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Renewing A
Shaken Culture

By Russell Kirk



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A few days past, my wife fell into casual conversation with three medical men. All three of the doctors were dismayed at the present situation and future prospects of the American people, and, unsolicited, expressed at some length their vaticinations. A surgeon, after remarking that on the imminent breadlines people would be armed and fighting, claiming rights but denying duties, then groaned. "It's all over! I thought we had more time! We lasted only two hundred years!"

This mood of despondency is widespread today. "Shine, perishing Republic!" in the line of Robinson Jeffers. The parallel with Roman decay is sufficiently obvious. As the American economy staggers under a burden of taxation that soon, we are promised—under Clinton Caesar—will be increased, the federal government sends the Marines to Somalia to take two million Somalis under our spread-eagle wings. It was thus the Romans occupied Greece, for the sake of the wayward Greeks—and never left Greece until the Greek cities were ruined in the collapse of the whole Empire. Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.

Yesteryear's great expectations are blasted. For the first time, a great many Americans suspect that America's culture is decadent. Some of them seem well content with the sickness of our old culture. "What do you mean by 'culture?' the Governor of New York exclaimed four months ago. "That's a word they used in Nazi Germany." This uncultured and unscrupulous demagogue is mentioned by President-elect Clinton as a praiseworthy future associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. When such persons are elevated to great power in the Republic, indeed there exists reason to raise the question of social decadence.

Defining Culture. There has appeared a spate of books about the present "Culture War." And much obloquy is cast upon the so-called "cultural elite" of the United States. Succinctly, how may we define this "culture" that has grown controversial? In my newest book, *America's British Culture*, published this week by the sociological firm of Transaction, I examine at length such definitions; but for the present, let us take a definition by Christopher Dawson, the great historian of culture, whose works, in twenty-two volumes, I have begun to edit in a uniform edition, at the request of the Homeland Foundation. Here, extracted from Dawson's first book, *The Age of the Gods* (1928), is that definition:

A culture is a common way of life—a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs.... And just as every natural region tends to possess its characteristic forms of animal and vegetable life, so too will it possess its own type of human society.... The higher culture will express itself through its material circumstance, as masterfully and triumphantly as the artist through the medium of his material.

Just so. Our American culture, derived in large part from centuries of British culture, has grown in this continent to a tremendous civilization; President Bush takes pride in the fact that America is now the only superpower. Pride goeth before a fall. That is why I am conversing with you on the subject of whether this civilization of ours may endure during the twenty-first century of the Chris-

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tian era. What, if anything, may you and I do to renew this shaken culture of ours?

In my preceding three lectures, I dealt with three menaces to the survival of our civilization: first, the fraud called multiculturalism, which is a device to pull down the inherited culture of these United States; second, the endeavor of militant secular humanists to undermine the religious heritage of the American people; third, the ideology called democratism, the heresy of democracy, which proclaims that one man is as good as another (or perhaps a little better), and that the voice of the abstract People is the voice of God. Of course these movements or attitudes are not the only reasons why our civilization appears to be in the sere and yellow leaf, but they are of fairly recent origin and constitute a clear and present danger. How may you and I contend with a tolerable hope against these forces, thus shoring up the footing of the edifice of the American common way of life?

Well, before we endeavor to prescribe remedies, we need to ascertain the causes of our difficulties. We must remind ourselves, to begin, that culture arises from the cult: out of the religious bond and the sense of the sacred grow any civilization's agriculture, its common defense, its orderly towns, its ingenious architecture, its literature, its music, its visual arts, its law, its political structure, its educational apparatus, and its mores. Christopher Dawson, Eric Voegelin, and other historians of this century have made this historical truth clear.

Decay of the Cult. Modern society's gravest afflictions, conversely, are caused by the decay of the cult upon which a society has been founded, or by the sharp separation of the trappings of a sophisticated civilization from the nurturing cult, with its glimpse of the transcendent. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his Templeton Address at London, put this plainly enough:

Our life consists not in the pursuit of material success but in the quest of worthy spiritual growth.

Our entire earthly existence is but a transition stage in the movement toward something higher, and we must not stumble or fall, nor must we linger fruitlessly on one rung of the ladder.... The laws of physics and physiology will never reveal the indisputable manner in which The Creator constantly, day in and day out, participates in the life of each of us, unfailingly granting us the energy of existence; when this assistance leaves us, we die. In the life of our entire planet, the Divine Spirit moves with no less force; this we must grasp in our dark and terrible hour.

