

THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS DEMONS

Posted on January 5, 2022



We should be open to receiving wholeness and beauty, open to the transcendent as it manifests in the bizarre fact of harmony, the startling presence of relationship. In this way we may manifest our oikos in all its coherence, its unity, and avoid developing the kind of resentment that would have us go about compulsively deconstructing our neighbor's identity.

Category: [Essay](#)

Tags: [beauty](#), [Carlos Perona Calvete](#), [Christianity](#), [culture](#), [home](#), [oikophobia](#), [oikos](#), [philosophy](#)

One autumn, years ago, leaving a corner store with friends and a robust supply of candy, a more pedestrian disagreement emerged as one of our party began reproaching another for his purchase. For his part, it seemed, he had no intention of coming to the door should trick-or-treaters come knocking.

"You have to give them *something*," insisted the first, "in case the devil..."

It was a strange answer. I've written an ellipsis where he intended a full stop. Entering now into the fray of conversation, I inquired after that odd bit of folksy wisdom.

"In case the devil what?"

"...wants his due." He obliged me, matter-of-factly, before adding that some of the neighborhood teenagers had been known to take the trick or treat option literally. Still, this felt somehow like a rationalization for what had been a genuine admission of

superstition.

In an essay on folklore, the Indian philosopher and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy noted the following phenomenon:

The content of folklore is metaphysical ... We observe, for example, that the primitive craftsman leaves in his work something unfinished, and that the primitive mother dislikes to hear the beauty of her child unduly praised; it is 'tempting Providence,' and may lead to disaster. (Coomaraswamy, [Primitive Mentality](#))

This was my friend's attitude to opening his door in case trick-or-treaters decided to cover it in egg and toilet paper—in case the devil decided to take his due. It was like the craftsman leaving his work unfinished, which is to say, open, not allowed to constitute a closed system in itself. A carpet must have its fringes. We could call this *apotropaic openness*. Apotropaic because it is meant to ward off fiends. Yet, surprisingly, these seem to be the agents of that providence we fear tempting, per Coomaraswamy. Providence, or God, here coincides with the devil, and we must make a deal with it, offer it sacrifice, tribute, candy, in exchange for safety, or at least for being left alone. The door to our house is the opening through which to propitiate hungry specters, but by the very same token, it is the opening through which those ghouls might rear their heads.

Such piety denies the aesthetic beauty of openness, relationality, community. Openness is a technology to avert danger. By being uncomfortably open, we remain unfinished. By giving the devil his due, we avoid tempting fate. But why are we afraid of completeness, of being whole, in this manner? Why are we attached to the idea that such completeness would lead to disaster? In part because complete things—coherent, beautiful wholes—cannot excite our problem-solving faculties. They instead inspire us with contemplation, inviting us, sometimes vertiginously, into a relaxation of mental tension. Insofar as most of us identify with that tension—that constant, albeit low-level or unacknowledged, psychic agitation—we perceive the slackening of such activity as a sort

of death.

In politics, this manifests in *oikophobia*, hatred of the home. We do not want to celebrate what we are or what we have, or revel too much in its seamless aesthetic beauty. We instead need to find the fault lines, the contradictions, therein. We need to open the door of the *oikos* for the devil, if only to give him momentary tribute. Denying ourselves in this way, we will jealously lash out against those who seem able to walk in faith, those who seemingly do without our abnegations and sacrifices, yet somehow survive. This is the secret discourse of 'openness' that currently prevails. Openness (or its analogous 'spontaneity,' 'being natural,' 'being oneself,' etc.), for all its promise, is meant to be punitive.

We may consider how frequently sexual liberation and sexuality itself are (anti-erotically) marshalled as a weapon against old mores—a triumphant scandalizing of those depicted as, at best, stuffy conservatives and, at worst, morally irredeemable '*-phobes*.' Likewise, immigration is often described as enriching, but also as restitution for past colonialism and a deserved end to the cultural homogeneity clung to by xenophobes. The right (when it makes economic liberalism its chief concern) does this as well, invoking the free market not only as open field of competition but as grueling arena that would bring low the incompetent leftist political opponent whose degree in some newfangled field of sociology is hoped to be as practically useless as it is ideologically distasteful. It may be so, but imagining vengeance delivered by the invisible hand of the market turns openness and freedom into bywords for punishment. Key to this, although it would take us far afield to develop, is the tactical deployment of Rene Girard's mimetic rivalry for the purposes of social engineering (a topic that deserves its own exploration).

Coherent identities are allowed principally as gestures against established ones, ones whose gravitas, be it inherent or inherited from generations of loyal adherence, has made them odious to the rapacious deconstructivism of the culture industry. We need only think of the interminable string of forgettable 'strong female characters'TM whose strength and character are rigorously circumscribed to opposing 'the patriarchy.' Otherwise, identities as defined in terms of their parts, and not the whole. I recently saw an otherwise very

good [BBC documentary](#) about Africa in which it was emphasized that the Asante of Ghana are an amalgam of peoples, that Swahili culture is not so much African as it is a fusion of African with Arabic culture, with additional Indian and Portuguese influences, and so on. I would not deny such characterizations, but they seem to reveal an attitude allergic to considering cultural forms in their unity, and not only in their constituent elements.

On one level, then, we are dealing with the modern, political expression of an old superstition: fear of tempting fate and being punished for hubris. However, another reading of that superstition is possible. Perhaps the traditional craftsman is not really leaving his work slightly undone, slightly open as self-effacement for fear of inciting punishment. Perhaps he is rather leaving it open for beauty's sake. Something must suggest to the observer that the craftsman's work is not only the surface image which he presently sees, that it can pour forth and give way to what is beyond, that it receives itself from beyond itself. Houses have windows, and it would be absurd to imagine that the ideal house should have none.

