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Disillusionment: A Christian Response of Hope

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Abstract: The world as it is presently does not give the impression of hope, therefore it is for individuals and communities to strive towards a hope that satisfies, a hope that sustains in a troubled and difficult world. The chapter Disillusionment uses narratives through the 19th and 20th centuries to show how persons and people in community are being compelled to change in the face of their disillusionment. This is happening because their stories are changing. There used to be fixed ways of functioning in society, as in fascist and communist governments, which made living regimented but easy to understand. With the advent of liberalism, when people began to voice their opinions and demand their due, the stories began to vary, and this brought in insecurity which could have led to disillusionment. The author holds that we should continue to persuade the world that the key to any changes happening is that those developments should serve life rather than death; that the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ and the sacramental life of the Spirit should be lived as a

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community of disciples. It should embrace stances that include pluralism, freedom, and democracy.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Yuval Harari Noah, Globalization, Liberalism, Christian Faith.

Definitions of the word ‘illusion’ (Illusion, 2020) according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary are: a misleading image presented to the vision like an optical illusion; something that deceives or misleads intellectually, and perception of something objectively existing in such a way as to cause misinterpretation of its actual nature. ‘Disillusion’ means to be free from illusion, or the condition of being disenchanted, of being dissatisfied or defeated in expectation or hope (Disillusion, 2020). It is worth noting that the meanings of both illusion and disillusion, have more or less the same sense, a sense of nothing to hold on to, of being separated. The difference that is evident from the definitions is that the meaning of the word ‘disillusion,’ adds the element of ‘hope.’ Something is illusionary or a person gets disillusioned when there is lack of clarity, when something unclear, or there is a lack of something to which a person can get attached. It is seen in self as well as in communities. In cultures, it has to do with self as well as self in community. This implies that persons and communities, are in the search of something that satisfies, something that is a constant, something that gives and leads to hope.

The world as it is presently does not give the impression of hope, therefore it is for individuals and communities to strive towards a hope that satisfies, a hope that sustains in a troubled and difficult world. The chapter Disillusionment uses narratives through the 19th and 20th centuries to show how persons and people in community are being compelled to change in the face of their disillusionment. This is happening because their stories are changing. There used to be fixed ways of functioning in society, as in fascist and communist governments, which made living regimented but easy to understand. With the advent of liberalism, when people began to voice their

opinions and demand their due, the stories began to vary, and this brought in insecurity which could have led to disillusionment.

Insights into Harari's 'Disillusionment'

Humans think in stories rather than in facts, numbers or equations. In the early 1900's there were three main stories that were told - the fascist story, the communist story, and the liberal story. Then the fascist and the communist story collapsed, and the liberal story remained. In 1938 humans were offered three global stories to choose from, in 1968 just two, in 1998 a single story seemed to prevail; in 2018 the stories are down to zero.

No wonder that the liberal elites, who dominated much of the world in recent decades, have entered a state of shock and disorientation. To have one story is the most reassuring situation of all. Everything is perfectly clear. To be suddenly left without any story is terrifying. The sense of impending doom and disorientation is exacerbated by the accelerating pace of technological disruption. Democratic regimes took the place of brutal dictatorships and free enterprise overcame economic restrictions. People learned to think for themselves and follow their hearts, instead of blindly following hidebound traditions.

The twin revolutions in infotech and biotech began to restructure not just economies and societies but also bodies and minds. In the past, humans had learned to control the world outside of them, but had very little control over the world inside them. The revolutions in biotech and infotech now give humans control of the world inside themselves, and are enabling them to engineer and manufacture life. Humans have begun to design brains, extend lives, and kill thoughts. Nobody knows what the consequences will be.

Humans were always far better at inventing tools than using them wisely. It is easier to manipulate a river by building a dam across it than it is to predict all the complex consequences this will have for the wider ecological system. Similarly, it will be easier to redirect the flow of our minds than to divine what it will do to our personal psychology or to our social systems. Lots of mysterious words are bandied around excitedly in TED talks, government think tanks and hi-tech

conferences – globalization, blockchain, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, machine learning – and common people may well suspect that none of these words are about them. They are beginning to feel increasingly irrelevant.

