

A Populism of the Spirit

By: SHIMON COWEN

Introduction

The word “populism” has been used to describe a variety of recent movements around the world, from Russia to Western Europe to the Anglosphere. Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian social philosopher whose writing has a strongly Russian cast, and for that reason may not be applicable without qualification to populism in other parts of the world, expresses a revolt against an imperious global liberalism that (until the election of Trump at least) has proceeded from the United States of America.

There is much talk about a rebellion against “elites”: whether in the media, politics and industry, bureaucracy, the official arts and certainly in the universities and the professions that were ideologically educated by the culture of the universities. I find it, however, more fruitful to speak of an *ideology* that has captured the elites rather than the phenomenon of elites, or centers of influence, *per se*. This ideology has, I would argue, eclipsed the human spirit or soul, with its moral compass and religious teaching that have guided civilization as we know it. Elites, with a world-outlook that embraced the human spirit and its tradition, would not have brought us to this.

At the same time, there is something significant in the populist skepticism if not hostility towards the elites *as* elites. “Populism” proceeds from, or is driven by, “grass roots,” ordinary people. Ordinary people are by nature humbler than the elite personnel, who are occupationally prone to hubris whether by virtue of intellectual prowess or power. In ordinary people, a residual humility—the consciousness that they are ordinary and not “tall poppies”—has allowed the soul or spirit to live

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with much better health than in the hubris-prone zones of the elites.¹ The essential soul or spiritual knowledge is that it has a Creator and a purpose much greater than the human being. From the soul (the likeness of G-d in the human being), and its natural resonance with its Creator, well up the values, which the populist revolt seeks to restore.

What is stated here is a spiritual reading of the significance and potential of the populist revolt. It does not claim that populist movements necessarily grasp themselves in this way. Populism may also have many other rough and objectionable manifestations. But in this essay I would like to manifest the latent and potential spiritual content and affinity in this populist insurrection. I call this potential “a populism of the spirit.”

The ideology against which populism rebels I have elsewhere called “hedonistic materialism.”² It is based upon a model of the human being as a solely psychophysical being—that is to say, without a soul—with a variety of bodily and psychic impulses and interests, the fulfillment of which is to be brought about as a matter of “rights.” These interests are largely ones having to do with pleasure and pain and the ideology employs a utilitarian calculus intended to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. All this is carried out under a much-vaunted rubric of “compassion,” but this compassion in fact overruns the traditional moral boundaries set by the moral review of the human soul, and the religious tradition that expresses it.

The code of universal ethics, which is found at the root of the great world religions and was renewed to all humanity at Mount Sinai, is known as the Noahide laws. Through the conduct of these laws, the human being “imitates” G-d, since Divine attributes translate into these forms of ethical conduct. I have written about these laws at length in my book *The Theory and Practice of Universal Ethics—the Noahide Laws*.³ There are seven major Noahide laws and I have sought to correlate them in this essay with the major grievances and aspirations of the populist revolt—seen in its spiritual light—as follows.

The first object of grievance of the populist revolt is the atomization of the family and the destruction of its constituent member identities: male and female, husband and wife, parent and child. This is cured and

¹ Of course, this does not mean that intellectuals, leaders and professionals are incapable of humility. Indeed, precisely that is demanded of them to be ultimately ethically *true* intellectuals, leaders and professionals. Humility and skills are *conjoint* requirements for them.

² S. D. Cowen, *Politics and Universal Ethics*, Ballan: Connor Court Publishing, 2011. See particularly Chapter 1.

³ New York: Institute for Judaism and Civilization, 2014.

the human being is actualized in the fullness of particular identity and relationships through the Noahide law of sexuality. This provides for the traditional, heterosexual family with clear identities of male and female, husband and wife, parent and child, which house the sacred. The second object of grievance of the populist revolt is the aggressive secularization and repression of the culture of faith as the moral anchor of society and the individual. Three Noahide laws have here been repressed, and the restoration reconnects society with the human spirit and with G-d. They are the belief in G-d (or prohibition of idolatry), the respect for G-d (or prohibition of blasphemy) and the Noahide law of justice, which requires not only standards of objectivity and impartiality for law enforcement, but also keeps law in line with its Noahide parameters. The third grievance has to do with the ruling quality of “indifference,” in regard to economic and technological trends, to their human impact on individuals. Here the Noahide law of theft and material harm insists that economic relationships are essentially human relationships and must forever and constantly be so regarded. The fourth grievance is against a “mythic” environmentalism expressed in doctrines of climate change that seem to reverse the traditional relationship of nature to the human being as something that can serve the human. This is corrected by the Noahide law relating to the treatment of nature which balances the legitimate expectation of the human being from nature, with constraints against wanton cruelty or waste. The fifth grievance is the indifference of hedonistic materialism towards the protection and value of life, which indifferently kills the vulnerable (abortion on demand and euthanasia) and fails to properly defend viable life against violence. This is corrected by the Noahide law on killing, which insists on both the protection of vulnerable life and the defense of viable life.⁴

The Restoration of the Family

The populist revolt resents the attempt of hedonistic materialism—the ideology of the liberal staffing of the elites—to rework human identity, as this is traditionally articulated in the fundamental unit of society, the family. Universal ethics, expressed in the Noahide laws, distinguishes male and female based on their distinct physiologies and from these

⁴ The protection of life is the great boundary of civilization. It is the boundary around nation states, defining their sovereignty and integrity; it is also the boundary around the human being. We may not eliminate the boundary.

grow, or should grow, masculine and feminine personae or identities.⁵ Roles within the family are predicated upon these biological distinctions. The most basic of them is the concept of heterosexual marriage, the alone sanctioned sexual relationship, fortified by legal commitments and responsibilities. This relationship in turn allows children to be born, who have biological and thereby also full personal identity with their parents: these are my parents; this is our child. The family thereby also creates a sequence of generations, both caring and educative. Parents care for and educate their children, and in turn children in some significant measure care for and respect their parents. The law of valid sexual union articulates the individual within the crystal of the family: as male or female, husband or wife, parent or child.

