

# Three Metacultures of Modernity

## Christian, Gnostic, Chthonic

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### I

I BEGIN WITH the banal observation that within the past five years, near the end of our century, the world has changed enormously, most of all, of course, stemming from the unexpected implosion of a Communist empire that only a generation earlier had seen itself as the Angel of Death for bourgeois society. Earlier this century, another five-year interval, 1914–19, saw equally momentous changes, such as the demise of centuries-old empires and, in the wake of this period, major changes in mores and lifestyles emerged on the scene. One difference, and not a trivial one at that, between the two settings is that the vast structural changes that have framed our immediate political and cultural situation cannot be taken as the bitter fruits of war.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of sociology – at least in its ‘classic’ legacy – is a sense of mission to account for and interpret the ‘wild beast’ of change, namely the historicity of modern society, including its crises and ruptures (with as different sociologists as Comte, Marx, Weber, Spencer, and down to C. Wright Mills and Sorokin intending different outcomes with their interpretations). Yet recent sociologists, with a rare exception such as Touraine (1995), have shied from providing major diagnoses of the contemporary, post-Cold War era world in transformation.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are two provocative and complementary pieces by others that frame our recent period and which will provide this paper with a point of departure. The first, Francis Fukuyama’s ‘The End of History’ appeared in the summer of 1989, the second, Samuel Huntington’s ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’ appeared in the summer of 1993. They have become so well known that I want to touch on just some of their essential points. Fukuyama, on the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet empire and following the trail of Hegel and Kojève, argued that competing ideologies – really key

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motors of the historical process – had shriveled, leaving liberalism in its main Western political and economic forms the clear global winner, and thereby bringing to an end history as the contestation of incompatible ideologies. Four years later, Huntington resurrected the idea of a global conflict as part of our late 20th-century situation, but this time with civilizations, rather than nation-states, clashing, and more particularly, a Western (including Japan) modernized, economically affluent but demographically poor civilization confronted externally by ‘the rest’, especially the populous Islamic and Confucian civilizations. Huntington’s scenario of the realignment of international relations in terms of competing civilizational units, especially the West vs Islam,<sup>3</sup> has a direct echo in the analysis of a noted French international relations specialist, Pierre Lellouche (1992) and more recently in a special survey feature of *The Economist* (6 Aug. 1994). To offer validation for Huntington’s thesis, one might point out that in the present decade, the United States has had bitter verbal clashes with two bearers of Confucian civilization: with Japan a re-run of Admiral Perry’s demand to open up that country’s internal markets and with China over human rights issues. With Islam and (or versus) ‘the West’, the clashes have been much more physical and violent, with an Islamic population taking the brunt of the attack, starting with the Gulf War and on to Chechnya and Bosnia.

Indirectly, Fukuyama’s and Huntington’s accounts of the world condition place the realm of the *cultural* in the foreground: competing ideologies, no less than competing or clashing civilizations are, at bottom, large cultural conflicts. While I agree that the cultural scene is a critical terrain to study large-scale social change (a general perspective which has a well-established sociological genealogy including Durkheim, Weber, Sorokin and, among our contemporaries, Georges Balandier and Fernand Dumont),<sup>4</sup> at the same time the provocative analyses of Fukuyama and Huntington have certain limitations.

Regarding Fukuyama’s neo-Hegelian ‘end of ideology = end of history’ perspective, although there have been brief moments when one ‘ideology’ seemed hegemonic, these have been succeeded by new ideologies or, to use Dumont’s (1987, 1991) expression, the ‘return of the repressed’. Even as Fukuyama spoke of the eclipse of competing ideologies, nationalism and fundamentalism have had significant global resurgence in the past five years, just as the decade of the 1960s is more remembered for the resurgence of new ideological conflicts and the cultural gap between generations than for a broad cultural consensus heralded a few years before by an analysis of ‘the end of ideology’. Further back in time, the West has gone through a series of cycles of ends of ideologies – such as Restorationist Europe 1815–30 (which suppressed the dangerous ideas of the French Revolution that had been exported by Napoleon) and much earlier ecumenical accords as far back as Nicea – followed by new ideological battlegrounds. In brief, the historical evidence, if we had a careful evaluation of it, would show that the period of relative ideological tranquillity we have had in recent years is not to be mistaken as ‘the end of history’ but rather as one in a series of historical ‘pauses’.

As to Huntington's analysis, while it has an important conceptual innovation of making civilizations units of international relations – an improvement in more simplistic or totalizing macro analyses which stick with multiple nation-states or the unitary world-system – it also has in my judgment some weakness. If I have read him correctly, Huntington treats a 'civilization', such as the West, as a relatively homogeneous entity within a bounded geographical area. But this does not take into account that increasingly processes of globalization, including international migration, increased means of transportation and communication, 'global commodity chains' in the production process, and so forth, are making civilizations more and more 'porous' (or interpenetrative with) other civilizations. If the Soviet totalitarian system could not keep the West from intruding via television into the socialist world, how can the democratic West, despite nationalist pressures manifested in immigration restrictions, keep the Islamic world from making headway into the territory of Western civilization? It is not only bearers of an Islamic civilization that have (re)entered the geographical historical boundaries of the West, but also, in North America, it is the bearers of Sinitic civilization that have been the major wave of immigrants in recent years (along with the bearers of Latin American civilization coming from the South).

