

THE ALTERNATIVE

Vol. XL No. 1
Sept. 2014

Dear Reader,

The recent decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the Hobby Lobby case was met by outbursts of opposition from several quarters. The decision was described as affirming the religious liberty of a business corporation. To most people in the country this decision seemed preposterous; the question seemed to be one that should have been laughed out of court. There was not agreement, however, on what exactly was wrong about the decision.

One common complaint was that the Court had extended its ruling of a year previous in *Citizens United* that corporations are persons. Actually, the decision went in the opposite direction. It affirmed the right of a few individuals, not the corporation, to what they claim is their religious belief. Hobby Lobby is not the name of a few individuals; it is a corporation with 13,000 employees in 43 states.

The problem in *Citizens United* was not the recognition of corporations as persons. The idea that some corporations should legally be considered (artificial) persons has a long history. The problem with the decision was that it set no financial limits on a large corporation's influence in an election. It is important that corporations be treated as legal persons that have both duties and rights. A corporation as a person should be held responsible for its actions including how it spends its money and how the corporation cares for its employees. However, some characteristics of a natural person do not apply to an artificial person. Corporations do not die, neither do they exercise religious liberty.

Liberty is an idea that is obsessively talked about in the United States. The problem is that liberty is a negative term; it refers to freedom *from* something, especially from government. Liberty is only part of freedom. For freedom to exist among a large number of people, some regulation of individual liberty is needed. In the origin of the United States the Declaration of Independence/liberty had to be followed by a Constitution of freedom. Most of the time when right-wing speakers profess their devotion to the Constitution, they are actually talking about the Declaration of Independence.

Why is *religious* liberty taken to be the test of liberty? The answer to that question requires asking what "religious" means. And that is the theme of this Newsletter. It is often said that religion is in decline. For example, one tenth of the U.S. population are former Roman Catholics. There is something called "the new atheism" which gets much attention in the press. And Christianity seems to have lost its grip in Europe.

But it can also be said that the world is having a vast religious revival. The most obvious case is Islam, which has six times as many members now as it did in 1900. China, which tried to get rid of religion, now has more people attend church on Sunday than all of Western Europe does. The new atheists are sure that this is the last gasp of religion but the old atheists thought the same thing in the eighteenth century. The only thing that seems certain is that religion/religious is a complicated story.

ON BEING RELIGIOUS

By Gabriel Moran

There is a general assumption that most people know what the word religion means. A question does occasionally arise about whether a particular group qualifies as a religion. That issue surfaces in the United States whenever the government gets involved in anything religious or with any group claiming to be a religion. A few years ago, several prisoners in California petitioned the government that their religion required having wine at 5PM each day and that their religious liberty was being violated by the prison system. Did they have a case as good as the owners of Hobby Lobby?

The meaning of religion is highly ambiguous in ways that are hardly ever recognized. I am amazed that I wrote about religion for decades before I realized the basic ambiguity of the term. Once I saw it I could not imagine how I had previously missed it. Religion is one of a number of words that at one moment of history nearly reversed its meaning. The older meaning does not disappear and passionate arguments occur between people, each of whom is sure of their meaning of the word. And they are both right.

For example, the advocates of “multiculturalism” could not believe the narrow-mindedness of their opponents. But their opponents were not usually defending “monoculturalism.” They were, consciously or not, assuming the meaning of culture before anthropology nearly reversed the meaning in the late 19th century. In the earlier meaning of culture, which has never died out, culture is a judgment of value; the choice is to be cultured or uncultured. In the new meaning of culture, there is always multiplicity; one should avoid judging one culture to be superior to another. The answer to conflicts over multiculturalism is obvious. Recognizing many cultures is quite compatible with becoming cultured; but first one has to recognize that two very different meanings are in play. Religion underwent a change of meaning similar to that of culture at a particular moment of its history.

