

Who Will Lead Us?

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Photo date and location unknown

The 40 years following World War I between the Allied and Central Powers have been rightly called apocalyptic. Many say that a man who was born prior to 1910 alone can recognize the chaos and universal restlessness of our time.

The poet calls ours "The Age of Anxiety." The theologian writes "Reflections on the End of an Era." The psychoanalyst speaks of "Modern Man in Search of a Soul." The biologist labels us "The Naked Ape" in "The Human Zoo."

On one hand the modern age represents the culmination of the Protestant era... the end of everything Luther, Calvin and Zwingli fought for. Where is the authority of the Holy Bible now? Where is the priesthood of all believers? Who can still believe in justification by faith? What happened to the sanctity of the common life? Why read Luther on "The Freedom of the Christian Man" or Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion? On the other hand, modern man seems in such desperate straits that this eschatological time of troubles might herald the arrival of nothing less than the Messianic Age. As has been said, when the night is black the stars shine most brightly.

In the new age, leadership is definitely needed. Only some person of remarkable personal charm, proven will power and innovative outlook can play the role of a new Messiah, to use the Jewish title, or a new Avatar, to use the Persian name, or a returning Jesus to refer to the Christian hope.

One might look for such a Divine Herald of the Heavenly Kingdom, the Anointed Messenger of God in one of the great world powers. Possibly an industrial or economic or advertising giant like the United States should produce the Lord of the Second Advent.

Or perhaps one should turn to the other global power, the Soviet Union. Surely since 1917 no land has produced a more persuasive ideology than the Marxist-Leninist one. If not in manufacturing ability or industrial genius at least in the forum of public opinion the Russians have excelled over every rival. The young, the idealistic and the intellectual have been literally fascinated by the success story of Lenin, Stalin and Mao. In undeveloped nations the U.S. symbolizes the status quo, if not the reactionary colossus, whereas the Soviet Union looks like the salesman of the century. Communist writings far outsell any religious or capitalist publications.

Who can quote Isaiah? Who memorizes Marx? The problem is contained right there. Who still follows Jesus? The old and the old-fashioned. Who waves the Marxist banner from the barricades? Students and professors, black men and yellow, Cubans and Arabs, proletariat and statesmen. That would seem to solve our problem. It would appear that from within the Soviet bloc could appear a figure of such charismatic

power that the whole world would follow him into a brave new world.

As for America, politically, ideologically and culturally there is small ground for hope. Politically, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt through five successive Presidents the qualities of charismatic leadership have briefly flickered only to be extinguished by scandal, corruption, ineptitude or malfeasance.

When has America produced a Gandhi, a Schweitzer, a Bertrand Russell, a Charles deGaulle? Her greatness has been the byproduct of pre-1932 energies generated by Paul Bunyons of the 19th century. Europeans spoke of their fears of an American Caesar. No such man on horseback appeared co-create a new Rome.

Economically, America is pushed to the wall. Politically she is almost obsolete. Culturally she has relied on foreign imports. Religiously, worst of all, she looks middle-aged and paunchy. Others must deal with the political, economic or cultural illness of the U.S. We stick to religion.

Among the churches the crisis deepens with each passing year. The gigantic big city churches built from 1900-1930 are empty or taken over by blacks without the resources to keep them going at peak efficiency. First Protestantism fled to the suburbs; now the young and influential are abandoning the churches in droves. Every mainline denomination reports an exodus, a brain-drain and prayer-drain.

Of the prominent theologians of the 60s, who was strongly identified with specific churches or particular denominations? Not Paul Tillich. Not Harvey Cox. Not Malcolm Boyd. Not Martin Luther King. Nor even Billy Graham. These men relied not on denominational structures but ad hoc listeners of their own making. The charismatic figure is outside or at least far above the existing ecclesiastical establishment. The old men are dropping off three of four each year. No equals have yet arisen within the denominations to replace them.

The ecumenical movement was once hailed as the great new fact of our time. It is so no longer. The machine has stalled. No prominent theologian champions it as a solution to the crisis in society. No dynamic bureaucracy exists to get it on the road and on the go.

Quite significantly American Protestantism has shifted to the radical right.

For influence the old *Christian Century*, once the ministerial weekly, has given way to the evangelical or neo-Fundamentalist *Christianity Today*. But who reads it? Only the still committed remnant of a Protestantism which has largely drifted away. As for Dr. Billy Graham, he now gets his largest crowds in Seoul, South Korea rather than in New York or the American Bible belt.

It seems that the global community cannot rely on America for moral, intellectual or theological breakthroughs in the near future. The Communist world seems to be in a far worse state. Having proscribed all religions and persecuted them with great savagery, it must rely on either official state ideology now largely discredited or minor charismatic figures like Castro, Lumumba and Pasternak.

