

Lady Gaga and the Civil Religion

Frederick Turner

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Robin Fox's brilliant book, from which this essay is excerpted, has as an implicit and often explicit subtext the project of a world secular religion, and as a consequence or precondition, some kind of world unity, an end (in both senses) of history-as-we-know-it. This is dreaming on a large scale, a forte of Fox's, but it is unlike almost all such dreams in being brutally realistic about the human material in which any such project must deal. Almost always the precondition for the utopia is a blank slate, as Steven Pinker sardonically terms it. Fox has made himself a creditably bad reputation by persistently reminding us of the not very blank slate that is the old Adam.

I am a known sympathizer with Fox's premise, that we are an animal that evolved by domesticating itself but that kept both the raw materials it shaped by its self-taming and the essential heuristic and generative methods of the taming process. I am impressed by his masterly integration of the concepts of *thymos*, *communitas*, evolutionary psychology, left-right brain asymmetry, sacred time and *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft*. In the light of his synthesis, and of my work on epic as the family history of our own evolution as a species, I will use his schema to analyze a striking recent example of the orgiastic *communitas* he describes: Lady Gaga's Monster Ball event in New York.

But first we need to deal with a question that Fox addresses obliquely in the book but sets on one side in the essay: why would we want unity, a world secular religion, the end of history, a peaceful world of justice, free enterprise abundance, rational negotiation, equality, etc.?

To many the answer is contained in the question. When the Ming emperors of China were faced with the choice of such rational unity on the one hand, and the cacophonous babel of the barbarian nations on the other, the choice was clear: destroy the nautical log books, execute the navigators, and fine-tune the hard-won, wealthy and already happy and beautiful mandarin regime they had inherited.

For us the immediate appeal of the world secular religion is the ending of genocide, the freedom of individuals, equality of the races and sexes, and all the other good things in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights—good things only enforceable by a super-national authority and a world consensus on its policy. There is even a philosophical appeal in the prospect, articulated by philosophers like Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty—the establishment of a universal shared commitment to a conversation, one necessarily without an agenda (that would carry particularistic cultural presuppositions) but gently constraining the participants to the minimum civil behavior required to have the conversation itself. Of course 9/11, the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, and the murder of Theo van Gogh put a quick damper on such hopes—what do you do with people who don't even want to get into conversation with you, and for whom such conversations would be an insult to God? But the hopes remain under the surface.

Should we even hope for such an outcome? Some have argued cogently that the notorious stagnation of Ming and Qing China, after having achieved world preeminence in technology, science, and culture, was directly due to the perfection of its unity under a single written language, a demonstrably meritocratic mandarin bureaucracy, and a harmonious unification of three non-theistic religions. Divided, conflicted, and troubled Europe, by contrast, never got back its Roman empire, even its Holy Roman

F. Turner (✉)
The University of Texas at Dallas,
800 West Campbell Road,
Richardson, TX 75080-3021, USA
e-mail: frederick.turner@gmail.com

Empire (until, arguably, today). But as a result of Europe's disunity, the endless struggles of nations, creeds, ethnic groups, ideologies, theories, ethical systems, scientific hypotheses, and technical and business systems produced the astonishing progress of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. And this progress has made possible the very conception of the U.N. human rights charter, replacing slaves, serfs, and chattel wives with machines that do not feel the injustice of servitude. Can we, like old China, now afford to kick away the ladder of competition that got us where we are? In any case, the question may be moot: Fox points out that even in the equality and fairness of the imagined post-historical utopia the old Cain would still envy his brother. Ambition for superiority and praise did not cease among the Chinese, indeed in the absence of political competition it led inevitably to corruption. And when China found itself left behind by the West, it made spectacular haste to catch up.

The social-constructionist paradigm of the Hegelians, Marxists, and post-structuralists—now included in the moderate statist liberalism of the developed nations—has sadly no solution for the problem of stubborn reactionary loyalties but the world state. The relatively tolerant inclusive civil religion of the Seleucid and Roman Empires faced the same problem with the Maccabean movement—in Roman terms, the terrorists—and its only solution was the same as ours: to seek them out in their mountain strongholds and destroy them there. (The history of Maccabean movement and its continuation into the Jewish-Roman War, culminating in the siege of Masada, bears an uncanny resemblance to the history of al Qaeda, with the Seleucids playing the part of the Soviets, and the Romans playing the part of the U.S.) Is there another model of human unity that might avoid the problems of world hegemony, while still preserving the ideals of fairness and a reasonably empathetic atmosphere among fellow-humans?

