TO CONFRONT A NEW DELPHIC ORACLE

James Noel Ward

Entering the Modern Areopagus

James Noel Ward *is Assistant Professor of Finance at the American University of Paris. Raised in The Episcopal Church USA, he was received into the Catholic Church and confirmed during the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, March 20, 2008, at the Cathedral of the Resurrection in the Diocèse d’Evry by Bishop Michel Dubost, C.I.M.*

Scrolls long ago were discarded in favor of codex. Scrolls themselves had replaced baked clay tablets. The codex to printed book has had a good, long run, but new media beckons. At Mass, I still use a printed missal; only embarrassment keeps me from using my smartphone with digital missal, alternate readings, and scrollable French, English, and Latin text. An app with 80 Bible translations is at my fingertips. St. Paul, in his sermon in the Areopagus, instructs us to preach where those who are searching seek answers: “Now all the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21). We, too, must heed the imperative of the Great Commission, however comfortable our old methods and media have become. We must go to the Areopagus.

NOR readers cannot be faulted for not swimming in alternate waters and cyberspaces low and high where souls are seeking answers, for the NOR is a thought journal, not a debate forum. The noise of the *Kultursmog* of the Internet often overwhelms the signal, and caution is prudent. We must, however, turn our attention to where the harvest may prove bountiful. And that place increasingly, and perhaps permanently, is in the forums, threads, and disjointed chaos of social media and its deformed progeny. It behooves us to recall that the early Church was built by the presence of the Apostles and their teachings, and though the texts and oral testimony that circulated widely in their wake were inspired, false and error-filled teachings abounded, too. Diligent correction was an early calling of all the faithful. Dogmatic definitions, canon law, and the canon of Scripture were hard fought to preserve. Apologists in online forums and modern media defend against the same winds today.

Which brings us to the curious case of Bronze Age Pervert (BAP, for short), of unfortunate name, or “handle,” in his world. Author of the self-published *Bronze Age Mindset* (2018), BAP is present in 4Chan discussion threads and on YouTube, and he produces weekly subscription-only podcasts with approximately 6,500 paying clients (I am among them). He was banned from Twitter but reinstated in December 2022, and he now has over 100,000 followers. A Google search turns up scores of articles addressing or discussing his work, all written in palatable forms. But BAP’s own subjects and rhetoric are for adults only.

Who is BAP, what does he espouse, and what compels the attention of orthodox Catholics? After all, Internet celebrities — like shooting stars and subatomic particles — continuously flicker in and out of existence. There are three principal reasons why he should be taken seriously and why he merits a serious response by serious Catholics.

The first reason is BAP’s appeal to young men. The cultural deprecation — under the guise of “toxic masculinity” — of the role of husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, sons, and consecrated religious as leaders, protectors, servers, and bearers of sacrifice has taken its toll. Even Hegelians agree that from this pejorative-label thesis an antithesis has arisen, which social engineers equally pejoratively label “hyper-masculinity” or “mega-masculinity.” BAP swims in these Aegean waters, encouraging young men to train and develop their bodies into works of art — the Greek ideal form — by worshiping in the temple of steel, namely, gyms in which to lift weights.

In addition, BAP offers simultaneously rebellious, stimulating, inspiring, and leading ideas, for he discards the dominant cultural *Zeitgeist* as the foundationless trash it is. Unabashed masculinity meets with hostility on all fronts, and there is nothing better than a real challenge to attract and inspire men. BAP taps into this masculine instinct, which is currently culturally suppressed, dormant, and sometimes perverted to the point of degeneracy. He argues ~~that~~ the natural condition of life is the domination of the strong and noble over the weak and ugly. Specifically, he argues for the rise a warrior caste of virile men of European descent who will dominate the urban American “wasteland” he sees as currently overrun by Jews and blacks. His political philosophy is centered on a rejection of the liberal bureaucratic state. “The only right government is military government,” he writes in *Bronze Age Mindset*, “and every other form is both hypocritical and destructive of true freedom.” He has been called a fascist, a racist, a misogynist, and a homophone. Yet his message is resonating far and wide.

In a word, BAP is winning converts while our seminaries are empty. Catholics are doing something wrong.