The liberal story was the story of ordinary people. How it remains relevant in a world of cyborgs and networked algorithms is something which needs to be considered. Yet we need to realize that this time, however, the liberal story is not faced by coherent ideological opponents like imperialism, fascism, or communism. At the end of the day, humankind won't abandon the liberal story, because it doesn't have any alternative. People may give the system an angry kick in the stomach but, having nowhere else to go, they will eventually come back. For the first time in history, infectious diseases kill fewer people than old age, famine kills fewer people than obesity, and violence kills fewer people than accidents.

But liberalism has no obvious answers to the biggest problems we face: ecological collapse and technological disruption. Liberalism traditionally relied on economic growth to magically solve difficult social and political conflicts. Liberalism reconciled the proletariat with the bourgeoisie, the faithful with the atheists, the natives with the immigrants, and the Europeans with the Asians by promising everybody a larger slice of the pie. With a constantly growing pie, that was possible but now the pie is becoming smaller and smaller. Therefore, economic growth will not save the global ecosystem – just the opposite, it is the cause of the ecological crisis. There needs to be a rethink on the ideas of what constitutes economic growth and how it is seen in all parts of the world.

At present, humankind is still in the nihilist moment of disillusionment and anger, because they have lost faith in the old stories and have not yet embraced new ones. The first step in embracing new ones is to tone down the prophecies of doom. There is a need to switch from panic mode to bewilderment because panic is a form of hubris. It comes from the smug feeling that the person knows exactly where the world is heading – downwards. Bewilderment is humbler, and therefore more clear-sighted. If someone feels like running down the street crying 'The

apocalypse is upon us!’, that person can try telling himself or herself ‘No, it’s not that. Truth is, I just don’t understand what’s going on in the world.’

Liberalism in the Church Today

Modern liberalism pleads for the greatest possible individual liberty. It denounces as absurd the derivation of human authority from God. It says that the legal position of the Church, both as a public institution and as a property-owner is a national arrangement and therefore entirely subject to the will of the nation; and that ecclesiastical property belongs not to the church but to the nation.

The newest phases of this Liberalism were condemned by Pius X as Modernism which advocates latitude in interpreting dogma, and oversight or disregard of the disciplinary and doctrinal decrees of the Roman Congregations. It emphasizes sympathy with the State, and doing away with the liberty given to the Church, which works through the action of her bishops,

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clergy, religious orders and congregations, and a disposition to regard as clericalism the efforts of the Church to protect the rights of the family and of individuals to the free exercise of religion. Therefore, many Popes and conservative condemned these liberal thoughts.

Liberal Catholicism always had a complex relationship to liberalism. It began with a concern for freedom, not of the individual, not of the dissenting conscience, not of an aspiring class, but of the Catholic church. Its pioneers were restorationists, who dreamed of restoring the church’s cultural power. They rebelled against the throne’s intervention in the affairs of the church and the alliance of throne and altar. They saw Catholic Christianity as doomed as long as the church remained chained to bankrupt regimes. Although the relationship between church and state was the leading issue that defined liberal Catholicism, and one that today seems pretty much resolved by

Dignitatis Humanae, the Vatican Council's decree on religious liberty (Steinfels, 2004).

Some of the reasons because of which Liberal Catholicism was not accepted by the Church is because by proclaiming man's absolute autonomy in the intellectual, moral and social order, Liberalism denies, at least practically, God and supernatural religion. It could even lead to a theoretical denial of God, by putting deified mankind in place of God. It was already censured in the condemnations of Rationalism and Naturalism.