This ideology of hedonistic materialism wants to dissolve the crystal of the family and thereby the most basic human identities. It starts by negating the fact of biological difference between male and female as something that predicates identities of masculinity and femininity. In fact, it negates masculinity and femininity as concepts, and buttresses this by allowing individuals to assign their own sexual identities and to follow this through with the surgical sexual reconstruction of their bodies, even for children who wish it. Secondly it endorses all kinds of sexual unions other than heterosexual ones: homosexual unions, and in some countries incestuous and bestial unions. With this go also the distinction of husband and wife. It then dissolves the relationship of parent and child. For homosexual humans who cannot reproduce, children are “commissioned” through artificial reproductive technologies, never to be raised by both their biological parents. Father and mother, parent and child are dissolved. Even where heterosexual relationships exist, the ideology removes the formal bonds of marriage, elevating simple cohabitation, in which no act of commitment or mutual designation has been made, to a status, identical with marriage, in terms of social benefits and rights. Every one of these principles is at variance with the prescriptions in universal ethics of the Creator of the human being.

A manifesto of traditional and eternal values, therefore, affirms first and foremost the complementarity of male and female, and the sole legitimate sexual union as a heterosexual one. With both moral clarity and compassion, it declares homosexuality and forms of gender dysphoria as irregularities and illnesses for which medical, psychological and spiritual counsel may be needed. It is integral to the created identity and spiritual

⁵ There is also the biological hermaphrodite, for which distinct sexual ethics apply within the Noahide code.

purpose of the human being to be, as he or she was created, masculine or feminine. The sexual union of male and female is the sole sanctioned union. It may not be incestuous and it requires the formal commitment of marriage. Parents and children are defined through a biological relationship and from the generational relationship derive both obligations and entitlements from one another. Lawful sexuality and the family produced by it is the basic prism of human identity, the vessel into which the other ethical laws of society contribute.

Once a child has been born into a family, in which it has and can verify its biological parents, mother and father, they continue to need their parents for nurture and moral and guidance, an education in which a mother and father have unique and complementary roles. The idea of making children and youths into autonomous beings before they have completed their education is also part of an ideology, which breaks up the organic unit of the family that raises the child in its values. The ideology of hedonistic materialism does this by sexualizing children and by incorporating into educational curriculum the sense of an entitlement to childhood sexual activity. Beyond this it models “sexual diversity” to children at an age (12 years) when 25% of children who would overwhelmingly settle into heterosexual roles, have as yet unformed sexual identity. It seeks thereby to lock them into “diverse sexualities,” at a time of high psycho-developmental vulnerability. It encourages children to undergo surgical sex-reassignment should they want it. Its outrage at pedophilia is not that sexual acts were performed with young children, for it encourages sexuality between children of the same age (often with psychologically and medically harmful consequences). Rather it is disturbed solely by the asymmetry of the pedophile relationship, where an adult takes advantage of a child. It upholds the goal of the equal and autonomous pleasure centers, and adults and children are not equal. The Greens in Australia further want to turn children of 16 into voters. This is well before their secondary education is complete. But it is significant that 16 is the age of consent to sexual liaisons with any person. “Maturity” as a sexual pleasure center confers for the Greens essential citizenship.

The culture of feminism, promoted by hedonistic materialism, is not about a very worthy topic—the respect due to women, as to men, seen in matters such as equal pay for equal work. Rather, it is about their intersubstitutability for men in all roles, starting from the family, and proceeding through every domain of society. Its goal is not to bring about their unique strengths *per se*, but to make them identical to men. Through this it denigrates and denatures qualities of femininity, a change that has played a significant role in extraordinarily high divorce rate and

the breakup of the family. This is stated without whitewashing male domestic violence or other failures. The notion furthermore, that they should work as much as men do, and that care-giver roles of men and women are interchangeable leads next to a concept of universal child-care outside the home. This is also stated without ignoring the fact that economic pressures have also increasingly driven women to work. Here the objection is not to the notion that a woman may work, and indeed in traditional cultures women have been major workers and providers. Rather the point is that this should not come through a sacrifice of femininity—of the special nurture and care of their families and children—which women uniquely possess by the endowment of their Creator. If working mothers need to find care outside their home, it is no more than an economic necessity, which should be minimized. It is not an ideal that should be stretched to the maximum.

One of the areas of greatest concern for contemporary society is the phenomenon of aging and the care for the aged. In traditional societies, aged parents were largely cared for by their own adult children, whether in the children's homes or in proximity to them. One of the strongest reasons to fortify the family is its capacity to care (or contribute in a variety of ways to the care) for aged parents. This is another reason that women should not be driven into the full-time work force: their caring capacity extends not only to their children but also to their parents and parents-in-law. Needless, to say, broken families are even more disadvantaged in the care that they can show for parents. The intact family, in which the wife and mother has a larger measure of work-free time, is good for the aged. So too, children who have been raised with a strong and unified family ethic will provide not only physical, but also psychological and spiritual sustenance to their aged parents. An elderly parent—even if for medical reasons, he or she has been placed in a nursing home—still needs to participate in a multi-generational context.

The breakdown of family is positively correlated with poverty. Family economies are lost and more units must be supported. Contemporary social welfare policy tends to put cohabiting couples on a par with married ones. Cohabiting relationships break up at a significantly higher rate than do married ones, and the consequences for the children of those relationships and the instability are felt even without or prior to breakup. That the State channels welfare equally to cohabiting units and married ones only serves to compound the instability. People do not have to marry to have the benefits, and this encourages unstable frameworks for raising children. Government policy should motivate people towards formal marriage. The full provision of welfare to unstable human relationships entrenches and encourages them.

Health in society is also related to the family. A human being's mental health—increasingly a problem in our society, aggravated by atomization of the family—and his or her physical health is significantly assisted by a strong family household. Higher mortality and morbidity is associated with the breakdown of the family. A drug culture feeds on disintegrated families. The combined cost of welfare and health in our society is a vast one, and it is directly related to the stability of families, aside from the actual suffering of individuals.

Community is an outgrowth of the family. It is spontaneously formed by the affinity of families with one another based on religion, culture and other values primarily fostered within the family. Where the family is atomized, so tends also to be community. Government programs become the universal Ersatz of the family, supportive and nurturing roles, its economic and health-stabilizing functions. That is why the Greens platform is full of Government programs: its world-view having atomized the unit that supports the individual and builds community, there remains only administered, bureaucratic welfare and care. The abstract, bureaucratically administered society does not replace family or community, but rather compounds it. Governments have found that community and faith-based organizations are the most efficient channels for welfare provision, and for that reason have sought to channel welfare funding through them. But for that one must have a community and its faith- or values basis.