Second, in contrast to Graeme Wood’s summary description in *The Atlantic* (Sept.) that “his views are so outlandish that even when stated simply, they sound like incoherent ranting,” BAP offers a *Weltanschauung* of complex, articulate, entertaining, and intellectually referent depth. In this respect, he is comparable to the 20th-century philosopher Isaiah Berlin in the breadth of his engagement with the development of Western intellectual thought. Like his hero Nietzsche, BAP has followed threads of philology to unearth and breathe life into embers of ideas long dormant but not extinguished. He has a compelling intellectual archeology from which those who dig into his thinking benefit, for he brings to their attention thinkers and ideas long ignored by the dominant Overton window of common discourse. To understate his worldview, BAP embraces the deep-pagan Greek roots of the thinking of the 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, “the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason.” Nature, will, and power are his animating ideas; he discards reflection. Beauty is truth, reason a farcical construct against nature.

All of which compels Catholics to stand in St. Paul’s place on this new Areopagus and respond with both reason and testimony to the divine, supernatural, and miraculous nature of the Church and her work in the world. “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12).

BAP takes Catholicism seriously. His singular recognition of the intellectual depth of the Church’s claims on all fronts of human knowledge — and his recognition that what the Church teaches scarcely resembles the caricatures of common, uninformed popular discourse — speaks to his intellectual brinksmanship. He keeps his enemy, the Church, in sharp focus. BAP recognizes that she is his greatest contradiction, an immovable, enduring intellectual presence and historical reality. Yet, as he espouses his pagan ontology based on Greek, Nietzschean, and Schopenhauerian foundations, the Church is ever before him, as is He who founded her. As circumlocutious, chaotic, or disjointed as his intellectual jeremiads become, BAP rarely, if ever, mischaracterizes the Church or her teachings. This quality is telling, for he is no mouth-foaming Protestant embracing heresy as doctrine and as a rhetorical cudgel on the faithful.

A few traditionalist Catholics of the rigorist, militant, and anti-authoritarian school have engaged with BAP, and he is familiar with the articulations of paleo-ultramontanes and integralists alike, as well as their intellectual archeology and history. But the Church must, with finality of authority, assert her primacy as divine agent, custodian of the deposit of faith, and the last articulator of truth, and Catholics must not be fellow travelers with BAPists. Apologists such as those who appear in the NOR must dismantle this idol with its glorious golden head appealing to beauty, silver chest and arms appealing to nature, bronze middle and thighs appealing to power, iron legs appealing to ancient scholarship, but part iron and part clay feet, for it is rooted in a foundational jest, not in the Eternal Word.

The third reason BAP merits a Catholic response is his appeal — and perhaps this surprises — to academics and intellectuals. At the April 2022 LeFrak Forum on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy, hosted by the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University, the theme was “Liberalism and Its Discontents.” The annual forum presents research into and debate on the theory and practice of modern democracy. As one attendee said of last year’s gathering, “The enduring presence of BAP’s absence was palpable in the room the entire time.” Scholars of political science take BAP seriously, for his method belies his intellectual heft, and he dives through the thorns of their citations like a rabbit in a briar patch. Departments of political science increasingly are overwhelmed with applications for Ph.D. candidacy by BAPists, who have the academic credentials and qualifications to be admitted.

BAP is a combination jester, mad prophet, comic character, and Rabelaisian oracle. He employs all forms of humor: anecdotal, blue, burlesque, gallows, droll, epigrammatic, farcical, hyperbolic, ironic, sophomoric, self-deprecating, and slapstick. He interrupts his podcasts with fantastic pauses as receives attacks by Israeli commandos, insidious malign agents, exotic carnivorous animals, biting tropical insects, and unseen vampiric forces. He switches to highbrow humor with a sneer but also with a poignant deftness that amplifies absurdity. The only form of humor he does not use is deadpan, as it does not work in his chosen mediums. Chasing him down and defining him is a screwball adventure. His anonymity is a merry chase, his true agenda a Delphic mystery, his Janus face a fugitive god, and his warrior poet soul a receding Dionysus in puckish revel — “what fools these mortals be” in mocking laughter.

This raises a concern about how to respond to this mashup of Puck, Caliban, Falstaff, and Melampos who has led us to the revels of Naxos and Mount Kithairon. The rhetoric of Catholic apologists of the American variety too often is informed by a native Puritanism than is good for its effectiveness. BAP’s rhetorical method has more appeal to the spirited nature of today’s young men, for these revels have wiles. He is more fun to read and listen to than a plodding, dispassionate exegesis of our own confession. The example of the mirth of St. Thomas More is instructive.