The most solemn condemnation of Naturalism and Rationalism was contained in the Constitution "*De Fide*" of the Vatican Council (1870); the most explicit and detailed condemnation, however, was administered to modern Liberalism by Pius IX in the Encyclical "*Quanta Cura*" of December 8, 1864 and the attached Syllabus. Pius X condemned it again in his allocution of April 17, 1907, and in the Decree of the Congregation of the Inquisition of July 3, 1907, in which the principal errors of Modernism were rejected and censured in sixty-five propositions. The older and principally political form of false Liberal Catholicism had been condemned by the Encyclical of Gregory XVI, "*Mirari Vos*", of August 15, 1832 and by many briefs of Pius IX (Ségur, 1877). The definition of the papal infallibility by the Vatican council was virtually a condemnation of Liberalism (*Catholic.org*, 2020, III).

This liberalism also petered down into the Church as newer ideas began to be talked about in the Church. Although Liberalism is not necessarily against what the thinking of the Church, it is often thought to be because of some of its confrontation with some church teachings. Some of the fears that arise from liberal thinking, within the church are with regard some of the 'hot' topics that theologians are discussing around the world today. They are more discussed in the western world, but have a peter down effect all over the world, as it opens new ways of looking at the functioning of the church with regard to various structures that are fixed. Some of the notable issues are same sex marriage, contraception, masturbation and divorce.

A Liberal Church?

If someone has a free way of thinking and acting in private and public life, that person is considered liberal. A liberal is also thought of as being a person who is intellectually independent, broadminded, magnanimous, frank, open, and genial. Liberalism is also attributed to a political system or tendency to oppose centralization and absolutism. The word has been applied more and more to inclinations in the intellectual, religious, political, and economical life. This implied a partial or total liberation from the supernatural, moral, and Divine order.

The necessary consequences of this are, on the one hand, the abolition of the Divine right and of every kind of authority derived from God. Also, there is the relegation of religion from the public life into the private domain of one's individual conscience. It ignores Christianity and the Church as public, legal, and social institutions and brings the sovereignty of the people into all branches of public life, especially with regard to legislation, administration, and jurisdiction.

In reflecting on understandings of liberalism in the Church today, a starting point could be, 'What does it mean to be a committed Catholic?' This question arises in the wake of the numerous changes occurring worldwide with regard to free will and making one's own choices. Many of the stances of the Church reflected in its teachings, have come under scrutiny and are being outrightly questioned by Catholic liberals who ask for a more open church. There are two groups of theologians, one that advocates more open view points and the other that advocates more liberal ones. The Church is more open now compared to a couple of decades ago, and has clear guidelines on some of these issues, arguing against more open, liberal interpretations.

Some of the stances that are under scrutiny and for which there already are provisions in Catholic teaching, are on same-sex marriage, masturbation and divorce, among other issues totally forbidden by Catholic teaching. The Catholic Church, a firm opponent of abortion, stands against the important liberal principle that women have a right to control their own bodies. There is little doubt that for many liberal Catholics that the Church's hierarchical character and its refusal to

admit women into the priesthood indicate a reluctance to recognize such fundamentally liberal ideals as equality, democracy, and freedom. Yet for all the hostility expressed by the Catholic Church and its officials to liberal principles, Catholics can also be found in the forefront of important struggles for social justice.

The arguments by the more liberal groups is that the focus should now be more on creating stable families lead by equal partners and the impact of media on moral values, rather than on premarital sex, same-sex relationships and giving the flock a sense of direction. Conservative theologians argue that Catholic ethics or sexual ethics should not change with the times. Ethical behavior must also be judged differently in a sexual relationship than in other relationships, they say.

The more liberal sexual theologians, extrapolate that official Church teaching needs to evolve with the times, while traditionalists say being a Catholic is about trying to be faithful to what the church teaches and to explore the content of revelation. The traditionalists also argue that meetings, conferences and public debate barely address church teachings or people supportive of church teachings in their arguments and mostly go for topics that are more sensational. There are also the integralists who put special weight on their reading of Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*, no.2), which states that "the human person has a right to religious freedom" (Vat II, 1965) and that "all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power" (Vatican Council II, 1965).

