

## "NATURAL" AS A THEOPOLITICAL WEAPON

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Some Americans, with the backing of our largest church, are using the theophilosophically-freighted word "**natural**" (nontheologically defined, for public discourse) to achieve the political-legislative goal of coercing their naysayers into conformity with that church's official will (the Roman magisterium) anent certain behaviors in which now individual freedom either obtains or is proposed.

For their political rhetoric, these (from my POV) wrongheaded Americans use "natural" to mean what is / should be exclusively in God's hands, thus coopting the deity to their side of the debate: we who disagree, who claim that the disputed matters are in our human hands, are Godless (whether philosophically so, i.e. atheists, or only functionally [sinfully] so).

This Thinksheet's **occasion**: FIRST THINGS No.95 (August-September/99)

1 In the million years we've been in existence, billions of us have died of **hunger** & thousands of us are right now dying of hunger. Some of this could have been / could be unnaturally (i.e., by human intervention) prevented; most of it has been by natural-biospheric die-off ("an act of God," in legalese whether or not in theologicalese). An old joke tells of a couple who bought a run-down place & within two years had turned its setting into beautiful gardens. "You have helped God make beauty," said a passerby. The new owners' response: "You should have seen it when God had it all to himself." Natural is beautiful, & also ugly.

Over the same period of time, hundreds of millions of us have been **eaten** (by tigers, cancer, et al). (The food chain, he said, was Darwin's main reason for giving up faith in the biblical God.) We are the most unnatural & successful species in staying inside the food chain with our teeth while protecting ourselves from other species' natural use of their teeth on us--a success that has produced nature's most spectacular instance of imbalance, our species now a cancer metastasizing through the body of the biosphere, to its depletion (mineral, animal, plant [desertification], soil) & (water, soil, air, stratosphere, space) pollution (including unnatural [i.e., humanity-released] radioactivity).

2 Statistically, our 20th c.--often called "the bloodiest century in the history of the world"--has been the *least* bloody (meaning people deliberately **killing** people) century. The planet's population has almost tripled in my lifetime, but people during this time have killed only about 100 million people--in procreational perspective, a statistically insignificant number. As for **plagues** (so often mentioned in the Bible, 7X in Revelation), ours is history's most successful century for reducing them both relatively (to earth's population at any one time) & absolutely (in the number of types of plague)....In Rev.6.8,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of humanity is killed by "war, famine, disease, and wild animals" (to which, in the chap., the traditional phrase "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse" do not exactly correspond). While we thank God for our unnatural successes against these four enemies, we must recognize that the more we succeed in protecting ourselves against them the more we fail to control the runaway numbers of our species: those four enemies were, homeostatically (the balance of nature/humanity) our friends. Only the 1st of these has any prospect of continuing its old function in the form of a subatomic-nuclear war, which however could fail the friend function: three years of no sunshine would eliminate humanity....

3 ....& speaking of eliminating humanity, within various scenarios it's an astro-physical certainty (barring divine intervention--grace over nature, faith over reason). (In the absence of the Cold War, the "Star War" warriors have taken to speculating on how to bomb-deflect any asteroid making a beeline for us. Here, & in scores of other science-formed situations, does "natural" still mean human nonintervention?)

4 At life's extremities, viz. conception & death, Rome teaches *unqualified* nonintervention: no abortion & no euthanasia. Before life (pre-conception), Rome teaches *qualified* nonintervention, the relatively low-efficiency **rhythm method**, which goes by the weasely phrase "natural birth-control" (though it's to control conception, not birth; & it's unnatural because involving human action, though in an instrument-

al sense [without chemical or physical instrumentation] natural). To an outsider, this sophisticated un/qualified distinction seems weirdly jesuitical (bad sense): is not the menses calendar an instrument?

