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THE PAPACY AND MODERNITY



ONE OF THE great political dramas in Western civilisation since the early seventeenth century has been the tension between the papacy and modernity. The strictures of many Enlightenment thinkers on subjects ranging from the nature of reason to the meaning of freedom has resulted in a range of intellectual positions with which the papacy is compelled to engage, often from the standpoint of critic. This isn't simply a function of the violence and upheaval that shook Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. It's also the result of the papacy recognising that the political, social and religious culture of modernity is one in which Catholicism is obliged to live, move and have its being. Although pronouncements by some nineteenth-century popes suggested that the church's position towards the modern world was one of intransigence, the reality is rather different.

As Samuel Gregg's short and accessible book *The Modern Papacy* hopes to show, nowhere is this more obvious than in the thought of the previous pope and his successor: John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Gregg's book will interest Catholics and non-Catholics seeking to understand the thought of two men recognised, even by their critics, for their intellectual abilities. It's also a resource for students of politics, philosophy and history curious about the significance of the modern project, especially in its European context, who have little knowledge of the papacy and the church. John Paul and Benedict aren't only Europeans; they are Europeans profoundly marked by Catholicism and the Enlightenment. While their ideas belong to a broader current of thought that stretches back two millennia and beyond, those ideas have been profoundly influenced by their critical engagement with modernity.

RELIGION

Another purpose of this book is to provide readers with a point of comparison for a range of modern political philosophies that emerged after the Enlightenment. Self-described liberals of a variety of positions, for example, may be surprised to learn that the papacy has devoted considerable attention to the origins, nature and ends of human liberty in all its manifestations, underlining in the process that everyone, including liberals, has metaphysical assumptions built into their respective visions of freedom, all of which should be analysed in terms of their rational coherence or otherwise. Self-described conservatives will see some clear parallels but also marked divergences between their approach to modernity and that of the modern papacy, most notably with regard to what John Paul and Benedict have long considered to be the crucial question of modern times: the relationship between faith and reason.

Reason is too often misunderstood. There's a vast difference between belonging to the Cult of Reason, which many people still do, and being a Critical Rationalist, which not enough people are. My mother used to shout "Be reasonable!" whenever she felt thwarted, and, with the benefit of hindsight, I now see her shouts were never good models of reason in action. Many in the modern world are like my mother; they shout "Be reasonable!" at the church but have little understanding of how reason operates as a critical faculty. They just want the church to obey their modern will, which is more non-rational, or perhaps irrational, than they care to admit.

THE PAPACY HAS consistently affirmed what is good about modernity while pointing out its shortcomings. *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888) and *Rerum Novarum* (1891) show the papacy being critical of positivism and socialism while simultaneously affirming a legitimate plurality of political arrangements—thereby diminishing formal support for throne-and-altar arrangements—and integrating Lockean insights into the church's scholastic teaching

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about property. The Pontifical Academy of Sciences was reconstituted in 1936 and charged with attracting the most qualified members in their field, not just Catholics. *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) condemned Communism, *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937) refuted Nazism's racist dogmas and state worship. The 1944 Christmas Message contains a careful analysis of democracy's strengths and liabilities. *Humani Generis* (1950) is remembered for its critique of existentialism, dialectical materialism, idealism and attempts to explain the totality of human existence in terms of evolutionary theory, while allowing Catholics to engage with it as a theory (which it is) rather than a theorem (which it isn't).

A crisis in the church's critical engagement with modernity came about during and after Vatican II. Some wanted any documents to consider modernity theologically: that is, only reaching doctrinal conclusions on the basis of revealed truth. Others wanted any documents to address humanity on its own terms. Paul VI wanted to challenge perceptions that the church and modernity were hopelessly antagonistic. The end result, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), combined an openness to modernity with an insistence that the church had distinctive things to say to it. The constitution affirmed that the natural sciences were legitimately autonomous but not exempt from morality's demands, and lamented the past conflict between faith and science—specifically referring to the Galileo case—but qualified its statements by saying that listening to others doesn't mean uncritically accepting their propositions or failing to point out intellectual or moral errors in their arguments.