The most common misunderstanding of language is to ask for a “definition” of a term so as to eliminate its ambiguity. But the ambiguity of an ancient word is what makes it rich in meaning and useful for understanding as long as the user has some control of the ambiguity. There is no lack of definitions for ambiguous terms but multiple definitions do little to provide guidance in how to deal with ambiguity. A 1912 book, *Psychological Study of Religion*, offered 50 definitions of religion. No doubt someone could come up with a 51st but that does not get us any closer to having a useful discussion of the topic.

For understanding the meaning of a term the helpful questions are: Who invented the term and why? What were main forces in its history that may have given it a radical shift of direction? The word religion was coined by Cicero because he thought there was no term that described practices by which people acknowledge their debt to the gods. In contrast to “superstition,” religion is true and pious worship of the gods. Cicero of course thought that the Romans were the world’s leader in religion. Cicero’s meaning of religion was not fundamentally altered by Christianity when it took over the word. Religion was a

set of (true) practices of worship; what is false is not religion at all. Not surprisingly, Augustine, in *On True Religion*, says that (the true) religion, which has existed since the beginning of the world, is now called Christian.

Cicero's meaning of religion controlled the word up to the sixteenth century. Thomas Aquinas has a brief treatment of religion in the *Summa theologiae* in his section on justice. He did not seriously challenge Cicero's meaning of religion. The revolution in the meaning of religion occurred between 1575 and 1625. One can see the edging toward a new meaning before 1575 when there are references to practices outside the officially approved practices that are deemed "true Christian religion." But the meaning was still fundamentally Cicero's when Catholics and Protestants were killing each other over which of them was true or Christian religion.

The near reversal of meaning occurred when someone first referred to Protestant religion and Catholic religion. That distinction gave religion the meaning of different groups that claimed to possess true religion. The term religion now existed in the plural. In this new meaning of religion the name referred to organizations or institutions. The old meaning of practices lived on; "true religion" might be claimed to be possessed by both Catholic and Protestant religions, or indeed by Jewish or Muslim religions. These new religions were political, social, economic institutions that contained "religion" in the older sense of the word. Both meanings float about in discussions of religion and are the source of constant confusion.

For example, the first amendment to the United States Constitution contains a cryptic statement about religion. The sixteen words are: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Did they really think that they had addressed the question? The statement is a conceptual muddle in which the first half of the statement refers to the modern meaning of religion and the second half of the sentence to the ancient meaning. But the phrase "establishment of religion" made little sense in the eighteenth century and is unintelligible today; the second half of the statement has no antecedent for "exercise thereof." Armies of lawyers argue about what these words mean (they could just ask Justice Scalia) as if the words made sense. The statement says confusedly two things that the federal government should not do but does not give a clue about what the government's role is in relation to religions (institutions) and religion (practices).

For most of the country's history there was not much need for legal arguments about religions. The sixteenth-century idea "America" united U. S. Protestant groups in the practice of religion. In the 1790s "the American" was given the meaning of white, male and Anglo-Saxon. The (true) Christian religion was American religion. Other groups were allowed to practice their religion as long as they kept it private. Henry Morgenthau, Franklin Roosevelt's brilliant Secretary of the Treasury, recounts in his diary a conversation in which FDR says to Morgenthau who was a Jew and another presidential advisor who was a Catholic: "This is a Protestant country; Jews and Catholics are here under sufferance." Not an unusual belief in the 1930s though it is surprising that FDR would say it to his Jewish and Catholic advisors.

In the 1940s the Supreme Court began inventing a new language to deal with religion, its immediate concern was the Catholic Church. The Supreme Court introduced the language of church-state which has simply muddied the waters. Especially in the southern United States, many of the Court's rulings are simply disregarded. Surely it is un-American to forbid bible reading in public schools or prayer before football games in Texas. If the Court says such practices are violations of "church-state separation," the response given is that the issue is not a church, it is the practice of true Christian religion. The Court does not know what to do about people actually practicing religion and, especially, practicing the American religion that dominates the history of the United States.