Thus it should be understood that the ideology of secular humanism, the ideology of democratism, and the ideology of negritude that lies behind professed "multiculturalism," all are assaults upon a common way of life that has developed out of Christian insights—or, if you will, Judeo-Christian insights—into the human condition. Ideology always is the enemy of religion, and endeavors to supplant its adversary among humankind. But ideology has been unable to produce a counter-culture that endures long—witness the collapse of the Soviet Union after seven decades of power.

The relationship between religious faith and a high culture, described here by Solzhenitsyn, has been denied or ignored by the intellectuals, although not forgotten by the humble. At the beginning of his Templeton Address, Solzhenitsyn made that point. "Over half a century ago, while I was still a child," Solzhenitsyn said, "I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia. 'Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.'" They were right, and so are their counterparts in the United States today.

About eight years ago, the Brookings Institution published a careful study by James Reichley, en-

titled *Religion in American Public Life*. In a chapter entitled "Religion, Politics, and Human Values," Mr. Reichley examined eight value-systems, and found only one of those sufficient to balance individual rights against social authority, so bringing about harmony in a culture. That one value-system he called "theist-humanism": most people recognize it as Christianity, in Reichley's description. It is only a renewed sense of the sacred, I am suggesting—by a return to Christian understanding of the human condition and its limitations, I am suggesting, that the American nation may withstand the designs of ideology and restore those common ways of life that we call America's culture.



The governor of Mississippi has been reproached for declaring that America is a Christian nation. Despite objections, he was quite right; his opponents seem not to understand the meaning of the word "nation," except as it is incorrectly employed by the daily journalist. True, the United States of America is not a Christian *state*, for the country's Constitution forbids the establishment of a national church by Congress, and stands tolerant of all religions. But the words state and nation signify different concepts. "State" means the governmental organization of a country, political society with sovereign power; while "nation" means the people of the land, with their culture—and not merely the people who are living just now, but also their ancestors and those who will descend from them: that is, a nation is extended in time and shares a culture: those participants in a common culture who are living today, and the participants in that culture who have preceded them in time, and those participants in the common culture who are yet to be born. One might call a nation a community of souls.

In that proper understanding of what a nation amounts to, the American nation is Christian, although more Christian formerly, perhaps, than it is just now. For Christianity, if sometimes in a diluted form, is the religion of the majority of Americans nowadays; and beyond church communicants, there are millions of Americans who do not attend churches, but nevertheless are strongly influenced by Christian morals; moreover nearly else who has lived long in the United States, though he be Jew or Moslem or agnostic, conforms in large degree to American folkways and customs and conventions that are Christian in origin: in short, the American culture, with its Christian roots, is everywhere dominant in these United States, among the larger "minorities" of the population as well as among Americans of European descent; that is, the Christian ethos is no less strong among blacks and persons of Latin-American descent than among Americans who can trace their descent in this country back to the seventeenth century.

So the Governor of Mississippi is quite right: America is a Christian nation; this is a matter of fact, not of opinion. Whether America will remain a Christian nation is matter for argument, perhaps: the creation of special rights for pathics, for instance, indicates that Christian morals are going by the board; and the prevalence of abortion, the deliberate destruction of one's offspring, is another suggestion that both Christian belief and Christian morals have begun to succumb to total religious indifference, if not yet to atheism. But if Christian faith and morals will be generally rejected by the coming of the twenty-first century, then probably the whole culture will disintegrate, the material culture as well as the intellectual and moral culture; and human existence here will become poor, nasty, brutish, and short: unless some quite new culture, which as yet nobody can imagine, should rise up. Any such unnameable innovative culture, to endure, would require some transcendent sanction, perhaps some theophanic event—something more enduring than mere Marxist ideology, which was a violent attempt at a new faith and a new culture.

Why have an increasing number of Americans endeavored to break with our inherited culture and its religious roots? The reasons are diverse; but the fundamental impulse to reject a religious patrimony is expressed by T. S. Eliot in his choruses for "The Rock," especially in the following lines:

*Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to
be soft.
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.
They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.*

Religion restrains the passions and the appetites: and sensate natures flout restraints. The more perverse the pleasure, the more it is sought by some. So it is that public funds have been employed recently to subsidize obscene representations of Jesus of Nazareth; this seems to some titillatingly smart. I find it odd that, so far as I know, nobody has compared these “works of art” to the obscene representations of Jews in which Joseph Goebbels and his colleagues rejoiced during the regime of Hitler.