May St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine intercede for the protection of our apologists, for their attackers are legion, jumping on the most picayune of imprecision. I use *legion* in that tongue-in-cheek sense in which modern Catholic apologists are weak and BAP is strong. BAP’s joyous, unhinged id delivers laughs-a-plenty and contemplation abundantly; thus, his appeal to misdirected young men. Of course, contemporary Catholic apologists are in a solemn struggle to persuade and correct, but if there is no joyous laughter even this side of the precipice of damnation and Hell, then Heaven, too, must be mirthless. This cannot be true of eternal joy. Po’-faced apologetics has no appeal to those who seek joyous truth, the zooey of life abundant.

BAP paints his rhetoric with a broad, imprecise brush, and it advances his appeal and furthers deeper engagement by those who engage with him. Perhaps engaging the unconverted with a “You are going to Hell. Change my mind” tack followed by a hearty laugh is the new frontier of apologetic rhetorical expediency. BAP’s rhetoric works while dispassionate, Wittgensteinianism, propositional apologetics fails for a key demographic of angry young men. Our voice must change for this audience.

Who is Bronze Age Pervert? Is he merely a comic incarnation of a Dostoyevskian figure, an imago, a personae, the reincarnation of Vladimir Nabokov, toying with us? His IRL (in-real-life) identity is known among his 4Chan acolytes, and I am not doxing him by identifying him as Costin Vladimir Alamariu, who holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Yale (his 2015 dissertation was titled “The Problem of Tyranny and Philosophy in the Political Thought of Friedrich Nietzsche”) and a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the child of Romanian immigrants and, according to some sources, is of Ashkenazi descent. He was raised in the middle-class academic ghettos of Coolidge Corner, Brookline, and later Newton, Massachusetts, where, as a teenager, he was surrounded by a large cultural presence of American Jews with tangency to the second and third generation of the European intellectual diaspora brought on by Soviet and European anti-Semitism. A stable suburban childhood in a dominant Euro-American, bourgeois, Jewish subculture is an unlikely seedbed for the reincarnation of Zarathustra’s eternal return in the form of an historical-farce Harlequin, forever bearding melancholic Pierrots of academia.

It is this last element of BAP/Alamariu that compels the most curiosity and inspires this prolegomenon, for much of his vitriol — whether rhetorical flourish or actual conviction — is of the tin-foil-hat variety of anti-Semitism. Further, he calls for a selective genocide through eugenic science and an appeal to pagan “nature.”

For Catholics, this idea of BAP’s merits a most urgent response, for a human soul is of infinite value, created by a loving God, so much so that He died and was resurrected to redeem each soul to live forever in His presence, experiencing eternal joy in the beatific vision. BAP’s arguments are of such appeal that his adherents are hurtling toward a diabolic element of an incomplete teleology. A Catholic response and a personal appeal for BAP’s conversion are a pressing necessity. The perversion of his bronze-age spirit leads to a teleology of clay and iron, the compositional elements of a furnace.

Why does BAP demand our attention? Because those of great intellectual and persuasive rhetorical force who have been converts to the faith have become compelling and enduring voices testifying to the eternal mission of the Church: the salvation of souls. We want him on our side.

Augustine’s conversion ended in a Doctor of the Church. Other intellectual converts include St. John Henry Newman, G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh, Dorothy Day, Christopher Dawson, Avery Dulles, Robert Hugh Benson, Robert Bork, Kenneth Clark, Russel Kirk, Mortimer J. Adler, Scott Hahn, Eugene D. and Elizabeth Genovese, Paul Williams, William George Ward, Alasdair McIntyre, Ronald Knox, G.E.M. Anscombe, and our own Dale Vree. A hero of BAP’s, Ernst Jünger, converted. Robert Novak, raised a secular Jew, whose rhetoric resembles BAP’s, converted. Joseph Pearce, whose former political *Weltanschauung* bordered on BAP’s, converted and is an apologist known to these pages. Of these conversions inspired by the Holy Spirit, “Jesus did countless things I haven’t included here. And if every one of his works were written down and described one by one, I suppose the world itself would not have enough room to contain the books to be written!” (Jn. 21:25).

Doubtless there are many souls praying for Alamariu’s conversion. If there is a saint in Heaven praying fervently for the same, I would guess the most efficacious prayers are those of one named for a pagan god. “But certain men clave unto him [St. Paul] and believed: among whom also was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (Acts 17:34). Dionysius the Areopagite, pray for us and for Costin Alamariu!