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The Order of the Covenant: Uses of Freud after Faith

INTRODUCTION

In his poem *Connoisseur of Chaos,* the American poet Wallace Stevens examines a plainly obvious fact of reality: there is an essential unity to the world, and the human imagination finds this coherence to life reassuring.

> If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;
> If all the flowers of South Africa were bright
> On the tables of Connecticut, and they are;
> If Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon,
> and they do;
> And if it all went on in an orderly way,
> And it does; a law of inherent opposites,
> Of essential unity, is as pleasant as port,
> As pleasant as the brush-strokes of a bough,
> An upper, particular bough in, say, Marchand.[1]

Stevens, by confirming that all things are in fact in their right place, alludes to some supernatural order that eludes analysis in the natural world. As if by law, disorderliness is ordered; things come good. Resisting religious explanation ("when bishops' books / Resolved the world"), Stevens maintains that order arises organically and spontaneously and such cannot be imposed.[2] In fact, where order is coerced, it becomes disorderly.

[1] Wallace Stevens: Connoisseur of Chaos. In STEVENS 1955: 215.
[2] STEVENS 1955: 215.

A. A violent order is disorder; and,

B. A great disorder is an order. These

Two things are one.[3]

Stevens had great influence on the sociologist Philip Rieff, who founded his cultural theory on the metaphysical basis that there is a transcendent order discernible in the imminent world. He calls this authority "sacred order".[4] In fact, according to Rieff, the sacred and the profane are intimately entwined. Much like the apparent ordered disorder in Stevens' poem, Rieff says "meaning in the world is very near, the most personal body knowledge to be observed".[5]

However, for Rieff, there is also a distinction, even a perpetual disconnect, between the sacred and profane. As in Stevens' poem, the coherence of the world can be imagined, theoretically, but the origin of this sacred ordering power cannot be located in reality; theory and reality never fully meet; the two do not observably interact. For Rieff, this only further confirms that the order is of transcendent origin. This metaphysical distinction between a sacred order and the natural world in which we live and have our being forms the basis of the following inquiry into how we should then live.

In this chapter, I will explain how modernity has diminished our capacity to imagine a unified world; forcing the severance of the supernatural and natural through a process of disenchantment. This prepared the way for enlightenment thinkers to eschew non-rational directives of moral value, such as cultural practices. The consequent crisis of authority has wrought untold social damage. In order to correct course, we must respond to modernity differently, in a Rieffian way; seeking harmony, not hostility, between the sacred and the profane. A conservative interpretation of Freud can show us how this order can redirect human conduct towards the common good. I call this the order of the covenant.

[3]   STEVENS 1955: 215.
[4]   RIEFF 2006.
[5]   ZONDERVAN 2005: 127.

THE THIRD WORLD CULTURE

Phenomenologist Gerard van der Leeuw observed that "[o]ur time is yearning for the lost unity of life".[6] Lost, because the interaction between the transcendent and the imminent which represents a coherent reality (as in Stevens' poem) is forgotten today.

During the Age of Reason, as incredulity towards the supernatural grew with scientific advancement, achieving coherence in the world meant finally severing the natural from the supernatural and banishing the latter to a fictitious sphere. This describes a disorderly approach to realising order; imposing order on reality, rather than discerning it from the phenomenological experience of "tea in Ceylon" or other such instances.[7] Such an imposition has disordered reality and now the modern man does not attribute the trace of transcendence in reality to a sacred order. Instead, something else has been reified with sacred meaning in order to make sense of reality.

