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MODERNITY AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

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[Note: In the original text, the notes are printed as endnotes on pp. 18-19. In this version the notes are supplied as footnotes, hence the text ends at the top of p. 18.]

In the twentieth century, especially since the second world war, social scientists generally discuss the development of Asia, Africa, South America, and the “underdeveloped” parts of the rest of the world, under the theme of modernization. This means that these social scientists, and their counterparts in the governments and economic enterprises of western civilization, look upon the evolution in the nonwestern world in the light of a movement *from* the particular historical phase it has reached *to* the stage of “progress” which the industrialized countries in Europe and North America have achieved. Modernization is the process of incorporating the attainments of western civilization.

In this essay I would like to focus briefly on the concept of modernity — its spiritual roots and contents, its agents, and its consequences.

INTRODUCTION

Since modernization is a matter of development within and between civilizations, a few comments about the meaning and texture of “civilization” are in order. One of the definitions of this term in Webster’s unabridged *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* reads as follows: “the whole of the advances of human culture and aspirations beyond the purely animal level.” Apart from the question whether it is proper to speak of an “animal level” in human existence, this definition suffices for my purposes. It brings to the fore the important question as to what accounts for “advances” in human culture and aspirations. The proponents of modernization have an explicit answer to this question. The content of this answer demands thoughtful analysis. My own approach to the question of what constitutes an advance in civilization can be explained in terms of three interlocking “layers” within civilizations. These are the layers of religion, culture, and society. Three definitions, taken from the same dictionary, are helpful here.

Religion; “the personal commitment to and serving of God or a god with worshipful devotion, conduct in accord with divine commands especially as found in accepted sacred writings or declared by authoritative teachers, a way of life recognized as incumbent on true believers, and typically the relating of oneself to an organized body of believers.”

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Culture: “the total pattern of human behavior and its products embodied in thought, speech, action, and artifacts and dependent upon man’s capacity for learning and

transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations through the use of tools, language, and systems of abstract thought.”

Society: “a community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests.”

My thesis is this: (1) religion is the most fundamental factor in the advance or regression of a civilization; (2) religion expresses itself in the matrix of the several cultures that can exist within a single civilization; and (3) the impetus from both religion and a civilization’s cultures is largely accountable for the structuration of the societies that exist simultaneously within a civilization. The main moving force in a civilization therefore is from religion to culture to society.¹ This does not mean that there are no influences from society to culture to religion. But I am concerned here about the fundamental direction. In the light of that concern I dare say that religion is the human condition; it encompasses mankind’s predicament on earth. This embracing character does not belong to culture, society, history, nature, existence, life, labor, evolution, behavior, etc. Due account must be given to the content of these words, but their significance is relative to that of religion.

The most fundamental change in the culture and society of western civilization was the result of a radical redirection in the religion of the West which began five hundred years ago with the Renaissance and of which the defense of modernization is the globally expansive expression. An understanding of modernization therefore presupposes an understanding of this religious redirection.

For more than a thousand years the Christian religion had been the major civilizational force in the West.² This does not mean that elements of Greek and Roman civilizations had not been absorbed by the Christian civilization of the “middle ages.” The absorption of elements from earlier epochs at the level of culture and society was of course necessary to maintain civilizational order. As a matter of fact, at the fundamental religious level the civilization of the middle ages combined in a fascinating synthesis spiritual components from both Biblical and nonbiblical sources — Greek thought, Roman Stoicism, near-eastern gnosticism, etc. The nature-grace framework of the high middle ages, which incorporated especially an Aristotelian understanding of nature, endangered the spiritual authenticity of medieval Christianity itself and thus contributed to the weakening of the religious foundation of Christian civilization and its speedier disintegration in the face of the spirit of modernity — the new religious force that considered [5] itself as the foundation of the culture and of the society in the “modern age.”

ONE. THE NATURE OF MODERNITY

Modernity is the post-Christian religion in the history of the West. It entails the abolition of Christianity. From a formal point of view, modernity in its radical essence *negates* the

¹ See here Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), especially the section on “Christianity and the Meaning of History.”

