

# After Christendom:



*Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt is professor of theology at Loyola University Maryland and a deacon of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.*

*This book review appeared in Commonweal Magazine on May 19, 2022*

Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946) and Chantal Delsol (b. 1947) are both prominent French philosophers who are very public about their Roman Catholicism. This alone would put them, in the minds of many of their fellow citizens, into “conservative” political and cultural camps, though the truth is considerably more complicated.

This past year saw the appearance in English translation of Marion’s 2017 book, *A Brief Apology for a Catholic Moment*, and the publication of Delsol’s *La Fin de la Chrétienté*. Both of these short works grapple with the role of the Church in a dechristianized culture; both show the complex negotiations required to steer between what Marion calls the “twin and rival disasters” of integralism, which seeks to establish a Christian social order, and progressivism, which risks letting any distinctively Christian identity evaporate.

Religion has, of course, played a very different role in modern, highly secular France than it has in the United States (which Delsol calls a pays biblico-revolutionnaire—a biblical-revolutionary land), but the differences may not be as great as is sometimes claimed. As shown by the *Quiet Revolution* in Quebec in the 1960s, and by more recent cultural changes in Ireland, the secularization of seemingly robust religious cultures can happen very quickly, and there is reason to think that our own country is undergoing just such a shift. So Marion and Delsol’s books can help us contemplate our own likely more secular future.

Jean-Luc Marion first came to the attention of English-speaking readers three decades ago with the publication in translation of *God Without Being*. This work of philosophical theology embraced the postmodern critique of “onto-theology” while drawing some surprising conclusions from that critique, including a robust defense of that seemingly most ontological of theological doctrines: transubstantiation.

Because of its sometimes counterintuitive intellectual moves and its postmodern Heideggerian idiolect, this book helped secure Marion’s reputation as a challenging and highly speculative thinker. But Marion is also a practicing Catholic who cares passionately about the place of the Church in the postmodern world. In *A Brief Apology* he offers what he characterizes as an exercise in practical reasoning in an interrogative mode, pursuing the question of the role Catholics can and should play in French society. (Like Delsol, he makes only passing reference to non-Catholic Christians.)

Marion argues that the situation in France, and the West in general, is so dire that in order to avoid complete societal dissolution, “we must make an appeal to all the resources and all the strengths. Even the Catholic ones.” He chooses to characterize this situation as “decadence,” rather than “crisis.” This decadence is in fact “a crisis of crisis,” by which he means something like what Nietzsche meant by modern nihilism in his *Twilight of the Idols*:

# Catholicism in a More Secular Future

“‘I do not know where I am or what I am to do; I am everything that knows not where it is or what to do,’—sighs the modern man.” This also echoes the critique of modernity made over half a century ago by Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of Marion’s intellectual mentors, in *The Moment of Christian Witness*.

It is precisely by the infinite deferral of the moment of crisis that the modern world defeats the Gospel, since the Gospel is a call to crisis that demands a decision. The modern allergy to crisis undermines not only Catholicism but also Western society itself. “We are not falling into the abyss, we are suffering from a stagnant decadence.”



Marion employs Augustine’s critique of Rome as a republic that failed to embody true justice, which requires worship of the true God. Marion argues that because divine grace gives Christians access to justice, “they alone can uphold, always only partially, but always effectively, earthly cities to which they fundamentally do not belong.” It is precisely the “outsider” status of Christians in society that allows them to press beyond narrow national interests to true justice and communion.

The French Republic’s motto—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*—is realizable only if there is a universal paternity that unites all people: “The only Father conceivable who can ensure just and actual brotherhood, because it ensures union in communion, is found in heaven; only from there can it come to earth.” Marion quickly notes that the Republic, being a secular state, obviously cannot incorporate this into its motto, much less into its constitution, yet “Catholics can witness to this paternity in a society of orphans.”

Given the strong connection he draws between Christianity and true justice, Marion’s embrace of the secularity (*laïcité*) of the French Republic might seem surprising. This embrace distances him from integralism and its arguments in favor of a Christian political order, which he dismisses as “an illusion.”

But he does it also for positive theological reasons, invoking thinkers such as Ivan Illich and Charles Taylor to argue that first Judaism and then Christianity “desacralize” the world, and worldly politics along with it. His exposition and defense of *laïcité* depend upon a dual use of this term: on the one hand, it can be a neutral word for the secular sphere’s renunciation of competence in religious matters; on the other, it can mean an aggressively secular anti-religion.

The more neutral sense of the term simply identifies a realm distinct from the sacred, part of the structure of difference that is integral to the providential order of the world. *Laïcité* in the negative sense is precisely the violation of this structure of difference, an overstepping of the profane into the realm of the sacred, the former banishing and replacing the latter. Marion writes that this sort of *laïcité* could become “a fourth monotheism, like the first monotheism without God, the most abstract and therefore the most dangerous.”

