

The Christian Alternative to the Moral Decline of Society

It would be very difficult for anybody looking around the world today to resist the conclusion that something has gone very badly awry with what we continue to call western civilization.

This awareness is, in my opinion, muffled, if not obliterated, by the media, which manage to induce us to take for granted such continuingly explosive situations as Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Southern Africa and so on. They would have us see as positively beneficial, as an enlargement of our freedom, an enhancement of the quality of our living, the clear and ominous erosion of the moral standards on which our traditional way of life has been based.

I read once of an experiment—a rather horrible experiment—in which some frogs were put into a bowl of water. The water was very gently heated, and by the time it was boiling, the frogs were all dead. None of them had made the slightest effort to get out, because the heating of the water had been so very gradually done.

Well, it seems to me that we may well see ourselves as the frogs, and the media as the gas ring which keeps the water's temperature imperceptibly rising. And my suggestion to you is that it is rapidly approaching boiling point.

As for the reversal of moral standards so that, as the witches chant in Macbeth, "Fair is foul and foul is fair," there is a quotation by a French writer I admire very much: Simone Weil. It bears very closely on this—not just confusion between the concepts of good and evil, but actual replacement of one by the other.

The quotation says: "Nothing she writes is so beautiful,

nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy as the good; no desert is so dreary and monotonous and boring as evil. But with fantasy, it's the other way around. Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive and full of charm."

Simone Weil wrote that a decade or so before television had been developed to attract huge audiences all over the world, becoming incomparably the greatest fabricator and purveyor of fantasy that's ever existed, occupying as it does the attention of the average adult in our western part of the world for some 35 hours a week, or 12 years of his three score and 10 years of a normal life span.

And it seems to me that generally speaking, its offerings bear out Simone Weil's proposition to a quite remarkable degree, for in them it's almost invariably eros rather than agape that provides all the excitement, success and celebrity rather than a broken and contrite heart that is made to seem desirable, and it's "Jesus Christ, Superstar" rather than Jesus Christ on the cross who gets a folk hero's billing.

After all, good and evil provide the theme of the drama of our mortal existence. In this sense, they may be compared with the positive and negative points which generate an electric current. Transpose the points and the current fails, the lights go out, darkness falls, and all is confusion. The darkness which is falling on our civilization is likewise due to a transposition of good and evil.

In other words, what we are suffering from is not an energy crisis, or an overpopulation crisis, or a monetary crisis, or a balance of payments crisis, or an unemployment crisis but from the loss of a sense of a moral order in the universe. Without that, no order whatsoever, economic, social or political, is attainable.

The contemporary scene, I admit, presents particular temptations to observers with a satirical bent. Something I discovered when I was editor of Punch and professionally engaged in anatomizing those set in authority over us, with a view to making them figures of fun. As I discovered, an impossible task, because they invariably proved intrinsically funnier than anything I could possibly invent.

The fact is that there is built into life a strong ironical theme for which we should be duly grateful to our Creator.

God has mercifully made the diversions whereby we seek to evade this reality so ludicrous—the alternative pursuits of power, of sensual satisfaction, of money, of learning, of celebrity, of happiness—so preposterous, and their outcome so evidently disastrous that we are forced back to Him to cry out for help, for mercy.

We look back on history and what do we see? Empires rising and falling, revolutions and counterrevolutions succeeding one another, wealth accumulating and wealth dispersed, one nation dominant and then another. As Shakespeare puts it, “the rise and fall of great ones that ebb and flow with the moon.”

In one lifetime I’ve seen England ruling over a quarter of the world, and the great majority of my fellow countrymen convinced, in the words of what’s still one of their favorite songs, that “God, who had made them mighty, would make them mightier yet.”

I’ve heard a crazed Austrian announce the establishment of the German Reich that was to last for a thousand years; an Italian clown restart the calendar, to begin with his assumption of power; a Georgian brigand in the Kremlin hailed by the intellectually elite of the western world as wiser than Solomon, more humane than Marcus Aurelius.

I’ve seen this country, the United States, wealthier than all the rest of the world put together and with a superiority of

weaponry that would have enabled it, had it so wished, to outdo an Alexander or a Julius Caesar in the range and scale of its conquest. All in one little lifetime, gone with the wind.

England now an island off the coast of Europe, threatened with dismemberment and bankruptcy, having lost an empire on which the sun never set to acquire a commonwealth on which it never rises. Stalin, a forbidden name in the regime he helped to found and dominated totally for three decades. Hitler, Mussolini, seen as figures of fun. The United States haunted by fears of running out of the precious fluid that keeps the motorways roaring and the smog settling, by memories of a disastrous military campaign in Vietnam offset by the glorious victory when the Don Quixotes of the media so valiantly charged the windmills of Watergate.

Can this be what life is about? This worldwide soap opera, going on from century to century, from era to era, whose old discarded sets and props litter the earth? Surely not. Was it to provide a location for so repetitious and ribald a production as this that the universe was created and man, or *homo sapiens*, as he likes to call himself—heaven knows why—came into existence? I can't believe it.

If this were all, then the cynics, the hedonists, the suicides are right—the most we can hope for from life is amusement, the gratification of our senses, and death.

Now it's here that the great mercy of the incarnation comes in. The cosmic scene is resolved into a human drama; God reaches down to become a man and man reaches up to become God in order that men might comprehend the nature of their relationship with their Creator. Time looks into eternity and eternity into time, making now always and always now.

This is the Christian alternative—the sublime drama of the incarnation, God's special parable for fallen man in a fallen

world.