² See Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950).

religious foundation of Christian civilization and rejects, in a more or less thoroughgoing manner, its Christian culture and society. Moreover, modernity *posits* both an alternative to the Christian religion as well as a more or less thoroughgoing substitute for Christian culture and society. As to the content of what it posits, modernity cannot be understood apart from the content of what it negates. To put it differently, modernity is an inversion of Christianity. In nearly every one of its tenets, modernity is linked to the Christian view of things, but in an inverted manner.³ It turns matters upside down. What are some of its salient features?

1. *Secularity*

Modernity is secular. By this I do not mean its legitimate concern for the *saeculum*, the span of time that men and women spend on earth. In the middle ages, this span of time often did not receive its proper due because of the depreciation of creation in the medieval juxtaposition, in which temporal and worldly matters were often considered merely as stepping stones to eternal and heavenly matters. Nor do I mean by secular what is commonly associated with this term, namely, the emancipation of nonecclesiastical realms from the dominion of the institutional church. These two instances of “secularity” do not at all have to be an expression of the abolition of the Christian religion. Rather, as in the early Reformation period, they could embody more authentic expressions of the biblical spirit.

By describing modernity as secular I have in mind its repudiation of the divine revelation of the truth about reality and the rules about good and evil by which mankind is to live. In many ways the protagonists of modernity are interested not so much in the denial of God’s existence but in the denial of his revelation. As Hannah Arendt once put it, the secularization of the modern age “began with a turning-away, not necessarily from God, but from a god who was the Father of men in heaven.”⁴ God in the modern age is no longer the Father in heaven who reveals his good will for his children on earth. To be sure, the protagonists of modernity in its radicalized unfolding found it increasingly imperative to deny God’s existence, for if he does not exist he certainly cannot reveal. Karl Marx especially insisted on this; for him man and nature are the only existent entities, the only “essential beings.”⁵ But it is not necessary to be an atheist in order to be an agent of the spirit of modernity. What is imperative is the denial of the divine elucidation [6] of truth and the divine explication of what is good for human life.

³ For the theme of inversion in modernity, see Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), and the literature cited in B. Zylstra, “Voegelin on Unbelief and Revolution” in *Een staatsman ter navolging: Groen van Prinsterer herdacht* (A Statesman to Follow: Groen van Prinsterer Commemorated) (The Hague: Educational Centers of the Antirevolutionary Party, The Christian Historical Union, and The Catholic Peoples Party, 1976). pp. 191-200.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 2.

⁵ In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx wrote that socialism “proceeds from the *theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness* of man and nature as the *essence*.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 306. For the position of Marx within modernity, see B. Zylstra, “Karl Marx: Radical Humanist,” *Vanguard*, December 1973, pp. 9-14.

In the place of divinely revealed truth about reality, modernity posits as its substitute autonomous reason, which expressed itself first in the great philosophical systems up to the time of Hegel, but then increasingly in positivistic science as the best instrument to control nature for technical inventions and industrial production. In the measure that positivistic science cannot fulfill the needs of persons, modernity is willing to speak of ideology. But this is purely the individual or collective opinion of the world or the justification of behavior. But this opinion or Justification is not subject to the criterion of truth. Modernity places the content of classical philosophy and revelation in the category of ideology. This content is at best metaphysics, at worst superstition.

In the place of divine revelation about the rules for human life — traditionally referred to as ethics — modernity substitutes the self-sufficiency of the human will, either in its individual or collective expression. Here modernity posits its conception of freedom. In the Christian religion, to be free is to act in accordance with the rules that fit human nature. In modernity, to be free is to act in accordance with rules established by the human will. Rousseau formulated this notion most pointedly. For him freedom is “to obey a law which we prescribe for ourselves.”⁶ In this sense modernity is at once an expression of humanism — man is at the center of the world — and liberalism — “man’s essence is his freedom.”⁷ Because of this assumed essence, modernity in its radicality cannot endure rules that have their origin outside of man’s individual or collective will. The foundation of ethics or “normativity” is drastically altered. The ethics of modernity is one of “values,” that is, individual or collective preferences to guide our behavior. Here, as well as in so many other matters, we can learn from George Grant, one of Canada’s outstanding Christian thinkers. He formulates the difference between classical and modern ethics as follows:

(T)he traditional western view of goodness is that which meets us with an excluding claim and persuades us that in obedience to that claim we will find what we are fitted for. The modern view of goodness is that which is advantageous to our creating richness of life (or, if you like, the popular modern propagandists’ ‘quality of life’).⁸

2. *Nature as object*

A second characteristic of the spirit of modernity is its view of nature. In the revelation of the Scriptures, nature is creation. It consists of an amazing variety of creatures, made “after their kind,” with intrinsic qualities that make human life on earth possible, that are to be unfolded in man’s cultural deeds, and that are to be [7] respected and maintained in their creaturely integrity. In the sacred writings of the Christian religion, nature is not a world to be feared, as if it is inhabited by divine powers and deities which are not subject to the Creator. In this sense nature is demythologized in the Scriptures; and its qualities

⁶ Rousseau. *The Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter VIII.

