup>15</sup> But it was a pitiful day as well, for he left behind his life-long love, the Presbyterian Church, when he could no longer speak his Christian witness there and expect to be understood. And no traditionalist evangelical could miss the implications of what Clarence Darrow and the Baltimore Sun had accomplished at Dayton Tennessee in 1925. The Bible in its plain and simple meaning had been left in tatters. For a decade or more and for the decade after the Dayton trial the conservative evangelicals realized that Athis land@ is not Amy land@ or Ayour land.@ It was Atheir land,@ Clarence Darrow=s and Walter Lippmann=s and John Dewey=s land. Not a Christian land, but a land in which real Christians had to live in a ghetto B something like the one the Catholics lived in, a world of their own construction, a sectarian world. The culture had been lost to secularists and pseudo-Christians.

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discussion of Machen and Hodge in W. Shea, *The Lion and the Lamb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> See Machen=s sermon at the first General Assembly of his Orthodox Presbyterian Church (as it later became known), AThe Church of God,@ *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (June 14, 1936), 98. On Machen, See Daryl Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 157-158; and Bradley Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists and Moderates* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 211-213. To my way of thinking Machen was a fine man, a very determined Christian, far more understanding of his opponents than either Luther or Calvin, an admirable soul in most respects but one of the sort whom history wrecks without a quiver of guilt.

To fundamentalists the American cultural landscape looked very much like Europe looked to Gregory XVI and Pius IX and their successors, a pagan world once Christian and now pitted against true Christians, a world where, as Marx put it, All that is solid melts into air.<sup>16</sup> This is most evidently the case for apocalypticists & the dispensational premillennialists & among them. But turning the Christian church into a counter-culture sect is no easy task, and the fundamentalist efforts to do this began to break down in the late 1930s. "Be ye not yoked with unbelievers," [2Cor 6:14] when taken as a universal precept, produced unacceptable conclusions with unsupportable long-term results. And so, after several years of ground work, a meeting was called in St. Louis in 1942 and a second in Chicago in 1943.<sup>17</sup> The delegates who attended were from many of the fundamentalists groups and churches and from the conservatives who were in sympathy with fundamentalist drive toward Christian doctrinal orthodoxy and biblical Christianity.

As I read the founders of the National Association of Evangelicals, they attempted to reverse fundamentalist separatism, cultural as well as ecclesiastical, seeing the culture once again as a

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<sup>16</sup> The phrase is from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (NY: Amereon House, 1977). It is put to brilliant use in explaining bourgeois modernity by Marshall Berman in *All that is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (NY: Viking Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again! The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 141 ff.

mission field and the churches as fields for revival.<sup>18</sup> Neither could be abandoned without violating Christian mission. Those leaders seemed determined to re-enter the intellectual life of the national culture as well as to save its nominally Christian soul. The founders of the NAE and some of the founders of Fuller Seminary had received doctorates from some of the premier secularized universities, and they intended to use the training and social certification available there to forward the cause of the gospel. Perhaps the land was no longer a Christian land but they would not allow it to exist without the presence of a biblical and doctrinally orthodox Christian witness. Setting up over the next few years, not a new church, but a number of supra-church associations such as the Evangelical Theology Society and the Coalition of Christian Colleges signaled their attempt to revive Christian intellectual life and scholarly service to the church and the culture.<sup>19</sup> This evangelical re-engagement of the culture, along with their calculated rejection of fundamentalist ecclesial separatism, parallels what the Catholic bishops announced in *Gaudium et spes*, *Dignitatis humanae* and *Nostra aetate* twenty years later. The evangelicals reversed the failed strategy of fundamentalist separatism, as the fathers of Vatican II, including the last three popes, would reverse the defensive, anti-modernist, anti-Protestant strategy of their predecessors. As a field ripe for the harvest, the modern world, in spite of its Ideological modernity was too attractive for many fundamentalist Protestants and for Tridentine Catholics to turn their backs upon forever. In paying the price for readmission, however, the two found themselves gradually forced into one another=s company by their common opposition to its ideology, modernity. Once again, the enemy of one=s enemy became one=s friend.

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<sup>18</sup> The documents of the meetings are discussed in Shea, *The Lion and the Lamb* as well as in Carpenter.

<sup>19</sup> See George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987).

