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Desacralizing Violence:

Socrates, Jesus and the Idea of Western Civilization

Nalin Ranasinghe

Professor Holmes' paper has reminded us of what his illustrious namesake often said to the less perceptive Dr. Watson: "You see but you do not observe."¹ In other words, given that our world is heavily overlaid with toxic values masquerading as facts, it would well behoove us to subject some of these preconditions of experience – known by everyone and verified by no one – to critical scrutiny. But beyond the illusion that human experience is and should be value-neutral, perhaps the most dangerous of these preconditions is the idea that we live in a 'zero-sum' reality; a value-laden version of Social Darwinism is taken for granted by many of our teachers, politicians and students. Winning is everything or the only thing; the alternative is losing and humiliation. Our identity is affirmed by selecting, humiliating and destroying the Other. This manly ethic, which valorizes violence, power and stupidity, is also known as 'realism'. All is fair in love, sports or war. My students, who mostly learn ethics by osmosis as they watch ESPN, innocently believe that it's far better to be a 'player' than to be a 'loser'. Surely we should try to deconstruct this glorification of violence and contempt for peace? Once we see these perverse practices for what they are, maybe we can stop 'observing' them?

I believe that our civilization can yet be rescued from its addiction to technology and enslavement to violence. This can only happen by our becoming reacquainted with certain core humanistic principles. I will claim that recovery of the original insights of Jesus and Socrates, minus the paraphernalia of Neo-Platonism and the theological dogmas of High Christology, give us the moral language needed to address the West in its moment of gravest peril. No other voices have the authority to save us from the complementary powers of technology and fundamentalism – themselves perverted offspring of metaphysics

and monotheism.

Let us begin with Socrates. He exposed the political theology of Athens, the sacred and – to the extent that they were unspoken – secret conventions holding a community together. In doing this he incurred the wrath of both the fundamentalist right and the libertarian left. Despite their disagreements, both extremes agreed that human existence was violent and deeply irrational; this was either because of the nature of the gods or else pertained to the strife-ridden character of god-forsaken reality. In other words, the divinized passions replaced the gods. This may be observed in our time as well. Whether aware of it or not, 21st century consumers all worship at the altars of Ares (war), Zeus (power), Aphrodite (sex), Hephaestus (technology) or Hades (riches).² The evil that gods do lives after them; those who had previously been enslaved by theocracy often use positivism and science to wield the very powers they had previously deplored. This is the basis of my hope that the origins of our civilization, once recovered and understood, may yet be used to prevent its end.

Socrates rejected this ontology of sacred irrationality. His position that moral knowledge was available and sufficient was supported by his insight that no human ever had true knowledge regarding matters above the heavens or beneath the earth. This freed him to practice virtue by leaving his actions unimpeded by the previously noted falsely divinized irrational promptings (a god made me do it) that served to divide and conquer the soul's capacity for moral autonomy. Likewise his mind, emancipated from these false gods, was no longer limited to modes of manipulation and calculation. Socrates freed reason to pursue self-knowledge and contemplate the beauty of the natural world. He continually set out to show that base and vicious persons could never be truly happy.³ Conversely, his own life

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proved that a good man could enlighten his desires and attain *Eudaimonia*. Sadly, many Church Fathers denied his example of temperance – arguing that if virtue is possible then Christ died in vain.⁴ This paper’s focus is the life of Jesus, not the death of Christ.

Here we note that Socrates’ recognition of a natural order, exceeding the power of the mind to master, but amenable to being appreciated by its regularity, limits any tendency on our part towards *hubris*. We are not the highest beings in the universe. Further, the non-coercive authority of the cosmos surely indicates that human governance should also proceed along similar lines. Aristotle says that political science is concerned with justice and beauty.⁵ Following up on Socrates’ proof that the evil are unhappy, he claims that anyone not deformed in their capacity for virtue will be able to gain happiness through learning and attention in a polis.⁶ This is why Aristotle’s assurance that virtue is more enduring than even scientific knowledge⁷ has more relevance today than ever before. While the benefits of political life did not then extend beyond middle-class Greek males, one could always hope that recent advances in science and technology could be combined with Classical wisdom to bring the entire human family within the pale of civilization.