The great scientists of the 18th century emancipated imaginations from mediaeval misconceptions of geometry and astronomy, expanding the secular sphere of knowledge where facts about the natural world are uncontested by religion. Unfortunately, Newton's discoveries soon became useful to those convinced by the exclusive sufficiency of empirical tools like reason and science. Hume, Descartes and Spinoza's "geometrical method" attest to this.[8] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a key figure in the Enlightenment in Europe, was declared "the Newton of the mind" for his interest in establishing doctrines of governance using a scientific approach.[9]

This led Max Weber to proclaim that "[t]he fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world".[10] Enchantment might be broadly understood as the recognition

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[6]   ZONDERVAN 2005: 132.
[7]   STEVENS 1955: 215.
[8]   JANIAK 2021 [2006].
[9]   JANIAK 2021 [2006].
[10]   WEBER 2009: 155.

that myth, inspired by perceived yet unseen divine visitation, is a useful prophet of reality. In this way, the Enlightenment project had a disenchanting effect. Weber exposes the folly of seeking to extend modern science beyond its bounds to address questions of ethics by asking: "What is the meaning of science?"[11] For Weber, science simply has no end because each advancement "must ask to be surpassed and made obsolete".[12] This makes the Enlightenment belief that science can create moral value nihilistic. Here lies the great modern contradiction. In search of a unifying truth, with only recourse to science, the enlightenment thinkers' only gift was deconstruction upon deconstruction ad infinitum, or, ordered disorder.

Owen Barfield, one of The Inklings, is well-placed to manoeuvre the modern mind towards acknowledging that while empirical matter is all that can be examined by science, the very same phenomena is represented in reality in more mythical forms.

In his 1988 book *Saving the Appearances,* Barfield explains how rainbows appear as an arc of many colours which seem to touch the horizon and never come to their end. He terms this appearance "collective representation" which sits alongside the unrepresented reality of raw physics; the outcome of the sun, rain and my vision.[13] For Barfield, both the represented and the unrepresented are real, and no amount of empirical analysis of unrepresented matter can alter how things appear in collective representation, even if they propagate myths.

Barfield concludes "[t]he time comes when one must either accept this as the truth about the world or reject the theories of physics as an elaborate delusion. We cannot have it both ways."[14] In other words, reality comprises both nature and myth, and they accompany one another, even belong together; they do not contradict each other.

However, modernity *did* want it both ways. For Rieff, this marked a significant historical aberration. In his Trilogy, *Sacred Order/Social Order,* Rieff

[11]   WEBER 2009: 143.
[12]   KIM 2022 [2007].
[13]   BARFIELD 1988: 18.
[14]   BARFIELD 1988: 18.

tracks the shift in Western history from what he calls the first "world cultures" of paganism and monotheism to the third, totally secular world cultures. In the first two world cultures, from classical antiquity to relatively recently, cultures have been enchanted by the trace of the transcendent in reality.[15] In this way, the metaphysics of modernity pulled apart things that belong together – grace and nature – and this had a profound cultural impact; namely: a crisis of authority.

THE ANTICULTURE AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

Theodor Adorno took the hyper rationalism of Enlightenment thinking to task in his 1966 publication *Negative Dialectics,* referring to great confidence in science as "instrumental reason"; to make what is ungraspable, graspable, through "the insertion of some wretched cover concepts that will make the crucial differences vanish".[16] The Enlightenment project represented the consuming of the sacred by the profane and is thereby a totalising idea with no exit; nature is but empirical matter and no such trace of the transcendent can be found within.

The irony is that the enlightenment thinkers failed to purge the metaphysical category of the supernatural altogether. For Rieff, the "faith instinct [...] simply cannot be killed"; as in Stevens' poem, reality still testifies to some sacred order.[17] On this basis, modernity had to build a new structure of ultimate ordering authority in the world. But what does this look like under the metaphysical conditions of modernity? In Adorno's terms, this led to the reification of the individual in the natural world; no longer a *sacred* order but a wholly imposed, profane and disorderly one that confuses reality. The ultimately authoritative individual is the "wretched cover concept" that makes the crucial differences between the natural and the supernatural disappear; an artificial and corruptible authority.[18]

[15]   RIEFF 1987.
[16]   ADORNO 1973: 152.
[17]   RIEFF 2007: 6.
[18]   ADORNO 1973: 152.