Religious Renewal. I have been suggesting, ladies and gentlemen, that for our culture—our inherited ways of life that have nurtured our American society in the past—to be reinvigorated, a renewal of religious faith is required. So long as many of us deny the dignity of man and indulge what T. S. Eliot called “the diabolic imagination,” our culture limps downward. Our public schools, almost totally secularized, starve the religious imagination; federal and state courts often tend to frown upon Christian morals and churches’ claims to independence. Will a time arrive when religion is indulged by public authorities only on sufferance?

What can be done to restore the religious imagination within our common culture? One cannot look to many seminaries for such a vigorous work of renewal: most of those institutions are pursuing theological or quasi-theological novelties, and are caught up in the humanitarian spirit of the age. No one can sincerely embrace a religious creed merely because it might be socially beneficial to do so. Conceivably some great preacher or great novelist or great poet may move minds and hearts toward the transcendent again, opening eyes that had been sealed; there come to mind the examples of John Wesley in eighteenth-century England, Chateaubriand in France at the end of the French Revolution, T. S. Eliot in this century. Or possibly men of the natural sciences may come to perceive design in the universe, purpose in mutations. Or, as in ages past, we may be given a Sign.

Some people, after the fashion of T. S. Eliot, may turn toward Christianity once they have discovered how unendurable a place the twentieth-century world would become were that faith altogether lacking. Others, myself among them, may come from much reading and meditation to conclude that Augustine of Hippo and Sir Thomas Browne and Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Henry Newman, professed Christians and apologists too, were no fools. Whether enough such persons may take up the cause of Christian teaching to alter the spirit of the age—why, who can tell? C.S. Lewis and Malcolm Muggeridge succeeded in moving intellects and consciences, and a half-dozen American writers continue to do so among us today. By the way, I particularly commend to you, ladies and gentlemen, a new book by William Kirk Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong: Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education*. Say not the struggle naught availeth: this earnest book very effectively exposes the mischief being done by those educators who in Britain are called “the crazies.” At one American gathering of that educationist clan, hard haters of old moral principles, all the major religions of the world were dismissed as “male chauvinist murder cults.”



Short of a mighty reinvigoration of the religious imagination, what may you and I do to redeem the time?

Confining ourselves to the three causes of cultural decadence that I discussed in my three previous lectures, I declare that we can do much, in a practical way.

With respect to **multiculturalism**, it is entirely possible to resist this silly, malign movement, despite its temporary successes, and to begin to restore a decent curriculum to schools, colleges, and universities; if we succeed, nine-tenths of the students will bless us. At the University of Texas, recently, the multicultural program was opposed by a majority of the faculty in a secret ballot; and the university's president resigned in consequence, praise be. A little more courage on the part of college administrators and professors would undo this anti-cultural tyranny. And yet the advantages still lies with the aggressors. At one Michigan college, this year, black militant students engaged in wild demonstrations. Far from disciplining the student offenders, the woman president of the college ordered two or three members of the faculty to undergo sensitivity training, so that they would learn to be sufficiently servile to militant students. A mad world, my masters! Let us prod some university presidents and trustees into defense of true academic freedom.

With respect to the **assaults upon religious belief**, which has been the source of all high culture over the ages, it is high time for us to oppose most strenuously those governmental policies which discriminate against religion and received morality. In New York City, very recently, Dr. Russell Hittinger, a redoubtable learned champion of the doctrines of natural law, issued from the platform a virtual call to arms against the enemies of moral order—some of them entrenched behind the federal bench. Let us remember that not even the Supreme Court of the United States is endowed with arbitrary and absolute power: Congress, if it so chooses may remove from the Court's appellate jurisdiction certain categories of cases, and in other ways may remind the judiciary that it is not a constitutional archonocracy. But I leave to your ingenuity, ladies and gentlemen, the devising of ways to resist and even to intimidate those zealots for the abolition of all restraint upon sensual impulse.

In connection with this possible restoration of the religious imagination, it is of the first importance to bring about more choice in education at every level—so that those parents and others who would have their children obtain religious knowledge may be enabled to do so. The national administration of President Bush gave at least lip-service to this cause: and more than ever before, there exists a possibility of persuading state legislators to pass such measures.