The point of these remarks is that ultimately the dynamics of change which have so stamped Western civilization with different facets and features of modernity have, and will continue to have, a crucial cultural infrastructure to be examined *within* rather than outside the West. This cultural infrastructure has many levels. Some of these have been expressed in terms of a binary differentiation, such as 'high' and 'low' culture (elite and popular cultures), 'institutionalized' and 'dispersed' cultures or, more recently, 'global' and 'local' cultures (see Crane, 1992; Featherstone, 1993). I am tempted to make use of 'levels' in the sense of Georges Gurwitsch's 'depth sociology' (Bosserman, 1968; Swedberg, 1982). This is not the occasion to explicate the many levels of culture, but it might be suggested that one dimension for treating levels of analysis is how extensive or enveloping in terms of the population involved are the cultural forms in actors' experience of the everyday world. A second dimension is the degree of institutionalization, which entails the levels at which culture is considered as legitimate and, in turn, the levels at which culture is used or serves to legitimate an ongoing social order or a part of that order. A third dimension is the sacred–profane continuum, in terms of which cultural objects and cultural relations are treated as of central value or as peripheral (e.g. strictly as commodities) for the identity of actors. A fourth dimension that may be invoked is that of collective awareness, going from a surface general recognition and awareness (e.g. this book that I am reading is an English translation of a bestseller by a French philosopher) to lower levels of consciousness (e.g. the awareness of inhabitants of Quebec City or Beijing that they are communicating with each other in French or Chinese, respectively).

For the sake of the argument, let me invoke a metaphor from word processing (the metaphor may be prompted by my preparing this paper with a personal computer). We can think of different cultural bundles used by different sets of actors as different 'software packages'; the 'virtual reality' of the information world that is experienced and explored is a new and highly significant extension of the cultural sphere of the 'imaginary' in terms of which (social) reality is constructed in the interaction process between social actors and their environments.

To bring into the discussion of cultural levels the deepest ontological one, by 'metaculture' I understand a set of beliefs and symbols, generated in the distant past *and renewed* by succeeding generations of actors; metaculture as a set of beliefs and symbols, promoted and promulgated by human agency, is for the most part invisible, unobtrusive, but provides the basic and ultimate frames and symbolism for action.<sup>5</sup> The metaphor I propose is that of metaculture as *an operating system of civilization*. In the operations we do with our computers we tend to be oblivious to the operating system which provides the 'basic instructions'; nor do we know who are the persons who have engineered the operating system. But the operating system every now and then leaves traces of its presence, and after we have used a certain software program, we have the option of 'exiting' and 'returning' to the operating system.

Metaphors should not be overdone; the one just mentioned has the intention of giving familiarity with a conceptualization of a level of culture that has had little attention until now. Going beyond a simple metaphor, let me propose that a peculiarity of Western civilization is the presence of multiple such 'operating systems'. The three which I consider of particular interest in the dynamics of civilizational change are, for lack of better designation, 'Christian', 'Gnostic' and 'Chthonic'. While each seeks hegemony if not total domination of the cultural sphere in all its aspects, in the historical process there has been a continual struggle and conflict between them, with some historical settings seeming to witness the disappearance of one, yet the same setting in a later period seeing its return. Although there is a basic conflict between all three, in the historical development of Western civilization there have also been tacit alliances and accommodations, often – very much in line with Simmel's (Wolff, 1950) analysis of the triad – of two against the third. These metacultures, and their principal agents, are interactive in the public arena; they compete for space, for adherents and for institutions. They are forcibly interactive and to some extent interpenetrating (since human agents are exposed to elements of all three) in different ways at different periods.

## II

Let me seek, in ideal-typical fashion, to provide some essential features of each, bearing in mind this is at a very preliminary level of analysis.

*Christian* metaculture is one which is usually associated with Western

civilization. The core symbolism is the emphasis on the salvation of each and all through the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the divine savior who is both 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man'. The multiple interpretations of the core symbolism have provided different collective identities, different bases of legitimation and motivation and, of course, different notions of the community and the bases for membership in it, ranging from a small egalitarian community of 'brethren' to a national 'church' to a pan-human, universal 'church'.

Like all religious traditions, and like all ideologies, Christianity has over the ages a tendency to enshrine its doctrines and rituals. Yet, Christian metaculture has also had elements or orientations which have favored modernity, *understanding the latter as cultural, technological and social innovations capable of being accepted in a wide variety of societal settings outside and beyond their center of origin* (Tiryakian, 1985).<sup>6</sup> This readiness for modernizing had its initial impulse in the first centuries: the codification of a 'New' Testament, and the later adoption of a new calendar keeping continuous time 'AD', replacing the cyclic or dynastic time reckoning; the famous Pauline universalization of the community beyond ethnic demarcation; the injunction of religious activism incumbent on all the faithful to spread 'the good news' to all the world.

The person of Christ – and with him a set of highly recognizable human followers in successive generations whose lives on earth were marked by intersection with the God-man or those close to him – provided the metaculture with powerful motivational dispositions for role models of human conduct. The themes of 'sacrifice', 'abnegation', 'altruism' and even 'martyrdom' are part of the motivational repertoire of the Christian metaculture. In this vein, in an early article, Parsons (1935) drew attention to the very important Christian background in the ethical sanction of 'service', which went through successive stages of interpretation and secularization. Extending Parsons's analysis, the modern service orientation took particular strength in America in at least two seemingly 'secular' areas: 'public service' and/or the service the individual brings to voluntary associations, on the one hand, and the service orientation of American capitalism. To be sure, 'tithing' or, more generally, giving the transcendental a share of one's material gains, has a long history, not only in the West but in other civilizations. What is striking about the modern American case, however, is the extent to which successful capitalists have provided services for the societal community, in terms of both their personal time and in terms of material resources, such as libraries, museums and universities.

