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FOREWORD

In times of moral confusion, sensitive persons are tempted to denounce the perversity of their fellows. Some are tempted to nostalgia for bygone days; others, in despair, simply yield to hysteria. What the present unsettled age needs, however, is neither moralistic condemnation nor pious exhortation to the good. Rather, in the first instance, what is needed today is a clear vision of the good.

In many ways it was in a similar climate that the early Christian movement experienced rapid growth. Men like Justin, Tatian, and Tertullian indicate that the moral earnestness of Christians first commended Christianity to them. It may well be that in the present age that it will be the moral vision of Christian faith--and the faithful lives of individual Christians--that commend themselves to those whose lives are without meaning and direction. These essays are directed toward clarifying that vision and the situation which it illuminates.

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Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS:
PLURALISM, MORALITY, AND THE CHURCH

By Michael R. Weed

Some time ago moral philosopher H. D. Aiken observed that morality depends upon the support of what he termed a "beneficent society."[1] In many ways the present confusion about morality in Western society is reflective of the loss of such a supportive context--a society adequate to sustain a coherent morality. Although there are a number of approaches to this complex problem, I want to address it by defining and sketching something of the impact of social pluralism on morality and the importance of this development for moral and particularly Christian identity. In spite of the risks of oversimplification, this approach enables us to locate several of the major problems facing both society and the contemporary church.

Social Pluralism

At the foundation of every society there are certain underlying and grounding values, beliefs, and goals which provide overall self-understanding to a people and

shape the network of institutions and social relationships within the society. The Declaration of Independence, for example, refers to certain basic truths held to be self-evident. But every society, as a society, holds some such "self-evident" truths which guide and shape the common life of its members.

In large part, the present situation is reflective of the fact that many of the traditional values and beliefs which have directed Western society have deteriorated to the point that they may no longer be taken to be self-evident. At the turn of the century German sociologist Max Weber described the emerging climate of modernity by saying that we are living in the Götterdämmerung--"the twilight of the gods." Weber saw moderns increasingly living in an era in which the old gods have disappeared and the new gods have yet to appear.

In this climate, marked by the loss of shared ultimate values and goals, we find the emergence of a number of sub-societies formed around different and contradictory centers of loyalty and value. Accordingly, we see a plurality of competing views of the ultimate meaning and purpose in life. This, in essence, is the development of social and moral pluralism.

American Civil Religion

A society can tolerate a wide variety of beliefs and lifestyles as long as there are some shared core values which provide a protective context for social existence, e.g., that all people should be tolerant. Now it is not necessary that such core values

be explicitly articulated in order for them to offer some basic shape and direction to the apparent variety of different social groups. Will Herberg, for example, noted in his classic study in 1955 that beneath the different belief systems found among American Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews there was an underlying value system common to all and supported by all.[2] This underlying "civil religion," a quasi-religious nationalism which Herberg designated the "American Way of Life," thus provided a framework of basic values and beliefs which held American society together.[3]

There are many indications, however, that since Herberg's studies American society has increasingly progressed toward becoming a more radically pluralistic society in which many of the shared values and beliefs of Herberg's civil religion have also eroded.[4] Insofar as such a society is held together, it is only on the basis of the very thinnest of tissues--a kind of "minimalist agreement" (e.g., the principle of noninterference) that cannot and does not shape and direct society as a whole.[5] In such a society no substantive common roots or foundations--religious, philosophical, or otherwise--exist to provide integration and direction. It is necessary in such a society to avoid--studiously avoid--the realm of ultimate claims and values; education, for example, must be "value free." "Public interest" no longer designates a shared vision of the polis but becomes an aggregate of individual desires and demands.[6]

Consequently, it is important to recognize that the designation "pluralism"

may not do justice to the seriousness of the present problem. Those living in a radically pluralizing society are not, for the most part, merely confronted with a plurality of alternative value systems and viewpoints More nearly, they increasingly find themselves surrounded by an "unharmonious mélange of ill-assorted fragments."[7]

The Impact of Pluralism

Social and moral pluralism have far-reaching effects on both society and its individual members. As the underlying values and beliefs which provide an integrative framework for society and her institutions disappear, society tends to fragment into disconnected and independent pieces. The various social institutions, for example, no longer work in concert, guided by a shared vision of the common good they all serve. Rather, they increasingly take on an independent status capable of standing at odds both with society's overall good and with the perceived interests of individual members of society.

