

Facing the Implications of Our Professed Principles

Epigraphs

“And there is **another form of priggishness**, too, with which we cannot dispense—**the humbug of being unbiased**. No one can grow to adult age without forming a set of opinions; heredity, environment, education and experience all condition us; the happiest are those who have allowed their opinions and beliefs to grow naturally [and *sub Gratia!*]; **the unhappy** [though still potentially wise!] are those who **accept intellectually** a system with which they are **out of sympathy**. When we go abroad we take our opinions with us; **it is useless to pretend, as many writers do, that they arrive with minds wholly innocent of other experience; are born anew into each new world**. There is nothing more repugnant to the [superficial and languid?] English reader [as of 1939 and just before the Second World War] than to be **obliged** to form his own judgment **afresh** with each book he takes up. Indeed readers, **bored with the privilege of a free press**, have lately **imposed on themselves a voluntary censorship**; they have banded themselves into Book Clubs so that they may be perfectly confident that whatever they read will be written with the [slothful and tranquilizing] intention of **confirming their existing opinions**.” (Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican-Object Lesson* (1939), His “Introduction”—my emphasis added.)

“**It is a common complaint against Catholics that they intrude their religion into every discussion**, postulating a 'Church Question' in matters which **seem** to have no theological connexion. **This is, in a way, true; the Catholic's life is bounded by his creed at every turn and reminders of this fact may well prove tedious to his protestant or agnostic neighbors**. In the case of Mexico, however, no apology is needed for speaking of the subject. It is not land or oil or race or political organization **but religion which is the single, essential question of the nation** [as of mid-1939], and foreign writers may be **judged, as to how far they grasp the character of the place**, pretty well **by the importance they attach to it**....But for the purpose of any fruitful discussion the politicians know that **the religion of the country** [in pre-War 1939] **is Catholic; and it is in direct conflict with merciless, fanatical atheism**—an atheism that **at the moment** adopts Marxist language, just as in earlier generations it used Liberal language, **but which antedates either; the atheism of the impenitent thief at the crucifixion**.” (Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson* (1939), Chapter Seven—“The Straight Fight”—my emphasis added.)

During one of our conversations in late 2002—as the build up for the Iraq war was increasing, to include “the psychological preparation of the battlefield” on the home front—Joe Sobran suddenly said, and to me unforgettably: “**It can take men a depressingly long time to face the implications of their professed principles.**”¹ (His words and tone made me think of G.K. Chesterton and his own logical clarity, also about the inner logic of false premises.)

Joe Sobran then immediately, and so characteristically, added a related illustrative insight, and he did it by way of his own special form humor and irony: “I am going to propose a new bumper-sticker: **'I'm Non-Judgmental and I Vote!'**”

In our continuing discussion, I mentioned what the learned Father Stanley Jaki, OSB, often used to say: “In matters of reflective and practical thinking, as in sports—such as football—**first moves are important.**” By “first moves,” Father Jaki also meant one's own “starting premises”—whether one recognized them consciously or not. For, he also knew well how the inner logic of explicit (or implicit) premises put pressure on the mind to come to a conclusion. The pressure was also to “cross” a major premise and a minor premise, as in a classical syllogism, and thus inescapably present a “tendentious” conclusion—to include a false conclusion, if one or both of the original premises are false. Even with false premises, there is a certain psychological pressure to complete the inner logic of the presented premises and come to a logical conclusion. In such a situation it is always difficult to recognize and correct one's erroneous premises and their implication—even when one has a moral character of integrity, or at least an aspiring one that yearns for such integrity.

Father Jaki often likewise said that a small deviation at the beginning can all too easily lead to a larger resultant deviation later and “down the line,” as it were. Like **Fractal** Mathematics, a “small delta” (“change”) produces a large consequence, even a greatly disproportionate one—for example, whether the rain drops are either on the western side of the Continental Divide, or, alternatively, a few centimeters on the eastern side. The water drops to the west ultimately flow into the Pacific Ocean, whereas the rain drops just slightly to the east of that geographical divide ultimately flow into the Mississippi River a large distance from the Pacific. (Today, given advanced and covert modern technologies, analysts and strategists now speak also of “Fractal Warfare” or “Asymmetrical Fractal

¹ Joe Sobran later used this acute and poignant formulation in his own written articles and essays. For example, see his recent, posthumously published anthology, entitled *Subtracting Christianity: Essays on American Culture and Society* (Vienna, Virginia: FGF Books, 2015), p. 111—in an essay on Race. Joe Sobran died on 30 September 2010.

Warfare,” as in the sensitive case of the subtle Chinese, as well.)