Still, Socrates is not an optimist. The *Republic* reminds us that man was born in a cave; our irrational energies and murky origins mean that we can never fully transcend our body or community. Every generation must re-till the soil of civilization and pass on, by example and instruction, this ability to see and participate in the goodness of the world. This was the good news of the pre-Nuclear age: man could never gain any final victory over nature or end what Nietzsche called ‘the Eternal Return of the same’ in human nature. No human could either gain happiness without effort or be rendered incapable of gaining happiness by virtue. None foresaw our power to wage pyrrhic war against, and inflict apocalyptic defeat over, the natural order and ourselves. Under this sign of a mushroom cloud, post-Christian liberal modernity imploded. Utopian dreams were scrapped as sadly huddled navel-gazing apes tried to create small enclaves of kindness. As Mother Theresa, the Last Saint, helped the dead to bury the dead, nihilistic Buddhism became the liberal creed of choice. Culture collapses as obscene sums are spent on militarism, sports and special education. Violence, addiction and sentimentality all join hands to

savage high culture. Who are we to judge the Last Man as he plays video games in a theme park? We who have ‘invented happiness’ and destroyed nature over the course of one life span?

How did we reach this Omega point? How is it that the very gods Socrates defeated have returned with a vengeance to preside over the mindless spreadsheet-impelled rape of our planet and the pious destruction of all humanistic values? Those old gods of rage and lust who pitted Trojans and Greeks against each other⁸ now take delight in empowering both the MacWorld of technology and the Jihad of fundamentalism as they wage internecine war.⁹ While part of our species is happy to leave thinking up to robots, and is content to be ruled by technology, the other camp thinks nothing of destroying everything to stop them. The good, meanwhile, lacking all conviction, are paralyzed by self-doubt and pessimism...

Also, anyone answering this question must explain how we have regressed from the Classical celebration of the goodness of life, forsaking even basic reverence towards the beauty of the natural world, to those once vanquished pessimistic beliefs about human nature and reality that have returned with exponentially increased destructive power at their disposal. Again, while the technophile’s foolish optimism presumes that nature is either dead or indifferent, the rage of his fundamentalist enemy – whilst hugely enhanced by technology – is founded on the idea that it is evil to seek happiness in this life. So while the technophile is unconcerned with nature, and indeed anything that survives her, the technophobe is equally content to sacrifice this planet to Armageddon and meet his God. We need to explain how we have lost what Schweitzer called our Reverence for Life.

Nietzsche famously claimed that Greek ‘life affirmation’ was overcome by the slave morality of Judeo-Christianity, but before examining the merits of his argument we should bear in mind his own position that Greek virtuosity was an act of will performed against an essentially pessimistic ontological background.¹⁰ In other words, Nietzsche preferred the Pre-Socratic heroes to the philosophers, seeing them as role models and incentives for men to live short glorious lives that culminated as they embodied their ruling passion.¹¹ What Nietzsche denounced as Socratic optimism ultimately amounted to the belief that virtue was an activity that both served as its own reward and yielded self-sufficient happiness. Yet

Socrates, Aristotle and he would have been of the same mind about the value of a life that found virtue and/or goodness to be something negative: the avoidance of vice and any form of human self-expression. Their disagreements had to do with whether reality itself was ultimately benevolent. But we have still not considered Christianity and its pyrrhic triumph over Greek this-worldliness. Isn't it true that post-Christian apocalyptic fervor has much to do with this indecent hurry to bring about the end of this fallen world? While this paper, for reasons of space, will not describe the betrayal of the Christian ideal, it will set out a plausible account of the original vision of Jesus – a *logos* that is as relevant to our post-modern context as it was 2000 years earlier.

We should first see that the clash between Athens and Jerusalem did not really take place as Tertullian and Nietzsche staged it. While the Maccabees did originally revolt against Hellenistic excesses, the real denouement took place two centuries later when the Romans – who consolidated the power of the Greeks as much as they diluted its culture – destroyed the basis of post-exilic Judaism, its temple, and ironically created the very circumstances that allowed Christianity to come into existence as a distinct faith alongside non-sacrificial Judaism.¹² The militaristic Roman oligarchs wallowed in money and power; as such they embodied crass values that had as little connection with the good life of a Greek philosopher as they had to the tragic excesses of an Achilles or an Alcibades. If anything, Roman ways more resembled the kind of Prussian philistinism that Nietzsche the philhellene so loathed.

Likewise, the Jewish revolt had much to do with economic circumstances that were caused as much by their own elites as by Roman oppression. To cut to the chase, the Jewish peasantry was burdened by their service to two masters: the Jewish theocracy and the Roman military.¹³ While the Roman occupation of Palestine was expensive, arduous and humiliating, we cannot gainsay the additional expense of religious taxation imposed by the priestly caste in Jerusalem and the added spiritual burdens related to scrupulous application of the Law of Moses with regard to such matters as ritual cleanliness.