By the early 1970s, it was clear Catholics were divided over what this new openness meant. Some saw Vatican II as a betrayal of the faith and a capitulation to modernity. Others began reinterpreting Christian doctrines to conform to modern secular expectations. Inevitably this polarisation politicised both the church's self-understanding and its actions. In 2005, Benedict XVI suggested the church's post-Vatican II difficulties proceeded from inner tensions within modernity itself and an underestimation of the power of sin. Clearly the relationship between the church and modernity was more complex than some participants of Vatican II realised.

John Paul's experience as a Pole forced him to consider what makes modern people capable of such profound evil, along with a more fundamental anthropological question: What is man? The answers produced an awareness of the poverty of Kantian idealism and Marxist materialism, a questioning of much post-Enlightenment philosophy, and a renewed sense that classical and medieval insights have something to say about modern problems. His doctoral thesis, *Faith According to St John of the Cross*, argues that faith must be nourished by love and illuminated by reason; faith alone can't achieve union with God; reason alone

can't access all the characteristics of God found in scripture. His post-doctoral thesis, *On the Possibility of Constructing a Christian Ethic on the Basis of the System of Max Scheler*, argues that Scheler—a phenomenologist formed in Husserl's school—fails to provide a satisfactory basis for Christian ethics, since Scheler argues that morality is grasped through feeling rather than reason. In *Love and Responsibility* (1960), which is about sexual ethics, he translates the commandment to love into the language of philosophical ethics. In *The Acting Person* (1969), he argues that man, in the midst of enormous progress, is losing a truthful understanding of himself, which he traces to modernity's detachment of ethics from anthropology. In *Sign of Contradiction* (1976), he argues that man's encounter with the truth of God is contradicted by "the world", requiring the church to vigorously affirm the truth rather than simply conform to the demands of secularism.

Benedict shares John Paul's experience of living in a Catholic culture subject to Nazi totalitarianism. To be Catholic in Bavaria was to be German in a different way than for, say, Lutheran Prussians. In spite of their many failings, Catholics were more successful than Protestants in opposing Hitler, and Benedict believes the collapse of liberal theology before the juggernaut of Nazi ideology is one of the more instructive lessons in German history. Following his ordination in 1951, he completed his doctorate, *The People and the House of God in St Augustine's Doctrine of the Church*. In his post-doctoral thesis, his attention shifted from Augustine to Bonaventure, which seems odd until one realises Augustine and Bonaventure were both concerned with a theology of history penned in response to particular historical crises; the *City of God* attempts to answer pagan assertions that Christianity facilitated the collapse of the Roman empire; Bonaventure's work attempts to provide an orthodox Catholic response to the historical-theological prophecies of Joachim of Fiore. The longer-term significance of Benedict's study of Bonaventure is its grappling with what are clearly anticipatory medieval forms of the liberation theologies which the papacy confronted in the last decades of the twentieth century. As an Augustinian, he believes human history is transitory and only the City of God lasts forever. He argues that Bonaventure was in fact too tolerant of Joachim, whose attempt to realise "the end of history" within human history is a path which led to modernity's totalitarian movements.

Benedict developed his theology in dialogue with Augustine but tried to conduct this dialogue as a man of today. He found the Thomism of his time "closed in on itself" and "too impersonal", perhaps having in mind the abstract neo-scholasticism that emerged in the wake of *Aeterni Patris* in the nineteenth century. Biblical studies remain at the centre of his theology. He's never been

afraid of modern exegesis but believes Scripture needs to be interpreted through a sense of the unity of the Old and New Testaments as well as an awareness of the unfolding knowledge of church tradition. His book, *Christian Brotherhood* (1960), explores the Christian idea of the universal brotherhood of Christians, and how this ought to be related to internal Christian divisions as well as attitudes towards non-Christians, which he contrasts with secular notions of brotherhood emerging from the Enlightenment, especially Freemasonry and Marxism's radicalisation of those who belong to the brotherhood (the Party's revolutionary core) and those who don't (everyone else). Initially pleased with Vatican II's documents on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, and the nature of the church, *Lumen Gentium*, he ultimately became unimpressed by the Council, whose participants tended to lapse into habits more akin to secular politics, and earlier drafts of *Gaudium et Spes* tended to identify modern progress so strongly with Christian redemption the two seemed indistinguishable. Events after the Council confirmed his view that something had gone wrong with the way the church was addressing modernity. Christianity wasn't taking its truth claims seriously.

