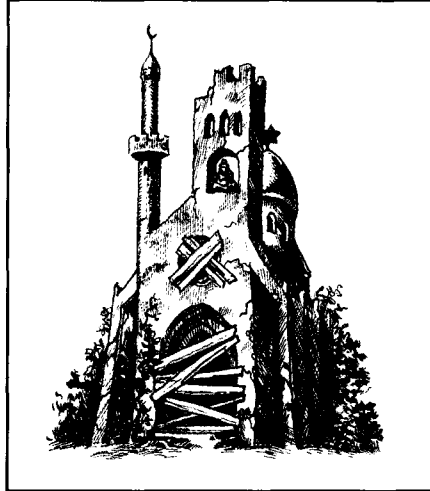


# Sic et Non?

Agreeing Not to Disagree

by Harold O.J. Brown



A number of years ago, when I was teaching a ninth-grade religion class (in Switzerland, where religion is taught in public schools), one of the boys said to me, “All religions teach the same thing.” Although only 15, he was, without knowing it, a witness for multiculturalism—not in the descriptive sense, in which one recognizes the existence of competing truth claims, but in the prescriptive sense, in which one says that all claims are equal, which, from the nature of things, means equally *invalid*. If a society professes Christianity, it can tolerate competing views, even while believing them to be false. A multicultural society tolerates every view *except* the one that professes to be true. All cultures are to be respected equally, with the likely exception of Western culture, which is not to be respected at all.

Let us turn back to the classroom situation: “So all religions teach the same thing—do you all believe that?” I asked. “Yes!” sang the chorus. Instead of arguing, I asked the boy to come forward and lie down on the long preparations table. (Religion, appropriately enough, was taught in a science classroom.) Then I proceeded—over the recumbent form of a somewhat distrustful 15-year-old—to describe the Aztec practice of sacrificing a victim, frequently a young lad like the one on the table, by cutting out his heart. The dripping heart was then offered to an idol, in accordance with the view that the gods required this “divine food” in order to keep the world in existence. The heartless body would then be rolled down the steps of the pyramid for use as food for animals and people.

“The God of Christianity,” I then said, “also wants your hearts—not ripped out and given to an idol, but alive, in living bodies, to love and serve him. No difference?” By this time, the

boy on the table had realized that nothing was going to happen to him, though he was still in shock. The class reacted with stunned silence, and I never heard that particular assertion again.

Of course, the difference between Aztec religion, with its bloody sacrifice, and Christianity (as well as the other “higher religions”) is extreme; other religions are much closer, particularly (as C.S. Lewis showed in *The Abolition of Man*) with respect to the fundamental principles of morality. However, a religion does not have to prescribe human sacrifice to be categorically different from Christianity. Christianity acknowledges one eternal, omnipotent God; Hinduism professes belief in many gods and lesser deities; Buddhism acknowledges no god at all. Hinduism and Buddhism both teach that the material world is illusory and that the human spirit will be reincarnated many times. Christianity teaches that God created an objectively real world and holds that “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). If either Hinduism or Buddhism is true, Christianity cannot be, and *vice versa*. The principle of religious tolerance holds that it is right for Christians to respect, for example, Hindus, while rejecting their doctrines—and *vice versa*, of course. Multiculturalism requires the adherents of each religion to accept the other as equally valid, which is to say that neither is objectively true.

The age of multiculturalism beckons us to enter it with joy, while asserting the essential equality of all human cultures. If religion is merely a product of culture, no religion can be objectively true; nor, for that reason, can it be superior to others. To assert multiculturalism is to deny the truth of any religion’s claim to be objectively true. How can Western civilization, which has so long claimed to have its origins in an historical, supernatural revelation, so quickly accept multiculturalism without apparently realizing that, in so doing, it is cutting itself off entirely from its spiritual roots?

The late Italian Catholic thinker Augusto Del Noce has of-

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ferred a helpful insight. Virtually every human society has some idea of transcendence, despite the obvious fact that there are vast differences among them. However, Del Noce argues in *The Epoch of Secularization*, transcendence no longer appears in the once-Christian West. It is not that it has been abolished; it is, rather, as though the culture as a whole has lost what R.L. Bruckberger called “a certain metaphysical organ” and is no longer capable of perceiving or thinking about the transcendent. We no longer see a conflict between Christian theism and atheism; atheism no longer exists, and Christianity has been reduced to a kind of club activity, like bridge, and does not engage in philosophical combat. (This is why the defense of naturalistic evolution has become such a frenzied concern of much of the intellectual world. If the merest suggestion of intelligent design is reasserted, then one has to ask the God question again, and that is precisely what we increasingly lack the mental equipment to do.)

