Review of *Modernity on Endless Trial*

Modernity on Endless Trial, by Leszek Kolakowski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) vii, 261 pages.

The failure of the modern age is generally acknowledged. What it was exactly, and how it failed are greatly in dispute. Most writers have in mind something they think should replace modernity. One who favors, e.g. international socialism, is interested to show that the flaws of modernism that produced its dissolution are just those that the favored alternative will correct. Only a few Marxists (for whom 'postmodernism' is heresy) have directly challenged this postmodern enthusiasm. Books and essays proliferate designating the key theme or idea that made the modern era modern. What is the same thing, debate rages over the point where the West took a false turn leading to the modern dead end. Was it Hegel? The Renaissance? The historian Stephen Toulmin blames Descartes. In its more restricted field of philosophy of religion the Calvin College “Reformed Epistemology” has laid the blame on John Locke. The debate still seems to be intensifying and spreading to more disciplines.

Kolakowski, a Polish philosopher associated with Oxford University and the University of Chicago, writes on this topic as one conscious of a Christian civilization in his past, a civilization that seems to have run aground. He writes in criticism of the modern failure to provide a workable substitute for Christianity. An unease with the cult of reason and its effects is prominent in the title essay. The laments of contemporary cognoscenti over the dissolution worked by the acid of secularization are, he notes, reminiscent of warnings heard from ordinary pulpits for three centuries.

Written from 1973 to 1986 Kolakowski’s essays precede the height of this debate and are probably too probing, sane, and most of all too concerned with enduring questions to satisfy postmodernists. Indeed he is skeptical of the debate.

> Having no clear idea of what *modernity* is, we have recently tried to escape forward from the issue by talking about *postmodernity*... I do not know what postmodern is and how it differs from premodern, nor do I feel that I ought to know. And what might come after the postmodern? The post-postmodern, the neo-postmodern, the neo-antimodern? When we leave aside the labels, the real question remains: Why is the malaise associated with the experience of modernity so widely felt, and where are the sources of those aspects of modernity that make this malaise particularly painful? (p. 6)

But the question cannot be avoided; Kolakowski blames Descartes's rationalistic mechanics as a key instigator, and singles out Nietzsche as the one who finally smashed the illusions that permitted traditional values to coexist for so long with modernity.

It seems to Kolakowski that “The explicit orthodoxy still consists of patching up. We try to assert our modernity but escape from its effects by various intellectual devices, in order to convince ourselves that meaning can be restored or recovered apart from the traditional religious legacy of mankind...” Because of their artificiality, he has little regard for the prospects of such attempts. “There is something alarmingly desperate in intellectuals who have no religious attachment, faith or loyalty proper and who insist on the irreplaceable educational and moral role of religion in our world...” This manipulative mentality expresses modernity's tensions instead of healing them.

In “Looking for the Barbarians” he explores the problem of Western homage toward other cultures. Does this mean that we cannot value our own? Further: “we have managed to assimilate the kind of universalism which refuses to make value judgments about different civilizations, proclaiming their intrinsic equality; on the other hand, by affirming this equality we also affirm the exclusivity and intolerance of every culture—the very things we claim to have risen above in making that same affirmation.” The discipline that most clearly embodies that ambiguity is anthropology. The anthropologist's attitude or "spirit of research" is by no means shared or valued by the cultures he studies.

> A European who says that all cultures are equal does not normally mean that he would like to have his hand cut off if he is caught falsifying his tax forms... To say, in such a case, “This is the law of the Koran, and we must respect traditions other than our own” essentially amounts to saying “That would be dreadful if it happened here, but for those savages it’s just the right thing.” (p. 21)

Similar difficulties arise in trying to assimilate all aspects of world or even European cultural heritage.

In this connection Kolakowski reiterates a major theme of these essays. Historical change has generated new cultural forms that cannot coexist with continuing elements from older ones. Europe found in Christianity the balance it needed for scientific and cultural development, but the humanistic tradition which emerged, once freed from Christianity, appears to be self-destructing. For example:

> [T]he theory of inalienable rights of man was developed from the Christian idea of a person as an unexchangeable value. Again, this theory was to establish itself despite resistance from the Church; and later, when its various imperatives proved less than perfectly compatible, and the idea of the State as the distributor of all material and spiritual goods took precedence over the idea of the inviolable rights of persons, it turned against itself. Thus the rights of man became the right of the State to possess man, and a foundation was laid for the idea of totalitarianism. (pp. 29-31)

At the end of the essay Kolakowski reaches for a consciousness of limitation, and antiutopianism as the enduring and universal value of European civilization. Christian Europe, he thinks, achieved a sort of balance, especially between ascetic rejection of the world and a pantheistic embrace of everything in it. But it has generated movements which destroy the balance. The Reformation destroyed the mediæval barriers to rationalism, issuing in the Enlightenment which degenerated into a deification of man and nature. Out of this collapse there is a groping after the restoration of balance.