It is in this context that three aspects of the message and works of Jesus turn out to be especially significant. They are found prior to the more divisive issues of Jesus' own identity and the meaning of his death. These may be inessential to his message. I will claim that these three

elements give us with the basis for a creed that affirms life and avoids the twin extremes of toothless relativism and draconian fundamentalism.

Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry begins with various acts of exorcism and healing of lepers followed by the Sermon on the Mount and the Our Father. We now know that what was called 'leprosy' in first century Palestine was really eczema.¹⁴ In other words, this disease wasn't really contagious; rather it was seen as a sign of divine displeasure.¹⁵ These social lepers were expected to wear torn clothes, have disheveled hair, cover their upper lip, cry out "unclean, unclean" and shun the company of others.¹⁶

Since there were very few physicians in the Galilee at the time, and as the lines between medicine and superstition were extremely porous, the real issue here was ritual impurity. Physical defects were viewed as punishments for sin; this is the real connection between sins being forgiven, the casting out of demons and the healing of disease. It was assumed that one could only be healed *after* God had forgiven his sin.¹⁷ Any medical failures could be conveniently attributed to the spiritual condition of the patient rather than to the ignorance of the physician or the primitive state of his art. Conversely, anyone who had healed a sinner without approval of the priests must have used the power of the Devil; many herbal healers were accused of witchcraft following this same twisted logic in the middle ages. Nietzsche's claim that guilt was the cause of sin, and not vice versa,¹⁸ seems to apply here. While Jesus seems to have the ability and /or authority to cure many psychosomatic malaises, the religious authorities always had the last word. A leper was only considered cured after the priests had completed a complicated and expensive ritual involving the slaughter of birds and the purification of the entire house with their blood.¹⁹

We should pause to note that both Socrates and Jesus could be seen as exorcists; one had a divine mission to rid his interlocutors of false and toxic opinions, especially those about the gods; while the other took away the guilt and psychosomatic symptoms of those who had either been persuaded by others or convinced themselves for many reasons, including so-called bad faith, that they were hated by God. Neither man would have been much loved by the priests. They spoke to the unwashed many, in ordinary language, in the profane agora of Athens or in the pagan countryside of the Galilee.

Let us now turn to a celebrated example of this speech, the Sermon on the Mount.²⁰ Here we see Jesus offer congratulations or blessings to all the ‘losers’ of society: the poor, the meek, the downtrodden and the oppressed. But he does not in any way endorse passivity, also singling out for beatitude (active and self-consciously secured virtue) those who hunger and thirst for what is right, make peace and are persecuted for the cause of justice. It takes no great stretch of the imagination to see that those who ‘hunger and thirst’ for justice must include those who fight for the right of the poor to receive food and drink.²¹

We must see that these blessings are not promises deferred until the afterlife; neither do they require one to be passive until ‘the form of the world’ is taken away. The beatitudes are immediately followed by an injunction to be ‘the light of the world’ and ‘the salt of the earth’.²² In other words once the curse of ritual impurity is lifted, one is obliged to flourish in the world – like the lilies of the field – secure in the knowledge that they are blessed by God. Further, the new higher standard, going beyond ritual performance of the law to requiring that one act for the right reasons, suggests that neither physical actions nor mental intentions are either predetermined or beyond our power. We *are* capable of virtuous thoughts and deeds. This is very different from the pessimism of predestination and original sin. Thus binding oneself by oaths and vows is forbidden. Acts of love and freedom are more pleasing to God than promises kept begrudgingly and fearfully. This way of flourishing in the world is eons removed from the Protestant work ethic of today.

Jesus’ attack on ritual actions continues in his condemnation of the hypocritical practice of parading good deeds before others for their admiration. He seems to assure us that while our deeds will have efficacy in the world, the intent behind them will be known to God. All of this presupposes freedom, rather than predestination, and this basis is further reaffirmed when Jesus teaches his followers how to pray to God.²³ The “Our Father” is strikingly not addressed to “Our Master” or “Our Lord.” It re-affirms the word of *Genesis* that man is made in the image of God and goes on to make this word flesh. The “Our” is key for it makes these prayers collective and appeals to a common good, an almost alien concept on our zero-sum libertarian society. The heart of this prayer has to do with the coming of God’s kingdom, a way of life that can only be

lived as a non-adversarial people. The days of seeking ritual piety at the cost of social justice must end.