What is probably the main opponent of American religion is a religious belief founded fifty years ago. It can be called ecologism. It is a serious religious challenge because it addresses a world-shaking issue with a firm ideology and daily practices. The big issue in this religion is that the human race, led by the United States and Europe, has been recklessly exploiting the surroundings of the human race. What is offered as an alternative is a re-imagining of the human being in its relation to everything else and daily rituals to do penance for past crimes and to maintain hope for salvation.

The enemy of this new religion is something it calls "Judeo-Christian tradition," a term invented in the 1890s by people who were not very familiar with either Jewish tradition or Christian tradition. The term was not commonly used until about the time that ecologism declared it to be the source of all our environmental problems. The political right-wing took the bait and it now passionately defends "Judeo-Christian values" and "Judeo-Christian civilization." The term "Judeo-Christian religion" is hardly ever used because there is no such religion in either sense of religion. There is no Judeo-Christian institution and no one is a practicing Judeo-Christian.

Ecologism calls for repentance and humility by the whole human race. The humans, it is believed, have failed to stay in their place and have risen up against Nature. Such rebellion can produce short-term benefits in the form of a comfortable life but disaster is just around the corner unless we repent. The dire warnings, when they are not listened to, often lead to the claim that it is already too late. This part of the ideology is borrowed from the American religion which has always been apocalyptic. The end is near; the final judgment is at hand.

Ecologism is similar to the ancient doctrine of Stoicism, the chief competitor to the Christian movement at its beginnings. While many Christian practices resembled Stoicism the two religious beliefs were incompatible. For the Stoics, Nature is mother of us all; human are one species among Nature's many offspring. Human choice consists in saying yes or no to Mother Nature; human rebellion against Nature only leads to defeat.

The Christian belief was not in Mother Nature but in God the Father who creates everything that is. There is no being called nature; nature is a useful concept that humans invented for understanding living beings. The humans share in the condition of natural or living beings: birth, growth, decline and death. But humans by understanding these

conditions can improve their own lot and some of the things that make up their environment.

For humans to bow down to nature would be to worship a false god of their own making. The ultimate reality whether called One, All or the Nameless, must be greater than what humans recognize as their own best characteristics, including thought and will. Only a greater than a human person would be deserving of honor, respect and obedience by humans. As philosopher Max Scheler put it, the religious profession is: "Thou All, I nothing; or rather Thou All, I not quite nothing."

The environmental movement that emerged in the late 1960s quickly adopted a rigid orthodoxy. It does not receive much criticism except from ideologues on the right whose anti-environmentalism is no help at all. Left-wing environmentalism keeps citing scientific facts that are not persuasive for most people. Scientific facts will never change religious practice. Telling people that the universe is old (13 billion years!!) or very, very big (!!) has no practical effect for most people. They don't become humble because they are told that humans are an insignificant speck in the universe.

One of the key concepts of ecologism is "anthropocentrism," the sin of seeing the world from a human point of view. The worst disease one can have is when the name of the cure has been given to the disease. In this case, the disease was humans removing themselves from the center of their environment. Having failed to control nature, humans are now told to submit to nature. What is needed is to put humans at the center of everything where they can be responsible beings. In recent centuries, humans presumed to have a godlike view of the universe; that assumption continues in ecologism even while it talks about humans as just one species among others.

The environmental movement has raised the real religious question: Is the emergence of personal life without meaning or is the universe friendly to the personal power to know and choose? Humans have a difficulty in asserting meaninglessness. They are caught in the paradox of claiming meaning for their statement of meaninglessness. As Nietzsche noted we still believe in God because we believe in grammar. Nietzsche is often referred to as an atheist which is misleading. He thought that atheism was just another variation on theism, both ideologies having been invented in the eighteenth century.