Admittedly the analogy limps, because evangelicals had no church to reform and no authority over anyone. No evangelical in Chicago in 1953 could say, as a Vatican Council or the bishop of Rome might say, "Come and he comes, or go and he goes, or do this and he does it." What the founders had to change was an attitude and a direction, and they could only do it democratically and by authentic Christian witness. Of course the Catholics were clearer on what they were up to, and did it more swiftly, deftly and in a typical Catholic phalanx B the advantage of a church in which the old boys hold the deeds to every piece of property. But the NAE first generation provided leadership and possibilities which played out over the next fifty years. It was and remains a stunning performance by people with vision and chutzpah.

One of the important decisions made at the founding was for evangelicals to stop insulting one another over doctrinal differences, and to cool the rhetoric about the mainline Protestant churches and their members. If you are to end separatism, you must drop its rhetoric. Speak respectfully of one another and to the "others" B though the founders= theological judgment of liberal errors was perhaps as severe as those made by J. Gresham Machen himself. These new evangelicals even looked forward to some limited sorts of dialogue and cooperation. After all, if the culture was to be engaged, so too must those "others" in the culture who thought of themselves as Christian.

#### *IV An Opening*

Thus a side door opened, at least by implication, toward those other putative Christians, the Roman Catholics. In the NAE meeting itself the Catholic Church was still branded a threat to the gospel, yet given backhanded compliments for its political and social resolution and its unity of purpose. We hear about the Catholic schools and about the attractions of ritual, and about its strong, if unbiblical, sense of authority, but we hear nothing about the papal anti-Christ, nor do we hear about Satan prowling about in a Roman collar, about Jesuits lurking in the shadows. The apocalyptic rhetoric is restrained all round, but its absence is particularly note-worthy in reference to the Catholic Church. The founders were not of a mind to allow a hot-wired

millennialism and its associated desperate anti-Catholicism to obscure their unity of purpose in re-addressing the gospel to modern culture.

The problem that mainline and liberal Protestants had with the Catholic Church over the decades preceding Vatican II had been chiefly the implications of the old Constantinian Catholicism for a democratic social and political order. The renunciation of the Catholic dream of Christendom at Vatican II made a change in Catholic-Protestant relations relatively easy in the years after the Council. The mainliners and liberals had been gradually softening the Reformation dogmatic concerns for well over a century, at least according to their more orthodox brethren.

But the change in Catholic-conservative evangelical relations has taken longer, is still by no means secure, and is most certainly not universally accepted on the evangelical side. Just as Archbishop Lefebvre rose the flag of the Council of Trent against the ecumenical bent of recent popes, so there are evangelicals who plant their feet firmly on the shoulders of Luther and Calvin.<sup>20</sup> Many are devoted to what they call *AReformation Principles*<sup>®</sup> and see absolutely no change on the Catholic side on those foundational doctrines. In fact a few have written with nostalgia for the doctrinal clarity of Tridentine Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> The Catholic leopard may have had *a* political manicure, but it has not changed its doctrinal spots so far as they are

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<sup>20</sup> William Dinges, *In Defense of Truth and Tradition: Catholic Traditionalism in America* (South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> John A. Armstrong, *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), especially the essay by Robert Strimple, 85-118. Also R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995); and John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Protestants and Catholics: Do They Now Agree?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995).

concerned, and so they charge that the evangelical signatories to ECT have betrayed the Reformation and that the bishops at the Vatican Council were little more than skilled morticians.

The evangelicals who advocate dialogue and cooperation with Catholics fully recognize the doctrinal differences, so far as I can see. As for the immediate pressure bringing on new conversation among evangelicals and Catholics, I would point to this: if the evangelicals in 1943 and if the Catholics in 1965 shifted from a sectarian stance toward the culture on the issue of respect for political and religious liberty, they are destined to find themselves sitting at the table with former opponents. If one does not adopt that attitude of respect, one can have a table to all to oneself. For those who will not enter the dialogue, that very same separation from error which powered the religious side of the Reformation, is top priority again. Good luck to them!!

It seems to me that both sides -- evangelicals and Roman Catholics -- effected this unexpected change in attitude and strategy toward the modern world, and, without saying so, toward its ideology, modernity. The change was not initially or primarily toward one another but toward the culture and only then toward one another. Both were giving up their distinct versions of the ideal of Christendom and nurturing another sort of hope in mission. What both strongly react against, before and after their swing events, is religious Modernism's denial of the supernatural and Post-modernism's cognitive relativism. What they both accepted is modernity's proclamation of the human subject's freedom of conscience as a public fact and in public law, and an end to the Christian churches' directive control of culture. For both changes I am grateful.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> William M. Shea, "A Vote of Thanks to Voltaire..." in *A Catholic Modernity: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James L. Heft (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39-64.