Housing is also a basic human need. The breakdown of the family only compounds a crisis in housing, for more individuals need to be housed as a result of family breakup. Moreover, the phenomenon of crisis in accommodation, namely where individuals become homeless for a variety of social and mental-health reasons, be it drugs, psychological ill-health, family abuse and so forth is also traceable often to family dysfunction and disintegration. The stable, traditional family is itself the best preventative against homelessness or housing crisis. After that comes the caring community, which can find accommodation for its members when they are in crisis. But where the family falters so does the community. Again, the State must step in and abstractly—and often inefficiently—seek to respond to what at root is a social and ultimately familial problem. The family grows into community—the “village” which, according to an African proverb it takes to raise the child—for the family is the seat of primary culture and transmission of values, and seeks its like in the community. The universal Noahide law that grants sole legitimacy to a heterosexual union fortified by the commitment of marriage is the foundation of family and the aggregation of families into community. The “sexual revolution” has first and foremost worked to

dissolve the family, with its ultimate casualty—the individual who found identity and was nested within it. The family (and community) is replaced—at tremendous economic and human cost—with the bureaucratic provision of “human services”: the atomization of the family replicates itself in the abstraction of administered care.

Religion and the Culture of Community

The “correctness” of political correctness comes from the authority of an ideology that has sought to establish itself against the sources of traditional morality: belief in G-d and the morality associated with religious belief. Above all, the ideology of hedonistic materialism is aggressively secularist. The voices of this materialistic and anti-spiritual ideology come mostly from the universities and the media and also from the professions educated by the universities in hedonistic materialism. There is a constant derision of traditional religion. The most basic need and entitlement of a human being, who is ultimately and fundamentally a spiritual being,⁶ is to receive nurture and education in belief in G-d. This spiritual literacy includes knowledge of the core ethical religion tradition, that of the Noahide laws at the root of the world religions. Without an experiential education in belief and the morality that has been transmitted to us by G-d, morally anything becomes possible.⁷ Populism—the voice and conscience of the ordinary person—values belief in G-d and religion in general. It resents the attempt to dismantle spiritual literacy in education and public life. The first (if we may so conceptually order it) of the Noahide laws is the belief in G-d, or at least the repudiation of idolatry, of which hedonistic materialism is a variety.

Signally, the Greens, in Australia, are opposed to public funding for private (which means, largely religious) schools. Their argument, that the taxpayer should not have to fund religious education, overlooks the fact that some 70% of Australians in a recent census stated a religious affiliation. They are the tax-payers and for them religion is of value. The review of the National (Educational) Curriculum in Australia clearly stated a need to nurture spirituality. However, this has been perversely interpreted as a comparative study *of* spirituality, not an education *in* spiritual-

⁶ See Viktor E. Frankl, “The Science of the Soul” (transl. S. D. Cowen), *Journal of Judaism and Civilization*, Vol. 11 (2016).

⁷ In the famous words of G. K. Chesterton, “When men choose not to believe in G-d, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.”

ity. Consequently, as the Government of Victoria excluded special religious instruction of the various faiths from their very small (one-hourly) weekly optional allotment from school hours in Government schools, it introduced a compulsory strand to curriculum, which studies world faiths relativistically and includes with them secular humanism. This means that a child is not taught and strengthened in his or her family's or personal belief—i.e., in the *act* of belief. Instead it is made into a formal and academic study that relativizes world religions. This concept of “General Religious Education” comes from Sweden, one of the most atheistic societies in the world. Its real rationale is that religion is a “problem” that can be solved only by relativizing it. Moreover, the subject includes in its smorgasbord of beliefs that of secular humanism, which is non-belief in G-d. That means it is teaching children that belief is as good as non-belief. Whatever you call this, it is not a *religious* education. This negates the commitments of successive Governments, and most recently the Review of the National Curriculum, to nurture students' spirituality. This spiritual need—and its active deprivation through an ideology entrenched in bureaucratic elites—touches the very soul of our civilization.

On the individual level, the dismantling of a religious education—which is of greater urgency than ever before, since faith is less and less drawn from family and community in an Internet-saturated environment—has the consequence of deconstructing personal conscience. The child no longer situates values in the context of *belief*, and therefore does not internalize values in conscience.⁸ There is no internal authority, which only belief can establish as distinct from relativistic proposals of intellect. All that could motivate a child to pay for a ticket on a public transport system is the fear of being caught by an inspector—not personal conscience.

The exclusion of religious education in public schools and ultimately through relativism and the neutralization of religious belief (aside from the constant derision of religion in the media and universities) plays itself out in the undermining of public and personal morality. The preamble to the Australian Constitution uses the words “Humbly relying on the blessing of Al-mighty G-d.” American currency has on it the words “In G-d we trust.” This *default* position or belief is the foundation of the morality that comes with it. The attempt to shake, relativize and remove this foundation of society has the gravest consequences. You cannot

⁸ See S. D. Cowen “An education in a shared ethic,” *Interface*, Vols. 4-5.

have it both ways, because the moralities predicated upon a belief in G-d and upon non-belief in G-d can become diametrically opposed. No problem to religious values is posed by constitutional doctrines of the separation of religion and state whether in Australia, in the US or elsewhere. All this doctrine requires is that no specific religion become the official religion of the state, and that its adherents can become office holders. Nowhere, however, does it imply that the common or shared beliefs of many religious groups cannot operate in public policy. The Noahide law setting forth belief in G-d (and prohibiting idolatry) needs to have basic expression in public life, and its starting point is education for all.