Fox's implied answer is similar to mine: we do as a species share the heroic family history of our evolution. Luca Cavalli-Sforza and others have traced the astonishing odyssey of our kind from southern Africa to the ends of the earth—Australia, Siberia, Easter Island, Tierra del Fuego. It was an odyssey so swift in evolutionary time that we are still cousins, and we all speak dialects of the same language, Humanese, as Steven Pinker calls it. My own current study of epics from all over the world—the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, the Malinese *Sundiata*, the Hebrew *Genesis*, the Indian *Mahabharata*, the Japanese *Heike*, the Roman *Aeneid*—argues that that they are all one story, the story of how we became human, the insider's account of human evolution.

The model of human unity that this history suggests is not the compacted and homogenous sphere of world bureaucratic hegemony but the branching tree of vital emergence and exploration. If there were a civil religion

based on epic it would simultaneously proclaim our siblinghood and comradeship in the heroic human adventure, and welcome as constitutive the branchiness and divergence that its mechanism mandates. Only by competition among the various worlds generated by our brothers and sisters can the human world grow and flourish.

In the evolutionary perspective time itself is branchy—though every event is caused by its predecessors, many other events could have resulted from the same initial conditions, and the world chooses its future out of many alternatives. In the microcosm many possible times, velocities, and places are available for any quantum particle to manifest itself; in the macrocosm almost all the damped, driven dynamical systems of matter have strange attractors rather than point attractors, and men and women by choosing each other as mates choose the future genetic constitution of the world. The universe is radically free: determined in its root, or radix, and open in its branches, its ramifications.

The embryonic development and multi-cellular organization of living organisms provide an appealing model for a kind of unity based upon branchy individualism. An animal, vegetable or human body is not a mass of inorganic matter organized and directed by a single central blueprint. The complete code for the whole is in every cell, and though those cells have been specialized into bone, flesh, nerve and organ, they can, as stem cell technology has shown, be persuaded to recover their original pluripotency when their chemical environment is appropriate. A society of conscious persons based on such a model might conceive of its citizens as common offspring of an ancestral human fertile egg, all carrying the full potential of their ancestor. The republic would not be made up of individuals as machine parts valueless in themselves, but rather of individuals who each contain the republic in full. The specialized roles of the citizens would be determined by their own choices, interactions, contracts, and contests. I believe the framers of the U.S. constitution had something like this in mind when they constructed the federal system, invited the states, municipalities, corporations and individuals to emerge and compete, and laid the law of the land open to future amendment.

And one might add that such a model, when applied back to the world's biological ecosystems, might suggest an exciting paradigm-change in our conception of biodiversity. Genetic research increasingly implies that the basic genetic modules and epigenetic repertoire of all extinct species still exist in the genomes of current living species. They are perhaps recoverable by recombinant DNA methods and data-mining of the inconceivably vast genetic archive currently present. The quagga, the aurochs and the mammoth are already being resurrected; other species may follow. An abundance model may eventually be more appropriate for life on earth than one of scarcity and loss,

and such a model, and practice based upon it, may one day replenish the world's biodiversity and feed its people—Jurassic Park to the contrary notwithstanding.

I believe that in some parts of the youth culture in many developed countries—and now, after Tahrir Square, increasingly everywhere—there already exists a sort of pan-human syncretism whose spirit reflects the human epic as Fox and I conceive it. The universal themes of the ancient epics—the hero, the quest, the beast-man, the journey to the underworld, the struggles of kin loyalty, the magic woman, the founding of the city, the sacrifice, and so on—recur in anime, manga, science fiction, *The Lord of the Rings*, Marvel Comics, Bollywood, *The Matrix*, triple-decker fantasy novels, superhero movies, Dungeons and Dragons, novelas, Hong Kong martial arts films, Miyazaki animated features, multiplayer computer games, war reenactments, and the plotting of music video and rock concerts. The young reject the unified, totalitarian, bureaucratic, and statist systems of Mordor and the Matrix. Their vision of world unity is bottom-up, not top-down.