For Rieff, this state of affairs is practically apocalyptic, culturally speaking. "No culture has ever preserved itself where there is not a registration of sacred order. There, cultures have not survived."[19] Rieff's estimation that the consequences of the metaphysical conditions of modernity are borne out in culture reveals his thesis that the supernatural and natural, sacred and the profane, grace and nature are in a symbiotic relationship with one another. We will return to this idea later.

When third world enlightenment thinkers reified the individual, they also eschewed directives of moral value that did not originate in the mind of man; like cultural practices. Such norms affront the modern individualist man because they represent an unauthorised visitation of authority; outside of myself. Cultural norms too much depend on myth, the symbolic or received wisdom, rather than a rational appeal of authority. This is the outlook of liberalism, inspired by enlightenment thinkers such as Kant. For Kant, in order to establish universal maxims, one must actively discount inclinations which are vulnerable to irrational cultural forces such as hopes, fears, attachments and affections. The arrival at a Kantian transcendental perspective represents theory apart from reality; an artificially created transcendent authority with its origin in the mind of man, not sacred order as revealed in nature.

Such theses gave rise to a new, disorderly social order: liberalism. The idea that individual freedom is the only legitimate universal telos of man. Political Scientist Patrick Deneen says that the three "cornerstones of human experience – nature, time and place – form the basis of culture, and liberalism's success is premised upon their uprooting and replacement".[20] Instead, the liberal approach to moral philosophy reflects a "computer science".[21] These are the words of Martin Buber, a theologian who dismisses the transcendental way of establishing universal maxims which "links together citizens alien to one another in their very being, without establishing, or promoting, a being together".[22]

[19]   RIEFF 2006: 13.
[20]   DENEEN 2018: 66.
[21]   BUBER 2013: 31.
[22]   BUBER 2013: 31.

One such example is the Blairite Equality Act 2010. According to the Act, the most salient thing about the person in law is his "protected characteristics". In a noble bid to stamp out discrimination by elevating gender, sex and race, such characteristics have instead been reduced to commodities. But the negotiation of competing rights and responsibilities is too great for bureaucracy; it is social, not abstract or political and depends on virtue, not law. Herewith the disorder of the liberal order to which, I maintain, conservatism can offer a corrective. Rieff helps us to see how.

Beyond the Enlightenment, Rieff observes a "therapeutic culture"; the natural progression of the late modern period, where it is no longer considered rational for individuals to subjugate their desires for the sake of conforming to cultural norms.[23] Rieff describes the archetype of the therapeutic man as with "no face" – as if he is unable to be moved by summons of loyalty, honour or obligation that are fostered in culturally reinforced associations like families and communities.[24] The therapeutic culture is an anticulture, and it forms the therapeutic man:

> [B]eyond the old deception of good and evil, to specialise [...] in techniques that are to be called therapeutic, with nothing at stake beyond a manipulatable sense of well-being. This is the unreligion of the age, and its master science.[25]

Rieff laments that while cultural pressures such as "reticence, secrecy, concealment of self were once aspects of civility", now these things wage sacrilegious war on my deified self (the reified individual). In his book *Sociology and the Sacred,* Antonius Zondervan explains that "[t]his sacrosanct belief in the instincts, as the true and core of the self, makes modern man blind to the central role of authority in culture".[26]

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[23]   RIEFF 1987.
[24]   RIEFF 1987: 13.
[25]   RIEFF 1987: 13.
[26]   ZONDERVAN 2005: 122.