In 1966 Benedict assumed a chair in dogmatic theology at Tübingen, at the invitation of Hans Küng, who later became one of his fiercest critics. Two years later Tübingen was engulfed in a tide of late-1960s student radicalism, as modernity seemed to implode around him, with the theological faculties—Catholic and Protestant alike—at the epicentre. He saw this student revolution as a postwar generation regarding Christianity as a mistake and a failure. He was particularly disturbed at how Marxist categories were being transplanted onto Christian concepts. He was shocked by attempts to rationalise state terrorism through the use of pseudo-theological arguments and by blindness to the crimes of Marxist regimes. While at Tübingen he delivered a series of lectures, later published as *Introduction to Christianity*, a popular book which isn't about being for or against Vatican II, or being open or closed to modernity, but what it means to be a believing Christian. In 1969 he moved to the University of Regensburg where he became more involved with other Catholics who believed that, in the post-conciliar period, *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date) had become detached from *ressourcement* (returning to the sources), and who insisted there must be some critical distance between the church and the cultures in which it lives. In 1975 he wrote an essay on moral theology critical of those whose approach to modernity insisted that orthopraxis (right practice) should take precedence over

orthodoxy (right belief), since the two need to be held in a creative tension. This is the path he has attempted to steer ever since.

THE CHURCH HAS always insisted people can arrive at a natural knowledge of God through reason, while simultaneously warning against confusing practical wisdom with esoteric speculation. In 1998, however, John Paul issued *Fides et Ratio*, to clarify the church's teaching on faith and reason, and to draw attention to certain misleading views about reason promoted by modernity. Both John Paul and Benedict believe the sundering of knowledge conferred by faith from the knowledge attained through reason—a sundering associated with modernity—is something the church needs to analyse, correct and explain to those who believe the two realms have nothing in common, and to those who believe the claims of faith somehow threaten the advances made by reason, particularly in the sciences. Until the late medieval period, there was no incompatibility between the two realms of knowledge. Since the late medieval period, Benedict believes Catholics have lost a sense of the relationship between faith and reason. Thereafter, John Paul believes, a separation developed between philosophy and science which has misled many into thinking faith and science are opposed, especially given the way the church handled the Galileo case. The distinction between *ratio* (the empirical realm of what can be done) and *intellectus* (reason that contemplates the deeper strata of being) has been lost and only *ratio* remains. Reason has been reduced, Benedict argues, to solely experimental study, and morality and faith to the purely subjective. The drama of this separation has been played out in Western intellectual history.

The drama embraces modernity's arguments over how truth and freedom are related, which Benedict believes originate in an erroneous conviction that the Enlightenment regarded liberty as the criterion of all other values, when in fact the Enlightenment's concept of liberty has either been badly defined or not defined at all. Another factor, John Paul believes, is the erroneous theories which propose human freedom creates values which enjoy a primacy over truth, to the point where truth becomes a creation of human freedom. Behind such theories are ongoing debates about the relationship between liberty and human nature; some moderns reduce human nature to cultural constants, social conditioning, and psychological impulses; other moderns conceive human beings as the raw material for human activity needing to be transformed and overcome by human

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freedom, which limits and denies what freedom really is. Benedict believes these theories undermine natural law; the traditional way pre-moderns reconciled freedom and truth. The establishment of evolutionary theory as a grand narrative that explains everything leads moderns to believe human beings have the right and duty to construct the world anew in a rational manner. The problem with this view, as Benedict sees it, is that having denied human nature *is* truly rational in more than an instrumental sense, and having reduced reason to the sciences, man himself becomes a product to be shaped rationally and thus subject to the control of others. In such a world there are no moral absolutes and ethical questions are dominated by utilitarianism. The result of detaching freedom from truth is therefore antihuman.