Related to the above, Christian metaculture is also the ground of some very basic personality strictures or constraints. These have served to enhance the process of individualization by expanding the sphere of autonomy while making persons accountable, not so much to the immediate social group as accountable to the Godhead internalized in the self. It is the constraints of 'conscience' and 'sin' that provide the internal checks on conduct. In a sense, the unfolding of the Christian metaculture in the West, in particular, has put in place, particularly in modern society, what might be thought of

as a sort of 'transcendental pact' between the person and the Godhead. The person has the right to 'move around', to venture, to become what she/he chooses to be, to experiment, to develop himself or herself beyond the confines of the primary social group, but the set of activity has to be evaluated in the short term against or in light of 'conscience', and long-term (i.e. on death's bed) on the adequacy of the life course for gaining 'eternal salvation' in Heaven, as judged by God Himself. There is a tacit other-worldly oriented 'liberation theology' in primitive Christian thought, namely that the Redeemer-God who took on a human likeness has freely given everyman the possibility of liberation from death.

There is, of course, much more to the Christian metaculture than this. I have not gone into some obvious spatial and temporal differentiations, including ethnonational variations. A further complicating factor besides the complexity of providing an ideal type of Christian metaculture is that in the actual historical process, Christian culture has commingled with other major cultural orientations, within Western civilization as well as across civilizations.

*Gnostic* metaculture is in important respects more elusive and more obscure than Christianity. To some extent its shadowy aspect stems from its dim and unknown beginnings in antiquity. Its quasi-opaqueness also stems from its early entanglements and subsequent denunciations by the Christian Church once the latter crystallized around a set of 'orthodox' teachings which marginalized Gnosticism as the most dangerous of heresies. A third factor in keeping Gnosticism from general awareness is that its modern acknowledged promulgators (freemasonry, theosophy, rosicrucians and a variety of other orders) have tended to obfuscate the origins, practices and social actions in mystery and secrets. There is on the contemporary scene an 'official' renewed interest in the 'classic' Gnostic culture which became available to scholars with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic library nearly half a century ago. However fascinating to biblical scholars or those of the early Church these documents are (see Pagels, 1979), what I wish to bring out is the persistence of a broader Gnostic metaculture and its significance for the dynamics of aspects of Western modernity, particularly as an enduring and crucial current of heterodoxy (Tiryakian, 1972).

Gnosticism is an orientation which is highly ambivalent toward the constituted world. In traditional religio-historical perspectives on Gnosticism, that ambivalence is seen as stemming from the Gnostics' repulsion toward the created world of matter, and their seeking salvation through 'divine knowledge' of the hidden truths of the universe. The Gnostics feel thus uncomfortable, or alien, in the world which is there (see Jonas, 1963).

However, I would suggest the fundamental orientation of gnosticism is a bit more complex than the acquisition of a knowledge of the 'deep structures' of the universe, or even the stress on the initiatory aspects of the acquisition of this knowledge, though initiation is often as important as the knowledge to be obtained. One aspect of the orientation is that the ongoing social order, constituted by traditional culture, traditional customs and

beliefs and the institutional framework of that culture, operates in 'darkness' and needs to be redeemed by the light of *gnosis* and those who have received that light. The seemingly 'natural social order' is taken to be an abomination, the creation of evil powers or of the evil deity, against whom the gnostic community wages battle to the finish, which means, that the gnostic community seeks to replace, to overturn the social order with another, 'new' social order. This has a potential for revolutionary action, particularly in an eschatological vision of the 'evil' world of matter being destroyed in a cosmic or global convulsion. Sociologically speaking, any transformation in a social order entails the transformation of the stratification system, including the changes in the ruling elites. The gnostic elites are those whose self-identity as members of a privileged community centers on having gained (via special training) a superior knowledge of the virtual and hidden truths of reality, and whose knowledge gives them the power and the entitlement to alter the impure reality of the constituted world.

Ultimately, the Gnostic metaculture in the West<sup>7</sup> is a mirror image of Christian metaculture. Both have as cornerstones of their world activity the liberation of men from the 'natural order'. The basic Gnostic orientation is that this liberation can only be really accomplished by some form of institutionalized intellectualism (particularly via legal and educational institutions); the basic Christian orientation is that the liberation of self and mankind comes from following the exemplary teachings and conduct of the Divine Savior (see Weber, 1963: 131f). Both the Christian and the Gnostic metacultures have promoted a strong individual activism, despite their respective ambivalence toward the world. In the Christian orientation, the tendency toward contemplation and withdrawal from worldly concerns has had to contend with contrary tendencies: to proselytize and bring the 'good news' to all corners of the earth, and in related fashion, to act as 'fiduciary agents' in the making of a Christian community (nation, kingdom, empire, etc.). In the Gnostic orientation, the tendency to escape from or repudiate an evil creation of matter has also had a complementary course of action: to reconstruct the material world with a more perfect plan formulated by human beings with the guide of a superior knowledge.