⁷ George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1959, 1966), in the Introduction of 1966, p. iv.

⁸ George Grant, “‘The Computer Does Not Impose on Us the Ways it Should Be Used’”, in Abraham Rotstein, ed., *Beyond Industrial Growth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 127.

and potentials are opened to man's cultural acts, including his scientific and technical acts.

But in modernity, the creaturely character of nature is done away with. For this creatureliness both directs and limits man's interference with nature. Modernity rejects that direction and these limits, and views nature as the object of man's autonomous will, in his art, his science, his technology, and in his economic exploitation of nature's resources for the satisfaction of his limitless needs. Nature in the Scriptures is the theatre of God's glory. Nature in modernity is the arena of man's Faustian conquest.

Nature is the object of permanent change in accordance with the desires of the human will, by means of science and technique. While the biblical view of reality as dynamic creation provides a basis for science and technology, modernity's conception of nature as object provides a basis for the attempted destruction of nature by means of science and technology. As a matter of fact, it is not inappropriate to say that the very word *nature* is scrapped from the terminology of the modern age. In its place we have *changing process*, which can be directed in one way or another. Even human nature itself does not escape this onslaught of modernity on creaturely stability. Human freedom cannot be limited by a *given* nature of man. Human nature itself must be the object of change. If modern man is to be genuinely free, he must be at liberty to change his own nature, "to remake himself altogether."⁹ Here the Biblical revelation concerning God's creation of the world is inverted so that man becomes a self-creator.¹⁰ The means for this self-creation are man-made means: science, technique, and labor.

3. *Man as instrument*

The implications of this conception of human nature are of course phenomenal. Christian revelation depicts human personality as having its existential, spiritual center in the love of God and fellow-men. Perhaps the most significant casualty of the onslaught on the Christian religion is the elimination of this spiritual center in modernity's understanding of what it means to be human. This does not mean that human nature no longer has this spiritual center in the modern age. Created human nature cannot change. But it does mean that individual persons can be treated as if they are objects without a spiritual center. In its radical excesses, modernity justified the instrumentalization of man, the use of one human being by another as an object.

This potential instrumentalization of man is intensified by the [8] elimination of the faith faculty from the modern view of human experience. Human nature is endowed with the faculty to receive divine revelation and to articulate the content of revelation in confessional symbols or creeds. Since modernity denies the existence of revelation, it cannot present a satisfactory account of this faith faculty, nor of the confessional symbols

⁹ Cf. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 16. For an assessment of Bell's approach to modernity, see B- Zylstra, "A Neoconservative Critique of Modernity," *Christian Scholar's Review* (forthcoming in 1977).

¹⁰ Marx is perhaps the most radical proponent of man's self-creation within the spectrum of modernity. He claimed that "for the socialist man the *entire so-called history of the world* is nothing but the creation of man through human labour," See *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 305.

or creeds or acts of worship that are a normal part of ordinary experience. Because of its intense opposition to revelation, modernity rejects this openness to the divine in human experience and leaves us with a truncated conception of human personality. Every expression of man's faith faculty is reduced to an intellectual proposition or, more likely, the ideological justification of behavior patterns or material acquisition.