Del Noce’s analysis casts light on the situation that prevails in the West. Real atheism no longer exists, because in order to be atheistic—in order to deny that there is a God—one must first “think God.” Otherwise, what is there is to deny? Atheism has been superseded by agnostic secularism, in which God does not even appear on the radar screen. Atheism usually requires an awareness of a religion that affirms a belief in God, or at least of the possibility of transcendence; otherwise, there is no idea of the God that one wishes to deny. How has this happened? Del Noce sees the cause in secularization. In contrast to the 19th century, when materialism was a philosophy which challenged theism and revealed religion on intellectual grounds, the 20th century, at least since World War II, has attacked Christianity, and with it the idea of transcendence. It has done so by flooding Europe and North America with wonderful things to buy, to have, and to do, causing the transcendent to recede from view. People do not bother to deny transcendence; they simply cannot really imagine it.

Eternity vanishes in the torrent of worldly goods, and with it moral judgments here and divine judgment hereafter. All transcendent values disappear; only commerce remains. Although Del Noce does not use this example, this is why internet pornography cannot be suppressed. If there is any commercial value in anything, no moral reservations can impede our access to it. (An illustration of the victory of commerce over tradition can be seen in the gradual suppression of the Confederate Battle Flag in states where it was once honored. The crisis came with an NAACP boycott of South Carolina, and the fear of losing income quickly persuaded South Carolinians to abandon the old flag.) This marginalization is why something as illogical as multiculturalism seems to be having a relatively easy march to triumph over all vestiges of particular cultural commitment, including religion.

If we return to the image of the boy on the table, it seems absolutely self-contradictory to assert the equality of all cultures when one is based on human sacrifice and others are based on the sanctity of human life. To accept multiculturalism as a valid principle is easier than to deny the validity of your own religion, but it quickly comes to mean the same thing. To call all cultures equal, and to designate religion as an aspect of culture, is to call all religions equal, which means, of course, that none is more valid than any other. Most postmodern thinkers, politically correct though they may be, do not believe that Aztec practices are no more objectionable than a Sunday-school pic-

nic. Or do they? Some might find a Billy Graham crusade more objectionable than the sacrifices on the great pyramid of Tenochtitlan, because, after all, the sacrifices are long past and do not threaten us, while Dr. Graham’s crusades frequently win people away from multiculturalism to the exclusivist religion called Christianity.

The impact of multiculturalism on the churches is visible everywhere, and not only in the more extreme variants of Christianity. We have heard of the re-imagining conferences, funded by leading mainline denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church—both of which ought to know better. Jesus Christ is “re-imagined” as a female persona, Sophia, and His Supper is turned into a meal with milk and honey. The Pope himself allowed Buddhists to erect in St. Francis’s church at Assisi what earlier Christians would have called an idol. Conservative Protestants seem increasingly culture-driven. Willow Creek Community Church’s “seeker friendly” Sunday services hardly resemble traditional Protestant worship. Evangelical Protestants, in their zeal to reach the young, have created “Christian” versions of rock concerts. The authors of some theological curricula seem to be more interested in incorporating elements of popular culture than in impregnating students with Scripture and Christian tradition. A recent Harvard Divinity School catalog listed only one semester on the literature of the New Testament, but two semesters on feminist interpretation of the same. (To be fair to Harvard, there were some courses on individual New Testament books.)

The 19th century was the century of missionary expansion, and the 20th century began with even greater missionary enthusiasm. But today, Christian missions are in considerable disrepair in the mainline churches, including Roman Catholicism. The Roman Catholic Paulist order, founded in the 19th century with the goal of converting Protestants, now specializes in such things as publishing books on liberation theology.

Missiology, for many, is becoming anthropology, dedicating itself to the study of other religions rather than to changing them. Few will now sing the old missionary hymn, “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains,” with such multiculturally incorrect lines as: “The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.” One may infer from this change that we now assume that earlier Christian missionaries, who really thought this way, were blind to the authenticity (another buzzword in modern multicultural religiosity) of what we used to call “paganism,” but must now call “indigenous religion.”