As Europe is the continent where the separation of faith from reason first occurred, where the separation of truth from freedom first occurred, where there have been epic clashes between Catholicism and modernity, and where atheistic humanism has taken root, both John Paul and Benedict have sought to promote the historical and cultural unity of European Christianity: Eastern, Central and Western. John Paul never believed the church needed a *modus vivendi* with Communism in order to survive. Instead, he set about re-engaging the public imagination with what is good about Christianity; with how Catholicism and Orthodoxy adapted the subtle and complex elaborations of Roman–Hellenic law so new peoples could adopt them; with acknowledging a legitimate pluralism that has always existed within a Christendom which crossed national and ethnic boundaries. Benedict’s focus has been more on four layers: remembering “the Socratic difference” inherited from ancient Greece, without which Europe can no longer be Europe; remembering the synthesis mediated by Jesus Christ between Jewish revelation and Greek reason; remembering the civilisation created by legal systems that transcended tribes and nations, church councils, the establishment of universities, the establishment and spread of religious orders, and the circulation of the spiritual life of the church with Rome as the ventricle of the heart; remembering the indispensable contribution made by the spirit of the modern age. Benedict believes Europe can’t reject modernity, as did much of the nineteenth century, as did many Catholics between the two world wars. The church isn’t anti-modern.

Neither John Paul nor Benedict is nostalgic. Their program for Europe is ambitious and open to conversation with those moderns who, for whatever reason, believe European modernity should open itself to the church’s insights; but neither pope entertains utopian illusions about what may be possible. Benedict acknowledges that many secularists of good will struggle with entering into a conversation with the church precisely because they find the Catholic vision of the relationship

between faith and reason incomprehensible. Moreover, Benedict notes the most recent church teachings on politics recognise that for Christians: “it is a question of what is feasible and of getting as close as possible to that which the conscience and reason have recognised as the true good for the individual and society”. Modernity, it seems, creates particular challenges for Christians wishing to do so, despite the fact that—as John Paul and Benedict both believe—the best of modernity is reconcilable with and finds deeper roots in the church.

The scale of their intellectual agenda is such that it cannot help but elicit a range of responses. The immediate question is what type of responses have been generated, from within the church and from outside. The answers are startling and surprising.

IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO do justice here to Gregg’s excellent summary of how the church itself reacted to the agenda set by John Paul and Benedict, through a range of restorationists, accommodationists and liberationists, few of whom fall neatly into established categories—progressive or conservative, modern or pre-modern, religious or secular—since contemporary political language is inadequate when confronting the mind of two popes whose ideas transcend such categories. However, a survey of responses indicates a significant proportion of Catholic intellectuals substantially reject the papal diagnosis of the church’s relationship with modernity and their proposals for how the church ought to approach the modern world: there are the Lefebvrists, who hated modernity more than they loved Rome; there’s Küng, who believes Scripture is paradigm-dependent and refuses to grant any religious institution any authority—even non-coercive moral authority—over its adherents; there’s Rahner, who believes in a “faith instinct” which apparently has little to do with Christian sources and seems to be equated with sheer will operating without or beyond reason; there are the consequentialists and proportionalists whose thought can be construed as a denial of the reality of intrinsic evil, and who seem to imply there are no real or substantial limits to what human beings can do; there are the liberation theologians who comprehend Latin America’s problems in Marxist-structural terms and—to varying degrees—advocate Marxist-like solutions. Reflecting on the promise Marxism once held for some Catholics, Benedict has said unequivocally: “This illusion has vanished.”

Some Catholic intellectuals have embraced, partly or wholly, the program John Paul and Benedict advocate, but with many nuances. By 2000, even those who couldn’t be regarded as dissenting from “orthodox” Catholicism were beginning to question aspects of the church’s post-Vatican II engagement with modernity. Scholars such as Tracey Rowland and Robert Kraynak

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claim *Gaudium et Spes*—and much of the post-Vatican II church—embraced an excessively optimistic vision of modernity and underestimated the degree to which modern culture was antithetical to Catholicism. John Paul’s thought addresses some of these problems; Benedict’s thought is perhaps more cogent. In Rowland’s view, secular ideologies ranging from liberal humanism to Nietzschean self-assertiveness draw deeply upon a view of man implicitly anti-metaphysical and closed to the transcendent. (Catholic intellectuals who had been aware of this problem weren’t invited to attend Vatican II.) Also Rowland finds a “terminological looseness” about the way *Gaudium et Spes* uses phrases such as “modern world” and *aggiornamento* and even John Paul’s use of the term “modernity” is almost always ambiguous and depends on what he intended to convey in a particular address or document. Benedict’s mind is more consistent. In 1969 he even described *Gaudium et Spes* as embodying “a downright Pelagian terminology”. Kraynak questions John Paul’s extensive use of the language of rights and endorsement of democracy, which he believes originates in the problematic way many Catholics engage with Kantian anthropology.

