

The Relevance of Zubiri

Editorial

The recent terrorist bombings in Madrid (March, 2004) demonstrate that the world remains a dangerous place, one in which a small group of dedicated fanatics can leverage their political power far from home by means of attacks on innocent civilians. How is the thought of Xavier Zubiri relevant to such a world?

As we have discussed before in these pages, the terrorists are unlikely ever to read Zubiri. Nonetheless, Zubiri's thought addresses their actions in important ways. The terrorists wield power only because of a fundamental weakness at the heart of the civilization they attack, a civilization which doubts the truth and authenticity of its roots. Already in the 1920s and 1930s Zubiri sensed this malaise of the occidental world, which indeed nearly capitulated to Nazism and Communism. After a brutal World War and an epochal cold war struggle the West emerged triumphant, but now lies seemingly weaker than before, turned in upon itself, spiritually drained, preoccupied with material gratification, and content with its accomplishments in science and the concomitant domination of nature. Zubiri speaks to all of this, and we may identify four key areas in which his philosophy is of the greatest importance, and uniquely situated to confront the problems our civilization now faces:

1. Metaphysical and theological thought ultimately drives political thought; therefore just and viable political systems must be based on a solid metaphysical and theological foundation, such as Zubiri provides.
2. From Zubiri's philosophy it is possible to derive political theory basics, if not particular systems.
3. The notion of personal freedom and personal causality is based in Zubiri's metaphysics, and thus must appear in any just political system.
4. Zubiri's theory of the human person as a different kind of reality affects all aspects of morality and thus the obligations of sovereignty at all levels.

First, we observe that political thought and thus political systems have always been driven by metaphysical and theological thought. Whether one considers older or newer political theories, the conclusion is the same. Older theories, based on such concepts as the Divine Right of Kings, or the divination of rulers, common in ancient Egypt and even in the Roman Empire, illustrate the importance of theology and religion in legitimizing rulers (though not necessarily their ascent to power). More modern theories rely less on theology and religion and more on philosophy and quasi-religious or surrogate religious thought, much of it of dubious quality but sufficient to achieve the purpose. This is obvious in political systems such as Nazism (Nietzsche) or communism (Marx, Hegel). Even nominally secular states, such as the United States, have

founding documents grounded in religious belief, mixed with philosophy (Locke). Of course, some states, notably those in the Islamic world, have never accepted the idea of separation of church and state and hence still ground their rule squarely on religious notions.

Because of the profundity and incisiveness of Zubiri's philosophy, which penetrates one layer deeper than others, and also because it is grounded in human experience and knowing, it can speak to the modern secular world, as Zubiri intended it to do, and provide the solid ground needed for rebuilding and refurbishing civilization. And this brings us to the second point, that it is possible to derive political theory basics from Zubiri's thought. An article along these lines appeared in the last issue of the *Review*, which discussed the reality of political systems utilizing Zubiri's notion of postulated reality. We hope to publish more research in this area in the future. Zubiri did not himself try to depict the ideal state, as did many of his illustrious predecessors such as Plato, and Aristotle. But he did create the framework within which just and viable ideas of state and statecraft can emerge.

An essential part of this framework is his notion of the human person, both with respect to causality and with respect to reality. Zubiri emphasized that human beings, as reality conscious, are a different *kind* of reality than all other things. They therefore must be treated differently than these other things with respect to political and economic matters. And this applies to the full spectrum of players in the political arena, from animal rights activists trying to equate man to other animals and even plants, through those seeking to eliminate the unwanted or unfit for expediency sake, up to the dictator-thugs that seem to dominate power in many parts of the world. Political and economic systems must put the human person first, while recognizing of course the realities imposed by physical laws, geography, and other factors. More concretely, Zubiri has discerned that one aspect of the uniqueness of humans is their intimate knowledge of themselves, which stems from the fact that they are *substances* rather than *substantivities* like the rest of things. This grounds causality in them, which thus becomes the basis for moral law, and hence the moral foundation for political systems and states.

The challenge that lies before us is to further develop these ideas, and make the world at large aware of the power of Zubiri's thought to address its fundamental problems, problems which have been brought into sharp relief by the terrorist activities of 2001 and now 2004, but which have long weighed down upon our civilization. This will not stop the terrorists in the short term; but in the long term, when they realize the underlying strength of what they are fighting, they will discern that this is a contest they cannot win.

Thomas B. Fowler