Quite different from these two is the third metaculture, which I propose to call *Chthonic*. It is tempting to use the more familiar designation of 'pagan', but 'pagan' has had in the past a derogatory connotation that I wish to avoid.<sup>8</sup> 'Chthonic' refers to a basic ontological affirmation of earth as the primordial locus of reality, and of the forces of life which have to be cultivated, enhanced or placated in order to insure the reproductive processes of survival. Chthonic metaculture is found throughout the Western world, with different specific archaic and antiquity forms (e.g. Etruscan, Celtic, etc.) but with structurally similar adaptive problems, for all societies until very recently have been conditioned by the problem of survival, stemming from food shortages, epidemics, warfare or, in general, an unknown or unpredictable and hostile environment (physical and/or social). Chthonic metaculture is *not* salvation oriented, and its forms of expression do not favor a

lifestyle of asceticism or world renunciation; if anything, in some historical periods, a manifestation of chthonic culture may take the form of *carpe diem*. It is oriented to communal living in this world, however precarious life in this world may be. However simplistic may seem its intellectual life in contrast to Gnostic or Christian intellectual reflections, the Chthonic orientation is rich in folk culture of various sorts, since it easily incorporates how local communities in the course of time have found adaptive rituals, customs and beliefs which enable them to reproduce themselves generation after generation. Durkheim's analysis of 'mechanical solidarity' is embedded in chthonic culture, for survival is a group affair, which means the subordination of the individual's interest to the group's interest.

### III

Earlier in this paper I proposed that these metacultures are interactive and interpenetrating. By that I mean that in contact with one another, through immigration, conquest, intermarriage, etc., of the various populations, there has been over previous centuries not only much conflict and clashes but also much adaptation, borrowing and even occasional alliances between the three. This vast intracivilizational interaction has contributed much to the dynamics of cultural change in Western civilization. A brief discussion to illustrate the point is in order.

The Christianization of the West in the first millennium used different strategies in coping with its two major adversaries. With the Gnostics, the strategy was, first, dispute or argumentation and, second, condemnation. This seemed to have been relatively successful in driving Gnosticism from the public sphere, but we can say that Gnostic culture only went 'underground', reappearing first in the 15th and 16th centuries with the new humanistic and neo-Platonic currents, and then more fully in the 18th century with the Enlightenment.

From the period of Constantine to the 16th century, we may think of a grand alliance between at first a nascent and later a dominant Christian metaculture and a Chthonic metaculture, as the ideals of the early Church made compromises with chthonic forces, permitting what was in effect a secularization of the religious vision: for example, the cult of saints and feast days replaced the cult of chthonic deities and forces. Popular and folk culture were considerably modified, generally with a greater softening of mores in keeping with an overall Christian tutelage. The reproduction of life became sanctioned and family life sacralized in the image of the Holy Family. What should be kept in mind, though, is that the alliance was a marriage of convenience, with chthonic metaculture kept in rein by the Christian dominant culture, which mistrusted the 'erotic' or 'dionysian' impulse in the chthonic emphasis on the 'world of the flesh'. As Max Weber (1958: 343) quite correctly and succinctly stated it:

The brotherly ethic of salvation religion is in tension with the greatest irrational force of life: sexual love. The more sublimated sexuality is, and the



more principled and relentlessly consistent the salvation ethic of brotherhood is, the sharper is the tension between sex and religion.

It may be ventured that the alliance, or interaction, between the Christian metaculture and the chthonic was most visible and least conflictual in countries which remained Catholic after the Reformation, or which in the Eastern periphery had adopted Orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup> Invoking Weber again, the ‘disenchantment of the world’ as a major feature of the post-Reformation world placed a premium on the rationalization of life and of conduct, making chthonic culture doubly suspect as a source of the irrational and as a vestigial domain of Catholicism. Chthonic culture was, figuratively speaking, driven out of the public sphere and repressed or bottled up in the age of extensive industrialization and urbanization during the Victorian Age.

In terms of the perspective of this paper, the Victorian Age and its successors (until the end of the 1960s) had as a major cultural frame a new and somewhat uneasy alliance of Christianity (mainly liberal Protestant) and Gnosticism, which linked together in a paradigm of ‘progress’, and was carried forward in successive generations of liberalism. Gnosticism had had a latent period from which it emerged during the Enlightenment; it found in the domain of scientific enquiry and scientific institutions and in the renovated university milieu of the 19th century major new bastions of legitimacy where the pursuit of ‘gnosis’ could take place practically without restriction. Besides the important public space of the university and later the research institutes, such as the famed Princeton Institute of Advanced Study (see Ruyer, 1974, 1977),<sup>10</sup> the Gnostic space was also enlarged by various orders and fraternal organizations, initiatory and secretive, yet flourishing in the general liberal climate of the industrial age.