A further Noahide—universal—ethical law calls for the respect of G-d and thereby also of religion. This is also couched as a prohibition of blasphemy. Populism revolts against the elite's—the media's, university's, bureaucracy's and professions'—derision of religion. This is something carried out especially relentlessly by the media. The recent scandals relating to child sexual abuse in schools were pursued with almost exclusive attention to religious schools. The animus was at least as much against religion as against child abuse itself, which unfortunately occurred in schools across the spectrum. More recently, an invidious bill of the Victorian Government was defeated, which proposed to force religious schools to accept staff with values contrary to the ethos of the school. This Government was also successfully lobbied by an anti-religious group to exclude the optional special religious education hour from school hours, which we have mentioned above. The animus in all this is not indifference, but hostility to religious education and to religion in general.

“Multiculturalism” is a policy instrument of hedonistic materialism, which under the guise of preserving traditional cultures in their plurality, in fact works to destroy their organic structures and traditional values. The Greens state this quite clearly in their policy platform. It will accept the expression of different cultures only within the framework of “universally accepted human rights.” The ethics of traditional cultures are overwhelmingly opposed to same-sex marriage and to abortion on demand, and would like to see religious instruction made available to their children in Government Schools. All of these the Greens suppress as falling outside their categories of “universally accepted human rights.” Thus, multiculturalism seeks not to nourish the common denominator values of traditional cultures, but to add them to an armory of centrifugal particular interests. The members of cultural groups are individuals, just as indigenous peoples and women are individuals, who must be celebrated for their disparateness. Let the person be what he or she wants,

so long as it is uncoupled from traditional morality. Instead of seeking the centripetal common values—and common obligations—of traditional cultures, it seeks the centrifugality of individuals questing gratification of their own particular interests. Multiculturalism thereby actually atomizes traditional cultures, bringing their adherents into a universe of individual human monads seeking satisfaction of their private material interests. This is a deeply materialist philosophy: in the bodies and psyches of individuals one does indeed find great different interests. In their souls, however, one finds commonality, the imaging of the Divine and universal ethics. By definition, hedonistic materialism is not interested in the latter.

Not only does the populist revolt miss, and want to restore, G-d to our culture; it also resents the derision of religion in the public square. The Noahide law mandating respect for G-d, under a general rubric of a prohibition of blasphemy, is related also to the way in which religious institutions are treated by society. Religious institutions have always been privileged in moral societies. They have been non-taxable, donations to them have been tax-deductible and their students have been exempt from military service. Why is this so? It is because religious tradition is the guardian of ultimate social and personal values. It preserves the moral framework of society. Religious institutions are beyond society's mundane workings, but they are simultaneously the most comprehensive dimension within which social life proceeds. For this reason, they were revered.

We see now how religion functions as the ultimate guardian of moral tradition in our own society. In times when the most basic values—such as the structure of the family and the protection of life, whether against abortion or euthanasia—are being attacked, and generally by the liberal-relativistic media and the universities, it is *religious* bodies that are the primary source of resistance to these moves. It is religious bodies that know and remember and remind what the key and core values of the universal tradition are. Hence the attempts of radical-liberal and hedonistic-materialistic elites to strike at religious education, to remove protection from religious institutions and to apply all kinds of coercion to religious bodies, are essentially related to blasphemy. The attack on religion is blasphemy, and in the words of an English Chief Justice in 1675, “the allegation that religion is a cheat tends to the dissolution of all Government.” The populist revolt wants to restore respect for religion and its institutions.

Another of the Noahide laws also requires knowledge and respect for G-d and the ethics of religious tradition. This is the Noahide law of justice. Our society is supervised by a system of courts and judges. The

function of a justice system under Noahide law is to supervise society's conduct in accordance with Noahide law and all positive law (i.e., practical social regulation) consistent with it. A judge must be beholden to G-d and to the Noahide laws. One of the greatest concerns of the present time is the personal belief systems of judges. Since they are not elected and are not recallable, except under the most unusual circumstances, and can influence the interpretation and application of law, it is essential that judges first and foremost be beholden to the laws of G-d, that is to say to universal ethics. A former Chief Justice of Australia, the Honourable Murray Gleeson has made important statements to this effect. For it is universal ethics, the laws of G-d, that define the outer perimeter of the law. Judges who give validity to same-sex marriage and abortion on demand—whether or not these have been previously enacted by Parliamentary statute—violate the Noahide law of justice.⁹

One of the greatest crises of our justice system today is the growing incidence of crime, primarily associated with drugs, and family and social breakdown. We live in a time of unprecedented youth disaffection, de-

⁹ A former Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, the Hon Murray Gleeson AC writes: "The idea of a level of justice over and above the positive law is widely accepted, but its practical implementation requires care. The enforcement of the law by courts is subject to an obligation of legitimacy. The law cannot rise above its source. The authority of judges cannot rise above the Constitution pursuant to which they are appointed. Problems in this regard come up from time to time. For example, in Fiji, to take a country in our region, as a result of activities in recent years, judges had to decide whether they would continue to sit in the courts and implement the law—and if so, what law? This was a society in which citizens were complaining that authority had been usurped. The judiciary in Pakistan, to take another example, has had to respond to changes in power raising questions as to the validity of the appointment of judges and the exercise of judicial authority.

I think the way most Australian judges would approach the question of universal ethics is not that there is some higher law, which authorizes judges to overthrow a positive law or to refuse to implement a positive law that they do not like, with which they disagree. Most judges would say that if they can't apply the law according to their consciences they ought to resign.

The approach of judges here is rather how universal ethics *inform the content and the practical application of positive law*. In our positive law, whether it is judge-made law or statute law enacted by Parliament, there are many values from the tradition of universal ethics that inform the law and are taken into account by judges when they interpret and apply the law." "The courts and universal ethics: a conversation with former Chief Justice Murray Gleeson," *Interface*, Vols 4-5 (2014), pp. 68-69.

pression and mental ill-health. Youth crime has grown radically. Law and order requires not only treatment for mental diseases, a judicial system and correctional facilities, but also an anchoring in social values that operate in the culture and in education.¹⁰

Certainly, there is a significant void in the teaching of basic ethics to emerging citizens. Beyond that, there is a disconnection between whatever ethics are taught with religious belief, which could fashion the effective authority *within* the human being for those values.¹¹ Traditionally this has been called *conscience*, and the religious person relates this to the ethical knowledge of the soul, before and in the presence of G-d. A religious person calls it the soul. It is after all an education to civic values and the *internalization* of these values that gives children purpose, meaning and the internal monitoring of conscience to lead a moral life in society. A survey I conducted with Professor Ramon Lewis demonstrated a positive correlation between a moral civic life—which eschews theft and respects justice—and a religious education.