Then there is the subjective and objective matter of plain “human stupidity,” in Father John Hardon's words. Father Hardon once told me that, after almost fifty years as a priest in the confessional, he could make an unexpected generalization: “People would rather be accused and convicted of sin than to admit merely their own actual stupidity—which is often the objective case. And it is especially the case that people do not want to be made to feel stupid by others, and certainly not to be thought stupid by 'an intellectual bully.' It is a sort of perverse intellectual pride—another mark of our fallen human nature. What we have is Nature—wounded nature—what we need is Grace!”

In a more specifically intellectual example, Father Hardon also once spoke of the “ontological premises” of Hegel (as well as a few preponderant forms of later Hegelianism), in contradistinction to the Catholic Faith's own ontological premises concerning the Divine Creation. Father Hardon said many mock “*Creatio ex Nihilo*”—“the creation of a form of **non-divine** being out of nothing.” But, Hegel goes one step further, making even greater demands on the human mind and human belief (Faith)—or credulity. Hegel says that “Something comes from Nothing.” That is to say, there was no Eternal Divine Being to create “creaturely being”—being that is not Divine Being. For Christianity, there are only two kinds of being: necessary being and contingent being. God is the only necessary being (eternal being, with no beginning and with not end). “Contingent” being is created being, dependent being. “Contingent” also means “that it could have been otherwise,” while being dependent always on the Free Divine Choice of createdness, and sustaining that creatureliness in being.

By way of contrast, Hegel proposes a kind of “Evolutionary Pantheism” and it leads to further forms of “Process Philosophy” and “Process Theology,” wherein “the *Geist* **needs** us to complete itself” or, so blasphemously, “God **needs** us to complete Himself.” “*Credo in Evolutionem.*”

One implication of this purported “evolutionary framework” is: “I believe in the Evolution of Dogma,” hence the putative “Evolution of Irreformable Doctrine” and “the emerging process of 'the **Discontinuous** Development of Doctrine.’” The process and “the becoming” are now purportedly more important than the destination. The intellectually slothful, and evasively comforting summary formulation is, once again, seen in these words: “I Believe in Evolution” (“*Credo in Evolutionem*”).

Within a larger evolutionary framework, it is easier for the theological modernists to speak of “historical relativism” and “cultural relativism,” and of various forms of “indigenism” and “inculturation.” But it is not always clear that such Modernists “face the implications of their professed principles.” In any case, such relativism or nominalism is a challenge to all of us. Especially if we would loyally still want to help Pope Pius X.

Another way of facing the implications of one's professed principles is to give a fuller narrative illustration of one's convincing perceptions and confirming reasons. For example, while first ourselves recalling the oft-repeated—and sometimes inattentively prayed—vivid words of the *Salve Regina* about this our “valley of tears” and our “exile here,” we now consider the acute words and perceptions of a young man from England who is visiting Mexico in late 1938 and early 1939, not long before the shuddering outbreak of World War II. I am speaking of Evelyn Waugh, who was, at that time, already an ardent convert to the Roman Catholic Faith and still only 35 years of age. He spoke of a part of his own creed and view of life, as follows:

Let me, then, **warn** the reader that **I was a Conservative when I went to Mexico** [in late 1938] and that **everything I saw there strengthened my opinions. I believe that man is, by nature, an exile and will never be self-sufficient or complete on this earth**; that his chances of happiness and virtue, here, remain more or less constant through the centuries and, generally speaking, are not much affected by the political and economic conditions in which he lives; that the balance of good and ill tends to revert to a norm; that **sudden changes of physical condition** [e.g., of health, migration, or location?] **are usually ill, and are advocated by the wrong people for the wrong reasons**; that the intellectual communists of today [1938-1939] have personal, irrelevant grounds for their antagonism to society, which they are trying to exploit. **I believe in government; that men cannot live together without rules but that these should be kept at the bare minimum of safety**; that there is no form of government ordained from God as being better than any other [not even “Democracy”!]; that **the anarchic elements in society are so strong that it is a whole-time task to keep the peace.**²

The refreshing integrity of our admirably candid Waugh immediately resumes, as he now further “forewarns” us, with even more specificity, about his gradually deepened convictions, which are largely rooted in his manifold and often-privileged experiences in foreign lands and cultures, first starting in the 1920s:³

2 Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson* (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1940—first published in 1939 by Chapman & Hall LTD.), pp. 16-17—my emphasis added.

