

Review of Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014)

The essays collected here were published under a variety of different venues and publications. The result is that Del Noce could get away with a great amount of repetition. Different themes receive the emphasis in different essays, but they all appear multiple times. He is also very Italian, which manifests itself various ways. Not only does he constantly reference writers who are unknown outside Italian academics, but he is equally ignorant of the Anglo-American writers, whom he seems to think are still the logical positivists of the 1950s. Also he resorts to emphatic assertion just when exposition is needed instead. Del Noce was a Roman Catholic intellectual, and as typical, he assumes that the Thomistic synthesis of pagan and biblical concepts is the real Christianity, and so we should consider the possibility that what is a crisis for him, may not be the same crisis, or in the same way for those who had their Christianity restored by the Reformation.

In fact, this concept of a crisis of modernity is taken different ways by different writers. For some, it is modernity that underwent a crisis, after all the potential of its premises were played out, and so we have broken out into post-modernity. For others, modernity is a sort of end-point where an entire cultural development issued into a final period, called modernity, which destroyed the foundations of this whole development (which might be Western Civilization, Christendom, Progressive History, or some such long term ideal). Finally, and as we have in this book, modernity is conceived as a threat to something more specific. That specific thing might be the technological society, the relativization of Europe in face of a larger world which firmly holds conflicting values, mass culture, or some philosophical concept that undercuts everything. For Del Noce what is threatened is a certain philosophical synthesis that is believed by Del Noce to be essential for the continuation of a society that he thinks of as Christian Europe. The crisis, then, is a crisis in this society and its theoretical underpinnings which is caused by modernity, but there is a minor theme of a crisis of modernity in the first sense, where modernity suffers under the end of the potential held by Marxism.

Nature of Modernity

The sense of modernity will differ somewhat depending on whether he considers it as philosophy, or as science, or as some historical development.

I am inclined to define the “modernist” sense of modern philosophy as follows: “A philosophy is modern whenever it claims not to be a mere actualization of some “virtuality” of ancient thought, or of the medieval unity of ancient and Christian thought. And when, therefore, in order to place itself within history it must affirm that we have entered a period of philosophical research marked by a sharp break with respect to the Greek and medieval periods, which are thought to have ended.” ... The Middle Ages were characterized by a quest, in vain, to harmonize the Greek and Christian philosophical traditions. ... Then, the break from which “modernity” begins is the rejection of this compromise. (p. 4)

This peculiar definition, while getting at the essence of what perturbs Del Noce, would place the beginning of modernity in the philosophical developments of the 14th century. When he says that the medieval quest is “in vain” he is alluding to how modernity presents itself, as he does believe in the medieval synthesis. A focus on science, though, might direct us to the 17th century, and on politics to

the 18th. For some, the periods such as Middle Ages into which history is divided are a mere shorthand to allude to general dates, and they consider the periods themselves to lack any boundaries when examined in historical detail. Del Noce emphatically disagrees with this. But this still leaves the question of when the boundaries should be placed. Willis Glover has argued that the traditional major divisions are wrong (*Biblical Origins of Modern Secular Culture*). But then he also says that the Thomistic synthesis of Christianity and Greek cosmology was never a complete, stable achievement. Viewing the Renaissance Willis notes the Augustinian elements of the thought of many humanists and considers it to be more Christian than the Middle Ages. For Del Noce, for whom the Thomistic synthesis is the pristinization of Christianity, the Renaissance humanists' disdain for scholasticism would have a very different significance. Just as much so, his opposite number among the secularists who sees the great historical breakthrough in the triumph of experimental science over the Aristotelian authoritarianism of the Thomistic synthesis would see Thomism's breakdown as era defining. Thus periodization turns out to be relative to the appearance or disappearance of the truth that is your truth.

Del Noce says "we must observe that today philosophers practice their trade within this periodization scheme, which is taken as a fact. For rationalists, certainty about an irreversible historical process toward radical immanentism has replaced what for medieval thinkers was faith in revelation." (p. 5) The objection that Del Noce wants to make here is that the existence of the historical period does not mean a progress from A to B, where B is the inevitable outcome, but that there are parallel processes to different conclusions. His example is that besides Descartes to Nietzsche there is Descartes to Rosmini "and this second line is destined to arrive at traditional metaphysical thought and refine it."