The great crisis that faces us today, however, is the vast sea of spiritual illiteracy. Religion is little more than an early childhood memory—if that—for most young people. It has received inadequate support from, but rather constriction through minimization in or exclusion from class hours in, Government schools. The youthful spiritually illiterate then enter college and university, ready for retraining into the secular world-view of hedonistic materialism. Populism, which rebels against lawlessness, senses the roots of lawlessness in a spiritual and ethical void. It welcomes religious belief and education back into society.

Mutuality in Economic Relations

One of the grievances of recent populism is that existing economic systems do not care for the integrity and security of economic relationships. We hear talk of a squeezed middle class and a deprived blue collar class. The phenomenon of economic restructuring and “dislocation” caused

¹⁰ As the Hon Murray Gleeson (*ibid.*) points out, a “hairy-chested” law-and-order rhetoric, with a multiplication of police officers and heavier jail sentences and reduced bail, is not going to solve the law-and-order problem. As mentioned here, it is a question of how (a) we educate youth in values that make good social sense, and (b) how this can be internalized in personal conscience, i.e., anchored in *belief*.

¹¹ Professor Brian Hill remarks that *actually motivated* ethical conduct takes root in the context of belief systems and that education must accordingly situate ethics within a belief framework. See S. D. Cowen, “An Education in a Shared Ethic,” *Interface*, Vols 4-5, pp. 22-23

by constant technological innovation creates ongoing job insecurity. There is growing income inequality. Globalism is a source of the outsourcing of jobs. Whether or not real earning power, house-purchasing power and employment has fallen, there is a strong sense of insecurity and flux in the economic life of individuals. Perhaps the strongest trend has been the relentless growth of huge corporations and the decline of small business, including the declining creation of new businesses, which were traditionally an important source of jobs.

As customers, people also find themselves as the fodder of vast corporations. Notwithstanding the action of regulatory bodies, banks, telecommunications companies and energy providers have a disproportionate leverage vis-a-vis the customer in an increasingly concentrated and oligopolistic market. Utility prices rise, housing becomes increasingly unaffordable. The relationships between supplier, retailer or service-provider and customer become less personal; employment relationships within large firms similarly become more abstract and indifferent. The small intergenerational family business or farm is in decline. The technologically driven constant restructuring of business creates a feeling of insecurity and dislocation. Globalism and free trade contribute the ever-present threat of annihilation of businesses that cannot stand up to them, and populism also has an anti-globalist streak that would seem to call for an element of protection and tariffs. But what is at the core of the populist discontent with economics is a crisis of human relationships garbed in economic relationships. Abstract seemingly autonomous run-away processes—growing corporate agglomeration, technologically restructuring, globalism—operate in a way seemingly independent of the human being. No one cares if I lose my job; I am mere prey for the giant corporations—such as the banks—whose customer and client I am supposed to be; “innovation” proceeds, without any attempt to anticipate or control its consequences. The existence of a welfare safety net for those who fall by the wayside is small solace for the loss of one’s economic and occupational identity.

Interestingly the populist upset with economics is not a critique of a particular economic system. Nor does it find a panacea in some new economic model. Traditional and modern political-economic theories have looked for their answer to human economic wellbeing in different models of ownership. Capitalism, Communism, the Social-Democratic Welfare State, and also a model of highly diffused private ownership called “Distributism.” They each find their answers in different structures of ownership, which are supposed to guarantee social goods, fairness and equity. Yet each model has been faulted. Laissez-faire capitalism was touted as a bulwark against the tyranny of the state, exemplified

by Socialism. Such was the argument of Friedrich Hayek. But this system has also had its own failings, where individual owners have been driven by rapacious greed. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 put to rest the classic laissez-faire capitalist formulation of Adam Smith, that the universal pursuit of self-interest would enable an “invisible hand” to operate to guarantee prosperity for all. The experience of Communism, with the State ownership and management of the economy, brought out all too vividly Lord Acton’s maxim that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The mixed welfare state might have been the best alternative to each of socialism and capitalism, but welfare is not work, and it operates at a huge social cost in terms of taxation and expenditure, plus the immense costs and inefficiencies of bureaucracy. Health and social services account for more than half the budget. Life on welfare is itself a subsistence existence. Welfare is not work, but a compensation for not working. The populist revolt has taken place largely under forms of the welfare state.

We must help others find work and a good work-relationship, within the constraints of good practice. We must also have a concern for the welfare of the other party. Put boldly, our work and business relationships should be other-regarding: work should be welfare (for both parties to the relationship). Similarly, leisure does not compensate unhappy work. The notion that we work to escape or end work, and that work is attractive only because it gives the opportunity to “really live” during our holidays and leisure hours, is a failure of the work relationship itself. The human being was “born” to work, as much as to enjoy leisure. Leisure does not therefore either quantitatively or qualitatively compensate an unhappy work experience. Work *itself* must be a rewarding activity, both materially and humanly. We need to seek the greatest possible distribution of ownership, to bolster small business, to boost and multiply individual ownership, and to encourage cooperatives, trusting in this model to avoid the evils of capitalism and socialism. Apart from the fact that franchises have been deemed not to meet the distribution model, because in fact the franchises are constrained into uniformity by the corporation that offers them (like McDonalds), it does not seem politically or economically feasible to alter the existing structure of ownership in our economies into a distributive-cooperative format.

By revolting against the indifference of economic systems, which seem to operate autonomously and automatically (*Selbstzweck*), instead of serving human beings, populism approaches a position of universal ethics. This is that universal economic ethics are related not to a particular system of economic relationships, but rather to ethical requirements upon any economic system. This has to do with the concept that *an econom-*

ic relationship—be it that of buyer and seller, employer and employee, manufacturer and distributor or distributor and retailer—is a *relationship between human beings*. Neither side should exploit the other and both are entitled to live and live decently, even if their prosperity is not equal.