3 For example, see Waugh's other and earlier travel writings, all experienced and published before 1958: *Labels; Remote*

I believe **inequalities** of wealth and position are **inevitable** and that **it is therefore meaningless to discuss the advantages of their elimination**; that men naturally arrange themselves in a system of **classes**; that such a system is **necessary for any form of co-operative work**, more particularly **the work of keeping a nation together**. I believe in **nationality; not in terms of race or of divine commissions for world conquest**, but simply this: mankind inevitably organizes itself into **communities** according to its geographical distribution; **these communities by sharing a common history develop common characteristics and inspire local loyalty; the individual family develops most happily and fully when it accepts these natural limits** [and thus also allows Grace to operate!]. I do not think that British prosperity must necessarily be inimical to anyone else, but if, on occasion, it is, I want Britain to prosper and not her rivals. I believe that **war and conquest are inevitable**; that is how history has been made and that is how it will develop. I believe that **Art is a natural function of man**; it so happens that most of the greatest art has appeared under systems of political tyranny, but I do **not** think it has a connection with any particular system, **least of all with representative government** [such as “parliamentary democracy”], **as nowadays** in England, America and France **it seems popular to believe**; artists have always spent some of their **spare** time in **flattering** the government **under whom they live, so it is natural that, at the moment** [in early and mid-1939], English, American and French **artists should be volubly democratic**.⁴

Waugh then additionally shows us his winsomely becoming politeness and his unmistakably gracious irony after having first given us his quite acute and compact and well-pondered set of opinions, especially concerning the Natural Order and by largely remaining on the Natural Level:

Having read this brief summary of the political opinions I took with me to Mexico [and further strengthened them there], the reader who finds it unsympathetic may send the book back to her [sic] library and apply for something more soothing. Heaven knows, she will find plenty there.⁵

One must also maturely face the implications of a public and **actually expressed sensate culture**—not only one's own **professed** principles, which might also, to some extent, **inform** that culture. For it is so that a true and sincere Faith—especially a Sacred Faith—always produces Culture; but Faith cannot be reduced to Culture.

For example, the Mexicans must finally face the implications of their Culture, both sacred

People; Ninety-Two Days; and *Waugh in Abyssinia*. See also Evelyn Waugh's collected travel writings, compiled after his death in April of 1966. **The 1100-page Volume** is entitled *Waugh Abroad: Collected Travel Writings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf—Everyman's Library # 266, 2003).

4 Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson* (Op. Cit., 1939, 1940), p. 17—my emphasis added.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

and secular. But, how does one also face the implications of a culture that seems even to cultivate various forms of Noise, to include very expressive public **Noise**? Here is another occasion unexpectedly presented to us—and, earlier in 1939, to Evelyn Waugh—to consider afresh, and more fully now **to face, some of the long-range implications of the protracted absence of silence.**

Evelyn Waugh's extensive and memorably vivid depiction of the **Public Urban Noise** in Mexico City, for instance, will not likely be ever forgotten, after it has even once been attentively read and savored:

It depends on **the circumstances** of his arrival [in a foreign land] **whether listlessness or violence is dominant in the stranger's mind during his first hours in the country**....On this first grey and chilly morning [in Mexico City], I was **relieved of all annoyance** [I thought!] and conducted to my quarters.

The principal hotel [the Ritz] stands in the old Spanish town, in the street now named Avenida Madero [the Revolutionary Francisco Madero]. There are others [as of 1938] larger, more expensive, and more recently built, offering an equal **profusion** of hot, cold and iced water, but it is to the Ritz that **people naturally gravitate** who are spending any length of time in the city. It is the only hotel frequented by the Mexicans themselves **and it has the somewhat equivocal advantage of standing in the heart of the busiest street.**

Busiest street!...Mexico is the most shrill and thunderous city in the world.⁶

Are we ready to see the evidence and understand how Evelyn Waugh could make such a claim? Let us do it together:

Mexico is the most shrill and thunderous city in the world. **Noise is the first, shattering greeting to the stranger**, it is **the constant companion of all his days, the abiding memory which he takes home with him to the nordic stillness of London or New York** [!]. **Noise of every conceivable kind competing for predominance.** Noise of traffic; the old-fashion courtesy for which Mexicans are justly famous seems to forsake them when they get behind the wheel of a motor car. They move, as all urban drivers must, in a series of rushes, **like infantry advancing through machine-gun fire**; when they are halted they hoot continuously to be released; **when they go, they still hoot to scare off the streets any aged and infirm persons who have got caught, half way across**, by the change of lights; embedded here and there in the turmoil, raised sometimes on little platforms covered in advertisements, stand policemen, whistling.