The church as such has either been driven underground or become a willing agent of the Soviet state apparatus. Few better illustrations exist of the folly of a cut flower civilization. Deprived of its natural religious roots, the Holy Russia of the Slavophiles has degenerated into a routine ant hill culture.

Stalin is dead, Mao feeble, so where can the Red world look for leadership? Not to rioting Sorbonne students. Not to commune China or commune America. Not to Eastern or Western Europe. Not to Arab lands or Africa, where nationalism sits on the throne. Having given up on America and the Communist bloc, one looks in vain to Western Europe.

No world statesman is in the offing. No dynamic or innovative religious leader towers above the distant horizon. No Pope serves a Vicar for the Coming Christ, as Catholics are among the first to confess.

From Karl Barth came the most damning indictment of European Protestantism. Writing in 1967 after Vatican II, the Swiss theologian drew up a bill of particulars against the churches of the Reformation.

Why, he asked, were pronouncements of the Vatican listened to with greater interest than similar social messages from the World Council of Churches? What made Pravda, for example, greatly impressed by the historical and political halo of Rome?

According to the Swiss theologian, once the prophet of the Wholly Other, Papal pronouncements proclaimed a message and issued directives. Men were summoned to act unreservedly and bindingly with an appeal to the highest authority. By contrast World Council resolutions looked like "only advice and admonition."

The ecumenical movement was too vague, too super-terrestrial. There was nowhere near enough

practicality about Geneva in 1967. Vatican II meant in Pope John XXIII's words opening the window to let fresh air in. Probably he and certainly his curial advisors had no idea what damage winds of change would accomplish. The open window let in a tornado. Never again would integral Catholicism become possible.

In large part modern man has been paying for the sins of his forbearers. Since the Renaissance and Reformation centripetal forces have been loose in the world. Our fathers ate sour grapes and our teeth are set on edge. They sowed the wind and we have reaped the whirlwind. Can figs grow on thistles? Such folk wisdom enshrined in Scriptures texts illustrates the predicament of contemporary society. Negatively, the course of modern times shows the mortal wages of collective sin. Positively, we are witnessing the birth of an era of unparalleled promise. Can ye not read the signs of the times? Jesus asks of our generation.

It may be no exaggeration to suggest that nothing quite equals the promise of the present epoch since the birth of Jesus Christ. Everybody from the historian to the novelist senses the innovative character of the post-war world. There's an occult air, a science fiction mystique, to our times. The age is on tiptoe, so to speak, peeking at the stupendous future ahead. Gutenberg is out, we say; Marshall McLuhan is in. We mean by this that a Messianic Age is a dawning all around us.

Adam symbolizes the beginning of the human race and Jesus its unfulfilled hopes. Do we have reason to believe that those hopes are now possible of concrete actualization?

Nothing less is exactly what the Divine Principle teaches. God and man can be and are being reconciled on a scale never before really possible. The stage is set for a new Divine Comedy: the actual restoration of men as God intended them in the first place.

We look therefore for the full manifestation of the Lord of the Second Advent. Whenever conditions reach an intolerable impasse, whenever nothing looks good, God re-enters human history. As St. Athanasius would say, God becomes like us in order that we might become like Him.

History works through central figures -- individuals who sum up an age and usher in a new pattern of human existence. What we need, what we seek, is that sort of supernormal person... a Caesar of the soul, a Christ of the spirit, a Messiah for modern man. No one but such a figure could establish the inviolable foundation of universal restoration.

Elsewhere can be found political, economic and sociological treatments of the period from 1914 until today. The interest of the theologian lies elsewhere. God is in history, say the Israeli prophets of sacred Writ. But how? And where? To answer those questions, the profoundest of all, is the task of the Christian thinker. His job it is to trace the straight line of Divine Providence connecting and making whole the multitude of events characteristic of an age.

Like the prophet Amos, he must see God with a plumb line in His hand, measuring the angle of a civilization on behalf of His ideal of universal restoration.

The historian and statesman, the economist and sociologist play an important role. They record the external factors which make and mold international affairs. Seeing more deeply and therefore with greater clarity, the religious prophet justifies the ways of God with man, as Dante and Milton, Carlyle and Guizot, Toynbee and Spengler did. The theologian points out the internal spiritual factors behind every civilization, its rise and progress, its decline and fall. Just as the Hebrew chronicler testified to the Godward aspect of Israeli history from Adam to the Maccabean Revolt, so the Christian philosopher must point out the widest religious significance in yesterday's newspaper headlines.