The most basic requirement of the Noahide law of theft or material harm (which is the basis of economic ethics) is that the property of one—his or her property, be it goods, labor and bodily wellbeing or money—not be wrested without consent or be extracted through fraud and misled consent. But it goes beyond this and clearly, we are not concerned only with this—the avoidance of theft and fraud—in ordinary economic relationships. These are matters of criminal theft. It is rather in the realm of civil law, and what is required *above* desisting from outright theft, that the Noahide law of theft and material harm is significant. The ethics of economic relationships do not only prohibit deprivation of the property and entitlements of others, but also require *positive* expressions of human reciprocity. They relate to the avoidance of subtler forms of exploitation, fairness, greed and charity and the regard for the wellbeing of others.

Accordingly, when the focus is upon the actual moral character of an economic exchange between two or more persons or groups, the structure of ownership, including its scale or size, becomes formally irrelevant. A huge firm in a capitalist economy may act ethically, whilst a tiny business could exhibit gross exploitation. A natural monopoly (such as a sole provider of water in a district) or a comprehensive socialist, managed economy could be run fairly or corruptly. A collective, made out of a large number of small owners, according to the distributist model, could also act, as a result of collusion to exploit its suppliers or customers. Whether one system is prone to abuse, and whether such a system is politically, technically and socially more or less implementable, is not our concern here. All can exhibit abuse; and all *could* function ethically: where seller and customer, employer and employee treat *one another* ethically.

The most fundamental consideration that must govern an economic relationship is that both sides deserve to make a living. This does not mean that their livelihoods have to be equal, but each needs to be able to live and satisfy basic needs. Predatory pricing, and the undercutting and eventual destruction of a competitor, negates this principle. In this instance, a wealthier firm sells a product below cost for sufficient time to destroy the competitor, whose resources are not adequate to make a similar sacrifice. Once the competitor has been destroyed, the predatory firm then hikes its price and recovers its losses. The attitude of competition needs to be that the other is also entitled to a fair chance to make its

living—not to be “destroyed.” The exploitation of the consumer, through overcharging through price hiking or collusion, and similarly the exploitation of the supplier—for example the farmers, who are forced to accept less than subsistence prices for their goods by a supermarket duopoly—are breaches of reciprocity. They constitute exploitation.

Greed is an attitude that is not only ethically reprehensible but can also be catastrophic in its consequences, as we saw in the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. The culture of huge CEO salaries carries the message of “profit at any cost you can get away with.” In Australia, this culture is seen in a highly-concentrated banking market (controlled by four banking groups) extracting immense profits, for example, through inordinate fees for dishonored checks and slightly overdrawn accounts, something that can easily occur with delay in the processing of credit card orders. Technically, in a civil law relationship between individuals, penalties cannot be unilaterally imposed (as distinct from the State’s ability to punish), but banks in Australia were levying a \$50 penalty every time a savings account was overdrawn by a dishonored check or even through the late processing of a credit card order. The revenue from such fees and penalties levied against their own customers brought in billions to the banks, through the predation of their own client base. After an outcry, this fee (\$50) was finally trimmed back to \$9, based on assessment of “time-loss” and “harm” suffered by the banks through these micro-overdrawings.

The point has been made that companies listed on the stock exchange are particularly open to the pursuit of exploitative and non-reciprocal practices because they are driven by share-holders to make profits and profits alone. There is some solace for those whose superannuation funds are grown by the same firms that “rip them off” as customers. But this cannot provide an ultimate justification for all those customers who do not consent or are not party to this deal. It is precisely the large (indeed mega) family businesses like IKEA and ALDI that, being immune to the exclusive profit interest of publicly owned, shareholder driven companies, have excelled in terms of their corporate ethics, relationships with suppliers and customers. A large firm can have a very good corporate ethos: it treats its workers thoughtfully, and its workers work hard and loyally for it. It considers its suppliers and customers as persons, entitled to livelihood and value.

The fact that a privately-owned company has a greater potential to act ethically does not morally permit a publicly owned company—answerable to its stockholders—to act unethically. And here we must remember that unethically means not only “criminally” but also “inconsiderately” and “callously.” There are various ways to ethically “audit”

and regulate the conduct of business. But for regulation and legislation to achieve this requires a culture that recognizes the partner of our economic exchange as human beings like ourselves, with whom we should deal with reciprocity and care. This is a spiritually informed ethics, and under Noahide law translates into concrete requirements. In the populist ferment, it means, that above our commitment to any one existing economic, trade or financial system, the primary consideration is the actual (quantitative and qualitative) livelihoods (not wholly replaceable by welfare handouts) of the people party to it. If necessary, modifications and mixes must be made to our existing systems to implement these *concrete* moral objectives. The two sides of an economic relationship should be driven not by *envy*, which breeds conflict and confrontation, nor by *competitiveness* for an ever-larger stake, which drives exploitation. The ruling ethic needs to be one of reciprocity, which grasps that each side of the relationship needs and deserves to live. Populism, as its name suggests, is about *people*.

Restoring a True Perspective on Nature

The populist grievance against the world-view of hedonistic materialism regarding the environment has both theoretical and practical sides. The Greens' philosophy is one that makes nature an "Absolute." It is a fundamentally materialist world-view that sees physical nature as "all there is" and human beings as a form of animal life that inhabits it. Consequently, human survival and well-being depends on the maintenance and service—to the extent that the human being can carry this out—of the body of nature. Nature, in their view, is finite and combustible. It is worn down by human industry and human needs. The dominant concern is the theory of "global warming." The future of the planet—as an inhabitable place for human beings at least—depends, according to their view, on human management, especially of carbon emissions, which can, they think, eventually destroy the planet.

The consequences of this doctrine are twofold—practical and ideological. In practical terms, it means that human industry and energy production (and farming, since animals are also emitters) must be transformed and cut back, to maintain the mechanism of creation. Consequently, industry must be penalized through carbon credit and emissions trading schemes until it gives up using fossil fuels. Consumers of energy must be prepared to pay higher prices for renewable energy. So too they must be ready for price-increases on all commodities, as the penalties on commodities produced through high carbon industries are passed on to them. Above all, industry and jobs that depend on high carbon emis-

sions must be cut back. Many in the populist revolt perceive this as a direct threat to the economic wellbeing of industry and of ordinary citizens as workers and consumers.