Therefore, from the standpoint of the general periodization of the history of philosophy we must abandon the notion that the idea of modernity possesses an axiological character. Instead, it must be regarded as the period in which the phenomenon of atheism manifested itself and burned itself out. (p. 6)

This he holds in contrast to "the usual perspective, [that] modernity is regarded as the proof, provided by history, of the assertion that thought and civilization develop irreversibly from transcendence to immanence."

Another idea of modernity, is that of a new science.

Modern science, whose great contribution to its own field obviously nobody can deny, started in the 1600s when the search for "vertical causality" (from physics to metaphysics) was replaced by the one for "horizontal causality", in the sense of searching for laws that express constant relationships between phenomena. It is hard to miss the analogy between the scientific revolution of that time (which, however, was limited to science in the strict sense) and today's religious revolution, which openly declares its own horizontalism as well, in the sense of shifting attention to "worldly realities." (p. 88)

But what was the objection against Copernicus and Galileo? They defied Aristotelian science. But why care? What was the big deal about the opinions of some ancient Greek philosopher? And was there something especially "vertical" about him?

What was being challenged by that early science was the medieval synthesis between Christianity and Greek cosmology. This idea according to which divine reason and intelligible forms pervaded the

world, and created an intermediary between the mind of man and God's operations had been proclaimed to be a foundation of Roman Catholicism. The challenge was not to Christian concepts, where, e.g. in the case of the nominalist view God could do as he pleased, and it was up to us to observe God's work and find out what it was. The Roman Church, however, made the opposition to the new science a matter of the Church's authority, thus identifying "vertical" explanations with Greek horizontal ones.

As late as Newton, scientists found no need to banish a vertical aspect to a scientific explanation, as Newton saw the cosmological order as one where God was both founder and maintenance man. But gradually such explanations were excluded from science, under the influence of general cultural trends. But the explanation for this has to be sought outside science. But even Newton's sort of science was just as much a rejection of the Church's Aristotelian synthesis science, as was the later purely horizontal science, so from Del Noce's Romanist perspective, the new science of the 1600s was the introduction of what is modernity to him, even though his appeal to vertical vs. horizontal is the wrong explanation.

Secularization

Secularization has an undeniable correlation to modernity. Again, Marxism becomes archetypical for Del Noce's understanding of modernity.

In my opinion, the term secularization attains its full meaning if we think of it in connection with what we can call the Marxist counter-religion; namely, Marx wants to achieve the complete rejection of any dependence of man on God, and so, in the first place, of dependence on God the Creator. (p. 76)

But Marx did not foresee the rise of the attitude of nihilism, as the term "is used today to indicate the collapse in the Western world of the values that until now had been regarded as supreme." Instead there was supposed to be an end to alienation. "On the contrary, in the Western world Marxist culture, during its revival after the Second World War, produced nihilism; the nihilism of Western society cannot be explained without referring to this repercussion of Marxism."

To sum up, when secularization turns into nihilism it coincides, therefore, with the crisis of the idea of modernity ... This crisis is expressed by the decomposition of Marxism, which takes place without the possibility of sublation into a superior form.

Marxism, then, is a sort of catalyst that turns secularization into nihilism. This, he seems to suggest, removes from modernity its agenda, hence creating a crisis for modernity.

Secularization, as he presents it, seems to be pretty much what the Romantic poets at the beginning of the 19th century introduced under the theme of Promethianism, which preceded Marx and was adopted by him. If it was transformed into nihilism later at a time when Marxism was historically prominent, this does not mean that the same development would not have occurred without Marx, despite what Del Noce thinks.

In fact the whole promotion of the succession of post-Hegelian German philosophers, especially Marx, as necessary to the development of modernity seems questionable. Between Rousseau's ideas about

revolution, Romantic Promethianism, and similar ideas, the necessary elements were in place. Perhaps only the definition of dialectics required the contribution of the German philosophers, and Rousseau had developed the essentials of the modern revolution idea without it. Dialectics, after all, is a process, not something revolutionary. As revolutionary socialisms claimed to be scientific, but instead depended on an irrational, magical transformation into a “totally other”, people were bound to be disillusioned and left with a choice of going back to pre-revolutionary values, or of nihilism, Marx or no Marx.