If a person has any sense of the grandeur of the world, atheism is not a serious question. Debating whether a being named god exists is not relevant to religious practice. The first question of religious minded people has always been not the existence of god but the nature of god or gods. The same still holds true; if anything, the universe is far more compelling today in testifying to divine glory. The world's great religion are in no danger of disappearing. But religions such as Christianity and Islam have to examine how much of religion (in the older sense) is actually practiced within their walls. How much awe before the universe do they generate in the lives of their members? Each of the world's great religions has something to contribute to an environmental movement centered on humans in their responsibility to the nonhuman natural world and the artificial world

THE FANACTICISM OF THE APOCALYPSE

By Pascal Bruckner

There are several ways of engaging nature, and our mistake is to have neglected some of them in favor of a relationship of utility or exploitation. We are simultaneously outside nature and inside it, embedded in it and looking down on it. The world is not our due; it is conferred on us as an obligation so that we can transmit it to following generations, if possible in a better condition. “We do not inherit the earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children,” as an Indian proverb has it. But engaging in dialogue with nature does not prevent us from taming it or cultivating it.

We are sobered believers, perhaps, but being sobered does not mean being disillusioned, and it has never led anyone to reject electricity or to return to horse-drawn wagons (except for a few spoiled children of the affluent society). Why should we deprive ourselves of the countless outcomes of a discovery? Anyone who has undergone a successful surgical operation, has been saved by an antibiotic, or got rid of a headache by taking aspirin, knows what the word “advance” means. Renouncing inconsiderate destruction does not entail renouncing research. The choice is not between an intact Nature that slowly recovers from human intrusions and a devastating productivism, that forges, pierces, and disfigures, but between a process of regression and a process of development lucidly embraced with all its risks and benefits.

We can distinguish three ages in our relationship to nature since the seventeenth century: the age of scarcity for a majority of the population, which lasted up to the middle of the twentieth century, the age of gluttony, with the invention of credit (which reached its apogee in the subprime crisis that occurred in the United States in 2008); and finally the age of duly considered desires, into which we may now be entering, and which will cause us to move from a property economy to a rental economy.

Why should we tolerate the costly possession of objects that can be rented and returned at will? Purchasing, with its simple rules and obvious pleasures, will persist. It is better to democratize consumption than to abolish it; the real scandal is not to be able to participate in it for lack of means. In any case, money, Seneca already pointed out, is one of the preferables, along with health, no matter what destiny one chooses for oneself. Every way of life is an affirmation of values and ideals. A civilized society does not scorn material goods but offers several meanings of wealth, financial, moral and spiritual, and does not reject any of them.

In the United States, the counterweight to commercial frenzy resides in patriotism and religious faith, the two things that democratic empire holds sacred. In Europe it resides in culture understood as a common treasure and power of creation, in studious idleness, in the art of living and living well with others. Perhaps the Old World is better adapted to change than the New, to the extent that its ideal of competition is less ferocious, the cult of work less frenetic, and the ability to rediscover slowness and sweetness – that is, new uses of time, new intoxications with the minuscule – are more firmly anchored.

The best way to cope with the degradation of the environment is first of all the material enrichment of the masses. One has to have access to abundance to combat evils, and we have to work at the same time on development and corrections of development. The new Green puritanism may be nothing other than a reaction on the part of the irked West, the last avatar of a despondent neo-colonialism preaching to other cultures a wisdom it has never itself practiced. Inundated to the point of nausea with alarmist prognostications, we forget that what we are experiencing is not the end of time but the end of the supremacy of Europe and the United States over the rest of the globe. “Old men like to offer good advice in order to console themselves for no longer being in a position to give bad examples” (La Rochefoucauld).

This is probably the first time in modern history that a movement claiming to belong to this camp, political ecologism, has proposed to take humanity backward, claiming the guarantee of nature and the cosmos. But time never returns to its source. To change directions, we will first have to change our fear, that is, our priorities, and rid ourselves of our obsession with defeat. Environmental concern is universal, but the disease of the end of the world is purely Western.