In the ideology of global warming, arctic ice-caps will melt, land-masses will sink into the water, and a whole host of disasters will come upon nature and humanity. There are two things about this global theory that irk the populist revolt. One is its mythic quality: a view of nature as a vast wounded beast that must be helped back onto its feet. Others have termed it, less delicately, “witchcraft” and “neo-Paganism,” according to which the human being must serve nature.

The traditional religious view, with which populism has a much stronger affinity than hedonistic materialism (which in fact repudiates it), is that nature was given by G-d to serve the human being. This does not mean that the human being may willfully abuse animals or heedlessly destroy natural resources. To the contrary: in the use that the human being has been permitted to make of animals and vegetative or mineral parts of nature, one is restricted not in the amount of one’s use but in the constructiveness of one’s use. Material incorporated or used, should be done purposefully and with a minimum of pain to animals and wastefulness to non-animal resources. If our actions directly affect another person, e.g., if we draw heavily on a finite water supply, or we pollute a stream and thereby kill the fish, that does direct calculable harm to other people. It is therefore forbidden. Similarly, if I wish my own fields to produce next year, I must be careful to let the land rest at intervals and to fertilize it. But all of this is in the calculable and foreseeable short term. On a “cosmic” scale, however, I am not bound to make calculations of remote places and time frames about the state of the cosmos.

In short I must do what is demonstrably and foreseeably beneficial to myself and avoid what is demonstrably and foreseeably harmful to others, including inflicting unnecessary pain on animals and heedless waste in material resources. Yet as far as knowing the macro-conditions and inputs, these have always been beyond me. How the soil will yield, what the rains will be—these have always been things for which people of traditional faith have prayed. They sowed seed in the earth, and prayed to G-d for its success. They have been careful of what they have done, to sew the land properly. They have not made the macro-calculations. They have not calculated the weather. And this is because, this is in the lap of G-d. Nature is not a big machine. It is the glove of G-d’s providence. Its bounty is not calculable. We have to do ours and G-d His. Cosmic calculations are therefore idolatrous: they make nature into a huge self-subsistent animal or machine, for which human beings are veterinarians or mechanics. That is not the posture of the ordinary,

prudent but praying person. It is not about servicing or appeasing the “great one,” “the all that is there,” the “mythic beast—nature.”

The second grievance of populism in regard to this environmentalism is a more practical one: human beings’ livelihoods (in industries that rely on fossil fuels) and the affordability of their goods and services (raised by costs for carbon emissions) should not be sacrificed out of fear for the health of the great beast of nature. It has rebelled against the practical economics and impact upon human livelihood of “global warming.”

Those who reject the “theory” of global warming are not anti-science. They are skeptical of its grand-theoretical vision and its evidence. Many top scientists share this skepticism. So it is with all dominant scientific paradigms. That a majority of the world’s scientists might support historically one paradigm over another does not make it more true. History and the transformation of scientific paradigms attests to this. Rather, we have instead the ideological dominance of a particular grand theory and way of looking at the world. What irks grass roots is the mythic cast of this grand theory—its metaphysic which changes nature from the glove of G-d into a huge machine or beast to be serviced by humanity.

It is worth finally considering traditional religious doctrine concerning nature. In the Garden of Eden, the human being did not have to work at all. One of the curses handed out to the human being after the sin of the tree of knowledge was the phenomenon of work: that nature became an opponent and that the human being had to toil to eke out a living from it. This curse, however, is not an eternal punishment for the human being. Rather work, as taught by mystical religious doctrine, is the process by which nature, tainted and corrupted by human sin, is restored to its pristine state, as an instrument for the manifold blessings of G-d. Thus, Maimonides writes, in the times of the Redemption of humanity, material abundance will be readily available and the human being will be lifted out of the struggle with nature, and the occupation of all humanity will be “to know G-d,” to study, pray and behold G-dliness.

What this signifies is that “nature” is in fact an instrument of G-d’s bounty. Its relationship to man depends not only on one’s use of it in the immediate present and place, but also upon one’s personal merit and prayer before G-d. It is not for us to take over G-d’s work and to predict and produce His responses. As someone once said about global warming, “Let’s get tomorrow’s weather right first.” The weather was always something that a human being *prayed* for.

One could educate populism not to be afraid of various trends that point towards the end of work. The specter of robotics might be viewed

with some anxiety, but it can also be grasped as the actual freeing from work. There is no doubt that technology is available to endow humanity with abundance, the only question being how the management and distribution of that abundance is to proceed. The spiritual—redemptive—concept that nature can in fact be a source of great bounty, and that this bounty can be extracted without bitter toil, is even anticipated in the writings of Karl Marx in his *Grundrisse*, where it is envisaged that human beings will be primarily occupied with the management of things—the developed instruments of production—not people. Unfortunately, the materialistic philosophy that underpinned Marxism saw to it that the struggle of human interests perverted the socialization of industry. A *spiritual* humanity—given that souls work together better than bodies—might well manage the economy of abundance much better.

Work—the original “curse” upon humanity—is often viewed anxiously as an existential need of humanity. Unemployment per se is a fear. Does that fear proceed from the equation of employment with livelihood or because people *do not know* what to do with leisure and see it as an existential abyss? Certainly, the phenomenon of longevity and an aging population creates this issue potentially for all individuals: what are they to do with decades of retirement? The answer to this from a religious point of view is that as people get older, their spiritual sensitivities mature: the growing weakness of the body is associated with the growing strength of the soul. But this can happen only when humans are spiritually literate, when they have developed spiritual consciousness and have a spiritual education, to deploy in their leisure and old age. Indeed, it has been—rightly—suggested that older people should be seen not as an economic problem (unproductive and expensive to maintain) but as a spiritual resource for society. So too with humanity: in its old age—the times of redemption—it comes into its spiritual maturity: in the words of Maimonides, quoted above, “at that time, all the material luxuries will be as abundant as the dust of the earth, and the occupation of humanity will be to know G-d alone.” Spirituality comes into its own amongst the bounty of nature, and presumably a spiritually wise humanity would know how to manage that bounty, without all the pitfalls of political and economic struggle.