Hallowing God’s name does more than repeat the commandment not to use the name of God vainly. Silently flouting the need for elaborate priestly rites and codes of cleanliness, this prayer suggests that we can also silently act for God’s greater glory in our daily works presumably untainted by original sin or ritual impurity. Praying for His imperial rule to come also forbids us to claim that the ‘is’ or the *status quo* is identical with the ‘ought’ or the coming kingdom, thus never using his name in vain to sanctify injustice or privilege by saying that all power is from God.²⁴ Praying that God’s will be done on earth as in heaven, apart from recognizing that this is presently not the case, also clarifies the relation between this world and the next. God’s imperial rule only spreads from heaven to earth when we – creatures made in his image – freely and lovingly realize our God-given potential and form. If the kingdom of God is within us, then Jesus is its Socratic midwife! The word ‘imperial’ derives from emperor or commander. Simply put, God is not King but a commander; he rules by his word or *logos*: Jesus spoke with an authority that all with ears could hear. His last miracle healed an ear cut by a sword drawn in his name.²⁵

The request for daily bread provides further insights into the nature of this relationship with God in the time between the proclamation of the kingdom and its realization in time. We are seen as day laborers rather than slaves. The metaphor of slavery represents both the Old Law and the brutalizing security of the fleshpots of Egypt. It also provides an interesting convergence with the Greek world and sheds light on an ancient problem that raises its ugly head again in our impersonal world of globalization and technology. Achilles’ shade said that he would repudiate all tragic glory and come back to life, even under the most humiliating circumstances: not as a slave but as a day laborer.²⁶ Hesiod clarifies this condition by speaking of three basic human types: the best man, who sees things as they are; the next best man, who can learn to see things as they are; and the worst man, too incorrigible to be enslaved.²⁷ This model is ironically used to shed light on both soul and city in Plato’s *Republic*, and Aristotle repeats its tripartite order more seriously four centuries after Hesiod by incorporating it into his mimetic political theory.²⁸

This model sets up three types: the lord and

maker of the *status quo*; the slave, who learns to see all through the eyes of his master and receives stability and protection in exchange for sacrificing his freedom; and the incorrigible one who is not worth enslaving, as his soul cannot be ordered by the regime, although Aristotle describes him in the *Politics* as a natural slave.²⁹ Otherwise put, we have masters who make the law, slaves who see the law, and outlaws who lie outside the law and are consequently invisible to it in the sense of not having protection or rights. These are those very persons once regarded as being ritually unclean and offensive to God. Their inferior status on earth may be seen as divinely sanctioned in so far as God's kingdom is mirrored by Caesar's rule on earth. While this model is the basis for the doctrines of original sin and predestination that follow the Romanization of Christianity, it is also diametrically opposed to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and "Our Father." The first mark of our freeing by Jesus consists in the repudiation of the bleak doctrines often used, with our voluntary acquiescence, to enslave us. Far from setting out a sacramental order, a ritual of guilt and misery that underscores the inability of fallen humanity to naturally practice virtue or deserve grace, we are called out to work in the Lord's vineyard and gather his harvest.

Jesus calls upon us to abjure the false self-alienating security of slavery to Rome and instead become day laborers, receiving our daily bread in the service of the Kingdom of Heaven. The age-old opposition of nomad to farmer is re-enacted here in a context that seems to value erotic prodigality over economic prudence. His radical repudiation of such matters as oaths and family ties are consistent with leaving the dead to bury the dead. The community he seems to have created consisting of the poor, pariahs, divorced, social lepers and all those shunned or condemned by the law is also uniquely free to advance the coming of the kingdom, that pearl beyond price. A few lines after this prayer he urges his followers not to store up treasures on earth, urging them instead to see things correctly and pointing out that God and money cannot be served together. This leads up to Jesus' celebrated consideration of the lilies of the field and his advice not to worry about food, clothing and other concerns of the body; while these matters can never be assuredly provided for by man, God provides and feeds all daily. Life is said to mean more than all these things and Jesus suggests that it is best lived by devoting one's heart to the coming Kingdom. The day laborers are warned not to

worry about the morrow; it will take care of itself. They should live from day to day; each day brings new worries and challenges.

Strikingly Socrates' poor family values, the result of a single-minded focus on virtue over economic prudence, are consistent with the life – and divine protection – of a day laborer. Just as Socrates' friends took care of him, the early Christian community seems to have grown in leaps and bounds through the primitive social security its members provided to each other.³⁰ Miracles like the feeding of the five thousand exemplify the contagious effects of this collective generosity; the insecurity and hoarding instincts of the slave are overcome by the gracious prodigality of the day laborer. Yet we also see how the very words of Jesus, once spoken to day laborers, were hoarded and codified by the slaves of God and money.