Whether it is liberalism as a social phenomenon or liberalism in the Church, most people are concerned with survival. Survival is governed by three things, food, clothing and shelter. If society and religion can provide them with these three necessities of life, then they become more open to issues other than survival. The next most important issue, is having a job. A job is required to live. The technological revolution has pushed millions of humans out of the job market, and created a massive new useless class, leading to social and political upheavals that no existing ideology knows how to handle. All the talk about technology and ideology might sound abstract and remote, but the very

real prospect of mass or personal unemployment leaves nobody indifferent. One point of view is that in the light of a loss of job, what a faith or a religious tradition says become immaterial, as it is survival that becomes paramount. Another point of view is from the perspective of those who profess to faith traditions, who say that it is their faith that makes them hold on in a difficult world, and it is only because of their faith that they survive and continue to live in hope.

Personal Appraisal

Faith in freedom of inquiry should not be abandoned at the gateway to theology. In order to do so, we need to understand clearly the difference between the Catholic left and liberal Catholicism (Steinfels, 2004). There is a real difference between liberal Catholicism and the Catholic left. Liberal Catholicism, affirms the positive values of the culture and democratic institutions, advocates religious liberty and a vigorous lay apostolate of social reform. Its public style, stresses dialogue, mediation, compromise, and gradualism. It is grounded in the lay experience of work, family, and politics.

The Catholic left, was born out of liberal Catholicism but quite consciously defined itself over against it. Race and Vietnam were the catalytic issues, and the militant stances developed on those fronts soon worked their way into internal church conflicts. The Catholic left's style is measures society, and culture, or the church against gospel standards. It presses to repair the resulting contrast, with, attention to compromise, incrementalism, or extended analysis and debate. It is linked much more closely to third-world liberation movements than to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European experiences.

The rise of nationalist movements and ideas around the world today, has occurred because of rising economic inequality and dislocation, eroded communal ties, and rapid cultural change. Political thinkers from the left and right have offered strong critiques of the globalized liberalism associated with them. Some of these nationalist ideas have got entangled with racism and nativism. A commitment to liberal (not leftist) principles remains the best guarantor of human rights, the promise of peace, and a robust pluralism that allows communities of faith to flourish.

It's no surprise that Catholics have been at the heart of these conversations. The Catholic Church is rooted in diverse local communities. Catholic social thought as well as the Church's on-the-ground experience provides considerable resources to help navigate these political movements. Pope Francis offers a particularly interesting lens through which to explore these questions. One of his favorite movements is that he is a strong advocate for migrants, and a prominent voice for solidarity and community who opposes a globalized "economy that kills" (Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, 2019).

Some of the developments the church must address are in the areas of change in control of fertility and in the relations between men and women and in the meaning of both sexuality; the extension of scientific knowledge and technological control over genes and the mind; in building entirely new relations between world religions, a deeper understanding of the modern quantum leap in historical consciousness and cultural pluralism and a worldwide revolution of individual freedom and democracy (Steinfels, 2004).

Concluding Remarks

Liberalism establishes the need to protect human rights, to grant everybody the right to vote, to establish free markets, and to let individuals, ideas and goods move throughout the world as easily as possible and that countries and groups need to look beyond racial, national or gendered privileges. The teachings of the Catholic Church have been at the forefront of a lot of these movements. It has for millennia successfully evangelized cultures and countries by holding fast to its doctrine. Rome has rejected any changes to its major teachings on morality for the simple reason that moral truth is unchanging but has been open to changes in other teachings.

Pope Francis has said that we should not fear schism, trusting in the Bible's promise that the faith will endure (Busch, 2019). Catholic Christianity should continue to persuade the world that the key to any changes happening is that those developments should serve life rather than death; that the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ and the sacramental life of the Spirit should be lived as a community of disciples. It should not be from behind barred gates or armed ramparts or from stances that refuse to acknowledge change, and that tries to evade historical consciousness. It should embrace stances that include pluralism, freedom, and democracy.

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