Nature of Revolution

The ennoblement of violence is tied to the philosophical idea of *total* revolution, that is, of revolution as a transition from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom, to a reality that is qualitatively “totally other”. This transition implies a radical, necessarily violent break with history up to now. Therefore, the revolution cannot take place in the name of the traditional ethical principles because they are either empty words (justice, freedom), or legitimations-mystifications of the existing order. The idea of total revolution implies the elimination of ethics. Thought *in terms of violence* follows this elimination. (p. 20)

From the viewpoint of revolutionary violence, what matters is that even the memory of the old man must vanish; there must be change without conversion; the past must be erased, and thus even repentance. (p. 21)

He amplifies this in connection with his discussion of Marx, for whom “the revolution represents a transition not just from one social situation to another, but from one stage of mankind to another. That is, *there is no analogy between the reign of necessity and dependence and the reign of freedom; i.e., the transition from the one to the other requires a revolution capable of transforming human nature itself.* (p. 62)

But in this idea of revolution, the revolution necessarily destroys itself in that what comes out of the revolution is not the “totally other”, but the return of a non-revolutionary state.

The relationship between the revolution and nihilism then becomes all too clear. Indeed, it is apparent that the revolutionary idea implies the combination of two stages: a negative one in which the traditional order of values is devalued, and a positive one in which a “totally other” new order is established. The transition from the revolution to nihilism is mediated by what I have called elsewhere “the suicide of the revolution,” What happens is that nihilism, instead of being the preliminary stage of the revolution (the tearing away of the masks, the night of values, and so on), becomes its result. At that point, violence is no longer accepted as necessary, or revolutionary violence exalted as divine. Rather, it is accepted as normal because ethics comes to an end. Ethics is replaced by rules of coexistence imposed by the strongest side, and violence truly is “wrong” because it is lawmaking.... The fact that it is lawmaking is the sign that the transition from the reign of necessity to the reign of freedom failed. (p. 36)

He says that also as a historical sequence “nihilism follows revolutionary thought. It is the result of the revolution: of its success in demolishing the old values and of its failure to build new values. Not by chance, the same young intellectuals who earlier preached the revolution in the name of Marx have become reconciled with neo-capitalist society in the name of Nietzsche, making a perfectly smooth transition from their old position to the new.” (p. 62) But the opposite of revolution “is not the idea of

nihilism but that of Providence. The idea of Providence, as affirmation of the divine government of the world, is the opposite of the idea of Revolution, aimed at achieving its complete human governance.”

Del Noce discusses this whole matter in the midst of many references to gnosticism, but in fact it can be discussed on its own, without having to explain gnosticism, its ancient and modern forms, and so on. Labeling things as gnosticism can become a ploy to blacken some rival point of view, by obfuscating the issues through the intermediary of the gnostic label. Del Noce in fact does this by calling Puritanism gnostic, and by invoking Eric Voegelin for the purpose, which is also a common ploy.

Of course for Del Noce, for whom true Christianity is the Thomistic synthesis with the Greek cosmic idea, in which divine reason permeates the cosmos, and within which the divine and human overlap, anything radically Christian would appear as the abandonment of the essential foundation.

Nature of Marxism

Marxism holds a special place for Del Noce in the unfolding of modernity; “if a philosophical event, namely Marx’s philosophy, marks the beginning of our historical period, then contemporary history offers the heuristic advantage of being fully rational.” (p. 75) Del Noce seems to ascribe to it some of the same inevitability that it gives to itself. For this he thinks he needs to establish “(1) that Marxism could only become realized historically precisely in the way it did; (2) that it must be viewed as the primary subject of contemporary history”. What does he expect to get out of this? Despite the pessimism that comes to the fore when he discusses the force of permissivism and eroticism in the contemporary world, when he considers politics he projects a positive outcome beyond Marxism.

Precisely the historical outcome of the revolution, viewed as man’s greatest attempt to deny his own limitations, creates the conditions to reopen theological discourse. Essentially, this line of thought comes close to that of Dostoevsky, who regarded atheism pushed to the highest degree as the condition for the discovery of God. Recognizing the philosophical power of the two great atheists Marx and Nietzsche is the condition for a renewal of religious thought.

....

We must realize that Marxism constitutes the greatest synthesis of opposites that ever appeared in the history of thought. ... the unity of materialism and dialectics and the unity of utopianism and political realism, both of which are pushed to their extreme consequences. (p. 64)

We have already noticed that revolution, in its ideologies, is an unanalyzable moment of passing from historical conditions to a “totally other”. That being the case, utopias, which are described in detail by their inventors, are not totally other, and so are not the outcomes of revolution in this modern sense of revolution. Del Noce nevertheless wants to bring in the idea of utopia to Marxism, where he treats it as the edge case rather than the denial of utopia.