Third, I urge you friends, to resist manfully and womanfully the **thoughtless centralization of political and economic power**. Not content with having reduced the several American states, nominally sovereign, to impotent provinces, America's centralizers, with their dream of a New World Order, have commenced to acquire provinces overseas—Somalia the first in this decade, perhaps. "Take up the white man's burden," certain liberal voices exhort us. One can imagine the nightmare of a universal domination of egalitarian "democratic capitalism" directed by the Washington bureaucracy—unimaginative, arrogant, everywhere resented in the twenty-first century—draining America's resources and energies as Rome was drained by her empire. The more centralization, the less freedom and the less energy.

Is this the manifest destiny of the United States to become the New Rome? Have you and I no choice about that? Nay, not so. In 1795, a dread year for Britain, old Edmund Burke, in his first *Letter on a Regicide Peace*, denied that great states have to obey some irresistible law of progress or decay; Burke set his face against the attitude now called "determinism." Permit me to quote a key passage:

It is often impossible, in these political inquiries, to find any proportion between the apparent causes we may assign, and their

known operation. We are therefore obliged to deliver up that operation to mere chance; or, more piously (perhaps more rationally), to the occasional interposition and the irresistible hand of the Great Disposer. We have seen states of considerable duration, for which ages have remained nearly as they have begun, and could hardly be said to ebb or flow. The meridian of some has been most splendid. Others, and they the greatest number, have fluctuated, and experienced at different periods of their existence a great variety of fortune. At the very moment when some of them seem plunged in unfathomable abysses of disgrace and disaster, they have begun a new course, and opened a new reckoning, and even in the depths of their calamity, and on the very ruins of their country, have laid the foundations of a towering and durable greatness. All this happened without any apparent previous change in the general circumstances which had brought on their distress. The death of a man at a critical juncture, his retreat, have brought innumerable calamities on a whole nation. A common soldier, a child, a girl at the door of an inn, have changed the face of fortune, and almost of Nature.

In those two sentences, Burke may refer to the reverses of Pericles, to the death of the Constable of Bourbon and other startling historical instances of a country's fate hanging upon a single life. His common soldier is Arnold of Winkelreid, who flung himself upon the Austrian lances at Sempach; his child is Hannibal, taking at the age of twelve his oath to make undying war upon Rome; his girl at the inn is Joan of Arc. Providence, chance, or strong wills, Burke declares, abruptly may alter the whole apparent direction of "that armed ghost, the meaning of history" (Gabriel Marcel's phrase).

Even such as you and I, my friends, if we are resolute enough and sufficiently imaginative, may alter the present course of events. God, we have been told, helps those who help themselves. In the face of increasing tribulations, sometimes conservatives and liberals are making common cause in the defense of America's culture. Both Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and your servant have written books in repudiation of multiculturalism. Once more, say not the struggle naught availeth. A great number of the American people already have taken alarm at the drift of policy and morality in this land. Reactions may be salutary: as the poet Roy Campbell used to say, a human body that cannot react is a corpse; and so it is with society. Up the reactionaries against decadence!

Permit me, in conclusion, to quote a heartening passage from a book, *Our Present Discontents*, published in 1919, a year in some respects like the year 1992. The author was William Ralph Inge, then Dean of St. Paul's in London, commonly described by journalists as "the Gloomy Dean." The passage I offer you, however, is one of hope:

There may be in progress a store of beneficent forces which we cannot see, There are ages of sowing and ages of reaping; the brilliant epochs may be those in which spiritual wealth is squandered; the epochs of apparent decline may be those in which the race is recuperating after an exhausting effort. To all appearances, man still has a great part of his long lease before him, and there is no reason to suppose that the future will be less productive of moral and spiritual triumphs than the past. The source of all good is like an inexhaustible river; the Creator pours forth new treasures of goodness, truth, and beauty for all who will love them and take them, "Nothing that truly is can ever perish," as Plotinus says; whatever has value in God's

sight is for evermore. Our half-real world is the factory of souls in which we are tried as in a furnace. We are not to set our hopes upon it, but learn such wisdom as it can teach us while we pass through it.

America has overcome the ideological culture of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. In the decade of this victory, are Americans to forswear the beneficent culture that they have inherited? For a civilization to arise and flower, centuries are required; but the indifference or the hostility of a single generation may suffice to work that civilization's ruin. We must confront the folk whom Arnold Toynbee called "the internal proletariat" as contrasted with the "external proletariat" from alien lands. Otherwise we may end, all of us, as fellow-proletarians, culturally deprived, in a nation that will permit no one to rise above mediocrity.