Here we find out why, for Rieff, modernity and its anticulture amounts to a crisis of authority. Institutions that inculcate virtues must be deemed illegitimate vessels of moral value. Conservatives through the ages doubt the prudence of such revolutionary instincts. For Edmund Burke, the French Revolutionaries denied "human concerns" by the "nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction".[27]

It is of course no surprise that without some sacred rationale, cultural norms are rejected, or subverted. But for Rieff, much more than religious accounts of reality are at stake here. In his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self,* Theologian Carl Trueman explains:

> Third worlds, by way of stark contrast to the first and second worlds, do not root their cultures, their social orders, their moral imperatives in anything sacred. They do have to justify themselves, but they cannot do so on the basis of something sacred or transcendent. Instead, they have to do so on the basis of themselves. The inherent instability of this approach should be obvious.[28]

For Rieff, sacred order cannot be artificially created in the third world. Its substitute – the reified individual – is a false transcendence; imported rather than imbibed. It is on this basis that the anticulture of liberalism fails to command civility, only disorder. It fails because it is based on a unifying metaphysical theory with absolutely no bearing on the imminent conditions of reality.

USES OF FREUD AFTER FAITH

Here, in postmodernity, how can we recover civility? For Rieff, the answer lies in recovering culture from the anticulture through a restoration of a sacred order. As we have seen, this can only be a metaphysical enterprise. The subtitle

[27]   Burke 1790: 7.
[28]   Trueman 2020.

to Rieff's book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* is "uses of faith after Freud".[29] In this book, Rieff draws on Freudian psychoanalysis to make the case for a trace of the transcendent in our inclination to renounce individual desires for the sake of cultural stability. Over half a century since this book was published, and with census data recording increasing numbers of people in the West declaring no faith whatsoever, Freud might just help us to direct some faith instinct towards the common good, or at least towards order.

Rieff's interest in Stevens reflects his interest in Freud; once remarking that the former is a "poetic version" of the latter.[30] Like in Stevens' world of peculiar coherence, an emergent order, or authority – while not necessarily religious ("bishops' books") – is present in Freudian theory.[31]

Freud's psychoanalysis illuminated the battle set by modernity; between the desire of the individual and the wider culture. The impulse of modernity, to liberate the individual, must deconstruct stifling authoritative cultural codes that demand the renunciation of individual desires. However, Freud considered the "unbridled gratification" of every man incompatible with a functioning and resilient society.[32] Freud describes something much like Rieff's therapeutic culture:

> Unbridled gratification of all desires forces itself into the foreground as the most alluring, guiding principle in life, but it entails preferring enjoyment to caution and penalises itself after short indulgence.[33]

Without recourse to cultural norms or habits, on the basis that the autonomy of the individual is the only measure of a legitimate social order, we cannot recommend that practices like sex are regulated by certain conditions, like marriage. In *Why Liberalism Failed* Deneen said of marriage:

[29] RIEFF 1987.
[30] ZONDERVAN 2005: 125.
[31] STEVENS 1955.
[32] FREUD 1994: 12.
[33] FREUD 1994: 12.

> These arrangements exist, in part, to reduce the volatility and dangers of sex – to preserve its energy, its beauty, and its pleasures; to preserve and clarify its power to join not just husband and wife to one another but parents to children, families to the community, the community to nature; to ensure, so far as possible, that the inheritors of sexuality, as they come of age, will be worthy of it.[34]

Deneen's rationale for regulating sex – for the sake of cultural resilience – cannot be accepted in third world cultures. However, nor can the liberal anticulture provide an alternative imperative for the proper regulation of sex. Much is made of mechanisms like consent, but this is both a weak safeguard against exploitative sex, and a very thin condition for what constitutes "good" sex.

Zondervan explains how we can see the influence of Freud's psychoanalysis in Rieff's theory of culture. For Freud, quite obviously, the widespread sexual chaos that would ensue if men were to indulge their carnal desires at every turn is not sustainable. This itself is a sound rationale for individuals to conform to more conservative cultural norms.

Here, the theory or explanation as to why, or on what authority, or by whose design it is necessary for individuals to renounce their desires is never met in reality, apart from some counterfactual scenario; chaos. As in Stevens' poem, the presence of a coherent order is apparent, but the peculiarity of unity is never resolved; reality is never identified with theory. The crisis of authority in modernity certainly begs the question for Freud: reality is governed by authoritative rules.