Utopianism reaches the highest degree. This is why Marx, unlike ordinary utopians, does not linger on describing the future society, and only says generically what it will not be like. He does so because he conceives his future society as so completely other with respect to the existing one that trying to describe it would be slipping into reverie. Another reason is that earlier forms of utopic communism had been able to indulge in such descriptions because what they proposed as the ideal reality was present reality freed from its contradictions, whereas for

Marxism the reality to be created by the revolution was the result of those very contradictions and their explosion. (p. 65)

But we remember a book, *Communist Eschatology* by Francis Nigel Lee, which devotes 1177 pages to what Marx, Engels and Lenin had so say about this utopia. Del Noce's necessary and "greatest synthesis of opposites" is something of an idealization of his own construction. In his mind, this idealization is so perfect that not only did it have to unfold historically the way it did, but it could not be combined successfully with other ideas, such as psychology or idealism to carry forward into new revolutionary movements. Yet, looking ahead, Del Noce will provide an extensive treatment to the Freudian/Marxists conglomerates and their big impact, in 1968. And in our own time we find it amalgamated into a race, class and gender ideology, which in the same way as pure Marxism seeks to completely eclipse historical reality.

As an aside: there is now the growing view that all this (Marxism and post-Marxisms) are and have always been ideologies for "useful idiots" and have been deployed by powerful elites behind the scenes to destroy civil society and with it any structured opposition to their exploitation of the world population as a whole. Del Noce, then, would be conducting an interesting analysis of the relationship of abstract concepts, but not digging out the necessary unfolding of modernity.

Continuing from here, Del Noce says that "this utopianism coexists with an extreme form of political realism. Indeed, the fact that all values are merged into one, the Revolution, must end up dissolving ethics into politics altogether", and he quotes Lenin "Morality is whatever serves the success of the proletarian revolution." (p. 65)

Del Noce outlines the steps of the necessary development of Marxism. He says here and often in various essays that this "chain leads to the heterogenesis of ends." This favorite phrase appears where we would prefer to have an explanation of the concept. The revolution requires a revolutionary class which can employ the degree of force necessary to carry it through, that is to overturn society. "Marx arrives at the theory of the proletariat as the only mediator of the transition to the society of equals." But this class "needs self-awareness. Who can provide it? ... Lenin answered that ... [it] can be brought to the workers only from without" that is, by Marx and Engels, who were bourgeois intellectuals. "Thus, what is needed are intellectuals who possess a superior knowledge, which enables them to grasp the development of history in its entirety." We find, then, that even in advance of the moment of revolution there is a transcending of history, which happens intellectually in this elite, and which then guides the revolution. Del Noce calls them the "new Gnostics", but effectively it is a denial of Marxist historical dialectic because history has to be guided ahead of the dialectic by something which transcends history. What Del Noce is trying to portray as a necessary aspect of Marxism is in fact an incoherence. This necessary development, he says, means that the party replaces the proletariat, "then the dictatorship of the party, then the new techno-bureaucratic class.... But what matters is ... understanding that they are necessary links in a chain that starts from Marxism considered in its philosophical aspect. This aspect must be recognized as primary in comparison with the revolutionary and the economic aspects." (p. 67)

From here he goes on to say that "we must acknowledge that Lenin was the most consistent interpreter of Marx and, at the same time, that the Communist revolution could succeed only by encountering the Russian populist tradition." "Stalin was able to radicate Communism in the Russian popular tradition by exploiting the idea that Russian has a special task for the liberation of the world. ... In this way,

Stalin saved Communism, but at the price of linking it back to the Tsarist tradition. Here the heterogenesis ends, the sign of the Providence I talked about, comes full circle. Marxism realizes itself historically by continuing and increasing Tsarist imperialism, by fully empowering precisely the danger Marx had most feared.” So the necessity that appeared to be the unfolding of the theoretical nature of Marxism we are suddenly told is in fact the action of Providence. Del Noce’s whole analysis begins to look very contrived. Elsewhere, though, Del Noce argues that Marxism, as a theory of praxis and the development of history has to be verified by history, so it is this history that reveals what true Marxism is, namely something that could not have emerged without the Russian Revolution, etc. (p. 80)

Totalitarianism

Del Noce defines totalitarianism a couple of different ways.