Where Coomaraswamy distinguishes folklore both from mere religious dogma and secular understandings of science, he does not properly parse it from superstition. Folklore might begin with superstition, but it ends with a wink. If this is not properly understood, a slavish legalism comes to hide the initial insight. There is a saying in some parts of Andalusia, "Don't leave until later what you can do now. And so, he shat his pants." The first part is directed at the listener, the second is said by the speaker to herself (usually a mother) mocking the listener's potential naivete. It does not contradict the *practice* of getting on with one's work, but it dispels the idea that it might constitute some universal injunction. There are limits to the rules, if they are to serve man, for man was not made for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

The same external appearance, then, the same fringes on a carpet, can correspond either to superstition or to an entirely different mentality, except that, in the case of superstition, it will tend to be compulsively adhered to and taken too far. The same is true for Halloween and Carnival, very roughly the gates of winter flanking the year's rebirth. Donning costumes can represent temporarily becoming a monster, or else wearing the

skins of those monsters we have slain. If demon-clad trick or treaters are not stand-ins for demonic tribute-collectors, their visits become instead a ritualized door-to-door neighborly charity, a loving bond rather than a fearful bargain.

Slavoj Žižek made a similar point in his dialogue with theologian John Milbank, published as *The Monstrosity of Christ* (he rehearses some of his argument [here](#)). He begins by reminding us of Christ's words on the cross, *my god my god why have you abandoned me?* (for the sake of Žižek's argument, we may ignore that this is a reference to Psalm 22). Thereafter, having resurrected, Jesus speaks of the 'Paraclete' (traditionally the Holy Spirit) that will be sent wherever two or more gather in love in his name. According to Žižek, the god who seemed to have abandoned Christ did so genuinely and permanently: in the throws of crucifixion, the Divine *as transcendent reality* has been tested and discovered empty. Thereafter, the only divinity (lower case 'd') will be that of the human collective endowed with the paraclete (understood as proper ethical convivance). It is true that the post-resurrection teaching according to which the Spirit is present where persons gather in love re-locates Divinity, that is, it disrupts the idolatrous projection of God as a being *out there* so common in calcified, legalistic religiosity. But this is precisely not the 'Christian atheism' Žižek claims. God is not abolished for the sake of the agapeic community that takes His place, but made imminently present therein.

What the Gospel points to is, in fact, a turn to a true metaphysics where God is not imagined as a large, powerful being among smaller, weaker ones. A god who is a being among beings is precisely not a metaphysical God, not the Being *of* beings. To find that forms can relate harmoniously in the first place, that patterns exist, that things hold together at all, that there can be such a thing as a community of love: this is to admit underlying ontological unity. The alternative would be conflicting individual trajectories pacified by force or by accidental cause, that is, state tyranny or faith in supposed impersonal forces like the market or historical dialectic.

The god who is merely a being among beings, a great other, can only be known over and against that harmonious relation between forms—forms expressing unity not as the harmony between them but as their uniformity with respect to a particular, albeit more

exquisite, form. We might explain this in terms of a thought experiment: instead of understanding circularity as that by virtue of which differently colored circles are all circular, for example, we absurdly come to define it as a *particular* circle. Since any shape must be drawn in some particular color, whatever the color of our chosen circle happens to be will become included in our definition of circularity. If it is blue, then all circles, to be truly circular, must become blue. The blue circle is an idol (rather than an icon) for circularity. This is the situation of certain theological deviations.

We have adopted an ‘apophatic’ approach to shape, so to speak, refusing to ascribe any particular color to it. When we avoid the mistake of using a contingent feature to define a universal principle, each of our circles—blue, red, yellow, green—can be so while also attempting to perfect their shape individually and to form a wider circle collectively (in the Christian tradition, we may think of the meaning of Pentecost and Revelations 7). ‘Pure’ nationalism sees the former without the latter. It understands that each human society instantiates universals such as justice and order, but it does not want to fathom the ‘shape’ that they should, correspondingly, form together. Somewhat confusedly, and without the explicit conformity to tradition that it entails, Gianni Vattimo expresses our point in his *After Christianity*:

The death of the moral God marks the impossibility of preferring truth to friendship, because the meaning of that death is that there is no ‘objective,’ ontological truth that might be upheld as anything other than friendship, will to power, or subjective bond.

We should be open, then, but open to receiving wholeness and beauty, open to the transcendent as it manifests in the bizarre fact of harmony, the startling presence of relationship. In this way we may manifest our *oikos* in all its coherence, its unity, and avoid developing the kind of resentment that would have us go about compulsively deconstructing our neighbor’s identity. Instead of expressing unity through uniformity, what we have called ‘apotropaic openness,’ we may express unity through harmony, ‘apophatic openness.’ This is an argument against homogenization and conflict, as well as

The EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVE

in favor of treating forms, including identities and political communities, as both *whole in themselves* and in *harmony with others*. The defense of national identity, a diverse ecumene, the 'communitarianism' of the Gospel and classical metaphysics are all of a piece. The door will be opened, not fearfully in order to compromise with a great devilish outside, but joyfully to commune with the neighbor.

The above suggests a wider discussion, one that could range from an analysis of present conditions, looking at why coherent forms are viewed with extreme skepticism in mainstream discourse, and only really allowed if they are weaponized against inherited institutions, on the one hand, and on the other, a look at how the positive conception outlined here represents a traditional understanding of political order which is very much relevant to our age.