Accordingly, persons living in a pluralistic society find themselves experiencing a sense of estrangement and alienation. The social institutions through which society is maintained "cease to be the 'home' of the self; instead they become oppressive realities that distort and estrange the self."[8] Persons find themselves dealing with institutions of society which not only are distant and impersonal but also are perceived to be actually against truly human interests. (Even

religious institutions may be viewed in this regard; with many persons finding themselves alienated from the bureaucracy and impersonalism of the so-called "institutional church.")

Further, with the erosion of foundational beliefs, values, and goals, civil law survives as the nearest thing to a universally accepted authority within the pluralistic society.[9] Loosed from its moorings in traditional values, however, the legal system no longer directs and regulates society according to traditional goals and aspirations of the people. The legal system itself simply becomes one more independent zone of society standing over and against the individual. Divorced from its philosophical and religious heritage, the law becomes mechanical, arbitrary, rigid, and increasingly based on force rather than on acknowledged authority; it is no longer perceived to be "our law" but is seen as an external and impersonal restraining order.[10]

In addition to alienation, a sense of being a "stranger in one's own land," we may note several further developments which seriously affect moral identity and popular morality within a radically pluralistic society. First, those values and beliefs which are still held are all held a bit tentatively. Increasing and regular contact with those who do not share our worldview and values leads to a lessening of the grip which our own values and beliefs have upon us. Values, rather than designating common shared commitments, are viewed as private and subjective matters. (Pluralism is thus closely and complexly interrelated with the uneven but relentless process of secularism.)

Second, individual character traits and attitudes necessary to survive and to function in the maelstrom of pluralistic society are those such as adaptability, assertiveness, acquisitiveness, and even cynicism.[11] Traditional virtues such as honor, modesty, and truthfulness are not only obsolete and irrelevant but are even dysfunctional.

Third, pluralism leads to a "de-listing" of certain kinds of behavior as immoral, deviant, or subject to censure or criticism. Our moral sensitivities are numbed as we learn to speak of "alternative lifestyles," "sexual preferences," or "open-ended commitments"--and who would presume to pass judgment on another's self-expression in areas so private or subjective as sexuality? Abortion, for example, becomes a "religious" and thereby not a moral issue--and everyone knows that religion is a personal, a-rational, and idiosyncratic affair.[12]

Finally, perhaps the most far-reaching and devastating result of radical pluralism is that persons living within a pluralizing society are not just confronted with a kaleidoscope of jarring values and beliefs, they actually become such a kaleidoscope themselves. That is, pluralism not only occurs around us; it also happens within us. The various sub-groups into which a radically pluralistic society splinters are hardly coherent and stable sub-societies. For the most part, they are not sustained by foundational and integrating values and beliefs. Rather, they are only loosely knit gatherings of autonomous persons, each possessing his or her own private, largely unexamined values and beliefs. And these ragbags of ultimate

significance are highly unstable collections taken from such disparate sources as popular psychology, Eastern religions, astrology, the latest health food craze--all mixed in with the debris of traditional values.[13]

In short, individuals living within and marked by a radically pluralistic society tend to possess unstable and even contradictory collections of values, beliefs, and goals. These eclectic congeries are simply unable to provide any coherent or consistent vision of life's overall meaning and purpose. Religion tends to follow suit and survives largely as a highly private, subjective, leisure-time pursuit leaving untouched and unexamined the greater portion of the individual's dealings with the "real world." Understandably, many of the traumatized victims of radical social and moral pluralism exchange the pursuit of the good life for the frantic acquisition of life's goods.

A Christian Response

Admittedly, the present situation is not without its celebrants, even among Christians. Some argue that radical pluralism is to be welcomed because it dethrones our idolatrous absolutes and forces us to reexamine our contradictory values and shortsighted commitments. Others even cheer the emergence of the "pluralistic church" as indicative of Christianity's relevance to the modern pluralistic world.

On the basis of the preceding analysis, however, there appears little reason to

be optimistic about the situation. Radical pluralism fosters a spirit of skepticism and cynicism by destroying all absolutes, not just false ones. Moreover, it fragments not only society but also individual selves within society. Nor does anxiety appear to be driving many in honest pursuit of ultimate values. And the appearance of the so-called pluralistic church suggests the degree that the church mirrors rather than transforms the surrounding pluralizing and fragmenting world. What then should be the church's response to the onslaught of radical pluralism?

