

ECOLOGY AND HUMAN LIFE  
Strategic Postmodern Themes in Catholic Social Teaching's Challenge  
to the New Global Culture of Utilitarian Individualism

---

*Presentation for 2005-03-03 Symposium on Catholic Social Teaching*

Joe Holland

*President, Pax Romana/Cmica-usa, Washington DC*

*Professor of Philosophy & Religion, Saint Thomas University, Miami, Florida*

*jholland@stu.edu*

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Greetings and gratitude to all here, including those from the United Nations, members of the Holy See Mission, of Holy Family Church, and of the ICO Center, and members and friends of Pax Romana and other NGOs.
2. Ecology & human life, the two focal words in the title of my address, represent two interrelated postmodern themes that have come to center stage in the organic development of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) during the 40 years following the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World, "Gaudium et Spes"
3. They also represent, I propose, leading themes in CST's strategic postmodern response to the new global culture of utilitarian individualism, which is now so strongly emerging across the world with mutually reinforcing objective and subjective faces.
4. In addressing these two themes, my presentation will first review the development and significance of CST, and particularly its philosophical side; then sketch the objective and subjective faces of the new global culture of utilitarian individualism, and particularly its destructive grounding in a mechanistic root metaphor; and finally call for a holistic philosophical vision for CST that will promote a close working alliance between Catholic justice-and-peace movements and Catholic family-and-life movements, especially by means of solidarity around the two strategic themes of ecology and human life.

B. THE RICH DEVELOPMENT & NEW STAGE OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

1. With the emergence of technological and economic globalization, we are currently entering, and indeed have been entering for some time, a new stage in CST. In this new stage, CST is focusing more and more on the search for a fresh global civilization that transcends all modern ideologies. For more on this argument, please see my recent book which reviews the correlative development of three strategic stages of CST in response to evolution of three stages of modern industrial society. The book is titled *Modern*

*Catholic Social Teaching, 1740-1958*, and it was published in 2003. A sequel, *Postmodern Catholic Social Teaching, 1958 to 2000*, will be published in the near future.

2. CST has both biblical and philosophical roots and the two represent the Catholic complementarity of faith and reason. But here I will address the tradition from the philosophical side, since that side offers a public language accessible to all, while the biblical language is more specific to the Jewish and Christian traditions, though that language too has its own public impact.
3. In particular, I believe that for this new stage we urgently need to develop a coherent philosophical ground which will promote holistic solidarity across the presently fragmented and sometimes even polarized movements found within the broad range of contemporary CST. I refer specifically to the separation of the Catholic justice-and-peace movements (out of which grows contemporary Catholic defense of the poor and ecology) and the Catholic family-and-life movements (out of which grows contemporary Catholic defense of the very life of the unborn, the handicapped, and the elderly). Further, I believe that we need to develop such holistic solidarity in more than a simply pragmatic or ad-hoc fashion; hence the need for an integrating philosophical vision. Such a vision can be approached in part through the negative critique of the reigning modern philosophy of utilitarian individualism.

#### C. THE NEW DANGER OF A GLOBAL CULTURE OF UTILITARIAN INDIVIDUALISM

1. I believe that we currently face the frightening danger that a new global culture of an utilitarian individualism is emerging, and that it is ultimately threatening the family and human-life, as well as the poor and the ecosystem. I propose that that this new utilitarian culture is ultimately unsustainable, and that in its very unsustainability threatens us with profound and deepening postmodern ecological, social, and spiritual crises.
2. Since the birth of modern CST, its deep philosophical analysis has addressed and critiqued the entire modern Western project at the foundational level of civilization. For example, the traditional diagnosis of CST sketches a single unsustainable project revealing itself in multiple stages from the Reformation to the Enlightenment to Industrialization to Totalitarianism. A partial but well articulated example of this analysis may be found in the classic book by Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers*.
3. Of course, each of these movements – the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Industrialization -- have also brought incredible new gifts and blessings to the human family, and we still have much to learn from each, and certainly much to preserve from them for future generations. But, I propose, the common and erroneous philosophical grounding of these movements eventually leaves them without adequate philosophical resources to sustain their very gifts. As a result, the modern Western utilitarian project, while initially liberating, in its late phase turns into a boomerang that begins to turn to attack its own precious gifts. Thus the modern project, which arises in part out of early modern humanism, is now in its late phase threatened with collapse into an anti-human project.
3. Further, while there is not space here to develop my thoughts, I will also note that I see the deeper roots of this process as be found seminally in the Medieval Nominalist Philosophy (called at the time the *Via Moderna*). This philosophy arose within the new Western bourgeois consciousness of certain Medieval commercial cities, which became enriched by the trading roots opened by the Crusades. The Franciscan and Dominican movements were the first strategic evangelical responses to the negative side of this new

