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**The New Tridentine Moment in Global Politics?:
Civil and Sectarian Religion and the United States in Crisis**

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Reconciling 'The Three Narratives' — Art, Science, and Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

The New Tridentine Moment in Global Politics?: Civil and Sectarian Religion and the United States in Crisis

The end of the Cold War, which left the Soviet Union in a centrifugal state, concealed the fact that the United States enjoyed only a compromised victory. Since the destruction of the Berlin Wall the social, political, economic, and strategic vectors of the United States have led some scholars and commentators to describe the collective malaise as in terms reminiscent of the decline of the Roman Empire, or even worse, but the argument advanced in this paper is that there is compelling evidence to warrant a comparison with the period 1470 - 1530, the period of the Renaissance Popes. When the need for reform within the Western Church of the Latin Rite became so palpable, yet so frustrated, it provoked schism, and schism in turn was followed by widespread intolerance and war. Specifically, this paper argues that there are strong congruencies between the early period and the structural pathologies now afflicting the United States and they range from internal political economic corruption which fails its citizens to ambivalences and obsessions regarding the Middle East and Islam. Overall, the argument suggests that, failing a Tridentine reform project, the prospects for the immediate future are, once again, recklessness, intolerance, and the wars which beset declining great powers.

The New Tridentine Moment in Global Politics?: Civil and Sectarian Religion and the United States in Crisis

Invitation

Let us speak of a frightening prospect - the Great Power in decline, not only decline but in a state of moral torpor and rampant corruption, given over to the forces that are destroying it, and will eventually destroy it unless they are arrested and defeated. And frightening because Great Powers have long been the embodiment of Dylan Thomas's famous exhortation to "not go gentle into that good night," but rather, and we should seriously note, "burn and rave at close of day."

The beginning of this decline has no incontestable date but there seems there is broad agreement that, however long a gestation is advanced, the last sixty years provide unequivocal evidence that its trajectory is unsustainable, not least because its principal Orders (religious, education, political, economic, military-strategic) are in an advanced state of decomposition. Above all, it is in default of its essential purpose, which is nothing less than the salvation of those it governs from the world of threats and menaces.

Its Judaeo-Christian Religion – once a source of civil pride and strength, and an inspiration to many, is now asserted stridently, aggressively and mercilessly – but is neither a moral beacon to others, nor a cause of unification domestically. The wars it requires and justifies are a strategic demonstration less of strength and more of strategic incompetence and military impotence. They serve only to remind all who observe and can think that they are essentially, and truthfully defined as imperial wars and genocide.

Notwithstanding the opprobrium and ruinous costs of these, imperial expansion, an obsession with Islam, and endless war are to the fore. By its own decrees, the Great Power is faultless: all such strife is the result of the world failing to understand what the Great Power knew by revelation – that religious belief was imperative, that peace between peoples of different levels of

enlightenment was possible if, and only if, belief in the One God was unified. Then, and only then, would life on earth reflect the true order of the Divine Plan – what the ancient Greeks knew as *cosmopolis*.

To this end, it was necessary to define and proclaim those things that had to be formally set apart, banished, exiled or excommunicated – in other words, those deserving of the solemn theological curse known as *anathema*. Ironically, in light of the extant situation, there was general agreement on the inclusions in this category: atheists, pagans, heretics, polytheists, Jews, sexual deviants, and those who would, in any way whatsoever, challenge the unity which had been forged under the Great Power.

It had also been necessary to test the faith of believers by forcing them to concentrate on, reflect on certain mysteries which were essentially incomprehensible, even preposterous, to the human mind. Far from being an exercise in futility, such an effort was thought necessary to introduce all followers to the understanding that faith, not information or scientific rationalisation is the prime requirement for salvation. Science, of course, had its place and was recognised as a sophisticated way of knowing God and Nature; indeed, faith could accommodate science in so many ways but it was entirely unacceptable that it should challenge faith, let alone usurp it. In that way, it was held, lay damnation.

Political life is scandalous and the moreso the higher in the realms of power that one looks. Where representative government is the issue, representation has come to mean “of a privileged few,” and where government is required by law to be accountable and responsible, it simply is not.

Education, even of the basic kind predicated on functional literacy, is denied to many in direct relationship to their proximity to poverty. Even Higher education, thought to be mandatory for those responsible for governance in the system, is scarce. For the most part, instruction in a few techniques has supplanted education - the universities, in particular, being more concerned to align themselves within to the needs of interests without. In the process they

lose themselves in a preoccupation with the pursuit of commercial, political and financial favour. The predictable result is universities almost totally unconcerned with education as a moral enterprise and their ancient warrant to help build the ethical and moral character of students.