In the analysis of Augusto Del Noce, secularization drives out both true religion and atheism because it no longer thinks in terms of transcendence. Multiculturalism is the most devastating aspect of the secularization of culture. For Christians, it does not denounce their faith as vain by denying truth of the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:17). That would be a focused attack, and it could be countered with arguments from history as well as testimonies of faith. Instead, it tells them, in effect, “It is wrong to ask whether Christ is risen. That is only one among many religious and cultural convictions. To affirm that it is uniquely true is to be intolerant, and that is the one sin that multiculturalism cannot endure.”

If multiculturalism continues to gain ground, there will be no need for religious war—real or figurative—because no one will believe that his religion is true. For adherents of some religions, that may not seem terrible, but Christians will have a hard time explaining it at the judgment seat.



# The Whippoorwill

by J.O. Tate

*"The pure products of America  
go crazy."*

—William Carlos Williams

**Robert Mitchum:**  
"Baby, I Don't Care"

by Lee Server  
New York: St. Martin's Press;  
590 pp., \$32.50



Anatol Woolf

The go-to-hell attitude, unique features, and deceptive talent by which we know Robert Mitchum (1917-1997) were the product of his heredity and experience. His father was a Scotch-Irish South Carolinian with some Amerindian blood—he died young in a railroad accident. His mother was Norwegian on both sides, a bohemian woman of imagination who bequeathed a love of poetry, literature, and music to her son. Mitchum's anarchic spirit was both inherited and taught by his environment: Bridgeport, Connecticut, Delaware, and New York City, where his older sister went into show biz at an early age. As a boy, Mitchum already wrote and raised hell, and read Jack London and Jim Tully.

At 14, he left home with his mother's blessing to discover the big world, riding the rails in Depression America, freezing and starving, scrounging and hustling, seeing men die, and winding up rather notoriously on a chain gang in Savannah, Georgia. Mitchum himself declared that everything in America that is not nailed down winds up in California, so he did, too. Marrying his childhood sweetheart and moving into a converted chicken coop, he worked with no aim in the early

1940's, until he found his calling in the theater. Soon, he was the unshaven heavy for Hopalong Cassidy, and before the war was over, he was a rising star in Hollywood. He was on his way, and the list of movies stretches for decades. If Mitchum never took Hollywood seriously, neither did he turn his back on the money, the chance to travel the world, nor the opportunity to exercise his considerable talents.

Mitchum was no mere movie actor. He achieved, as some others have done, an iconic status—he became a god, as Parker Tyler would have it, a celluloid immortal. When he was young, the publicists formed a club of the "Mitchum Droolettes," so great was his magnetism and their vulgarity. One hobby-soxer gushed, "He has the most immoral face I've ever seen!" (She meant that as praise, of course.) Mitchum more than survived the crisis of a marijuana bust and jail term in 1948—he came out of it with en-

hanced stature. The bad boy had to be bad, and the public liked him that way. Both the pot and the booze continued to be processed for a lifetime. Planting marijuana by his mailbox, Robert Mitchum showed an American spirit of defiance at odds with our national mythology, but not with our national character.

Robert Mitchum has today become his movies, save in the memories of family and friends. I suppose that there are two genres for which he is best remembered and America is known around the world; certain of those will remain of permanent interest. Because of the popularity of the Western when he began his career—as well as his own brawny nature—Mitchum made many Westerns. While most such films are bad, *Pursued* (1947) is distinctive as a *noir* Western—"lit by matches," as Mitchum liked to say—and will never be forgotten. *Blood on the Moon* (1948) is another jewel; *The Lusty Men* (1952) is the best rodeo movie ever made; and *Track of the Cat* (1954), *The Wonderful Country* (1959), and *El Dorado* (1967) are also superior works. Mitchum never looked silly in costume, and with his voice, inflections, and body language, he put his own brand on the horse opera, forever.

In another—and not unrelated—mode, Mitchum did more than make his mark. Martin Scorsese has declared, "Mitchum was film *noir*." And he was, from the get-go. Don Miller has called *When Strangers Marry* (1944) "the finest B film ever made." *Out of the Past* (1947) is an acknowledged masterpiece, thought by many to be the best *noir* of them all. At least three of Mitchum's RKO movies are still regularly screened

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