In defending a positive notion of *laïcité*, Marion appeals to Pascal’s distinction between the orders of bodies, minds, and charity to argue for the incommensurability of these three orders and for the primacy of the order of charity.

# After Christendom:

This distinction “allows us to identify the neutrality of the state with the first order”—i.e. the state’s proper sphere of concern is the bodily acts of its citizens—“and to validate its positive powerlessness to see (and, what is more, to judge) the order of mind (freedom of thought, research, etc.) and above all the order of charity (freedom of conscience, of belief and unbelief, or ‘religion’ and of change of religion).” True *laïcité* requires that the state embrace its blindness and incompetence with regard to religious belief. Marion draws from Pascal here, but an American might be forgiven for hearing echoes of John Courtney Murray.

When Marion turns to the positive contribution the Church can make to society, he points again to the “outsider” or “other-worldly” status of Christians: “They make the world less unlivable, because their aim is not to set themselves up in it in perpetuity, but to begin to live in the world according to another logic, and in fact they already belong to another world.” The Christian orientation toward another logic, another world, and ultimately to a transcendent Other, lies at the heart of Marion’s account of what Christianity offers to the postmodern West. He sees the triumph of the market in the West as a form of practical nihilism that obliterates difference by reducing everything to its economic value: “The economy rests on a possibility of abstraction, which reduces each and every thing to money, and thus establishes equivalence between things that in reality have nothing in common; whence the possibility of universal exchange.” Our mania to put a price tag on everything obliterates difference, reducing it to a monetary sameness in which things are distinguished not qualitatively but quantitatively. Such a reduction destroys our capacity to apprehend a good that is qualitatively other.

This is the societal manifestation of Nietzsche’s will-to-power, the will that wills no good except its own increase. Such a will, Marion writes, makes a person “a slave of the worst of masters, himself,” and to be liberated from this bondage involves “attaining and setting up a thing for a good, a thing in itself, which is a thing outside of me.”

This is precisely what Christianity offers: “He alone tears himself from nihilism who, in imitating Christ, succeeds in not willing his own will (to will), in order to will elsewhere and from elsewhere.” Such a good can become the common good of a society because, while irreducibly other in its transcendence over the world, it is not abstract in the way monetary value is; rather, it is concretely “accomplished in the Trinity and manifested in a trinitarian manner by Christ.” This offers “a political model that is at base non-political...a community that aims at communion, because in fact it comes from communion.”

*True laïcité requires that the state embrace its blindness and incompetence with regard to religious belief.*

The appeal to the life of the Trinity and the life of God incarnate provides an opening for Marion to conclude his Brief Apology with a discussion of the phenomenon of the gift, a theme he has explored in other works. Rejecting the model of “gift-exchange,” which links giving and getting, Marion sees gift as following “the logic of erotic phenomena”: “It creates the eventual conditions of a gift in return, but does not depend on the reality of the return on investment, or expect it.” This erotic logic helps address the issue of the exercise of power by Christians. Because the gift is given without expectation of return, the Catholic citizen can, like Christ himself, offer to the political community his or her gift of witness to true communion without demanding political power either as a precondition or an expected award.

Delsol’s book might be thought of as a preemptive autopsy, comparing a dying Christendom with the death of pagan civilization in the late ancient world.

# Catholicism in a More Secular Future

Unlike Marion, Chantal Delsol is a thinker already known for her political philosophy and *La Fin de la Chrétienté* (*The End of Christendom*) continues an already well-developed line of inquiry. Her approach, influenced by her teacher Julien Freund and his appropriation of the thought of Max Weber, is marked by a philosophical anthropology that acknowledges the social and historical construction of human identity without totally abandoning the idea of human nature.

In this sense, her project is not unlike that of Alasdair MacIntyre. It leads her to pay close attention to the play of historical contingencies in such notions as human dignity. Rather than a static identity, human nature is a dynamic, evolving reality—indeed, if anything is “essential” to our nature it is our ceaseless desire to exceed that nature. As she writes memorably of the human person in her book, *Qu’est-ce que l’homme?* (*What Is a Human Being?*): “Rooted, he wants to be emancipated from his roots. Put another way, he seeks an inaccessible dwelling place through a succession of temporary way stations.”

The result is an Augustinian anthropology of the “restless heart” inflected by postmodern historical consciousness. All of this informs her account of the fate of Christianity in the contemporary West.