Either the lugubrious prophets are right that we are rushing toward the abyss and the only avenue left is the human race’s voluntary or involuntary extinction, or there is still room for maneuvers, and we should explore them fearlessly. The ecology of disaster is primarily a disaster for ecology: it employs such an outrageous rhetoric that it discourages the best of wills. It tries so hard to avoid our ruin that it will hasten it if we follow its recommendations and wrap the planet in cellophane like a Christo sculpture. Either ecology persists in imprecations and sterile gestures or it returns in a lucid way to the great idea of humanity’s moral progress, learning from its earlier mistakes. A race has begun between the forces of despair and those of human ingenuity.

The remedy is found in the disease, in the despised industrial civilization, the frightening science, the endless crisis, the globalization that exceeds our grasp. Only an increase in research, an explosion of creativity, an unprecedented technological advance will be able to save us. We have to try to push back the boundaries of the possible by encouraging the most fantastic initiatives, the most mind-boggling ideas. We have to transform the increasing scarcity of resources into a wealth of inventions. We have to count on the genius of the human race, which is capable of overcoming its fears in order to improvise new solutions.

If a generous defense of the environment is to develop in the course of the next century, it will exist only as the servants of humans and nature in their mutual interaction and not as an advocate speaking through an entity called “the planet.” The friends of the Earth have for too long been enemies of humanity; it is time for an ecology of admiration to replace an ecology of accusation. What is at stake here is the pleasure of living together on this planet that will survive us, whatever we do for it. We need trailblazers and stimulators, not killjoys disguised as prophets. We need new frontiers to cross them, not new prisons where we can stagnate.

(This excerpt is from an essay of 50 years ago in which the author tried to base the environmental movement on a bond between the living, the dead and the unborn)

WHAT HAS POSTERITY EVER DONE FOR ME?

By Robert Heilbroner

Adam Smith, the great economist and moralist, famously posed a question whether someone, if given the choice, would prefer the extinction of a hundred million Chinese in order to save his little finger. Smith says human nature startles at the thought. But what stays our hand? Since we are all such creatures of self-interest (and is not Smith the patron saint of the motive of self-interest?) what moves us to give precedence to the rights of humanity over those of our immediate well-being? The answer, says Smith, is an inner creature of conscience whose insistent voice brooks no disobedience: "It is the love of what is honorable and noble, of the grandeur and dignity, and superiority of our own characters."

He has put the question that tests us to the quick. It is one thing to appraise matters of life and death by the principle of rational self-interest and quite another to take responsibility for our choice. Mankind cannot expect to continue on earth indefinitely if we do not curb population growth, thereby consigning billions to the oblivion of non-birth. In this case, we sacrifice some portion of life-to-come in order that life itself may be preserved. This essential commitment to life's continuance gives us the moral authority to take measures whose justification cannot be found in the precepts of rationality, but must be sought in the unbearable anguish we feel if we imagine ourselves as the executioners of mankind.

This anguish may be from religious convictions or in our secular cast of mind from the biogenetic force we see expressed in every living organism. When we ask should mankind survive it is only here we can find a rationale that gives us the affirmation we seek. This is not to say we will discover a religious affirmation naturally welling up within us as we career toward Armageddon. We know very little about how to convince men by reason and nothing about how to convert them to religion. A hundred faiths contend for believers today, a few perhaps capable of generating that sense of caring for human salvation on earth.

We do not know whether religion will win out. An appreciation of the magnitude of the sacrifices required to perpetuate life may well tempt us to opt for rationality – to enjoy life while it is still to be enjoyed on relatively easy terms, to write mankind a ticket for a shorter trip so that some of us may enjoy the next millimeter of the trip in first-class seats. I am hopeful that experience will bring home to us the personal responsibility that defies all homicidal promptings of reasonable calculation.

I believe that the coming generations, in their encounter with famine, war and the threatened life-carrying capacity of the globe, may be given such an experience. It is a glimpse into the void of a universe without humans. I must rest my ultimate faith on the discovery by these future generations, as the ax of the executioner passes into their hands, of the transcendent importance of posterity for them.