Where the pursuit and creation of wealth are concerned the system is, in a word, unjust. Money, and the power it buys are deployed ostentatiously and those enriched are encouraged to believe that their status is a token of God's favour. Thanks to the universities, theories are propounded whereby the inequalities in society are naturalised and legitimised – little thought being given that the poor and the underprivileged are not poor and underprivileged because they lack the intelligence, or cannot keep up with the sophisticated understandings of the world reached by their superiors, but because they have been deliberately excluded from their just share in the common wealth. Exacerbating this situation are processes, ordained by law (but ridiculous nevertheless) in which public goods are acquired by private interests for their personal edification, and beyond this, the economy is dominated by a system of transactions defined not only by their Byzantine complexity but their inability to relate to anything real, the consequence of which is catastrophic collapse when reproached by their inherent contradictions.

And finally, war – unsuccessful and endless - and both consequences proceed directly from the inversion of the Great Power's foundational purpose. Promiscuous and deceitful alliances contribute to this, but the underlying *pons asinorum* is the Great Power's delusion that it is ordained by God to order the world and that all who oppose it are the incarnation of evil. It therefore thinks of itself as divinely ordained and claims an indulgence to act in ways that only ensure that it will be resisted. By the twisted logic of this delusion resistance can only be regarded as insolence to God requiring great and terrible punishment, the execution of which creates a wilderness of enemies, restive subordinates awaiting their opportunities to rebel, and perpetual strife.

Reform is, therefore, imperative, and has even been recognised. Indeed,

the need for it, and attempts to realise it have a provenance as old as the corruption itself. Moreover, many among the masses, and a few among the governing elite moved to address it with the urgency it required but without salutary effect. The problem for them is that, corrupt as the system was, and remains, it serves certain interests who, regardless of their debauch, retain enough power and control enough devices to frustrate, mitigate or simply veto all attempts to move against them. The consequences are clear: hope, faith, and belief all betrayed, and an alienated population. The prospects, historically, for such a chronic state of affairs would have to include revolution in one form or another – schism, the overthrow of the system, or at least the leadership responsible for it.

Yet revolution is not in sight. For all the omens that it should be imminent, there are others that indicate that nothing more than eleemosynary reform is in the offing from within – a position entirely consistent with an identity that holds it has nothing to answer for in the first place. This does not mean that revolution is out of the question, of course; rather, for now, it means that the most likely sources will be either the catastrophic collapse of the Great Power from its own internal contradictions, or externally, the refusal of the world beyond to indulge the Great Power any longer. Suggestively, this is to live the present as an extended moment between the lightning and the thunder.

The scene described to this point has been kept at a hopefully inoffensive level of generalization for the purpose of exploring two historical parallels, the first of which, in its unfolding, changed the world, but not without an extended period of war and destruction which, even when it had passed, continued to disfigure global politics. The second is yet to reveal itself in full, but already its portents are ominous. As regards the former, the description applies to the Catholic Church in the period leading up to the Protestant Reformation, and most particularly to the period 1470-1530; the latter, notwithstanding the lack of a culminating event, refers to the condition of the United States and its deterioration in all aspects of its own identity and power, especially since the end

of World War II. In both cases the sixty years or so that are the main, but not exclusive, focus are the periods in which the chronic accelerated into the acute, and change in the form of radical - which is to say revolutionary - reform displaced the clamour for the more mundane thorough improvement by way of the abandonment of wrongdoing and the restoration of observances and standards internally. For so many in the late 15th Century the established order was beyond was corrupt and contemptible and, more to the point, a real danger to the way they lived their daily lives, and ultimately, to their salvation. Separation, renewal and rediscovery became the spirit of the age. In these early years of the 21st Century the same anxieties are being lived and, provoking the same questions, but without, as yet, the enthusiasm, imagination and courage to effect revolutionary change. To phrase it through precedent, the United States now exists in a Tridentine Moment, defined as the immediate period in which the chronic corruption in the orders of the American Republic are manifest so acutely and profoundly that reform is much discussed but little addressed, as though, like the Church of the 16th Century, their demise awaits for open dissent prefacing schism among the Western powers and allies, and belatedly, their own Council of Trent. For now, however, the outstanding questions relate to what will constitute this event; when, if ever, that might be, and how it might arise.

To equate the Catholic Church and its conditions which led to the Protestant Reformation with the contemporary United States will seem to some an impossible religious, historical and political traverse. Indeed, the *perception* is conceded, but not the legitimacy of the comparison because the conventional wisdom embedded in popular understandings of the United States are are simply that – more conventional than wise, and conducive of an administratively sanctioned and policy-willed historical darkness.

Indication

In this milieu, to speak even to colleagues, senior and junior, of a Tridentine Moment, of a second Babylonian Captivity, of the possible relevance

of the Renaissance Popes, the Borgias, the Medicis, and the Della Roveres, of the execution of Giordano Bruno, Johann Tetzl, the financial reasons for Purgatory, the emergence of a “papal presidency,” and their possible relevance to the decline of the US over the last several decades, is to begin to understand the cave of ignorance which is forming in and around the University-as-Institution. Nevertheless, my approach is to recover a little history for the purpose of unlocking the politics and strategies of the present - but the key in question is not only a religious establishment, but the Catholic Church, the antithesis of everything America thinks it is. But this is a fable: in the world that America has significantly fashioned, it is something else as well – a costly delusion which allows a pretence to superiority which cannot be sustained before an intelligent and critical audience, or in a landscape of fact.