5 The "Correspondence" section (pp2ff) of this FT issue is loaded with antiunnatural (sic!) birth-control letters all of which are **parochial** (with no recognition that the biosphereic changes call for religioethical reevaluation), **species-narcissistic** (addressing the situation of only one species, ours) & **sectarian** (claiming a universal pertinence for a highly cultural-specific notion of "natural law" [as is true also of the piece by a Princeton prof. of jurisprudence, Robt.P.George, "A Clash of Orthodoxies" [pp33-40]]). Inevitably, such myopia leaves proponents defenseless against the charges of **blindness** (to the real argumentation of opponents) & **arrogance**. All this appalls & saddens me vis-a-vis this (otherwise intellectually sound) Christian journal & (why not say it?) Rome (to which in these matters FT is consistently, I must add obsequiously, faithful)...Some particulars:

(1) Credit FT with having a Protestant editor, Jas.Neuchterlein, whose prior assertion of having used, in his own marriage, what's commonly called "artificial [unnatural!] birth control": the letters are aimed against his position, which is that human beings "can't not know" natural law (I adduce Ro.1.18-23). Some objector-letters claim that natural law is occluded by sin; the sun comes out only for "upright lives" of "personal holiness" (a deft exclusion of the editor!). (So slavery, fornication, & usury [!] have not been always & everywhere recognized as violations of natural law.)....(2) A letter-writer says he & his wife are "better people" for having switched to "natural [!] family planning": "If we surrender to God's will, we change for the better." Crabbedly, he argues that marital sex temporally (in the menstrual cycle) intending nonconception is "not acting against" life even when the act is specifically against new life, viz. contraception! (This deception, witting or not, frightens me: I thank God the Inquisition can't get me.) It's pitiful to see how some Catholics, in trying to be seamless-garden pro-life, violate logic. The Pope violates the specific meaning of Gn.9.6 by using it against the death penalty, whereas the plain meaning is pro-death (i.e., execute the killer of an image-of-God-made human being)....(3) Another letter says that revelation (of our creation in God's "image") is the primary weight against contraception, though strengthened by "bona fide natural law arguments." God generously creates, we "must never deliberately preclude procreation" (is he a rigorist, against the rhythm method?). Right now, God has generously created, in a town near us, so many mosquitos that people would be imperiled to leave their houses.)....(4) And another letter: "Sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive is, in essence, a lie in which I treat myself or another as an object....we are called to perfection." But since Rome now recognizes that both love & children are valid reasons for sexual intercourse, how could sex while intending to avoid children (as in the rhythm method) be a degraded, object-affirming & person-denying activity in a loving marriage?....(5) Another: Why not continue the pre-20th-c. anticontraception mind of the church universal? I reply: (a) The records are not so clear as to substantiate that assumption; (b) Pre-20th-c. contraception was crude & dangerous; (c) The argument from universality cannot have primary pertinence ("new occasions teach new duties" on usury, etc.)....(6) Another premises what is to be proved, viz. that contraception is against natural law as allegedly known "norm" & on some issues "known only after close and sometimes complex reasoning": we Protestants counter that the Fall impedes reason's direct, unimpeded access to what this writer asserts as "truth."....(7) Protestants haven't matured to the ethical sensitivity that would dissuade them from contraception & "the abortion culture."

6 The R.P.George article claims that "Christian teaching is rationally superior to secularism," which falsely claims to be the only "neutral" doctrine & therefore alone worthy of forming the base for a public philosophy/ethic/politic. While I agree, I accuse his natural-law theorizing of being itself tainted with Enlightenment (unbiblical) sacralizing of Man the Inviolable, an error of the present pope in & since his PhD dissertation. It's irrational to argue that because "human life is intrinsically good" it's "morally inviolable": chickens are intrinsically good, but also good to eat. He's Roman-magisterium pro-life all the way & uses his take on natural law to support

the Christian v. the secular "orthodoxy"--putting me, a Christian biblical scholar who disagrees with him on most of the issues he discusses, in the "secular orthodoxy" category. Painfully awkward: We're brothers in (the Christian) worldview (creation, fall, redemption, consummation) & opponents in most particulars of earth-view (attitudinal-behavioral inferences to be drawn now by Christians in light of our present species-location [i.e., where we humans are & should stand] vis-a-vis [to use a phrase embedded in American documentary history] "nature and nature's God").