For without regard to man's spiritual center, human personality can only be defined in terms of the faculties or functions or aspects of his experience. The center of his personality must be sought in one of these functions, or in a cluster of them. The faith function is eliminated as a possibility. So we are left with the so-called animal functions and with the supra-animal functions, ranging from the analytic to the moral dimension of human personality. Within this range, the debate about the nature of man in the modern age has focused on which aspects are central. In the earlier centuries of the modern age the emphasis fell on the rational-moral faculties; especially with the Enlightenment, man's social functions received a good deal of attention; with Marx the view gained ground that man is an *animal laborans*: and with Darwin it became almost universally accepted that man is a psychobiotic entity. Eric Voegelin describes this process of change in the definition of human nature in these words:

The rapid descent from reason, through technical and planning intellect, to the economic, psychological and biological levels of human nature, as the dominants in the image of man, is a strong contrast to the imposing stability of the Christian anthropology through eighteen centuries. Once the transcendental anchorage is surrendered, the descent from the rational to the animal nature, so it seems, is inevitable.¹¹

The more conservative proponents of modernity tend to defend the rational-moral definition of man, while the so-called progressive elements tend to defend the psychobiotic definition of man. What matters most to us in this mind-body debate is that the defenders of the "body" have won. The satisfaction of the body's material needs is given priority as "values" in our culture. And the institutions of society, notably the educational, industrial, and political, are restructured to make that satisfaction possible. Nearly every one of the major issues in the realms of education, industry, and government presupposes the primacy of man's material wants. The inability of the leaders in these sectors of society to recognize [9] themselves as tools of the idols of a materialistic civilization is one of the clearest symptoms of the profound spiritual crisis of the modern age in its contemporary manifestation.

4. *Paradise regained: secular eschatology*

Biblical revelation instructs us about mankind's path through time as beginning with the *alpha* of God's good creation, disturbed by man's sinful rebellion against the Creator, restored in the right direction through the Father's redemptive acts in Christ Jesus, and moving towards the *omega* of the final consummation. As we saw, modernity rejects the *alpha* of God's good creation. Modernity's inverted view of history is therefore a secular,

¹¹ Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, p. 13.

immanentized version of the movement from sin to redemption and consummation. Man's creaturely finitude is equated with his "sinful" predicament, from which he must be liberated through self-redemption, by means of the trinity of science, technique and production, in order to regain paradise lost. The happiness to be found in that paradise depends upon the particular view of man that commands the attention of the proponents of modernity. We saw that material happiness is the dominant motive in the later phases of the modern age. The pursuit of material abundance is therefore the most powerful current within modernity, proceeding as it does from Hobbes's conception of man's avoidance of death as the *summum malum* — the greatest evil — to Locke's view of property, Adam Smith's conception of man as a bartering being, Marx's *animal laborans*, and the contemporary illusion of an inalienable right to leisure. In this movement towards the acquisition of material bliss, modernity locates *the progress* of its civilization. And in its radicality it will do nearly anything to accomplish that progress.

5. Revolution

If we now briefly place before us the main tenets of modernity, we will immediately recognize its revolutionary impact on the existence of civilizations, western or otherwise. Modernity *negates* the relevance of God's existence, the enlightenment of revelations, the given structure of created entities (natural or social), the spiritual essence of man, his openness to God, the significance of cultural traditions, and the meaningful stability of the social order with its institutions of marriage, family, church and state. Modernity *posits* the autonomous human will as the final source of "values," technical rationality in science as the most fitting instrument in extracting nature's resources in industrial production, and the acquisition of material abundance for man's bodily needs as the goal of progress in history.

I choose the word *revolutionary* to describe the impact of modernity advisedly. The proponents of modernity have given their allegiance to a post-Christian, in many instances today to a [10] posthumanistic "religion" as the foundation for a radical redirection in western civilization, which is increasingly becoming the civilization of this planet. This redirection entails a turnabout in the cultural and societal structurings of every existent civilization. And it must be admitted that modernity has been immensely successful in the realization of its revolutionary intent. In the dismantling of the old and in the erection of a new cultural and social order, the adherents of modernity are of course not equally radical. There are recognizable gradations among them which in effect constitute the occasions for many of the battles within western civilization, philosophically, artistically, economically, politically, and militarily. The content of these gradations — usually described as left, center, and right — of course depends upon the local cultural and social situation. The content is different in the United States, Canada, England, Poland, China, Chile, Israel, Nigeria, etc.