Rieff calls order "sacred". In order to correct course away from liberalism and its ills, we need to reconfigure the metaphysical basis of our social order. Unfortunately, the modern discovery of the laws of nature need not have given rise to secular naturalism; nature did not have to eat up grace with the advancement of science. True transcendence can be traced in the natural world, not only by some Enlightenment reduction, corruption, or reification of something profane.

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[34]   DENEEN 2018: 79.

Fiona Ellis' theory of "theistic naturalism" explains how the supernatural is "not a spooky superstructure, intrinsic or added on to a nature which is complete in itself. Rather it is a quality or dimension which enriches or perfects the natural world."[35] This account of the natural world is Rieffian; where the natural and the supernatural are distinct, yet entwined. Indeed, nature is naturally supernatural; wholly reliant on the supernatural "without which the world would cease to be and without which we would cease to be properly human".[36] On this account, there is no need to artificially create a sacred authority that disorders reality, like the reified individual. Instead, the individual must accept his created condition and seek some alignment with transcendent purposes.

TOWARDS THE ORDER
OF THE COVENANT

Rieff's theory of culture maintains that culture is a transliteration of the sacred order. In Rieff's own words, the task of culture is to "transliterate otherwise invisible sacred orders into their visible modalities".[37] In this case, the pressure to repress individual desire does not originate in culture, but is a cultural translation of a sacred, authoritative command. Zondervan is extremely useful here. He interprets Rieff's meaning of the verb "transliterate" as the translation of the signs of the sacred into a new language of social order.

> Translating is always interpreting because it is impossible to transfer the signs of one semantic field into another directly [...]. The idea of finding the "closest corresponding signs" refers to the very complex character of the transformation of the language of the sacred into that of the social order.[38]

[35] McPherson 2020: 158.
[36] McPherson 2020: 158.
[37] Zondervan 2005: 127.
[38] Zondervan 2005: 127.

We can see again the never quite meeting of reality and theory, of the sacred and the profane, and the respect for the ontological difference between the two. And yet, according to Rieff, the two are "inseparable" because the sacred is a concrete thing, imminently real in nature, most ostensibly in code.[39] The habits and rituals that a culture adopts is the sacred order present in the social order, and emerges from the peculiar distance between theory and reality.

Rather unsatisfactorily, despite his protestation that cultures must register a sacred order to survive, Rieff does not prescribe which sacred order should be registered by what kind of culture.

At this point, Alasdair MacIntyre can help us imagine a Rieffian social order; and it looks a lot like conservatism. Like Rieff, MacIntyre rejects the imposition of abstract law devised by enlightenment thinkers. Instead, he maintains that there is such a thing as natural law; "those precepts promulgated by God through reason without conformity to which human beings cannot achieve their common good."[40]

What makes MacIntyre particularly relevant to Rieff's theory of culture is his deductive reasoning. MacIntyre argues, quite simply, that a social order inspired by modern metaphysics – namely liberalism – does not stand up to scrutiny when we consider what activities the "plain person" must undertake in his day to day life, such as caring for family, learning new skills, and participating in local forms of political community.[41] These things that sustain a common life are not immediately upheld by liberalism.

In *Ethics and Politics*, MacIntyre says that precepts of natural law are those "presupposed" in rational relationships between individuals, where the "common good requires, and hence the natural law requires, the making of jokes and the staging and enjoyment of entertainment".[42] He goes on:

> It is only because human beings have an end toward which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do. [...].

[39] Zondervan 2005: 128.
[40] MacIntyre 1999: 111.
[41] Hauerwas 2007.
[42] Hauerwas 2007.