The sidewalks—they cannot be called pavements, for the greater part of them are not paved but coated with undulating asphalt—are very narrow and full of

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22—my emphasis added.

foot passengers, but, oddly enough, they are **the main center of social life** and the noise of human voices is louder, even, than the claxons [the loud automobile horns]; there are few cafés and little café life in Mexico [as of late 1938]; what there is occurs at night; during the day, at the crowded hours, **if a Mexican wants to talk with his friends, he stands in the middle of the sidewalk and yells**—politics, politenesses, business negotiations, anything that **requires full verbal expression**. And above them again—for as the conversationalists seek to outtalk the traffic, so they must interrupt the conversationalists—rise the voices of **the street sellers**, calling the numbers of lottery tickets and the headlines of the newspapers. In justice to **the beggars** who throng the side streets, it should be said that they are, when sober, a quiet lot; they rely for their appeal on proximity, pushing their faces very close and muttering confidentially or, in the case of **the children, merely swinging on one's coat-tails and reciting the rosary**. There are, however, **street singers** with curiously penetrating tones and I met one old Indian who was **well ahead of the traffic**, playing an instrument entirely new to me—the nose-organ.⁷

Although that last extended passage was only one-third of Waugh's compact presentation of the varieties and the surprises of Mexican Noise, the continuation of his discernment and cumulative eloquence is well worth our own resumption of his synaesthetically descriptive narration:

Besides these purely communicative and representational sounds, there is the abstract noise for noise's sake—the bashing together of pieces of wood or iron, preferably in the **echoing light-wells** [glassed-topped, illuminating vertical shafts] of the larger buildings, **for no other purpose than the general good; for Mexicans feast on sound, as the more ascetic nordics fast on stillness**, and count no man happy until his ear drums are ringing. Thus if one arrives early at the leading restaurant of the place, the head-waiter **hospitably** puts himself out to set you at ease **and relieve the unhomely silence**, by grinding the legs of the furniture on the tiled floor till the tables round you fill up and all is Babel again.

At night, in the shabbier parts of the city, and in all quarters of the provincial towns, **the stranger is likely to be alarmed by what sounds like rifle fire**. Occasionally, no doubt, it is so. In the brave days of Carranza and Calles [in the revolutionary, earlier 20th Century] people were fairly free with firearms; **they used to shoot the street lamps after a party and not infrequently their fellow guests. But most of these [current] explosions come from fireworks and from bits of dynamite stolen from the mines**. Europeans like fireworks for their visual effect and regard noise as an inevitable concomitant. **The Mexicans like the noise all alone** and most of their fireworks provide plain, large bangs.⁸

The last portion deals with certain modern construction-tools and the building of new vaults

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24—my emphasis added

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25—my emphasis added.

and well-fortified banks for the greater good of the financiers:

But of all the noises of Mexico city the loudest and most individual was made by the mechanical pile-driver opposite the Opera House. Thud-shriek, thud-shriek; it worked day and night; the hammer fell, the compressed air escaped and the great tree trunks sank foot by foot into the soft sub-soil. While, in the general [economic] slump, other major works were at a standstill, **this infernal machine pounded on incessantly, dominating a whole quarter of the city.** By a peculiar irony it was constructing new vaults for the **metallic reserves of the National Bank.** The national finances that summer [of 1938] were **a joke which was offensive to nobody.** Revenue was down, production was down, credit was down; **the pile-driver seemed to thump home monotonously the simple facts of national bankruptcy.** No figures had been published for sometime but everyone, whatever his politics, believed that the President was keeping up the peso by **buying American dollars at a rate which would completely empty the treasury in a few months; after that lay a prospect of inflation, repudiation, confiscation.** Everyone, for various reasons, **wanted a crisis** (with the possible exception of the American ambassador and it did not occur to him that a crisis was imminent) **for when the last of the metal reserves had left the country,** the Mexican government would have to readjust itself, one way or another. And everyone had different ideas of the readjustment that was required. **Meanwhile the pile-driver prepared the new vaults.**⁹

Waugh's artfully presented, sensate combination of the increasing **noise** and the impending national **bankruptcy** suddenly produces a subtly manifold, even bitter, irony. We can almost feel those new metallic vaults being noisily constructed but then remaining empty. Along with the devastation of ugliness, we perceive the Visual Noise now, along with the Auditory Noise. We are thereby again bolstered **to face some of the long-range implications of a protracted absence of silence.**

For, that absence of silence and a further-sensate presence of noise will also qualitatively affect the tone of the culture of the Catholic Religion in Mexico today—on the premise that, even now in 2016 (not just back in 1939), “the religion of the country of Mexico is Catholic.” For they still so openly show their unmistakably palpable and heart-felt expressions of Faith; especially in their abiding and loyal love for the Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe.

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⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26—my emphasis added.