A second, related point is that the revolutionary impact of modernity is not the same everywhere. The modern age does not begin at the same time in every society. Roughly speaking, it began in northern Italy in the late fifteenth century, in France in the sixteenth, in England and Holland in the seventeenth, in Germany and the United States in the eighteenth, in Russia and South America in the nineteenth, in China, India and Japan in

the twentieth century. The first great impact of modernity in the Arab world is occurring today, with the undermining of Islamic religion and culture as a consequence of the spread of technological materialism paid for by oil monies. A similar fate seems to be in store for the nations on the African continent, which, having shed the strictures of western colonialism and moving away from their indigenous religions, appear to be limited in their cultural and societal choices to the varying options of modernity. The representatives of these options are doing their utmost to help “modernize” the nonwestern world, as in VietNam and Angola.

Thirdly, though modernity is revolutionary especially with respect to the religious foundations of civilization, it has not succeeded in eliminating Christianity in the modern age, certainly not in those countries where the conservative wing of modernity is dominant (Spain, South America), nor in those nations where the moderate modernists are in control (Western Europe, Great Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia). Even the most radical expression of modernism (in Russia, eastern Europe, and China) has not obliterated religion entirely, as the witness of Solzhenitsyn shows. For the nature of man, though manipulable by the political and economic ideologies and the experiments of the social and medical “scientists,” is not so readily revised. But it is of course true that the condition of individual men and women can be changed — from life to death. Our era has witnessed that too, especially in the atrocities performed during 1914-18 and 1939-1945.

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This confronts us directly with our next theme: the civilizational agents of the spirit of modernity.

TWO. THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

Empires are the main civilizational carriers of the spirit of modernity. An empire is a power constellation in which one state imposes its political sovereignty on peoples and nations outside its territory. Empires are not new with the modern age. Before the Christian era, the Mediterranean basin witnessed the rapid succession of the Persian, Macedonian, and Roman empires, which Eric Voegelin describes as apparently “not organized societies at all, but organizational shells that will expand indefinitely to engulf the former concrete societies.” An empire is an “indefinite expansion of a power shell devoid of substance.”¹² The introduction of the Christian religion into the Mediterranean basin contributed to the breakup of the then existing imperial power constellation and for a thousand years prevented the rise of new empires. With the loss of the civilizational influence of the Christian church in western Europe and the rise of new nation-states, the possibility for the development of new imperial constellations became concrete. Because the spirit of modernity is one of limitless expansion, the imperial structure suits its realization best. In view of this the modern age has been one of imperial expansion and intensification of conflicts among nation-states with imperial goals, today equipped with nuclear arms.

¹² Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 117.

Because the territory of Europe was small and heavily populated, and because the military arsenal at the disposal of the new nation-states was relatively crude and immobile, the imperial goals were pursued not so much within Europe as in the newly discovered continents of the Americas, Asia and Africa. Here the seafaring nations of Spain, Portugal, Holland and England enjoyed great advantages. They were the initial instruments of the Faustian spirit of world conquest which gave them access to riches simply not available in a preindustrial epoch within their homeland territories. But proximity to the world's oceans was mainly a convenience. The spirit of modernity will cause imperial pursuits almost immediately after each outbreak. Only a decade after the French Revolution we see Napoleon attempting to subject Europe to his domination. With the seizure of military power on the part of Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler, we are confronted with imperial pursuits and conflicts which, because they were fought largely within the limited space of Europe, inevitably climaxed in the tragedies of World War Two.

The thesis that empires are the major carriers of the spirit of modernity brings all sorts of questions to the fore. If empires are not new with the modern age, what exactly is "modern" about this [12] epoch?¹³ What explains the loss of imperial dynamism on the part of Spain and Portugal? Is Japan's imperial role in the twentieth century a result of its contact with the West or a consequence of the secularization of its indigenous religions? Moreover, even if one accepts the crucial role of empires, what about other carriers of the spirit of modernity, such as nonimperial states, educational institutions, the professions, labour unions, the media, the secularized churches, the political parties, and especially the industrial and financial corporations? These questions are important, but I will not deal with them here. I will instead limit myself to one facet of the imperial phenomenon, namely, the role of the United States of America.

1. The stability of the center

The USA is an extraordinary phenomenon in world history. How are we to understand its magnitude? Earlier I spoke of the three major gradations or directions in modernity: the radical left, the moderate center, and the conservative right. The USA is the vanguard, not of modernity, but of its moderate center. Because of its moderate stance within the "spiritual" spectrum of modernity, the USA never so much as flirted with a radical, "once-and-for-all" revolution, which leaves the cultural heritage of the past in shambles and, because of the resultant social chaos and anarchy, establishes the need for a centralized dictatorship that occupied the seat of power, as in Paris after the French revolution in the 1790s, in Moscow in the 1920s, in Berlin in the 1930s, and in Peking in the 1950s.