The Monsters' Ball, Lady Gaga's latest extravaganza, is a fine example. I could have chosen Michael Jackson's last concert, but Gaga structures the basic ingredients of Jackson's vision into a more coherent epic form. The concert begins with a quest in darkness, whose naïve but hopeful fellow-travelers beg Gaga, their guide, to show them the way to the Monster Ball. Step by step they pass symbolically through various encounters with beast-men who menace or assist them; they enter the underworld and encounter the world of death, its dangers and its wisdom; and they battle the great chaos-dragon, are engulfed by it but emerge in a final apotheosis which is also the founding of new city, a new *civitas* of the Monster Ball itself. All the elements of world epic are present, set to Gaga's insistent beat.

Gaga deals with the whole issue of *thymos*, of that *amour propre* that Rousseau diagnosed as the flaw and generative irritant of civilization, by a frank and blatant contradiction. She calls her fans "little monsters" and insists that every one of them is a star. That is, we are all exceptional, we are all at the top of the heap. The last (the humble fan) shall be first (the star), and the first last. In one performance in Toronto she allowed a ten-year-old girl, Maria Aragon, whose own cover of Gaga's signature song, *Born This Way*, got 34 million hits on UTube, to share the stage with her in a duet and even upstage her. Maria is Canadian, of Filipino descent, belonging like Barack Obama to the mushrooming demographic of multi-ethnics that made up the population of Zion in *The Matrix*, and her name is that of the mother of God. Gaga proclaims the paradox of human life and of all the products of sexual reproduction, that each of us contains the full human genome, and each of us is radically individual. Aquinas defined angels, as opposed to humans, as being each a

species of its own; but in fact genetics tells us that every creature born of a mother and father is, *in Aquinas' terms*, a unique species too, and at the same time a member of a gigantic multi-celled social organism. But that organism is only healthy if each of us does our own thing, expresses the unique and undetermined agency that the mechanism of sexual recombination endows us with.

The full version of the signature song itself, *Born This Way*, is a powerful and surprisingly well-argued manifesto of Robin Fox's evolutionary civic religion. Gaga, like Fox, rejects the sociopolitical determinism of the social constructionists, insisting that every human being can rise above his or her social constraints. She recognizes that we are "born this way", i.e. that our genetic makeup is determinative of who we are. We are animals: at the opening of the song she calls on the audience to "put your paws up," and theromorphic imagery abounds in the Monster Ball, including the Edenic serpent.

But we are not just animals, but animals that are genetically enabled to play at being animals; and we are freed by this playfulness to be in charge of our fate. She insists that whatever race we are, we are human and that humanity is, in the words of another of Robin Fox's books, *the imperial animal*: "Don't be a drag, just be a queen". We are free to be what we choose to be, and our choice should respect our own particular nature. The song is explicitly religious—"God makes no mistakes"—but God for her can be either "capital H-I-M" or just "him", a girl's most recent lover. Each of us is made perfect in our kind, like Aquinas' angels, and each of us is thus also a monster, a *lusus naturae*, a genetic chimaera. "Who we are" is a new cause in the universe: "We are all born superstars."

We now possess a technology that can express this peculiar conception of a collective that is led by each of its participants: internet, Google, UTube, Facebook, Twitter. In the streets of Islamic capitals today the evolutionary religion is fighting it out with both social-constructionist statist world hegemony on one side, and ancient tribal solidarity on the other. Fox and Gaga define this third new way.

Further Reading

Fox, R., & Tiger, L. 1997. *The imperial animal*. Transaction Publishers.

Frederick Turner Founders Professor of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, was educated at Oxford University. A poet, critic, translator, philosopher, and former editor of *The Kenyon Review*, he has authored 30 books, including *Natural Classicism*, *The Culture of Hope*, *Genesis*, *Hadean Eclogues*, *The New World*, *Shakespeare's Twenty-First Century Economics*, *Paradise*, *Natural Religion*, and now *Two Ghost Poems*.