

PETRUSEK, Matthew. *Evangelization and Ideology*. Park Ridge – Illinois, Word on Fire, 2023, 472 pp.

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In July 2023 the above book was edited by Dr. Matthew Petrussek and published by the Word on Fire Institute. The Word on Fire Institute is a Catholic organization recently founded in the United States and led by the well-known US Bishop Barron with the intent to give a Catholic response, especially through the social media, to the increasing secular culture spread in North America, along with a great part of the Western world and beyond. Dr. Petrussek is a professor specialized in Christian ethics and moral theology and closely cooperates with the Word of Fire Institute in this work of evangelization.

The book is divided into two parts, preceded by an introduction. The introduction, immediately points out the increasing hyper politicization present in the United States at the detriment of freedom of speech and particularly of religion, increasingly relegating them to the private realm. It may seem strange to remark on the increasing politicalization in our present societies, since political disaffiliation has been characteristic of the past decades both in the United States and the greater part of the Western world and beyond. However, the author is mainly referring to the politicization of culture, which has been alimanted by past and present ideologies together with their most recent ramifications.

Following the introduction, Dr. Petrussek attempts to create the basis for a dialogue, as he observes the present challenges that differing parties and groups currently have in confronting their ideas in a constructive manner. This is partly due to the growing opinion inspired by the philosophical ideology defined as “voluntarism” according to which everyone is entitled to have his or her own truth. The author synthetizes this concept into: “you have your truth, I have mine” (p.27) which renders dialogue pointless. Another obstacle to the possibility of dialogue seems to be a misconception about tolerance (p. 29). While the emerging ideologies sustain transgenderism and abortion rights, in the name of tolerance they insist on maintaining their own rights both of expression and action, they fail to show this tolerance to opposing views. So, in the name of tolerance, these ideologies limit the meaning of

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tolerance to become a one-way principle, which contradicts the very same concept of tolerance. Modern intolerance, labelling as homophobia, hate speech, and mentally incapacitated those who dissent from the radical Left, tends instead to totalitarianism, or as expressed by late Cardinal Ratzinger or Pope Benedict XVI, to a dictatorship of relativism (p. 116). In this view, even keeping silent, meaning not speaking up for the radical Left, is a form of violence against the so-called marginalized minorities, who are victims to an unjust society (p.117). In front of this destructive perspective of our present moral code, the author sees a valid alternative in Catholicism, as expressed by the social teaching of the Church. In other words, promoting basic Catholic principles of human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity and the common good, are a valid alternative to the tribalism promoted by modern ideologies, thus warranting the evangelization in this prevailing secular culture (p. 126).

In the second part of the book, leading to the conclusion, Dr. Petrušek analyses multiple contemporary secular ideologies, their challenges, and how they impact American society. These include “utilitarianism”, “liberalism/libertarianism”, “progressivism”, with byproducts like “wokeism” and “non-theistic conservatism”.

Regarding utilitarianism, the author defines it as the ideology that replaces God with pleasure. Applying the definition of utilitarianism from the well-recognized British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), who summarizes this ideology into looking for “the greatest good for the greatest number of people” (p.153), the author argues how can one seek the greatest good if one refuses to define what is good. In addition, this kind of reasoning justifies the oppression of minorities in the name of an alleged good for the majority. Realizing these flaws, other philosophers with similar views, namely John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), have elevated the concept of pleasure from a dimension of quantity to one of quality, proper of a learned man in search of nobler pleasures. However, in this corrected form, utilitarianism remains incapable of asserting universal truths and easily justifies the suppression of life, as in the case of abortion which claims to pursue the good of the woman. In choosing this alleged good, while refusing to define it, is going to create the subordination of the good to a subjective criteria of the dominant party (p.209-10).

As per liberalism and libertarianism, they exalt the primacy of the individual to the point of asserting that “man is the creator of his/her own happiness” (p.214). Rooted in Kant’s philosophy, they reject God as the

authority on moral judgment (p.232). Consequently, everyone can invent their own conception of truth, so it is equally rational to believe in classical monotheism as to believe in polytheism (p.239). The distinction between these two similar ideologies can be understood in the thought of the two most recent recognized exponents: John Rawls (1921-2022) for liberalism and Robert Nozick (1938- 2022) for libertarianism. While Rawls claims maximum freedom and equality of opportunity in the name of justice, Nozick argues that the first principle of maximum freedom prohibits the existence of the second principle, equality of opportunity. Apart from these internal differences, both liberalism and libertarianism agree that all individuals are autonomous in pursuing their respective conception of the good (p. 251). Against such an interpretation of autonomy, the Catholic Church claims that the real task of man is not to determine by himself what is good or not, but to discern what is good and what is not, according to the nature he has received from God.

Regarding progressivism, lately known as wokeism in the United States, the author notices that it has become the most tribal and yet the most attractive ideology in recent times (p. 302). Heavily influenced by postmodernism, progressivism (wokeism), has absorbed the idea that universal truth does not exist, because truth is socially constructed. Our way of thinking and of speaking has been created in accord with the Marxist conception of superstructure, aimed at oppressing the minorities and favoring the dominating social classes, typically associated with the white race. Refraining from action or keeping silent in regard to the cause of wokeism, is a form of violence in itself because it contributes to maintaining the status quo, constructed against the minorities and the disadvantaged. It is time to “woke up” and fight for a new social justice. What really exists is power, not truth, it is up to us, as a progressive group, to take it (p. 316).

Finally, regarding nontheistic conservatism, the present growing secular ideologies even influence part of the conservative groups, who are abandoning their theistic beliefs to rely almost exclusively on attaining wealth, which is considered the real source of happiness in this world (p.368).

The concluding chapter is a call to consider the present secular status of our society as an occasion for a new evangelization and, in particular, for the rediscovery of the social teachings of the Church as a concrete solution to the damages caused by the diffusion of such divisive and tribal ideologies. By its emphasis on human dignity tied with the search for the common good, the social teachings of the Church possess the tools to distinguish and promote

what may be considered good for the secular ideologies, correcting, at the same time, their abuses against the dignity of the individual and the common good.

This book may be considered a valid contribution to the debate and causes and effects of the secular ideologies present in our societies, especially in the United States, Western countries, and other parts of the world. The book is a long treatise, with a number of unavoidable repetitions, which is very meticulous and requires a considerable time to examine it. Nevertheless, it is still worth reading it, because it provides an interesting contribution to the contemporary debate on modern ideologies, compared to the message of the Gospel.