7 Nature: I know nothing of Prof. George's experience of generative nature; but before further commenting on his text I need to say where I'm coming from. "Nature" willed my wife's death at 21: the coiling of the umbilical cord forbade the "natural" emergence of our firstborn. They had to throw out Caesar's mother soon after his birth by "Caesar"ian section, for medicine at that time had not advanced to the point of successfully interfering with the "natural" process of sepsis (i.e., rot); but by artificial means, rot was prevented in the case of all three of Loree's caesarians. Thank God for these medical "interventions," i.e. **interferences** with nature, which (unnaturally interfered with) had willed first the double death of pregnant & fetus & then the mother's septic death! "Nature's God" overruled nature through medical instrumentality. GENERALIZATION: I'm predisposed to think that "artificial" pro-human interference with nature is a Good Idea: nature *uninterfered* with was, in this case, doubly my enemy. Even more widely, I am now (1999) predisposed to view natural processes as enemies as well as friends. More anon.

8 We've just returned (since I wrote the above ¶) from our daily walk, during which Loree & I talked about (to use an analogy I didn't) the **marriage ellipse** with one focus on fe/male companionship (the Eden story, & Protestant marriage-theology) & the other focus on the product, viz. the baby (Catholic marriage-theology). She said "Most of those who formulated Catholic marriage-theology were celibate, & those who continue its exposition are celibate. Not experiencing the process [lifelong daily companionship with a woman], they naturally pay more attention to the product."

My response was to allude to Eden, thus: "When Cain popped out, it was a surprise." In the creation stories (Gn.1-3) there are no children. In the 2nd (& earlier) one (2.4b-3), there are no children, & the explicit purpose of marriage is **companionship**: "The LORD God said 'It isn't good for man to live alone. I need to make a suitable partner for him.'" (2.18 CEV) What follows is the storyteller's delightful whimsy. The reason (the story seduces us into believing) for God's creation of tame animals, wild animals, & birds was that he was trying to come up with something that would be "a suitable partner," but all were failures: they couldn't satisfy Adam's longing for a companion as like to himself as he himself was to God (in the story, "image" meaning communion-potential). Which brings us to 2.20e: "None of these was the right kind of partner for the man." Nothing said about babies: Cain was a surprise. Biblically, the intention to produce children is only a *secondary* reason for marriage, but Catholic theology has made it primary.. ..Yes, 3.16 gives the apple-eating as the etiology of birth-pangs: the storyteller is of course not unaware of babies as a consequence of marriage; but this reference to procreation could not be more secondary, marginal, even peripheral than in this telling. And yes, the 1st (& earlier) creation story (Gn.1.1-2.4a) telescopes the companionship/babies themes (1.27-28a CEV): "God created humans to be like himself; he made men and women. God gave them his blessing and said: 'Have a lot of children!'" Two levels of companionship ("image"): God with humanity, man with woman.

CONCLUSION: While intending offspring is natural, it's less natural than is intending an enduring fe/male (i.e., male-female) companionship. As abnormal psychology illumines normal, let's take an instance of the abnormal splitting of these two marriage-motives: Prince Charles' companion-woman, Camilla, was so before, during, & after his marriage to the procreation-woman (for the dynastic purpose) Princess Di(ana), who soon concluded that the marriage was "crowded" & wanted (& got) out.

9 Up to this point in this Thinksheet, a sharp eye will have observed that I've used "**natural**" with a considerable semantic range: it's a Protean word, making the phrase "natural law" as slippery as it is (except when confined within a system).