Why did the USA opt for a moderate, centrist stance within modernity? I will only venture a few suggestions. The main link between the USA and Europe was England. Ever since the time of the Reformation, Anglo-Saxon culture dealt with the spirit of the modern age in terms of moderation and accommodation. There always was sufficient continuity in cultural institutions and social structures to maintain civilizational stability.

¹³ Voegelin asks this question in *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 7f.

But at the same time there was a sufficient degree of change in religion, philosophy, science, technical inventions, and economic development (both via the colonial regime abroad and industrial production at home) to satisfy most of the material needs of the masses as well as the acquisitive demands of the socially powerful segment of the population. Because of the gradual absorption of the spirit of modernity (except for a brief hectic period in the seventeenth century which led to Cromwell's republic), England provided the proper setting for a slow but nonetheless fundamental political revolution and the ideal atmosphere for the industrial revolution. The French radical *philosophes*, in preaching freedom, equality and fraternity, prepared for the fratricidal practices of the guillotine after 1789. Meanwhile, the English scientists, inventors, and entrepreneurs set [13] in motion an industrial apparatus that provided labour for an uprooted proletariat, employed the colonies as suppliers of raw materials and as markets for the finished products, and thus substantially increased the material wealth of the nation. Rousseau's *Social Contract* is a radical expression of modernity; Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is a moderate expression. Rousseau continues to inspire modernity's left wing. Adam Smith proved to be pragmatically effective.

The spirit of gradual accommodation at the depth-level of religious direction in Great Britain accounts for the almost imperceptible shift from the Christian view of man as a being with a spiritual center to the modern view of man as a psychobiological entity with material needs. But this shift occurred nonetheless, as the entire tradition of British thought tellingly testifies, from Thomas Hobbes to David Hume to Charles Darwin to Bertrand Russell.

The USA inherited the Anglo-Saxon centrist accommodation with the spirit of modernity. Here the puritan origins of the American mind should not lead us to romantic idealizations. The spirituality of the late Puritans, as exemplified in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), was in itself already a departure from biblical Christianity, in its view of redemption — the pursuit of individual soul salvation — and in its concomitant depreciation of creation. When this individualistic pursuit of salvation became secularized, as depicted in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and concretized in the life of a person like Benjamin Franklin, the realm of creation returned as the object of rational-scientific inquiry and the arena for the pursuit of life, liberty, and property.¹⁴ In this light it is not a surprise that the Founding Fathers of 1776 were much more at ease with the "Christian" reasonableness of John Locke than with the radicalism of Rousseau and Diderot. Locke provided precisely what the eighteenth century centrist within modernity desired: rational religion and the rationale for property.

But why then did the USA develop into an empire when its cultural ancestor declined, when the British Empire collapsed? There are many reasons. I will mention a few. In the first place, we should never forget that the United States is the only major nation whose entire history falls within the modern age. It has no roots *of its own* that nourish it from the premodern era. In its self-modernization, the USA did not have to deal with long religious traditions, a rich cultural matrix, and an interlocking web of societal bonds. The

¹⁴ For a discussion of the relationship between modernism and Puritanism, see B. Zylstra, "A Neoconservative Critique of Modernity."

USA could almost start its history — and its empire — from scratch. The USA is in continuity with western civilization, but the break modernity brought into that civilization was most easily accomplished in the “new world.”

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2. *Revolution with a mission*

If indeed there were few historical roots from the past that stood in the way of America’s permanent revolution, what factors did the thirteen colonies have to cope with? The need of the hour was, of course, political severance from England. The American Revolution, as an historical event, was quite different from the French Revolution, since it entailed the declaration of independence on the part of a people that could well manage its own political affairs. The American Revolution, though of world historical importance, did not inflict the wounds in a civilization that its French counterpart did. The Declaration of Independence is a beautiful exhibit of the moderate position within modernity. It fused Christian reminiscence, reasonable deism, and the pursuit of happiness into a single creed.¹⁵ After initial tension among different factions in the thirteen states, an excellently functioning constitution was adopted in 1789. There was a growing consciousness that what had transpired among the few million citizens of the United States was to be of immense future significance. Even the moderate George Washington, in a letter to Lafayette, expressed this exuberant consciousness: “We have sown a seed of Liberty and Union that will germinate by and by over the whole earth. Some day the United States of Europe will be constituted, modelled after the United States of America- The United States will be the legislator of all nations.”¹⁶ Here we find an early description of the civilizational mission which one day the USA would strive for in the modern age.