The fundamental challenge the present situation offers to the church is actually an ancient one: How can we be faithful to Yahweh in an alien land? Implicit in this question is one of the most essential elements of any adequate response to the problem, viz., the difficult and painful but necessary task of recognizing that we are in fact pilgrims in an alien land. The people of God are today called to be what they have always been called to be--a community uniquely formed and guided by the transcendent claim of God.

To be sure, it is critical for the church in every age to resist costly misalliances. Through such alliances Christian faith has been dominated, compromised and taken captive by countless alien ideologies throughout the history of the Christian movement. Today, however, it is especially important for the church to resist the temptation to gain acceptability by acquiescing to a limited role as the "religious element" in the otherwise intact scheme of some alien worldview--whether it be laissez faire capitalism, socialism, or simple secularism.

With the rapid dissolution of traditional values and beliefs, it is especially important for the church to be a place where the gospel is spoken and dramatized in ways that offer individual Christians a clear and cohesive vision of reality. The church can no longer content itself with providing merely the "religious" portion of a much larger schema. Rather, it must offer a comprehensive vision of the whole of reality as created, sustained, and redeemed in Christ.

The church must resolutely and uncompromisingly maintain the importance of Christian faith not only for the sanctuary and for the home but also for the marketplace, the union hall, the classroom, and the laboratory. In this regard some would contend that it is especially important that the church renounce its unofficial concordat with the modern success credo and make it inescapably clear that Christians are not called to be successful; they are called to be faithful. And, to paraphrase Alasdair MacIntyre, individual Christians must understand that those skills which make for success in Philadelphia are not necessarily those virtues which inherit the kingdom of heaven.[14]

Such a stand as this will entail both a recovery of the roots and foundations of Christian faith and the articulation of Christian faith in a manner that illuminates all areas of human existence. It is precisely the transcendent dimension which must ground and give meaning and direction to the fragmenting world around us. In recovering its own roots, then, the Christian community will not only regain its integrity but also restore the very foundations of created humanity and of the human

community.

In closing, a word of clarification seems to be in order. The implication of this position is that the church should recognize and denounce its various misalliances with and accommodations to the modern temper. This entails a willingness to be a strange and perhaps even an unpopular presence in the world--to be a "sect." By this, however, I am not advocating a narrow sectarianism which seeks the survival of its own limited ranks. Rather, the strategic separateness of the church, coupled with the uniqueness of the faith lifestyle, is more nearly analogous to that of the ancient Levites--set apart in order that they might serve on behalf of the very ones from whom they were separated.

It is only by being a unique and peculiar people that Christians will be able to offer anything other than an echo to the surrounding din of confusion. It is only as a community that truly models its faith that the church points the way to values that are not merely "Christian" values but are also foundational human values. That is, the church must assist in the re-founding of those basic commitments and values which are necessary for existence of truly human community--trust, humility, compassion, self-denial--basic dispositions and virtues which at present glow dimly in the fast-falling twilight.

Notes

[1] H. D. Aiken, "Moral Philosophy and Education" in <u>Reason and Conduct</u> (New York: Knopf, 1962), 26.

[2] Will Herberg, <u>Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology</u> (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

[3] Herberg, 75.

[4] Peter Berger, <u>Facing Up To Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion</u> (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 156ff.

[5] British sociologist Bryan Wilson even goes so far as to contend that modern technological societies are held together by techniques and procedures and are not dependent on any consensus of values. Bryan Wilson, <u>Contemporary Transformations of Religion</u> (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 108.

[6] Daniel Callahan, "Minimalist Ethics," <u>The Hastings Center Report</u> Volume 11, Number 5 (October 1982), 21

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, <u>After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology</u> (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 10.

[8] Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner. <u>The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness</u> (New York: Random House, 1974), 156f.

[9] See James Gustafson, "Authority in a Pluralistic Society"" in <u>The Church as Moral Decision-Maker</u> (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970), 51.

[10] See Harold J. Berman, "Law, Religion, and the Present Danger," <u>Worldview</u> September, 1979, 46-51.

[11] "When men have to sell themselves, to assume dispositions that they do not genuinely feel . . . a process of widespread human prostitution occurs. New levels of distrust are reached, as men acquire the art of cynicism that is necessary for their very survival . . .. Cynicism learned as an art of survival is unlikely to remain con-fined to commercial relationships or to an appraisal of the mass media. It becomes a permanent posture in the face of all authorities and all belief systems." Wilson, 108.

[12] Callahan, 20.

[13] Sociologist Thomas Luckmann has done a thorough study of this phenomenon in his The Invisible Religion (New York: MacMillan 1967).

[14] MacIntyre, 185.

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