> So I discovered that I had, without realizing it, presupposed the truth of something very close to the account of the concept of good.[43]

In other words, MacIntyre goes further than Rieff. Not only must individuals conform to "practices, traditions and the like" for cultural purposes, but these are precepts of natural law; indeed, the very telos of man.[44] This alignment of social order and sacred order finds some form in the idea of the covenant; a freely chosen self-restraint that recognises the imperative for individuals to live associated not apart, and orientates all parties towards some common good.

Rabbi Sacks describes covenants as opposed to contracts:

> A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an "Us". That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform.[45]

Marriage is the obvious example of a freely entered but binding agreement that serves both parties, as well as the wider society. In order for covenants to form – for people to freely choose to self-restrain their desires for some collective good – we need to first be in relationships; to face other people.

Jewish intellectual, Emmanuel Levinas, observes that the face to face encounter fosters virtue, as the "defenceless eyes" and "impoverished face" of another stuns individuals into realising their duty to extend generosity and compassion.[46] Levinas uses biblical narrative to demonstrate the "prehistory" of the relating and related ego.[47] After murdering his brother Abel, God asks Cain: "Where is your brother Abel?" In response, Cain asks: "Am I my brother's keeper?"[48] God does not respond, implying that indeed one is already and

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43   MacIntyre 2013: xi.
44   MacIntyre 2013: xi.
45   Sacks 2020: 63.
46   Levinas 1996: 12.
47   Levinas 1996. 117.
48   Genesis 4:9.

always a brother-keeper. Cain fails to recognise this, and is therefore unable to experience a true sense of himself; a brother-keeper. Cain failed to freely choose self-restraint, forsaking the sacred order, or in MacIntyre's terms – natural law – that ordains we must covenant with those we face in order to honour our telos and the common good.

Fundamentally, we face other people in the imminent associations that rise above the individual: in families, communities and the nation. These associations are covenantal as they create the conditions for freely chosen self-restraint, and virtue.

In a Freudian sense, no other response to the *unchosen* reality of being born into such associations makes any sense; to refuse to conform to the cultural norms of such associations will result in penalisation "after short indulgence".[49] Widespread repression in the human psyche is simply the experience of the sacred order regulating our behaviour, transliterated in culture. It is not a problem to be solved.

Happily, it is almost impossible for the "plain person" to live unencumbered and unrelated, hermetically sealed off from the gaze of others and our obligations towards them.[50] The recognition of others in imminent associations forces one to sacrifice the limitless possibilities that abstract freedom affords; ultimately to dominate and destroy others. This is the end of liberalism. Individuals subject to strong cultural conditions find instruction as to what to do with freedom, how to use it and how not to abuse it. This is the true and authentic trace transcendent in nature. It gives rise to a more concrete kind of freedom; to live peacefully in communion with others.

What kind of politics does this thesis recommend? Rieff says that stable cultural codes make political force unnecessary: "Culture is the form of fighting before the firing actually begins."[51] Here, there is a sense in which politicians must look to the pre-political sources of authority, rather than asserting new regimes that disorder the order that can be found in the covenantal relationships.

49   FREUD 1994: 12.
50   HAUERWAS 2007.
51   ZONDERVAN 2005: 126.

Simone Weil held this conviction too, observing that "[t]he state is a cold concern which cannot inspire love, but itself kills, suppresses everything that might be loved; so one is forced to love it, because there is nothing else".[52]

CONCLUSION

The anticulture is sacrilegious because culture transliterates transcendent truth; that the individual is teleologically oriented towards some larger order for which he must sacrifice the indulgence of his desires. We need the order of the covenant; an old–new metaphysics where the natural and the supernatural, theory and reality, and the sacred and profane mutually reinforce the right way to be human. Through a process of re-enchantment, culture can recover some directive authority.

The conservatism of those such as Burke as well as Benjamin Disraeli and Roger Scruton can hold up the order of the covenant; recommending we live by codes that serve the sacred order of the universe through brother-keeping, and other such activities of the plain person.

[52]   WEIL 2020: 111.

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