We can say that the novelty of completely including ethics within politics also [i.e. not just Marxism] constitutes the novelty, with respect to all other previous political orders, of what is usually called totalitarianism. In fact, it is totalitarianism’s only precise definition, and we can find its necessary theoretical premises in Marx’s thought and nowhere else. (pp. 65-66)

But also:

The widespread notion that the age of totalitarianisms ended with Hitlerism and Stalinism is completely mistaken. In fact, totalitarianisms are founded on the negation of the universality of reason, so that any form of opposition to established power (in the broadest sense), be it cultural or political, supposedly does not express rational concerns but conceals interests of class (according to Communism) or race (according to Nazism), regardless of the awareness of those who criticize. If one reflects about the relationship between authority and evidence, it becomes clear that, ultimately, negating those two notions must necessarily lead to the persecution, ending in the elimination, of all dissenters. (p. 230)

Recently, of course, the Nazi position has been taken over by the blacks who say that $2 + 2 = 4$ is “white math” and is not true for blacks. Another example are the commentators in a Chilean television program who said that the epidemics were a cultural construct that need not be true for Latin Americans, who could simply escape them by not believing in them. Of course, this belies the claim of modern ideologies to be scientific, and in that sense modern. For they cannot be scientific if they do not even respect reason. These days, though, they would claim to be post-modern, but which is another form of modernity. So in effect, individual revolutionary ideologies do not crystallize the essence of modernity, but are themselves relativized by modernity.

The object of this rejection of ethics or reason is to neutralize any opposition to the false authority of ideological movements, authority which is exposed as false by rational analysis. The main venue for spreading this irrational totalitarianism, of course, are the universities. Considering these two ideas of totalitarianism proposed by Del Noce, we can see that they are very similar in that the external conceptual authorities, ethics and reason, are both to be neutralized so that there is no opposition to the political and cultural program. Realizing this exposes the authoritarian intent behind political and religious movements that attack one or both of these.

Technocratic Society

By “technocratic society” Del Noce intends “to denote a society that replaces, as its own foundation, the philosophy of being with the philosophy of doing.” (p. 71) He says that the transition to technocratic society is mediated by what he calls a “totalitarian” conception of science “in which science is regarded as the ‘only’ true form of knowledge.” He often speaks of this as “scientism”.

Del Noce associates this technological society with the dissolution of Europe.

[W]e understand why scientific anti-traditionalism can express itself only by dissolving the “fatherlands” where it was born. Because of the very nature of science, which provides means but does not determine any ends, scientism lends itself to be used as a tool by some group. Which group? The answer is completely obvious: once the fatherlands are gone, all that is left are the great economic organisms, which look more and more like fiefdoms. (p. 91)

This is a marked contrast to the ideas of Jacques Ellul, whom Del Noce cites frequently on the topic of revolution. Del Noce does not give an analysis of the technological society, about which so much could be said. Absent is Ellul’s idea that technique takes control of everything; for Del Noce it is just the tool of interests.

Libertinism – the Permissive Society

A large theme in this essay collection is Del Noce’s preoccupation with eroticism and the permissive society.

Boiled down to its simplest formulation, the justification of the claim of the permissive society is based on the idea that inhibition changes man at the structural level, in such a way that he acts, feels, and thinks against his own natural interest, the enjoyment of life, the inclination toward happiness. Inhibition produces a personality that is repressive, authoritarian, reactionary, and, as a result, aggressive. ... The psychological-utopian analysis goes hand in hand with the ethico-political one, and owes to it most of its success. Supposedly, the “Fascist” is the complete incarnation of the “repressive” type. As we shall discuss later, the great propaganda tool of permissivism is the claim to represent the fullness of anti-Fascism. Hence, a critique of permissivism requires a critique of the conditions that made this identification plausible. Supposedly, if we eliminated repression, if we cleared the way toward the full satisfaction of the passions, aggression would disappear. Thus, permissiveness would lead to non-violence. (p. 138)

He credits these ideas to Wilhelm Reich, whose 1930 book, *The Sexual Revolution*, he says already contains all the essential things to be said about the topic. Del Noce links this program to utopianism.

The notion of a social mechanism that will ensure virtue without sacrifice, and make it simply coincide with well-being, does belong to the realm of utopia. Indeed, the separation of the idea of morality from that of sacrifice follows immediately from the abandonment of the idea of the initial fall, which is the condition for the idea of utopia. ... at our time in history heresies and utopias have all come together *giving science the task of legitimizing them*. In fact, there is a link between utopia and science that has not received enough attention, in the sense that,

historically, to the rise of every new science has corresponded the rise of a new form of utopia. Well, the idea of the permissive society is the utopia that has accompanied the spreading of psychoanalysis, even though the most serious psychoanalysts have not subscribed to it. (p. 139)