The Christian metaculture, while under strong pressure from Gnosticism in this period of ‘secularization’ (Chadwick, 1975), found a new geographical extension in missionary activity in the overseas empires of Africa and Asia, in particular, but also, paradoxically, in the new industrial giant of the United States, whose immigrants found in religious affiliation a collective identity that had lost its salience in Europe.<sup>11</sup>

If the chthonic metaculture receded from the public sphere of Western civilization in the 19th and much of the 20th century as its natural adherents became uprooted from the land of their ancestors with industrialization, urbanization and the modernization of education, it did retain some influence in the cultural sphere. In part the chthonic served as a bulwark against the ‘civilization of progress’ precisely because it was imagined to be a sphere of the ‘irrational’, of attitudes towards life that contradicted bourgeois rationality and its staid conduct. The Romantic movement drew a great deal of inspiration from chthonic culture (often inventing or reinventing various of its elements, such as themes of witchcraft and sorcery). Nietzsche drew on early Greek chthonic metaculture (the cult of Dionysos) in rejecting the Judeo-Christian moral frame of the West as embodying a ‘slave mentality’, while Wagner combined Christian and chthonic metacultural elements in his

great operas such as *The Ring* cycle, *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin* and others. Picasso in his post-cubist period is perhaps the most striking 20th century embodiment of (Mediterranean) chthonic culture in the representational arts.

In recent decades we seem to have abandoned the more or less familiar turf that had marked the modernity of Western civilization from the Enlightenment to the 1960s. Just as sociological analysis since then has gone without a central theoretical paradigm to replace the Parsonian action theory/structural-functional analysis paradigm of the post-war period, so at the larger civilizational level have we been operating with none of the three large metacultures having clear-cut dominance.

The one that in the past quarter century has made a vigorous new entrance in the public sphere and in popular culture is the chthonic metaculture, having several and possibly interrelated branches and points of ingress.

A major impetus has been the confluence of the women's liberation movement and 'New Age Religion movements' in seeking to provide women with a significantly greater degree of empowerment, not only in both the domestic and the public sphere but also in the symbolic sphere of institutionalized mainstream religions. As part of the challenge to male dominance in the religious sphere (which several feminists see as providing the basis of legitimation for sexism) (Ruether, 1974), there is in the United States and Great Britain the restoration of the Wicca cult providing women with a sacerdotal and healing role in 'nature' religion.<sup>12</sup> Although this might seem to be what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) have treated as 'the invention of tradition', the positive images of 'Mother Earth' and the 'witch cult', which draw from the symbolic reservoir of chthonic culture have appeared earlier in this century, most notably from such contrasting figures as the anthropologist Margaret Murray (1967, 1974) and the political radical Emma Goldman.<sup>13</sup>

One might also argue that a new positive evaluation of the chthonic in feminist circles is also being enhanced by the growing acceptance of traditional practices such as 'alternative medicine', midwifery and breast feeding – all of which only a generation ago were practices viewed as 'archaic' or 'medieval' and not belonging to modern, rational, industrial civilization.

In brief, instead of men monopolizing a place in the sun, today it might be more true to speak of women claiming a rightful place in the revalorization of nature. In this sense, 'ecofeminism' may be a new term but it links very much with chthonic metaculture (Adams, 1993; Marie-Daly, 1991). The latter, with a broad appeal to various traditions of 'Mother Earth', including those of Native Americans (McGaa, 1990), may thus become a new democratic symbolic universe, *one whose modernity extends fully to cyberspace!*<sup>14</sup>

There is a second important aspect of chthonic culture, one which gives greater stress to sensuality, bodily expression and sexuality as a basic if not privileged conduct. To some extent, this was wittingly or unwittingly promoted by Gnostic currents in early psychoanalysis (Fliess's influence on

Freud, for example) and Marxism (particularly in the Frankfurt School which sought in the 1920s to amalgamate the two). Sexual liberation as a means of emancipation from the established social order has older roots than either psychoanalysis or Marxism, since what I have earlier termed ‘sexual anomie’, but which might as an orientation be more properly designated as *sexual gnosis*, goes back in the development of Western civilization to a libertinage underground and further back to antinomian sects, who saw in the trampling of sexual codes a key way of undoing the order of the world created by the enemy deity (see Tiryakian, 1981, 1984).

Whatever may have been its initial ‘modern’ sponsorship, the domain of human sexuality, emancipated (or deregulated) from the tutelage and constraints of both Christian and Gnostic sanctions which had relegated sexual conduct and bodily expressions to the domestic and/or private sphere – at least for the respectable middle classes – seems to have become unbridled, if not in practice at least in the media of ‘popular’ culture (such as ‘rock’ and ‘rap’).<sup>15</sup> This now even extends to public education in the lower grades of some school districts where a new ‘enlightened’ pedagogy is geared to making even pre-adolescents knowledgeable about ‘safe sex’. The sexual constraints which a generation ago were taken to be those of ‘nature’ are now the objects of public disputes as to what is ‘natural’.

And in a related manner, self-mutilation of the body (‘master and slave piercings’), especially genitals and orifices, has become notorious, spreading rapidly beyond its original West Coast sadomasochistic culture. The practitioners of this new cultural movement have been called ‘the modern primitives’ (quite different from the ‘primitives’ of modern painting such as Rousseau and Grandma Moses), but, as a syndicated columnist recently reported, the movement is also one of resistance: ‘the conscious attempt to repudiate Western norms and values by adopting the marks and rings of primitive cultures’ (Leo, 1995). It is ironic that the mutilation of the body, including bleeding, which in an earlier period in both Western and Eastern Europe was practiced by individuals and sects as a radical form of Christian asceticism would today be done as a sort of chthonic self-definition and self-assertion in opposition to a perceived Christian-industrial civilization. The new prominence of the body and body markings as a terrain of expression of self-identity, individual and collective, certainly gives justification to the anterior philosophical and sociological attention given to the body by Merleau-Ponty (1964) and Turner (1984).