The way was charted for us in the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that successive generations of Christian believers have striven to follow, deriving therefrom the moral, spiritual and intellectual creativity out of which has come everything great—truly great—in our art, our literature, our music, the splendor of the great cathedrals and the illumination of the saints and mystics, as well as countless lives of men and women serving their God and loving their Savior in humility and faith.

It's a glorious record, not just of the past, but continuing now. The books are open, not closed. The incarnation was not an historical event, like the Battle of Waterloo, or the American Declaration of Independence—something that happened and then was over. It goes on happening all the time. God did not retreat back to His heaven when the fateful words, "It is finished," were uttered on Golgotha.

The Word that became flesh has continued and continues to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. There are examples on every hand; we have but to look for them.

For instance, take the man in Solzhenitsyn's labor camp who, you remember, occupied the bunk above his. A man who in some extraordinary way remained serene, brotherly, in that terrible place, and who had the custom, Solzhenitsyn noticed, of pulling out of his pocket much folded pieces of paper on which some sentences were scribbled. And of course it proved that the sentences were from the gospels. And it was reading them that sufficed to make him different from all the other people there.

Again, think of Mother Theresa and her ever growing missionaries of charity, going about their work of love with their own special geography of compassion, moving into country after country. There are sisters now of many nationalities

arriving in twos and threes at the troubled places of this troubled world with nothing to offer but Christ, no other purpose than to see in suffering men and women the person of their Savior and to heed His words, "as you have done it for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you have done it for Me" (Matt. 25:40).

The point is this: If the Christian revelation is true, then it must be true for all times and circumstances. Whatever may happen, however seemingly inimical to it may be the way the world's going, and those who preside over its affairs, its truth remains intact and inviolate. "Heaven and earth shall pass away," our Lord said, "but my words shall not pass away."

Our western civilization like others before it is subject to decay and must sometime or other decompose and disappear. But Christ is forever, or He's nothing.

The world's way of responding to intimations of decline and fall is to engage equally in idiot hopes and idiot despair. On one hand, some new discovery or policy will put everything to rights—a new fuel, a new drug, detente, world government, revolution, counterrevolution, North Sea oil.

On the other hand, some disaster will prove our undoing—capitalism will break down, communism won't work, fuel will run out, plutonium will lay us low, atomic wastes will kill us off, overpopulation will suffocate us or, alternatively, a declining birthrate will put us at the mercy of our enemies.

In Christian terms, such hopes and fears are equally beside the point. "As Christians, we know that here we have no continuing city, that crowns roll in the dust, and every earthly kingdom must sometime flounder. Whereas we acknowledge a king man did not crown and cannot dethrone, as we are citizens of a city man did not build, and cannot destroy."

Thus, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth,

living in a society remarkably like ours, as disillusioned, depraved, with the TV and games specializing in spectacles of violence and eroticism. He wrote to them that they must be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in God's work, that they should concern themselves with the things that are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal.

It was in the breakdown of Rome that Christendom was born, and now, if it's the breakdown of Christendom, there are the same requirements—to remain steadfast, unmovable, abounding in God's work, to eschew the fantasy of a disintegrating world and seek the reality of what is not seen and eternal.

So we may see in this Christian alternative, our only hope, our only prospect, in a darkening world—a certain, an immediate salvation for those who choose to avail themselves of it. After all, even if the 20-century nightmare utopias were veritably to come to pass that's not the end.

If men proved capable of constructing their kingdom of heaven on earth, with abundance ever broadening down from gross national product to gross national product, and the motorways reaching from pole to pole, and eros released to beget a regulation of two offspring, like a well-behaved child at a party taking just two cakes, and all genes counted and selected to produce only beauty queens and immense intelligences, the divergences thrown away with other waste products, and the media providing music and musak 'round the clock to delight and inform all and sundry, and appropriate men claim to cure all actual and potential ills, the alternative would still remain.

For even then, we may be sure, in some distant jungle a forgotten, naked savage would feel compelled to choose a stone and daub it with colored mud and bow himself down before it, in that act, in those abysmal circumstances, revealing himself as the true custodian of the Christian alternative.

So the Christian alternative in our particular circumstances, as in any others, is simply to be true to Christ. It may well be the case that western man has wearied of his freedom and is now consciously or unconsciously engaged in shedding the burden it imposes on him, thereby, if he but knew it, headed for a Gulag Archipelago or some other servitude.

Yet in Christ whoever cares to can find freedom—the glorious freedom of the children of God, the only lasting freedom there is. Again, to quote from St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

It may well be that western man has turned away from the great drama of the passion in favor of fleshly fantasies of the human will and appetites. Yet, if the preaching of the cross is indeed to them that perish foolishness, to those who believe, it continues to be the power of God, whereby affliction is seen as part of His love and out of a public execution burgeoned the most perfect hope and joy the human heart has ever entertained.

Let us then as Christians rejoice that we see around us on every hand the decay of the institutions and instruments of power, intimations of empires falling to pieces, money in total disarray, dictators and parliamentarians alike non-plussed by the confusion and conflicts which encompass them.

For it is precisely when every earthly hope has been explored and found wanting, when every possibility of help from earthly sources has been sought and is not forthcoming, when every recourse this world offers—moral as well as material—has been drawn on and expended to no effect, when in the shivering cold the last stick's been thrown on the fire, and in the gathering darkness every glimmer of light has finally flickered out, it's then that Christ's hand reaches out, sure and firm, that Christ's words bring their inexpressible comfort, that the light shines brightest, abolishing the darkness forever.

So, finding in everything only deception and nothingness, the soul is constrained to have recourse to God Himself and to rest content with Him.