Del Noce's favorite refutation of this perspective seems to be the writings of Antonio Rosmini, who already in 1849 in response to Fourier said that "the promise of the greatest freedom and greatest unity among men, achieved by giving complete freedom to the passions, or, as Fourier used to say, to passionate attraction, would be followed in practice by the greatest slavery, by the complete destruction of freedom and of human society, "condemned" he said "to be drowned in the sugary bath of the passions." (pp. 137-138)

Del Noce says that the "opposition between repression and permissiveness" ... must be linked to two opposite conceptions of the nature of values." One, "the traditional view that values are immutable ... Is tied to a metaphysical-theological conception of an objective order of being, such that morality consists in respecting it. According to this view, there is, in brief, a universal and eternal reason, higher than man, which provides the foundation for the hierarchy and the absoluteness of values." In short, Del Noce cannot conceive of opposition to the permissive society apart from basing this opposition on the Thomistic synthesis. The other conception of values, which he equates with atheism, is that values "subsist only within the movement of history, and they too are subjected to the laws of birth and death." (p. 140)

Bringing this forward to the mid-twentieth century, Del Noce sees a "huge misunderstanding on the part of student protests, which took place as a rebellion against both the technocratic society and the traditional spirit." In fact, he thinks that the technocratic society welcomes permissiveness and eroticism.

One of the necessary features of totalitarianism is the persecution of all transcendent religions, because they propose an ideal of life that cannot be reconciled with ethical immanentism. ... Therefore, the best line of action is to be intransigent about lifestyles, and to support progressive and modernist trends whenever possible. Who can fail to recognize that all these elements are present in Reich's statements? (p. 143)

Practically speaking, the permissive society is anti-cultural:

We have examined by what connection the negations of religion, of freedom, of family, and of country are linked together, and at the same time concealed, at least from the general public, in the philosophy that is implicit in the permissive society. We may add that at the political level this implies the negation of the very idea of Europe, since this idea is founded on the tradition of the Logos. It is pointless to talk about European unity once the perception of Europe as a moral territory has been lost and we can talk only of a unified "European market." (p. 155)

Del Noce concludes that only a religious awakening can overcome the permissive society. What awakening? "Only a restoration of what for brevity I will call 'classical metaphysics' can truly dismantle the framework of judgments that make up eroticism." (p. 162)

Semi-Culture

Del Noce mentions the semi-culture.

What do I mean by this word? I mean the outlook of those who receive from outside, from the *mass media* and thus from the groups who direct and control the flow of information, certain “new” opinions and accept them without any serious consideration of the premises that shape them: those who incarnate perfectly, to use a fashionable expression, the other-directed type. The semi-educated man “does not know what he does not know.” (p. 140)

This is an important phenomenon, and some name is needed for it, though semi-culture does not seem especially descriptive.

Summing Up the Three Levels of Modernity

Effectively, as Del Noce sees it, modernity comes at us at three levels. The first and most general is what he calls secularization. This is essentially a religious attitude that denies transcendence because it rejects the authority of the transcendent. It seeks to remove any reference to God in explanations or in obligations. Everything must be worked out on what Del Noce calls the horizontal basis. What this amounts to is the fact that man is in rebellion against God, and he tries to give this rebellion the most complete and consistent expression. How it came to prominence need be no mystery. If we consider the rise of the printing press and commerce in books, we understand how people with that turn of mind were able more easily to become aware of each other and adopt and elaborate each other’s ideas. As a second step, the removal of repression meant that they could safely promote their ideas. This mentality thus became cultural rather than merely subjective and individual.

The second level is the destruction of the Thomistic synthesis of Christianity and Greek cosmology. This was the victim of philosophy, science and of the general dislike by people of having authoritarian beliefs rammed down on them. Del Noce sees the synthesis as the indispensable alternative to modernity. But he is wrong, not least because the synthesis was false and un-Christian in the first place.

At this level the danger is to Romanism (as well as to a few movements who propose to base some “mere Christianity” on the same basis), which without this metaphysical underpinning becomes a mere brand preference among denominations. Apart from historical momentum and some twisted proof texts, what have they got? There is, to be sure, a good amount of ritualism which reflects the synthetic outlook and is founded on it, and a vast institutional presence, now in great disorder. But it is looking worse all the time.

The third level is where modernity has real force behind it: politics, the technocratic society and most of all the permissive society. Here the churches need to ask, what do we have that is real, more powerful, and to which we have not been giving due place? How is Christianity better? What other things does Christianity have that are not really part of Christianity, and which get in the way?