Besides feminism and the bio-sexual sphere, the ‘return of the chthonic’ has found another major ingress in its appeal to ‘tradition’ in another important group, the African American community. ‘Africa’ as both a primeval and a contemporary homeland has a long history of appeal to diaspora Africans in the Western hemisphere, from pre-First World War pan-Africanism in the West Indies (e.g. Williams, Damas, Garvey) to post-Second World War America (e.g. Wright, Baldwin, Haley). The discovery of African soil has served to provide for a group identity different from the one handed down by mainstream ‘European’ or ‘white’ civilization associated with domination and

oppression. But the movement is not a one-way return voyage: intriguing are some fairly recent cultural imports of chthonic Africa into the contemporary Western urban scene, particularly but not solely 'kwanzaa' and 'santeria'.

'Kwanzaa' (from the Swahili *matunda ya kwanza* or 'first fruits') was imagined as an 'African American holiday' in 1966) – a seven-day holiday (26 December–1 January) combining continental African and diaspora African cultural elements (Karenga, 1988; Madhubuti, 1993). Its creator has stressed the nexus of this most recent of holidays with traditional African community renewal:

tradition is our grounding, our cultural anchor and therefore our starting point. It is also cultural authority for any claims to cultural authenticity for anything we do and think as an African people. (Karenga, 1988: 15)

Kwanzaa in the popular culture of the African community in the United States<sup>16</sup> has become an important vehicle of both family celebration and of communal resistance, since its feature of gift-giving to children is also intended

... to put to an end the negative and demeaning practice of reducing African American parents to the role of mediators and messengers for a mythological elf or a strange European. (Karenga, 1988: 87)<sup>17</sup>

*La Regla de Ocha*, more commonly called 'santeria', is another phenomenon drawing ultimately from African origins that has had a rapid spread in North America in recent decades, although an important phase of its development as a reconstructed collective identity took place among Afro-Cubans in the last century. It has received recently a good deal of attention (partly related to court cases in Florida over issues of religious freedom involving its animal sacrifices) and new scholarship (Brandon, 1993; Brown, 1992; Murphy, 1988).

'Santeria', previously seen as a syncretistic cult combining African and Christian elements, has received a new evaluation as a feature of Yoruba tradition related to Black nationalism. The 'modern' phase of santeria is traced to black Americans from the mainland being initiated in Cuba in 1959 and returning to open in Harlem a 'Shango Temple' in 1960 (Brown, 1992: 106); thousands of exiles from the Cuban revolution since then have propagated the santeria religion from Miami to New York on the Atlantic Coast and as far as Los Angeles. There are two things about this new, neo-pagan religion that merit attention. One is that it has in the black inner-city experience empowered the actors to redeem their (objective) condition of poverty. As a skilled anthropologist has noted, the rituals of santeria are played out on an elaborate symbolic urban stage:

Cultural shrines emerge in dialogue with conventional urban domestic space. Backyards, parks, rivers, monuments, cemeteries, crossroads and police stations are seen as dwelling places of spirits, where propitiatory rites are conducted. (Brown, 1992: 7)

Second, this fascinating process of ‘traditionalizing’ or ‘Africanizing’ the metropolitan urban landscape, which in the inner city is a ghostly or ghastly remainder of a Euro-industrial epoch, also entails a rejection by its practitioners of the wider society’s Judeo-Christian matrix.<sup>18</sup> The founders of the ‘Shango Temple’ who brought back from Cuba elements of the cult ‘sought self-consciously to “purify” the religion of European and Catholic elements’ (Brown, 1992: 106).

From the above discussion, we might infer that in the current period of modernity chthonic metaculture has increasingly provided vehicles of cultural opposition and antagonism to Christian metaculture, in marked contrast to their interaction at the beginning of this millennium.

### Conclusion

What does the line of analysis presented in this paper lead to? I began by examining two suggestive pieces providing broad global interpretations of the new, post-Cold War era, one positing an ‘end of ideology’ perspective, the second a rethinking of international relations in terms of clashing civilizations. Both merit serious consideration by sociologists who are interested in the cultural sphere as a strategic sector for understanding the dynamics of change. While these *global* approaches are enticing, as are in a related way the various ‘world-system’ studies emphasizing the development of political economy, on the one hand, or the ‘globalization’ studies stressing the cultural development of ‘humankind’, on the other, there is still need to consider the reality and vitality of cultural changes within Western civilization.<sup>19</sup> The basic methodological supposition which frames this paper is that immanent cultural change is neither residual nor ancillary to accounting for structural changes of large-scale units such as civilizations; it is an integral aspect of such change.

Since the religious sphere has been recognized as an important locus of cultural change in the classic frames developed by Durkheim and Weber, it might be in order before closing this paper to relate its perspective to some other modern formulations linking religion and modernity.