What unlocks the bounty of nature is not only technology, but also spirituality. This is because nature is not a mythic beast, but the glove of G-d, Who both dwells within, and transcends it. The populist revolt—the revolt of ordinary people, who believe in G-d more consciously than the elites—resents turning nature into an idol and making humans its servants. Without dispensing with prudence, care, holding back from cruelty to animals and wastefulness with resources, ordinary people

know or are ready to hear that nature was created to serve the human being the ethical project of civilizing the world. The farmer and the worker—and all those who have not been overtaken by hubris—know that the weather (and all other material abundance) will be brought to them by a G-d *beyond* nature, through the circumspect preparations that they make *within* nature.

The Protection of Life

Populism is unnerved by and responds strongly to violence and to the removal of protection from life. The greatest attack on G-d is the attack on the human spirit, made in G-d's likeness, the living soul. The attack on life is an attack on Divine property. This attack comes from two directions, pre-eminently in our time. On the one hand, there is violent killing perpetrated by international terrorism of which ISIS and its related bodies are the major exemplar. The other is from the (until now) hegemonic liberalism which installed across the world regimes of unlimited killing of human babies prior to (and sometimes right up to) birth, and which toys constantly with euthanasia and “assisted suicide.” Most if not all the populists are against the regime of abortion on demand. The connection that Noahide law places between killing of the vulnerable and the failure to stand up to violence within and against societies is that both constitute a failure to protect and defend life.

The liberal left—consistent with its hedonistic materialism—tolerates killing in the advancement of interests. Around the world it supports insurgent movements. It speaks about the so-called right to self-determination of movements that are not states. One example of this is the so-called Palestinian Liberation Organization and its sister organization, Hamas. Instead of granting Governments *prima facie* sovereignty and authority in their own lands, they endorse insurgent or “liberation” movements around the world.

When, however, it comes to national *self*-defense, the Greens, the flag-bearers of hedonistic materialism, are very soft. They want Australia to renounce any development of nuclear power, whether with or without military applications. In addition to that, they want to remove Australia from an alliance with America, as that would implicate Australia in American conflicts. An extraordinarily naïveté comes at the price of high vulnerability. Another aspect of the Greens' foreign policy is an extension of what President Obama called multilateralism, and the reliance on international organizations, including the United Nations and the International Court of Justice. The defect in these organizations is that they have no real power, and subscription to them in fact weakens the tradi-

tional role of deterrence in favor of toothless diplomacy. The deal with Teheran is a classic case of the renunciation of the threat of force (and sanctions) in favor of mere diplomatic assurances. This is effectively a renunciation of self-defense in real, military terms. Yet another downplaying of self-defense is the Greens' call for a minimal defense force, and a substantial removal of filtering on refugees and border protection. In this they are typical of the left-liberal regimes against which populism has arisen.

The supposed "idealism" that postures amidst the disavowal of real military self-defense (including pursuit of the pursuer) in fact fosters global extremism and terrorism, for which the United Nations General Assembly has been a cover, as we see in the vast number of motions supporting a non-state "liberation" movement, namely the PLO. It has allowed for Iranian adventurism. On the other hand, this movement uses international aid as a weapon for disseminating abortion on demand to third world countries (by making it conditional on abortion). This is also a Greens' policy: to tie this string to all Australian aid, and it was a string of American policy under Obama. It promotes this form of killing—of the unborn, forbidden by Noahide law—internationally.

Within our own society, the policy of left liberalism and of the Greens unleashes killing on a grand scale. It has defined prenatal life totally out of the realm of life and undeserving of any protection. This however is not what biblical and universal ethics state. Under Noahide law, full culpability exists for killing an unborn child, unless it is necessary to save the life of its mother. Even though its existence has a quality of latency, it is still endowed with a soul (from after 40 days from conception), and this makes such a life Divine property, which no person has the right to dispose of, other than under grounds of self-defense, i.e., threat to the life of the mother or possibly radical non-viability of its own life in the event of extreme deformity. Within 40 days of conception, in extreme circumstances such as rape or incest, there may also be permission to abort. However, the child is not the property of its mother—any more than her own life is her property—to dispose of at will. Human life is sacred, it is a Divine possession, and can be disposed of only under circumstances that G-d Himself has prescribed.

Abortion has become an anchor of the permissive society, in which sexuality is pursued without commitment or responsibility. A person knows that he or she may face extremely serious consequences for killing someone as a result of careless driving. However, this society does not import that seriousness or responsibility to life that can be engendered through sexual activity outside the framework of marital commitment. The idea that one can do what one likes and the state will kill (and

medically rebate the abortion of) any children born from such activities underwrites a culture of indifference to life. Open-slaughter killing of babies up to birth is the mark of a society that has repressed its spirituality. The even more ghoulis specter of euthanasia is ever present in this society, and it constitutes murder under Noahide law. It also destroys the ethic of care. The family of a terminally ill person could conceivably pressure the dying person to exit, and the dying person would need the inner strength to defend his or her own existence. It poses as compassion, but it has no compassion for the true person, the living soul. Euthanasia corners the vulnerable who are losing speech, and abortion on demand murders those who have no speech. For the ideology of hedonistic materialism, life is the calculus of pleasure and pain of sentient flesh. In abortion, it is flight from pain, for those experience pain (the terminally ill) and those who constitute a pain to others (the unborn). The attack on life, and on the human spirit (and Divine likeness) even turns upon those who are spiritually uneducated and might defend the attack on life, in the long shadow of depression and suicide, which has grown steadily. The populism of the spirit, by definition, values life.

It is under G-d that the “anarchy” of international society becomes a society with a common law. What will make peace and put an end to violence is not diplomacy and treaties, but as John F. Kennedy stated those values that resonate with hearts and minds of ordinary men and women. Populist leaders around the world are drawn to one another on the basis of shared values. There is, above all, a commonality between leaders who publicly acknowledge G-d and share a set of values anchored in religious tradition. Such leaders affirm the values of the Noahide laws and the authority of G-d. They come together by virtue of that authority. Neither ISIS (a pseudo-religious organization that speaks about “G-d” but means itself), with its associated terrorist groups, on the one hand, nor hedonistic materialism, on the other hand, believes authentically in G-d or universal morality. The violence that haunts international relations can be turned into a peaceful international society only by the acknowledgment of a common authority, G-d, and His laws, the Noahide laws. This is the promise of a true populism of the human spirit. 