These men mistrust God – seeing him as a hard master who reaps where he did not sow. Their deep self-contempt and resentment, from having been pardoned by a righteous god for a decade they must continually atone for, still pollutes the waters of baptism. Instead, in Luke's metaphor, we should see creation as a wedding banquet that binds man to God.

The theme of forgiveness is now taken up. It seems that we receive evidence of God's pardon for our trespasses by our miraculous ability to forgive similar transgressions when others request it of us. The kingdom is such that piety is best realized horizontally rather than vertically; we saw that the claims of piety and justice are not opposed to each other. The oppression of the poor by tithes and exactions that support the unproductive piety of a priestly class that prays to God for the forgiveness of the sins of those it preys on must be denounced as blasphemous.

The final part of the prayer, asking God not to lead us into temptation and deliver us from evil, is paradoxical. Surely God does not tempt us to perform acts of evil? This request is best seen as a reiteration of the commandments against using God's name in vain and coveting. Like the jealous *daimon* of Socrates, which forced him to stay within his human limits, looking to the loving essence of God protects us from the mad desire to transcend human nature, violate nature and covet what's not properly ours. Many of the evils of this age result from using technology to emulate the 'rough magic' of absolute godly power whilst denying the more essential divine qualities of love and goodness. Once the idea of God, following the logic of consum-

erism, mutates into a non-judgmental Santa Claus, the damage is irreversible.

As Socrates saw, those worse than us do not have the power to make good people evil.³¹ This means that the greatest evils we pray to be delivered from come from within ourselves. In this context ‘our’ collective identities can often become demonic, and spawn dangerous distortions of the divine image man was created in. While the first danger comes from the right, in the form of mindless and smug family values, other perils lurk to its left. The massive self-righteousness of ‘a people united’ becomes Dionysus: literally a bastard son of god but archetypically a demagogic deity of drink and destruction. A hysterical Dionysian mob creates the super-conducting context where evil men perform miracles of hypnotic power in God’s name. Meanwhile, at the other extreme, our global economy is ruled by the mindless necessity of spreadsheets and hedge funds. These processes make the middle class obsolete and add scores of millions to the dispossessed proletariat; corrupted by consumerism and denied an education that gives

true self-knowledge, they have no option but to follow angry Dionysus. Perhaps the “Our Father” gives one made in God’s image a healthier take on himself and his maker?

This paper has claimed that a truly life-affirming understanding of the human being and her God can be drawn from the origins of the Western intellectual and spiritual tradition. While we lack the space to do so now, the sheer contrast between the Christian humanism just sketched out and the more theocratic power-ruled view of man and God, both cause and effect of nihilism, helps us to see that the sad decline of the human spirit – from citizen to creature to consumer – is neither necessary nor good. Following Holmes’ advice that bad assumptions which only lead to disaster must be replaced, rather than being played out, I have tried to show how a different albeit older model of human nature can be restored, replacing others that have been taken for granted for far too long.

Gandhi famously opined that Western Civilization was a good idea. This essay has tried to reveal what its long forgotten founding ideals looked like.

Endnotes

1. Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Scandal in Bohemia* in *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Leslie S. Klinger (New York: W. W. Norton) p. 10.
2. See Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, New York: Anchor, 2003, for a vivid account of the power exerted by Ares in 21st Century America.
3. This is the overarching theme of Plato’s *Republic*. It is also argued for more explicitly in his *Gorgias*. See especially the concluding myth of the latter work.
4. Augustine, *The Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and On the Baptism of Infants*, III.2.
5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b15.
6. *Ibid.* 1099b18.
7. *Ibid.* 1100b11.
8. See, for instance, Homer, *Iliad* VII 58-59 where Athena and Apollo, gods representing the most sublime human qualities, take the form of vultures to watch a duel.
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14. Scott Korb, *Life in Year One: What The World Was Like In First-Century Palestine* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010) pp. 112-13.
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16. *Ibid.* 114-15, 118.
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18. See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* part III in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968) pp. 564-565.
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20. Matthew 5:1-10.
21. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of The Lord’s Prayer* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).
22. Matthew 5:13 ff.
23. Matthew 6:7 ff.
24. Romans 13 is perhaps the most abused text in the New Testament.
25. Homer *Odyssey*, XI 488ff.
26. John 18:11. Homer, *Odyssey*, XI 488ff.
27. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 293ff.
28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b10.
29. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b14ff.
30. See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1996).
31. Plato, *Apology*, 30d