

VARGAS, ALBERTO I.

*Genealogía del miedo: Un estudio antropológico de la modernidad desde Leonardo Polo*, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, 2017, 237 pp.

We are today in the greatest crisis in history, a crisis that we are incapable of recognizing and which we lack the courage to confront. According to Alberto I. Vargas, this is the inescapable conclusion of the fear introduced into western thought at the beginning of modernity seven-hundred years ago by John Duns Scotus and, especially, William of Ockham. This fear takes a fivefold form: scientism, relativism, skepticism, materialism, and atheism. The root of our modern fear is the voluntary despair, implicit in Scotus and adopted by Ockham, of the power of reason to grasp the real. As such, the despair of reason implies that the human being is not *capax Dei*. Expressing the recurrent theme of this work, Vargas writes that the crisis of our society, of modernity, consists in letting go of God and grasping onto ourselves, rendering us prisoners of a powerful sorrow. Furthermore, this crisis is not simply a situation that modern man finds himself within, but man is himself the crisis. We ourselves are the crisis because we have lost confidence in our capacity to reason. This crisis is not simply intellectual; it is a crisis of the heart—ultimately, an anthropological crisis.

Vargas's thesis is at first glance paradoxical, perhaps simply wrong. Marked as it has been by the power of the mathematical-empirical sciences, modernity seems dramatically to have shown the power of reason to an extent never seen in earlier ages. Certainly, the triumphs of the sciences and their applications in new technologies have dramatically changed our understanding of the world and our engagement with it. Nevertheless, it is precisely this triumph that manifests the crisis that we are. From the outset of the scientifically-formed modern era, we have fallen into *acedia*. Impressed with the power of the sciences to give new results, we have lost faith in reason's capacity to understand nature. That is to say, we look for knowledge that consists in more discoveries but not in understanding of why nature is as it is. Science, which is intended to provide understanding, is founded on its own mythology, according

to Vargas. "Modern science proposes to discover the foundations of nature," he writes. "However, she herself does not know her own foundations, and therefore, immediately and despite her successes, she becomes disoriented and, eventually, desperate and forced to seek the support of a *pseudo-theology*." (p. 122) Since the only permissible object of reason is the behavior of material things, reason is constrained only to the immanent. From the outset the transcendent is excluded and by this the interiority of the human heart is lost.

Here it may be worth noting the response of most physicists to the apparent incomprehensibility of quantum mechanics, whose implications for our conception of matter are paradoxical, if not contradictory. To the puzzled, they say, "Shut up and calculate!" In other words, the ability to calculate results is essential; to understand is secondary. This failure of modern sciences traces back to Descartes, whose methodological doubt constituted *suspicion of truth*. Not only is man not *capax Dei*, he is not even *capax Veritatis*.

The implications of the modern despair of truth reaches far beyond the realm of the sciences. It also affects our religious and social life. Science, which was to constitute a new religion of modernity, has left us with a profound emptiness, which Vargas calls a "post-modern catatonia". After a long citation from Leonardo Polo's *Las organizaciones primarias y las empresas* on mass society and its nihilism, Vargas writes: "Today we all [...] are seeking a solution to the critical situation in which we find ourselves, or better, which *we are*. After many blows, our society is admitting a certain consensus that the available conditions have lost their validity, that the principles that today direct our life and society are unsustainable and incapable of facing the challenges that are constantly evoked within us." (p. 151) Centuries ago Ockham put into question the personal being of man and, with this, his link with God. Uncorrected, this has resulted in our modern weariness, indeed catatonia. "The human spirit is found impoverished, naked, and on the periphery." (p. 154) Having lost or even renounced intellectual access to God, our social connections with other men are frayed to the point that, warns Vargas, Europe and the United State may well fall into civil war or even another catastrophic world war. Certainly, the conditions

remain ripe for the imposition of new totalitarianisms, indeed for self-imposed “interior” totalitarianism.

The dark picture that Vargas paints, especially in his fourth chapter, “Obturation: Disfiguring the future” [in Spanish, “desfigurizando el futuro”] is not inevitable. The solution to our modern illness, to the crisis which we *are*, is anthropological. Following Polo’s call for a renewed anthropology, Alberto Vargas calls for a truly personalist philosophy, an anthropology based on the person and his freedom. The person, argues Vargas, is more than an instantiation of the essence of man; he is “something more”, *además de su esencia*. In other words, we need to recapture the truth that man is a spiritual being, which means that he is free. Modern man needs to regain his freedom. Vargas writes: “If in the First Part we said that the crisis is of fear and lying, now we can add that this is true, but it is even more critical: it is about *despair* and *atheism*. [...] Therefore, we are incapable of recognizing that we are in the greatest crisis in history and likewise, neither have we the courage to confront it.” (210) To accomplish this, it is necessary to follow St. John Paul II’s call, “Be not afraid to receive Christ and to accept his power.” If the crisis we are in—or that we *are*—is to be resolved, if in this crisis which arose seven centuries in the Church ago, we are to find hope, then that hope must be found within the Church.

In his *Genealogía del miedo* Alberto I. Vargas has given us a rich book, which not only provides a provocative introduction to and interpretation of the thought of Leonardo Polo, but also engages a wide range of other thinkers. In particular, the author appeals frequently to the thought of Joseph Ratzinger–Benedict XVI. One senses that Alberto I. Vargas shares Ratzinger’s Augustinian cast of mind. The book is carefully argued and satisfying to the scholar (with this one complaint: I wish that Vargas had resorted more to Hegel’s own works than to Polo’s commentary on them.) It is passionately argued because its thesis is important. May we see more from Alberto I. Vargas’s pen going forward.

Adrian J. Reimers. Holy Cross College (Notre Dame, Indiana)  
a.j.reimers@ gmail.com