bourgeois consciousness, with the former planting spiritual seeds for a future Catholic defense of democracy and human rights, and the later planting spiritual seeds for a future Catholic defense of the poor and ecology.

4. I should also note, though there will not be time here to elaborate, that the modern utilitarian project is also in part shaped by the tragic legacy of the plundering conquest of Americas and its parallel African plunder by the Atlantic slave system. As Enrique Dussel claims in his book *1492*, I also see these two atrocities as foundational to the construction of the entire modern European and European-American cultural project.
5. Now at the birth of the postmodern era, I propose, the utilitarian vision whose first infection revealed itself philosophically with Nominalism, and whose infection grew in economic power with the conquest of the Americas and the Atlantic slave system, that very utilitarian vision now threatens the entire biosphere, as well as the growing numbers of the global poor, and the human family and human life itself. The seven centuries of growth by this infection has brought us, I again propose, to the increasing global triumph of a utilitarian culture of individualism that is ultimately unsustainable – unsustainable ecologically, unsustainable socially, and unsustainable spiritually.

#### D. THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS & CONTRADICTIONAL DUALISM OF THE MODERN UTILITARIAN PROJECT

1. The early modern Western philosophical rejection of the organic root metaphor, so central in the philosophy of Aristotle and in the Medieval adaptation of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas, was justified by the embrace of an alternative mechanistic root metaphor, which then became the foundation of modern Western philosophical consciousness. Drawn from the ancient pre-Socratic “atomism” of Democritus, this mechanistic metaphor was used in 16<sup>th</sup> Century by Bacon, Newton, and Galileo to create a reductionist redefinition of science (the Modern Western Scientific Revolution). This new mechanistic scientific paradigm was then applied in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries to society itself (the Modern Western Enlightenment). Finally in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and even more in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the mechanistic metaphor took expression in new economic and materialistic ideologies of the Industrial Revolution, including its expression in liberal capitalism, that is, the capitalism of laissez-faire liberalism, and in “scientific” socialism.
2. Central to the early modern philosophical or actually cosmological embrace of the mechanistic root metaphor was the accompanying epistemological crisis which led to the subject-object split of modern consciousness. This split had two variants, one Anglophile and empiricist (articulated by Locke) and the other Francophile and rationalist (articulated by Descartes). In both cases, the perceiving subject no longer was believed to have real and personal communing knowledge with the fullness of with objective reality. Rather the subject was seen as trapped in its own consciousness, with the empiricist-Lockean variant stressing simple measurement and calculating internal sense impressions in order to construct a model of the external world, and the rationalist-Cartesian variant also seeing the world as mechanical, but with detached skeptical human consciousness capable only of constructing its own internal system of ideas about it – ideas grounded in logic but not in real knowledge of the outer world. Still later, Kant would deep this rationalist idealism.