The twenty-three essays are organized into sections: *I On Modernity, Barbarity, and the Intellectuals, II On the Dilemmas of the Christian Legacy, III On Liberals, Revolutionaries, and Utopians*, and *IV On Scientific Theories* (these last are cleverly humorous). We cannot explore each of the essays, but note briefly: “6. The enduring psychological and social need for some form of religious values,” “11. A study of the nature of religious conversion”. Some of the essay titles speak for themselves: 3. “The Intellectuals: In God's Menagerie, Are They Necessary?” 7. “On the So-Called Crisis of Christianity”, 13. “The Idolatry of Politics”, 18. “Revolution - a Beautiful Sickness”.

The most important essay is “The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society”", an examination of the weakness inherent in modern pluralism, “the process by which the extension and consistent application of liberal principles transforms them into their antithesis”. The welfare state arises when the weak or disadvantaged are to be protected against the stronger, but a free market involves competition. Thus a fully instantiated welfare state results in suppression of the market, that is, suppression of disposal rights to property. Also the Open Society where there is no coercion in beliefs or values becomes a society without values since the values implicit in the tolerant society are by no means obvious or natural. But there must be some moral education, some coercion, some imposed tradition to maintain the society. Thus the institutions of law and education which enable society to function are targeted by its enemies using the Open Society’s values of openness, tolerance, and disestablishment of authority.

Kolakowski in a sense follows his own heritage in providing a Romish reading of cultural history. From that vantage the Reformation is seen as a humanistic break from long standing consensus, emphasizing as it did the freedom of the individual conscience. Calvin “by pitting his profound biblical conservatism against the haughtiness of scholasticism ... left to future generations only the very secular reason he so vigorously had condemned. In spite of his intentions, he thus created an intellectual environment that soon nurtured the advocates of natural religion and the deists.” But Kolakowski has his history wrong. Scholasticism had broken down and the disintegration had been underway for nearly two centuries by the Reformation. It is part of the cause of the Reformation, certainly not the result. What can be placed against the account of the Reformers is their philosophical (not the Biblical) conservatism, which they shared with their opponents on the Roman side, and which kept theology out of touch with changes in philosophy and science.

It is true that some 17th century freethinkers, 18th century skeptics, and 19th century theological liberals have claimed the Reformation’s spirit as their own, but they were looking back into the past and the historical gap this opened revealed obvious changes, which they supposed were set off by the Reformation. Others, less willing to credit religion, would seek to impute the altered conditions to the Rennaisance. But what these figures had in common was an ignorance of history, beyond the broad outlines of what they thought of as ages. We are talking about the Enlightenment invention of the Dark Ages, the Whig Interpretation of History, etc.

Kolakowski is also attracted to elements of the Enlightenment, and the ethical absolutism of rationalism, which preceded the historicism so useful to totalitarians, but he can find no better ground for it than its utility for free societies.

Kolakowski is offering us the reflections of a philosopher struggling with the diverse and conflicting elements in his heritage and trying to see beyond the present darkness. Free of the self-deception that characterizes the American liberal they are fresh alternatives to the common intellectual fare. This book is literature. It deserves to be read for its examples of the art of the essay, which is insufficiently practiced by American writers. In addition, on most pages the reader will find probing comments on issues ignored or misunderstood by the liberal intelligentsia. Kolakowski is aware of Calvinism and theocracy as constituting at least theoretical options, though he doesn't like them. Thus he exhibits a better grasp of the issues of modernity and can put them in a clearer perspective than the entire tribe of postmodernists.

Of course, we want more than this. The diagnosis should precede a prescription for treatment, and it is here that the Reformed “world and life view” should transcend Kolakowski. A lesson to be learned from the postmodernism debate is that diagnosis and prescription are inseparable, and usually it is also the desired alternative that determines how the problem is identified. This is true

across the ideological spectrum. But more than this, critics who affirm the same theological creeds make a different diagnosis of the problems of modernity, and not because of differences in their empirical historical research. They have differing worldviews which are not addressed by the creeds, showing a hole in the ways the Christianity of centuries ago defined the faith. Sadly most intellectuals who operate under the Reformed banner offer a “me too” liberalism that falls far short of even Kolakowski's reflections, even considering his deep suspicion of Calvinism.

But maybe modernity is not entirely a bad thing. Maybe there is a vast accumulation of very bad cultural concepts that need to be discredited and cleared away, but no one would do so before modernity came along. And maybe until Conservatives realize what are the wrong things to conserve and learn to let go of them the crisis of modernity will continue. Modernity puts us on endless trial.