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News Perspectives

Liberty and Personal Responsibility

One principle that today's intellectuals most passionately disseminate is vulgar relativism, "nihilism with a happy face." For them it is certain that there is no truth, only opinion: my opinion, your opinion. They abandon the defense of intellect. There being no purchase of intellect upon reality, nothing else is left but preference, and will is everything. They retreat to the romance of will.

Vulgar relativism is an invisible gas, odorless, deadly, that is now polluting every free society on earth. It is a gas that attacks the central nervous system of moral striving. The most perilous threat to the free society today is, therefore, neither political nor economic. It is the poisonous, corrupting culture of relativism.

Freedom cannot grow - it cannot even survive - in every atmosphere or climate. In the wearying journey of human history, free societies have been astonishingly rare. The ecology of liberty is more fragile than the biosphere of Earth. Freedom needs clean and healthful habits, sound families, common decencies, and the unafraid respect of one human for another. Freedom needs entire rainforests of little acts of virtue, tangled loyalties, fierce loves, undying commitments. Freedom needs particular institutions and these, in turn, need peoples of particular habits of the heart.

Consider this. There are two types of liberty: one precritical, emotive, whimsical, proper to children; the other critical, sober, deliberate, responsible, proper to adults. Alexis de Tocqueville called attention to this alternative early in *Democracy in America*, and at Cambridge, Lord Acton put it this way: Liberty is not the freedom to do what you wish; it is the freedom to do what you ought. Human beings are the only creatures on earth that do not blindly obey the laws of their nature, by instinct, but are free to choose to obey them with a loving will. Only humans enjoy the liberty to do-or not to do-what we ought to do.

It is this second kind of liberty-critical, adult liberty-that lies at the living core of the free society. It is the liberty

of self-command, a mastery over one's own passions, bigotry, ignorance, and self-deceit. It is the the liberty of self-government in one's own personal life. For how, James Madison once asked, can a people incapable of government in private life be capable of it in public? If they cannot practice self-government over their private passions, how will they practice it over the institutions of the Republic?

There cannot be a free society among citizens who habitually lie, who malingers, who cheat, who do not meet their responsibilities, who cannot be counted on, who shirk difficulties, who flout the law-or who prefer to live as serfs or slaves, content in their dependency, so long as they are fed and entertained.

Freedom requires the exercise of conscience; it requires the practice of those virtues that, as Winston Churchill noted in his wartime speeches to the Commons, have long been practiced in these Isles: dutiful stout arms, ready hearts, courage, courtesy, ingenuity, respect for individual choice, a patient regard for hearing evidence on both sides of the story.

During the past hundred years, the question for those who loved liberty was whether, relying on the virtues of our peoples, we could survive powerful assaults from without (as, in the Battle of Britain, this city [London]

nobly did). During the next hundred years, the question for those who love liberty is whether we can survive the most insidious and duplicitous attacks from within, from those who undermine the virtues of our people, doing in advance the work of the Father of Lies. "There is no such thing as truth," they teach even the little ones. "Truth is bondage. Believe what seems right to you. There are as many truths as there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please. Get in touch with yourself. Do what feels comfortable." Those who speak in this way prepare the jails of the twenty-first century. They do the work of tyrants.

You are, no doubt, familiar with the objection to this warning. Its central argument goes like this: to accept the idea of moral truth is to accept authoritarian control. But between moral relativism and political control there is a third alternative, well known to the common sense of the English-speaking peoples. It is called self-control. We do not want a government that coerces the free consciences of individuals; on the contrary, we want self-governing individuals to restrain immoral government. We want self-government, self-command, self-control.

If a people composed of 100 million citizens is guarded by 100 million inner policemen-that is, by 100 million

self-governing consciences-then the number of policemen on its streets may be few. For a society without inner policemen, on the other hand, there aren't enough policemen in the world to make society civil. Self-control is not authoritarianism but rather the alternative to it....

Liberty itself requires unprecedented virtues, rarely seen in simpler and more simply led societies. Special virtues are needed by self-governing peoples: calm, deliberate, dispassionate reflection; careful, responsible, consequence-accepting choice. In self-government, citizens are sovereigns, and must learn to exercise the virtues of sovereigns.

The free economy, too, demands more virtues than socialist or traditional economies: It demands active persons, self-starters, women and men of enterprise and risk. It requires the willingness to sacrifice present pleasures for rewards that will be enjoyed primarily by future generations. It requires vision, discovery, invention. Its dynamism is human creativity endowed in us by our Creator, Who made us in His image.

And so, too, the pluralist society calls for higher levels of civility, tolerance, and reasoned public argument than citizens in simpler times ever needed.

No one ever promised us that free societies will endure forever. Indeed, a cold view of history shows that submission to tyranny is the more frequent condition of the human race, and that free societies have been few in number and not often long-lived. Free societies such as our own, which have arisen rather late in the long evolution of the human race, may pass across the darkness of time like splendid little comets, burn into ashes, disappear.

Yet nothing in the entire universe, vast as it is, is as beautiful as the human person. The human person alone is shaped to the image of God. This God loves humans with a love most powerful. It is this God who draws us, erect and free, toward Himself, this God Who, in Dante's words, is "the Love that moves the sun and all the stars."

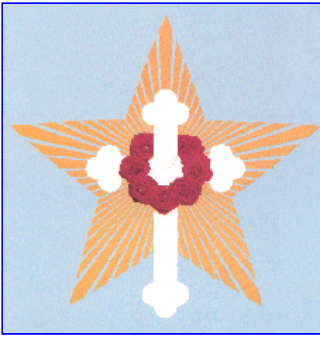
—Robert Novak

—*Rays from the Rose Cross Magazine,*
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