3. *An imperial home base*

But that civilizational role could only be assumed on an imperial basis at home. This none of the European nation-states was able to establish because of the limited space in Europe. It is possible for the United States, Russia, China and, in the future, perhaps India. Until today, the USA has made the most of this possibility, because the new land was inhabited by a new people. The native Indian population in North America was sparse, and could thus be killed off or placed in harmless reservations. This solution to the native problem was impossible to implement in Europe’s colonies in Asia and Africa, and considerably more difficult in South America. (With respect to the matter of a new population, only New Zealand and Australia are parallels to the USA.) This meant that in the expansion of the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, it never had to cope with significant and legitimate nationalist aspirations of native people which were a major factor in the collapse of the Dutch, British, and French empires since the second world war.

¹⁵ See Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932); and Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁶ Quoted in Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, pp. 181-182.

Slavery was another factor in the development of the American empire. While Christianity had contributed to the diminution of [15] slavery during the middle ages, it is amazing to note how readily the spirit of modernity, despite its notion of the self as freedom, had reabsorbed this inhuman institution to advance its economic foundation of wealth.¹⁷ The European-based empires had never introduced slavery into their homeland economies, limiting it to their colonies. But when the thirteen British colonies became independent, they did not consider the negroes as recipients of the newly won freedoms. They were maintained as slaves, who contributed substantially to agricultural growth between 1750 and 1860, when the slave population numbered nearly four million. This clearly gave the homeland economy of the USA a distinct advantage during the first century of its history as an independent nation.

This labour force was expanded immensely by what is probably the most important migration of peoples in human history: between 1820 and 1920 approximately thirty-five million immigrants entered the USA, mainly from old Europe. I believe that the meaning of this migration for the establishment of a “new society” in the history of western civilization generally escapes us. In any case, the social sciences, which deny the spiritual core of human personality and “neutrally” proclaim the “values” of cultural change and social mobility, obstruct an understanding of the meaning of this phenomenal displacement of persons. A first-generation immigrant, like myself, is as a rule least equipped to fathom the religious, cultural, and social uprooting of this migration into the permanent revolution of the “new world.” But I am beginning to sense what George Grant is saying to all of us whose ancestors left Europe to settle on this side of the Atlantic:

Those who know themselves to be North Americans know they are not Europeans. The platitude cannot be too often stated that the U.S. is the only society which has no history (truly its own) from before the age of progress. English-speaking Canadians, such as myself, have despised and feared the Americans for the account of freedom in which their independence was expressed, and have resented that other traditions of the English-speaking world should have collapsed before the victory of that spirit; but we are still enfolded with the Americans in the deep sharing of having crossed the ocean and conquered the new land. All of us who came made some break in that coming. The break was not only the giving up of the old and the settled, but the entering into the majestic continent which could not be ours in the way that the old had been. It could not be ours in the old way because the making of it ours did not go back before the beginning of conscious memory. The roots of some communities in eastern North America go back far in continuous love for their place, but none of us can be called autochthonous, because in all there is some consciousness of making the land their own. It could not be ours also [16] because the very intractibility, immensity and extremes of the new land required that its meeting with mastering Europeans be a battle of subjugation. And after that battle we had

¹⁷ John Locke, who has profoundly influenced the Founding Fathers in their centrist position with respect to their view of the social order, had also provided a convenient defense of slavery in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689).

no long history of living with the land before the arrival of the new forms of conquest which came with industrialism.¹⁸

4. *Modernity's new people*

By leaving Europe and settling here we left behind the better part of the arsenal to withstand the post-Christian spirit of modernity which, in its moderate expression, was the mainspring of the American way of life. The great majority of us did not come here for religious reasons. We came here for economic reasons. In this migration we lost our spiritual and cultural roots. And within a generation or two we learned to practise our religion and to maintain our cultural identity within the confines of the numerous sects and ethnic groups.¹⁹

