



# THE SECULAR QUEST FOR EDEN

*Posted on November 1, 2019 by Father Stephen Freeman*



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If you lurk around social media, particularly in conservative conversations, you will have undoubtedly seen something about recent statements on the part of a minor Democratic candidate for the Presidential nomination. I have no interest in the politics of the matter. However, the exchange goes to the heart of the modern impulse and serves as an excellent example of modernity's dangers. The exchange:

*Don Lemon: Do you think religious institutions like colleges, churches, charities, should they lose their tax exempt status if they oppose same sex marriage?*

*O'Rourke: Yes. There can be no reward, no benefit, no tax break, for anyone, any institution, any organization in America, that denies the full human rights, that denies the full civil rights, of everyone in America. So as president, we're going to make that a priority. And we are going to stop those who are infringing upon the human rights of our fellow Americans.*

"We are going to stop those who are infringing upon the human rights of our fellow Americans." Of course, removing the tax-exempt status of selected religious institutions will do nothing to "stop" them from believing (and practicing) what they believe – not if their faith is worth its salt. Indeed, the comment might have been an ill-thought attempt to simply say that "we will punish those who deny these 'rights'." Religious people have a long history of being punished for their beliefs and a dogged propensity to dig in their heels when persecuted.

Modernity has an impulse to power that is, apparently, hard to resist. In the drive to build a better world (regardless of its definition) there is a deeply hidden belief and assumption that the world doesn't want to be a better place. Thus, if the world is left to its own inclinations, it will lapse into a worse place. Modern thought is of a piece with the American frontier experience. The world is a wilderness in which civilization can only carve out spaces. The jungle always

threatens to return and must be kept at bay – by force, if necessary.

It was a very interesting way to treat the buffalo, the trees, and whole tribes of people. Of course, it was (and is) a philosophy of devastation. It is also the most patently dangerous set of notions ever to have stalked the planet.

Technology has always been part of human existence. The first sticks were technologically improved by sharpening and we have never stopped. Modernity is the first philosophy, however, to imagine technology as the means of remaking the planet. Indeed, in a manner of speaking, technology itself has become the new planet, inhabited by minds expressed as 1's and 0's. In a world of artificiality, artificial intelligence, or intelligence that has been rendered artificial, is "naturally" at home. Of course, it is less than human, as well.

Human life is a traditioned event: it is handed down to us. Everything about us, down to the most microscopic level of our existence, is given to us from those who have gone before. We do not start with a blank slate, nor is the world around us a blank slate. The madness of those who are driven by the modern impulse is their refusal to acknowledge and respect what has gone before. To be the smartest generation is an arrogance unknown until rather recently in human time. Evidence continues to mount that such arrogance ill-serves our civilization.

The Christian faith, when rightly taught, has no agenda for the improvement of the world. It has the commandments of Christ, which, when practiced, certainly treat the world with kindness, mercy, love, and generosity. However, the Church has no mandate to exercise the sort of control that would nurture the modern impulse. The moments in history in which Christianity and empire have seemed to coalesce, represent temptations that have betrayed the faith as often as they have seemed to foster it. The naïve sentiment that such times were an ideal, much less, a goal, are maintained only through a refusal to look carefully at the facts.

The commandments of

Christ point us towards His Father as the model for our life. He is "kind to the evil and the ungrateful." He "makes His rain to fall on the just and the unjust." If "making the world a better place" were the job description for the Father, then we would justly wonder why He fails to do so.

The work of Divine

Love is a "mystery hidden from all the ages." It is a "treasure buried in a field," and "like a lost coin." The death and resurrection of Christ point towards a triumphant love of God that, ironically, succeeds in failure. The modern impulse is a script for Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor

who suggests that

human beings can do a far better job than God with the needs of the world.

The philosophy of

control and the management of creation is deeply alluring for the simple reason that it seems to be the sort of thing that should work well and to our benefit. Indeed, there are any number of examples where such control has done quite well. The sheer power of technology creates a siren call to wield it – like a ring of power. Beto's words, however, reveal the corruption of such power. "We are going to stop those..." Such words are not restricted to either the Left or Right: they are the voice of modernity.

The great struggles of

modernity, culture wars, and ideological battles, have all been fought on the field of management. Each election cycle comes as an effort to seize power, only to find that the battle continues. Ultimately, only if the opposition is thoroughly vanquished ("we will stop them") will the battle appear to end. The great masters of this application of power understood that weakness and gentleness with regard to power are useless. Only the ruthless win in the game of modernity. Thus, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Pol Pot, and their ilk, all enjoyed their moments of apparent victory. And yet, each of them is dead and their projects returned to dust.

In a quote that should be etched in stone and memorized by all, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who had lived in the belly of modernity's darkest beast, offered his wise observation: "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every human heart — and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained."

There is "one small bridgehead" in the heart of every human being. That is perhaps the most hopeful statement of the 20th century. In point of fact, most human beings are not engaged in world improvement, or stopping the "improvements" of their adversaries. Most people live, work, eat, love, and die, within the relatively small margins of their existence. If the masses rush to the barricades, the madness overwhelms the world for a time. And yet, it always subsides.

There are, I think, limits set within the world that tend to protect us from our best intentions. First, we live for a limited time. Second, people would rather work, eat, love, and die rather than stand at the barricades. I have said quite frequently that in an argument with gravity, gravity will almost always win. There is a "gravity" in the world that tends towards stability rather than chaos, or that tends towards chaos when the gravity is of an unnatural form.

The New Testament speaks of two mysteries. There is the "mystery hidden from all the ages" that surrounds God's work of gathering all things together into Christ. There is also the "mystery of iniquity" that is not so well-defined. We are told, however, that it has its own time and its own limit. One small bridgehead of good always remains.

The nations rage and imagine themselves to be the arbiters of history. The mystery of the Kingdom continues to work its way within the bridgeheads of the heart. That the world still stands is testimony to

the vanity of the nations and the steadfast commitment of God to our salvation.

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The [photo](#) shows a painting by Zdzisław Beksiński.