Looking outside the church, and confining ourselves to Western intellectual circles, the church’s approach to modernity has been largely rejected by what might be called European and American progressives who recognise that the thoughts of John Paul and Benedict challenge the rationale of secular liberationist programs associated with the student radicalism of the late 1960s, especially when it comes to progressive views of sexual morality, the content of progress, and the character and ends of the sciences. When combined with many progressives’ embrace of utilitarianism—especially when assessing the morality of intentional abortion, euthanasia and various new technologies—coupled with an often negative assessment of Christianity generally, Western progressives remain largely closed to papal efforts to open up discussion about the path of Western civilisation. This became more evident during the 2003–2004 debate over whether the preamble to the European constitutional treaty should include a specific reference to Europe’s Christian heritage. The fact that the original draft referenced the Roman–Hellenic contribution and the Enlightenment but excluded any reference to Christianity suggests that much of Western Europe’s political leadership is at best indifferent to Christianity’s specific contribution to Europe’s identity or adheres to a distinctly anti-Christian outlook. The point was made more radically when the European Parliament rejected Italy’s nomination as Commissioner for Justice because he openly stated he believed and accepted Catholic teaching.

Few European conservative intellectuals have engaged with the metaphysical and civilisational questions John

Paul and Benedict pose. With the exception of Robert Spaemann, Germany’s leading postwar conservative philosopher, and an orthodox and theologically informed Catholic, a more common trend among conservative philosophers is a general scepticism towards any political or theological “grand narrative” and an attachment to the wisdom of tradition rather than the knowledge embodied in specific metaphysical claims. Complicating matters, many conservatives are of the same mind as progressives when it comes to controversial questions such as abortion, as some conservatives have embraced the utilitarian consensus prevailing throughout Europe on a range of moral issues.

What is most revealing about secular reactions to the papal approach to modernity is how they don’t fit typical secular progressive–conservative divisions. In fact, those intellectuals who are receptive to papal ideas are far more eclectic than most other Western thinkers and don’t always conform to expectations. Two secular European intellectuals—the progressive Jürgen Habermas and the conservative Marcello Pera—typify this reaction. Given Habermas’s milieu, one might assume only polite antagonism would exist between his thought and the questions John Paul and Benedict pose to modernity; however, Habermas’s thought is more complex than simply rearticulating Marxist conventionalities; he’s deeply critical of the post-Enlightenment dominance of instrumental reason; he believes if the secular state maintains a neutral stance towards universalising worldviews then the state can’t act as an agent in universalising the secularist worldview; he’s said secularised citizens shouldn’t deny that religious understandings of reality have tremendous power to express truth. Pera is a Popperian who criticises the establishment of ethical, intellectual and cultural relativism as the modern secular orthodoxy (a relativism that has also become apparent, to him, in the work of some theologians too). Pera argues that the resistance to and condemnation of such trends by John Paul and Benedict isn’t an instance of religious fundamentalism but rather an affirmation of what the church teaches to be the truth knowable through faith and reason.

It’s clear the traditional division in the post-1789 West—between the self-consciously religious and the self-consciously secular—has been replaced by a more fluid paradigm. It’s equally clear John Paul and Benedict have changed the intellectual terrain for the encounter between Catholicism and modernity, the implications of which continue to be played out in Western intellectual and political culture.

JOHAN PAUL IDENTIFIES Descartes’s maxim *cogito, ergo sum* as at the core of the revolution wrought by the Enlightenment. Descartes, he wrote, marks the decisive abandonment of what philosophy had hitherto been, particularly in the philosophy of Aquinas.