3. As a result of the modern subject-object split, the mechanistic interpretation of reality in turn split into disarticulated "objective" and "subjective" poles of social experience. In the case of the modern university, knowledge was divided into the "objective" disciplines of the modern sciences (so the BS degree) and the "subjective" disciplines of the arts or humanities (so the BA degree). As the late CP Snow lamented in a perceptive essay, the two sets of disciplines became two separate cultures, and their professorial elites even attended separate cocktail parties with little contact between them.
4. Equally perceptive social scientists later demonstrated how the two cultures, one "objective" and the other "subjective," each provided a guiding ethos for two separate realms of modern society, namely the producer side and the consumer side. In his now classic essay, "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism," which drew on an important distinction of Max Weber, the great Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell outlined a cultural schizophrenia between capitalism's producer side, which is guided by "instrumental individualism" (the objective-engineering side of the modern liberal project, exercising its power in the techno-economic sphere), and capitalism's consumer side, which is guided by "expressive individualism" (the subjective-artistic side of the modern liberal project, exercising its power in the sexual-cultural sphere).
5. Later Robert Bellah and his colleagues, in their landmark book *Habits of the Heart*, described the same cultural schizophrenia as the contradiction between a modern middle-class "managerial ethos," based on instrumental individualism, and a modern middle-class "therapeutic ethos," based on expressive individualism. In this analysis, the techno-economic producer side undermines community through its "managerial ethos" of instrumental individualism, while the sexual-cultural side undermines community through its "therapeutic ethos" of expressive individualism.
6. To elaborate, both sides undermine human community (and we might add ecological community) by condensing human consciousness into separate individualist projects. The managerial ethos grounds itself in the so-called "economic freedom" of the instrumental self, while the therapeutic ethos individualism grounds itself in the so-called "sexual freedom" of the expressive self.
6. In this schizophrenic dualism of the modern project, the only valid criteria for ethics becomes that which can be quantified (that is, measured mathematically). On the objective producer/managerial side, value becomes quantified as money (really only a mathematical measurement) and the only ethical guidance becomes what Pope John Paul II calls "economism," which constitutes utilitarianism in the techno-economic sphere. On the subjective consumer/therapeutic side, value becomes articulated in terms of feelings (pleasure and pain), and the only ethical guidance becomes what Alastair McIntyre calls "emotivism," which then is also attempted to be quantified (the quantitative calculation of feelings of pleasure and pain) and constitutes utilitarianism in the sexual-cultural sphere.

#### E. THE NEED FOR HOLISTIC PHILOSOPHICAL VISION AND PRACTICAL SOLIDARITY IN CST

1. The new postmodern era arises from the Electronic Revolution, which while good in itself brings not only economic globalization but also the triumph of the mechanistic metaphor across human society, in effect, a mechanistic society which is ultimately non-sustainable in ecological, social, and spiritual terms.
2. Today the justice-and-peace movements and the family-and-human-life movements are both confronting two faces of the modern utilitarian project, one on the producer/managerial side and the other on the consumer/therapeutic side.

3. Ecology and Human Life are the two new and leading postmodern themes in CST. In terms of social ethics, the biosphere itself is now under attack from the "objective" side, while in terms of medical ethics human life and with it the very foundation of human rights is threatened from the "subjective" side.
4. While again there is not time to elaborate, I further propose that the postmodern Catholic movements in defense of ecology and in defense of human life, each from one side, are fundamentally challenging the mechanistic root metaphor and its utilitarian project. They thereby provide opportunity for a deeper philosophical vision for CST that will embrace all the past contributions in a new and richer synthesis.
5. The core strategy emerging from postmodern CST, though it was also there in the tradition's 18<sup>th</sup> century beginning, has been powerfully articulated by the encyclicals of our three great postmodern popes (John XXIII, Paul VI, and John XXIII). That core strategy is the call to move beyond all modern mechanistic ideologies in order to create a new sustainable global civilization of humanism, of love, and of life.
6. But to do that we in turn need to move beyond fragmentation, or still worse polarization, between the justice-and-peace movements on one side and the family-and-human-life movements on the other side. We also need to go far deeper than simply pragmatic alliances between these two movements. We need to find the unifying vision of a comprehensive negative philosophical critique and a holistic positive philosophical vision, capable of supporting our correlative evangelical vision. Only such a comprehensive and holistic vision can bring together the rich diversity of Catholic movements into the common project of a new and sustainable global civilization protecting the earth, defending the poor, and nourishing us with a non-utilitarian spirituality of humanism, love, and life.
7. Such is the challenge before us as we celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Gaudium et Spes" document of Vatican Council II, that is, the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," and as we enter ever more deeply into the new postmodern era of the human journey and the new postmodern stage of CST. It is an enormous challenge!