In 1963 Bellah provided an ambitious *evolutionary* account of changes in the religious sphere as related to other social spheres (1970). His paradigm comprised five stages of religious symbolization: primitive, archaic, historic, early modern and modern. Arguably, the approach of Bellah and the one presented here have a degree of compatibility: the emergence on the world scene of each new stage after the primordial ‘primitive’ may be viewed as ushering a new epoch of modernity, given Bellah’s indication that each stage of new symbolisms is attended by new forms of action and social organization. The ‘chthonic’ metaculture we have presented would probably be seen as initially emerging in Bellah’s ‘archaic’ stage wherein ‘religions tend to elaborate a vast cosmology in which all things divine and natural have a place’, with an emphasis on ‘sacrifice’ as a major form of religious action (1970: 30). ‘Christian’ and ‘Gnostic’ metacultures would likely be seen as arising in the ‘historic’ stage.

Where I differ from Bellah is that the evolutionary scheme undergirding his essay seems increasingly inappropriate for our postmodern era. On the one hand, unilinear schemes of social evolution, including religious ones, which privilege the end point are increasingly challenged as masking intellectual domination; on the other hand, evolutionary schemes do not allow for the reversibility and/or cyclical aspects of trends. The present order of modernity (socially, culturally and technologically), ushered in in the past quarter of a century, requires us to rethink the progressive nature of change inherited from the Enlightenment. Not only has the 'secularization' thesis of the 1960s been contradicted by the upsurge of religious currents in the public sphere of various 'secularized' societies (socialist and liberal, democratic and authoritarian), but the reappearance and reinvention of the 'chthonic' point to the fact that 'the return of the sacred' does not halt at the 'historic' stage of religion but to older, even ancient 'traditions' whose very distance from the 'modern' social order is a source of powerful appeal. As a cultural resistance and opposition to the vast Christian (and Gnostic) overlay of Western civilization, the 'return of the chthonic' is suggestive that the validity of the religious evolutionary paradigm has to be rethought.

From another perspective, the three metacultures discussed here as the major 'operating systems', or 'lodestones' of Western civilization bear resemblance to the earlier analysis of Sorokin and his three types of competing cultural supersystems; the Sensate, the Ideational and the Idealistic (Sorokin, 1962). Although 'Christian metaculture' and 'Ideational' have overlap, they are not the same, and the divergence between 'Chthonic' and 'Sensate', and 'Gnostic' and 'Idealistic' are equally marked, though I will not go into detailed examination.

There is also an affinity between the perspective I have proposed here and the comparative 'axial age' civilizational analysis of Eisenstadt (1984, 1986, 1992). The latter has insightfully stressed the role of 'heterodoxies' or alternative sacred visions of symbolic and institutional arrangements which can serve as levers of change and modernization in societal transformations. Although one customarily thinks of deviant or marginal religions (such as the Protestant sects in the 16th century) as vehicles of 'heterodoxies', I would propose that Gnostic and chthonic metacultures have equally been sources of heterodoxies in the case of 'modern' Western civilization.<sup>20</sup> The interactions, conflictual as well as accommodative, of these heterodoxies with the 'orthodox' Christian metaculture, have been, in the last analysis, a major source of Western civilization's internal contradictions and propensity for change.

Today, it is hard to say if one metaculture is dominant. The three are competing for space and resources in the public sphere, and each has constituencies and powerful adherents. In this sense, the approach of this paper is congruent with the premise of Stephen Warner's recent proposal of a new paradigm for the sociology of religion (1993). Central to his argument is that American religious institutions, unlike their European counterpart, have operated in a deregulated or open market, and that this has given religion much greater flexibility in coping with modernity than conceived of in an

older paradigm framed in terms of evolution and 'secularization'. Warner's emphasis on the 'new voluntarism', drawn from Roof and McKinney (1987), is more explicitly micro oriented<sup>21</sup> in its unit of analysis than the metaculture perspective, and his materials are grounded in the specific American situation, rather than the broader civilizational matrix.

Yet Warner's parting call for 'comparative institutional research' to 'demystify the concept of American exceptionalism' (1993: 1081) invites a dialogue with the metaculture approach. The 'open market' perspective may be extended beyond the United States to a postmodern tendency for the deregulation of the religious market (with important pockets of resistance in the 'traditional' Islamic world and in the newly regained orthodox lands).<sup>22</sup> Added leverage may be provided in viewing the 'open market' as one characterizing Western civilization today as the setting not of 'an end of ideology', and not as a monolithic sociocultural entity, but as one marked by a few, highly powerful metacultures as competing and interactive programs, operating outside of traditional boundaries.

In sum, a new way of interpreting the present period of transition is to view the ongoing competition as well as the accommodation between metacultures as a continuing and striking feature of Western modernity.

#### *Notes*

1. In speaking of these global changes, I do not mean to negate or trivialize no less intensive but less extensive changes that have punctuated specific countries or regions of the world in relatively brief time periods in this century – for example, the decolonization of Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the women's 'liberation' movement in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the 'Quiet Revolution' in Quebec in the 1960s.
2. Discussions of the change from 'modern' to 'postmodern', which have occupied a great deal of attention, seem to be rather ahistorical and, tacitly, a negation of the facticity of the world. I admit to a 'realist' bias, though without privileging any one account of the course of history.
3. I am quite aware that these terms are amorphous constructions lacking spatial-temporal specificity, but in spite of definitional inadequacy, the 'West' and 'Islam' are still useful notation signs.
4. Since I am talking about culture as a factor in large-scale social change, I do not include in this genealogy other well-known sociologists who are predominantly interested in culture as reinforcing power and hierarchy.
5. I extend here the notion of 'metaculture' which Robertson (1988: 5) proposed earlier as 'a way of addressing the varying links between culture and social structure and between culture and individual action'. Archer made reference to this term in her endeavor to 'release culture from subordination, to restore its relative autonomy and retrieve its moral potency' (1990: 111) from its neglect by industrial society theorists.
6. A major difference with approaches that ground modernity in the Enlightenment and its legacy is that I view the historical process as having shifting centers of modernity, with these coming into being before the 18th century and presently, with an emergent center in East Asia.