Modernity will not permit the claims of religion to have an effect on the public realm. The claims of religion are radically privatized into personal value systems or ideologies. The migration of the European peoples into the USA goes a long way to explain the peaceful, nonviolent accommodation between Christianity and modernity. On this side of the ocean we do not fight religious wars, either by arms or by intellect. In the necessary societal distinction between the public realm and the private realm, this migration enhanced the allocation of religion to the private realm, with the convenient result that the claims of modernity could be pursued unhindered in the public realm. At the same time, the new immigrants did make an indispensable contribution to the public realm. In their readiness to join the pursuit of happiness which the “new world” promised the “old,” they supplied the labor necessary to conquer the West and to work in the factories that began to dot the land in ever increasing numbers after the Civil War.

The United States of America — the immensity of its land, the riches of its earth, the wide horizons toward the Pacific, the relative peace at its frontiers, a “proper” mix of social stability and mobility, a sense of manifest destiny, a spirit of self-determination and self-reliance to achieve that destiny (“God helps those who help themselves”), the proof of progress visibly present in the creation of a great agricultural and industrial apparatus — the USA had at its disposal just about all the ingredients needed to solve the economic problem of modernity, namely, the establishment and maintenance of a system that can produce the material goods considered essential for man’s earthly happiness. The dynamism unleashed by the Faustian spirit of modernity requires channeling in a dependable system of expanding economic production. This the USA has managed to achieve in its bicentennial pilgrimage, and it has done so in a manner hitherto unparalleled in the history of the human race.

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¹⁸ George Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), p. 17.

¹⁹ Here again it was John Locke who provided moderate modernity with the rationale for the adjustment of religion to the overriding claims of secularity. See his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689). The United States Supreme Court decisions interpreting the First Amendment of the Constitution are the best example of the legitimation of post-Christian modernity as the civil religion of the public realm.

CONCLUSION

The accumulation of economic and political power at its home base has given the USA a superiority which no other nation-state has enjoyed in the modern age. When the crisis of the Civil War was passed, the process of industrialization at home and expansion of influence abroad increased rapidly. Already in the nineteenth century the USA began to play an important role in South America and the Caribbean, not by a direct seizure of governmental power but by economic dominance protected by political power, often in cooperation with the economic, political, and military circles in these foreign countries. The US involvement in the Philippine war at the turn of the century revealed its expansion of interest in the Pacific arena. Its influence in Europe increased markedly by its participation in two world wars. Since 1945 the USA gradually moved into the vacuum of power left by the disintegration of the British Empire.

The structure of the American empire is different from that of earlier empires. It has not been necessary to plant the American flag on foreign soil in order to guarantee the imposition of American will. That imposition was never total, since it was checked by nationalist aspirations on the part of the recently decolonized areas as well as by the expansion of Russian imperial intents. Moreover, even though the European states have lost nearly all of their colonies since 1945 they did not lose all of the influence abroad. But in a general way one can say that the USA is the vanguard of western industrial civilization, which relates to the third world in these ways: the third world functions as a supplier of raw materials not sufficiently available within the industrial homelands; the third world functions as a market for the finished products of western industry; the industrialized countries, again with the US at its center, controls the availability of capital, technology, and managerial know-how for the internal development of third-world countries. There are, of course, numerous exceptions to these key marks of economic imperialism; but they reveal the fundamental structure or pattern.

The result of this economic imperial structure is the infringement on the internal political sovereignty of the third world-nations. Wherever the imperial “power shell devoid of substance” (Voegelin) expands, justice cannot flourish. The spiritual, religious, cultural, social, and national aspirations of nations outside of the heartland of the imperial structure are adjusted to the economic demands of the imperial center. This is the case to a great extent even in the relation between a relatively strong nation like Canada and the USA.

Empires are the carriers of the post-Christian spirit of modernity. Today we see that nearly the entire world is becoming modernized, under the guidance of the USA, western Europe, and the USSR. The modernization — with its industrialization and homogenization — [18] is our justification for the “progressive” role of the imperial regimes. This role must be subjected to a radical critique by members of the imperial centers. The heart of that critique must focus on the very assumptions of modernity as to what it means to be human on this earth. The disentanglement of Christians from the various options that modernity offers — right, center, left — is the first step of those whose path lies between the alpha of creation, the cross of Calvary, and the omega of the consummation.