For the present purpose it would be pointless & tiresome to recount the history & bypaths of "natural," "natural law," "natural theology"; but it's relevant to look at a few **antonymics** of "natural": (1) without divine intervention (Darwin's "natural selection," an atheist phrase); (2) without human intervention ("natural birth" [in its purest form, the pregnant goes off into the bush alone & returns with her offspring]); (3) without chemical intervention (organic gardening, producing "all natural" foods); (4) without supernatural revelation ("natural theology"); (5) without processing (raw); (6) without cultivation (wild, untamed, untreated, undyed); (6) without design, planning, purpose, calculation (Darwin's "spontaneous generation"); (6) without contrivance, affectation (authentic); (7) without divine grace (RHD<sup>22</sup>: "unenlightened or unregenerate: 'the natural man'"); (8) without artifice (e.g., "a natural bridge"); (9) without social-legal permission ("a natural [or "love"] child," i.e., a bastard).... "Without" is the string on which I've strung, in no particular order, these *negatives*. No point here in making a list of positive meanings of "natural": for making my points in this Thinksheet, I need only the negative semantic domain to display certain nodes at which those who claim to be pro-life are, I believe, **anti-life** in myopically defending all living human cells (no human interference with spermata/ova before-during-after coition [no contraception] or with zygotes-embryos-fetuses [no abortifacients; no nonchemical abortions even of anencephalics, even to save the pregnant's life if at the expense of the life of the fetus], no capital punishment, no war, no suicide [even as self-sacrifice], no euthanasia [passive, as inattention to a horribly deformed & soon-terminal neonate; active, physician-assisted suicide])--&, oddly, no pro-life(!) use of fetal tissue. The whole no-flow revulses me as cell-worship, **biolatry** at the basic-comprehensive level (with the one exception that the killing of cancer cells is permitted). Seamless-garment pro-life is a newfangled monstrosity falsely passing itself off as historic Christian orthodoxy.

To be pro-life (as I understand it), I cannot be (as Rome & Prof. George now are) **pro-cell**. Indeed, I must say YES to every (Rome-defined) "pro-life" NO. Since these pro-lifers have (for the 1st time in the word's history) sneaked the word "murder" up into the womb, I must be even (in that sense only) pro-murder. As Rome has a history of resisting rigorism (instance Donatism, the Albigenses, "enthusiasm"), how ironic that now it has itself, in cell-veneration, become guilty of purism. (Lay Catholic response against this "heroic" extremism? I mention just one: Catholic use of contraceptives is at about the same level as Protestant use.)....Prof. George's article doesn't touch on war or the death penalty, & needn't have.

10 As recently by semantic spread the word "murder" has slipped up into the womb to proscribe abortion, long ago the word "law" slipped by analogy from human & divine (Torah) jurisprudence out into the universe as a way of capturing the fact for which in Scripture Ro.1.19-20 is the locus classicus: human beings have "no excuse" for not discerning in nature the divine design, the intelligible order by which God governs through secondary causality. When the analogy is forgotten, human (including church!) laws slip up into, & acquire the sanctioning force of, "nature," the way things are. By this largely unconscious semantic slippage (in contrast to the recent conscious press of "murder" up into the womb), Rome excludes the likes of me from "nature and nature's God," BOTH! It irritates & saddens me & moves me to gratitude for the heritage of freedom: you know how Rome treated those who were (in Rome's eyes) against both nature & God & therefore against humanity. The mentality has not changed. In the FIRST THINGS "Correspondence" & article, **human-cell-myopia** blinds these thinkers to what a wider-angle lens would reveal--a radically different world today, becoming exponentially more different technologically-demographically-biospherically. Some ancient goods have become evils: to 30 million in Mexico City the pope preached against contraception! To be pro-cell now is to be anti-life, against human life in the round, including our surround that sustains us & needs sustaining. Nature was *tov meodh* (Gn.1.31) but is steadily becoming, under the increasing tonnage of human flesh & waste, the reverse of "very good": natural law in the sense of biophysical regularities has already denied 1/3rd of humanity of "natural" potable water, & on several other vectors as well the planet is becoming less livable for us, lowering the quality & dignity of human life. Observing our spectacular fecundity & death-resisting stratagems, the other species are saying "There goes the neighborhood." We have met earth's enemy, & it's us.