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Whereas pre-Enlightenment thought regards God as a fully self-sufficient being—and the necessary ground of all creation including man—now God is reduced to an element of human consciousness. This elevates man as the one who will decide what is good and bad, as if there is no God, which has become a common factor in ideologies of evil, including Marxism and Nazism. His comments aren't primarily negative though. He likens the church's encounter with modernity to Paul speaking to the Athenian philosophers in the Areopagus; they listened to him; some of them even wanted to hear more of what he had to say. "It is striking," John Paul wrote in *Memory and Identity* (2005), not long before he died, "how often the logic of Enlightenment thought led to a profound rediscovery of the truths contained in the Gospel." In a way, he commented, the documents of Vatican II reflected an attempt to return the Enlightenment project to its cultural and intellectual foundations in Christianity. This is an important reminder that the church gave birth to the Enlightenment and—if properly understood—the Enlightenment isn't against the church.

In 2006 Benedict gave an address at Regensburg where comments he made about Islam were widely reported out of context; however, the real subject of the address wasn't reported. It was about religion's relationship with reason and the respective challenges this created for believers and non-believers living in the context of modernity. While much of Benedict's analysis parallels John Paul's *Memory and Identity*, the mixture of theological, philosophical and historical reflection is different. Benedict stresses how Christianity reflects a *rapprochement* between "the Biblical understanding of faith in God" and "what is Greek in the best sense of the word". The Gospel of John begins by modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis by stating: "In the beginning was the *logos*." As *logos* means both "word" and "reason", this synthesis is, he argues, an inseparable part of Western identity and distinguishes the Western from other civilisations. Much of the drama of Western history can be understood as periods where Christianity's distinctive view of God as *logos* is either affirmed or sundered. One sundering occurred not during the Enlightenment but in the late Middle Ages with the emergence of forms of voluntarism: the idea that God isn't *logos* or even rational but simply Will. The greatest problem emerges with what Benedict calls the "dehellenisation" of Christianity, which first occurred with the Reformation, then recurred with the liberal theologies—both Catholic and Protestant—of the nineteenth century.

In his 2006 Christmas address Benedict revisited his point about the dialogue between faith and reason while underlining his Regensburg address's true significance

for Islam. The church, he said, has long been engaged in a critical and often difficult conversation with the post-Enlightenment world. For all its tensions, however, this conversation has never been definitively broken off, even at the worst moments of secular or religious intolerance. Benedict then commented: "the Muslim world today is finding itself faced with an urgent task ... very similar to the one that has been imposed upon Christians since the Enlightenment ... The Islamic world, with its own tradition, faces an immense task of finding the appropriate solutions in this regard." Benedict appeared to be presenting the Catholicism–modernity discussion as one the Islamic world could observe and—if its internal dynamics permitted—replicate in different areas. At the same time, Benedict believes an even greater challenge faces the self-consciously secular mind. "Secular reason," he said, "is unable to enter into a true dialogue with the religions." The cause, he notes, is simple: "It remains closed to the question of God, and this will end by leading to the clash of cultures."

John Paul and Benedict are convinced the encounter between the church and post-Enlightenment intellectual currents is a perpetual conversation. Both popes believe, as a matter of faith and reason, that the church will continue its march through history until the true end of history: Christ's second coming. Neither pope believes that any Enlightenment stream of thought is likely to disappear in the future. The turn to modernity, both believe, marks something new in human history. Though sharing their predecessors' varying degrees of scepticism about aspects of modernity, neither dismisses the post-Enlightenment world as hopelessly irremediable or irrevocably committed to a hostile view of the church. To this extent, the papacies of John Paul and Benedict have succeeded in shifting the parameters of the Catholicism–modernity discussion in a manner similar to the way in which the Galileo case changed the same conversation in the early seventeenth century. Just as Galileo didn't reject the faith, neither John Paul nor Benedict regard modernity as something to be disdained let alone dismantled. They are nonetheless convinced the post-Enlightenment world is incomprehensible without an appreciation of the Christian civilisation from which the Enlightenment emerged. The moment the papacy ceases to explore these matters—or begins, as Benedict writes, to present a vision of Jesus Christ as someone who "demands nothing, never scolds, who accepts everyone and everything, who no longer does anything but affirm us"—it will have nothing distinctive to say. The loss would be everyone's.

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