By way of just one example, I have waited in vain for many years for someone at an academic conference, or an associated forum, to make the link between - on the one hand, the US position that it holds torture to be legally proscribed and morally reprehensible, yet, through the device of “extraordinary rendition,” has no difficulty in sending selected prisoners, clothed in orange overalls, held without legal representation, accused anonymously in many cases, interrogated, maltreated, and even tortured, and then deported illegally to another country where, regardless of their guilt or innocence, they are without legal counsel, tortured, and frequently murdered in the process (such deaths being excused as an avoidable consequence of the need to combat a clear and present danger to an imperial project requiring uniformity of belief and practice - and on the other hand, the historical precedent set by the Spanish Inquisition.

Is there not a remarkably unnerving congruence between current US policy as outlined, and the practices in Spain during the 15th and 16th centuries? Under Tomas de Torquemada, suspects were arrested without divulging the reasons for doing so, charged on the basis of testimony by anonymous witnesses, or information which had not been communicated to the accused. They were made aware that torture was a definite prospect and, if insufficiently

forthcoming, actually tortured in their own account, and / or for the purpose of confessing knowledge of the crimes of others.¹ Consider, too, that access to legal advice for defence was available but the advocates in question were no more than officials of the Inquisition, dependent upon, and working with it. Those convicted were forced to wear either a yellow or a black (depending on the sentence) penitential garment -- the *sanbenito* – which signified infamy, wearing which those in black - the condemned - were “relaxed” to the civil authorities to be executed – the Church being legally and morally proscribed from torture and execution.² The specific, sanctioned use by certain US interrogators, of waterboarding also has its origins in the Spanish Inquisition – where it was initially known as the *toca* (and subsequently *tortura del agua* – water torture) only raises further questions concerning the lack of historical association by scholars.

Provocation

Within the context of empirical evidence which points to the advent of a Tridentine Moment for the United States, the first general argument is that America’s civil religion - for immediate purposes an amalgam of moral and spiritual foundations, folk religion and political culture, all of which inform daily the spectrum of life from the mundane to grand strategy – has not only arrogated to itself the status and many of the claims of the early Christian Church, but also that, over time, it has adopted the habits of mind and action that characterized the Catholic Church in the six decades leading up to the Protestant Reformation. [By “Catholic,” “Roman Catholic,” and “the Church” is meant simply the Western Church, the Latin Church, or, more formally, the Western Church of the Latin Rite (based on its inheritance from the Roman

¹ Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (London: Folio Society, 1998), pp. 189-210.

² *Ibid.*

Empire) which, until the sixteenth Century was “unified by the Pope’s symbolic leadership and by possession of that common Latin culture.”^{3]}

Most pronounced in this process are two developments: the first is the emergence, within this belief system, ecumenical in nature, that the United States as nation state and superpower constitutes a dogma in, and of itself – a set of beliefs which is authoritative and not to be doubted or disputed. Thus, within the civil religion, the United States is an object of veneration associated with profound religious dimensions, and the practise of which is a form of piety; the second, is the assertion of American Exceptionalism in terms essentially congruent with Catholicism – which is to say a Providentially-ordained universalism. Both of these developments are reliant upon, or accompanied by Catholic-Curial characteristics, or instincts, that had lain dormant in the early years, or are natural consequences of the development in question, respectively. In brief, the second argument, derived from observable processes, is that the original Reformation character of American civil religion underwent a radical change to one that is identifiably Roman Catholic, Papal, pre-Tridentine and, somewhat anachronistically, Catholic Counter-Reformation.

Obviously, the dual, seemingly opposed last two characteristics need explaining. They occur because, unlike the Catholic Church, the US civil religion has not experienced a Reformation, Protestant or Catholic. Neither the American Civil War, nor the trauma resulting from the Vietnam War, nor the end of the Cold War, nor the Global Economic Crisis of 2007 onwards are commensurable events to those that took place following Martin Luther’s appearance at the Diet of Worms, and the subsequent Edict of Worms, in 1521. As a consequence, American civil religion has not so much developed as deformed, without popular pressure for renewal or change, and certainly without the benefits of either the Protestant Reformation, or, for that matter, the Catholic Reformation (known

³ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. xxi (hereafter cited as MacCulloch, *Reformation*).

also as the Counter-Reformation), but with the same betrayals and excesses that distinguish both. Thus, while it is quite possible to observe corruption of a pre-Tridentine nature in the orders (military, economic, social-political, educational) of the US, it is also the case that in some instances (such as the more recent forms of doctrinal intolerance and the emergence of a Papal Presidency) the excess, or corruption belongs to a much later period in the history of both the Church and the United States. The Church, however, was forced into reform not only by the forces of Protestantism, but also by a pre-existing recognition that it was in error, and the decisions of its own Council of Trent; strangely, in light of the evidence, historical developments of an increasingly threatening nature, and the manifest desire in both the US and the international community, the prospects for comprehensive self-examination, let alone reform, in the US are currently non-existent.