English speakers might be misled by the title of *La Fin de la Chrétienté*. The term *Chrétienté* refers not to what we would call “Christianity,” understood as a community of belief and practice (what the French call *christianisme*), but rather to the sociopolitical formation that we refer to as “Christendom.” Delsol describes this as “the civilization inspired, ordered, guided by the Church,” which endured for sixteen centuries, beginning with Theodosius’s victory in the Battle of the Frigid River in

394 AD, but which is now in its death throes. Delsol’s book might be thought of as a preemptive autopsy, comparing a dying Christendom with the death of pagan civilization in the late ancient world—a death brought about by Christendom itself.

Delsol begins by examining how a Church that so resolutely resisted modernity for two centuries in the name of Christian civilization has since the 1960s come to embrace such modern values as religious freedom—values utterly at odds with Christendom. She offers an analysis of early twentieth-century fascism and corporatism as integralist attempts to save Christendom that “proved to be worse than the disease.” Animated by a utopian nostalgia that proved to be merely the mirror image of modernity’s utopian futurism, these sorts of movements fell prey to those, such as Charles Maurras, who wanted Christendom but couldn’t care less about Christianity itself. In the end, Delsol argues, such movements proved to be nothing but “the convulsions of a dying Christendom.”



While both Marion and Delsol see integralism as a doomed effort to resuscitate Christendom, Delsol is less confident than Marion that Christendom can be replaced by a benign form of laïcité, in part because she is generally

skeptical that any society can in fact be secular. Secularity is a fantasy indulged in by intellectuals, but for ordinary people, “for whom common sense whispers that there are mysteries behind the door,” religion of some sort is unavoidable. Our present moment, she argues, is not one of secularization but of revolution “in the strict sense of a cyclical return.” Ancient paganism is reborn, albeit in new forms marked by the sixteen intervening centuries of Christendom. This revolution involves

# After Christendom:

a kind of Nietzschean transvaluation both in morals (what she calls the normative inversion”) and in worldview (*the ontological inversion*) Delsol tries to retain a certain analytic detachment in describing these inversions of prior moral norms, casting herself as an observer of this moment of historical transition rather than as a partisan. Still, she insists on the significance of this inversion. She believes that the mores of a society form the basic architecture of its existence, a structure more stable than codified laws, shaping not only the actions of those who belong to it but also their feelings and habits. As any parent will recognize (Delsol is the mother of six), “children are always educated by their times more than by their parents.”

To shed light on our own times, Delsol looks back to the birth of Christendom, the last great inversion of norms in the West. She insists on two claims that might seem contradictory at first: the advent of Christendom was a radical break with the pagan past, and it was also unthinkable without that past as the basis

on which it built. Christians constructed their civilization using elements of pagan culture, in particular Stoic morality, though now “democratized” and reframed within a new system of beliefs that transformed what was appropriated. Like Marion, Delsol sees “otherness” as a key to the innovation of Christianity. In contrast to the profoundly unified religious world of the Romans, in which the gods and humanity were fellow citizens of the cosmos, Christianity “introduced a dualism between the temporal and the spiritual, the here-and-now and the beyond, human beings and God.” The advent of Christendom brought a sharp reversal of societal attitudes regarding divorce, abortion, infanticide, suicide, and homosexuality. Delsol evinces a keen sympathy for those pagan Romans, conservators of traditional values, who felt that with the advent of Christendom they had entered “an intellectual and spiritual world torn apart,” and she shows genuine admiration for those who continued to battle in the face of what was clearly inevitable defeat.

*The Catholic Church’s relevance is increasingly contingent on its ability to incorporate secular experiences and expectations into the articulation of the Church’s teachings.*

*Michelle Dillon*  
*Postsecular Catholicism*



*Because*

*So, I can't save the world-  
can't save even myself,  
can't wrap my arms around  
every frightened child,  
can't bring love to all who  
feel unlovable.*

*So, I practice opening my heart  
right here in this room and being gentle  
with my insufficiency. I practice  
walking down the street heart first.  
And if it is insufficient to share love,  
I will practice loving anyway.  
I want to converse about truth,  
about trust. I want to invite compassion  
into every interaction.*

*One willing heart can't stop a war.  
One willing heart can't feed all the hungry.  
And sometimes, daunted by a task too big,  
I tell myself what's the use of trying?  
But, Today, the invitation is clear:  
to be ridiculously courageous in love.  
To open the heart like a lilac in May,  
Knowing freeze is possible  
And opening anyway.  
To take love seriously.  
To give love wildly.  
To race up to the world  
as if it were a puppy,  
adoring and unjaded,  
stumbling on my own exuberance.  
To feel the shock of indifference,  
of anger, of cruelty, of fear,  
and stay open. To love as if it matters,  
as if the world depends on it.*

*Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer (wordwoman.com)*