7. It is important to specify the broad civilizational base 'in the West' because Gnostic metaculture is also operative in other major global regions, such as Asia, as Carl Jung (one of the most sensitized Westerners to Gnostic metaculture) so well realized.

8. The negative denotation of 'pagan' may be going through a metamorphosis. I have seen many internet messages between persons who proudly refer to themselves as 'Pagans' or 'Neo-Pagans' in opposition to the Christian mainstream. This might be seen as another instance of a negated or 'dominated' minority revalorizing the term given to it by the dominant majority, similar, for example, to the revalorization of 'queer' by homosexuals.

9. To substantiate this would require a great deal of attention and space. Although in its teachings the Catholic tradition was as ascetic regarding sexuality as the Protestant, it may be said to have provided for greater tolerance in human weakness in observing the ideal. In providing via the sacrament of confession and penance a means of rectifying the misconduct, it made sexuality a field of 'surveillance' but not one of 'purity or danger', unlike the Calvinist tradition of Protestantism.

10. Either by coincidence or in keeping with its gnostic ethos, the Princeton Institute in the 1970s was the setting for not granting a permanent faculty status to one of the most eminent social scientists in America because, some of its members feared, he was too much of a 'believer'.

11. American 'religious exceptionalism' is not just a matter of the religious vitality and activism of the United States in comparison to other advanced industrial societies; it may also designate that in the modern American historical experience, Christianization and secularization worked in parallel, at least until quite recently, whereas in the European context the two processes have been divergent.

12. In contemporary Great Britain and the United States, Wicca is the restoration or discovering of the archaic, pre-Christian 'Earth religion', having the goddess Diana (Artemis) as the central figure, whose cult was officiated by women. Wicca is viewed by sociologists of religion as one of the 'New Religious Movements' that came into advanced industrial societies in the counterculture of the past three decades. On this, see Kirkpatrick et al. (1986), Finley (1991), Barker (1982), Berger (1995), Griffin (1995), Neitz (1991).

13. As to Emma Goldman, starting in 1906, she edited for many years the anarchist *Mother Earth Bulletin*, whose title 'invoked ancient mother-goddesses of fertility to act as witnesses to the original purity and innocence of the procreative urge and to the need for freedom in sexual relations', Drinnon (1968).

14. Regarding cyberspace, on 14 June 1995 recipients of list <ANDERE-L@Ucsbvm.ucsb.edu> received a message which read, in part: '... in the 2 years that I've been an active Internet participant, I've been struck by how many Wiccans and Pagans I've met. I've wondered about the connection: whether the anonymity of the Net offers protection, or if there is a more general connection between college educated, computer literate, well-read, etc. individuals and Paganism...'. Metacultures and religious orientations of World Wide Web users offers an intriguing field of investigation for the sociology of religion!

15. In the United States, there is an interesting contradiction regarding sexuality's emergence in the public sphere. For while we have moved into a tacit acceptance of discussions and displays of sexual parts if not sexual conduct, strict injunctions against sexual harassment have also become part of the landscape, and public



officials can fall from grace and office for sexual peccadillos. Chthonic enjoyment of the pleasures of the flesh still has some Puritan limitation.

16. By African community in the United States is meant not recent arrivals from Africa but all those who accept an African origin as ancestral homeland and as a 'primordial element' (Geertz) for relating to others.

17. One of the gifts of parents, intended to 'break the oppressor's monopoly on our minds', is a 'heritage symbol' of Africa, whether an African art object or, for those who cannot afford anything else, a picture of Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary Bethune, Malcolm X or 'any other hero, heroine, or aspect of our history' (Karenga, 1988: 88).

18. One can see the conversion to Islam among a sector of the African American population as having a similar basis to the Americanization of Yoruba religion, namely the rejection of what comes to be perceived as alien cultural domination. Both are important aspects of black cultural nationalism in the reshaping of group identity, though they still are in terms of total adepts a small proportion of the black population in North America.

19. The 'world-system' perspective, owing in inspiration to Marx and *Annales* historian Fernand Braudel, has been developed in a series of volumes by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974–84) with related socioeconomic studies by various scholars including Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall (1993) and Giovanni Arrighi (1994). The cultural emphasis in globalization studies is forcefully expressed by Roland Robertson in various writings, particularly *Globalization* (1992).

20. 'Modern' can be understood in several time-frames: from the Enlightenment to the present, from the 'long sixteenth century' to the present, or, as I think also appropriate in a sociology of culture approach, from the institutionalization of Christianity in a symbolically and chronologically unified Europe inaugurated by Charlemagne and completed 500 years later with new patterns of urbanization and the appearance of universities as centers of learning.

21. For example, in discussing 'religious switching' among individuals.

22. This tendency was already contained in Max Weber's (1958b: 329) trenchant observation: 'Asia was, and remains, in principle, the land of the free competition of religions, "tolerant" somewhat in the sense of late antiquity.'

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