Mark G. Malvasi

At Century's End: A Historical Meditation

The theme of this "historical meditation" is the crisis and decline of civilization in the West during the twentieth century. That perspective is the product both of an individual temperament and also of a historical consciousness. One hundred, or even fifty, years hence neither the temperament nor the perspective may matter very much. But I am of the twentieth century and can see only where the past has brought us, not where the future may take us. I am a skeptic and a pessimist, although I am not a fatalist. Somewhat like those scientists who discern evidence of divine intelligence in the order and intricacy of nature, I have sought always to glimpse the hand of God moving beneath the surface of this confusing and chaotic age.

I. The Crisis of the World Wars

"What is Europe now," lamented Winston Churchill in 1947, "a rubble heap, a charnel house, a breeding ground for pestilence and hate." The Second World War was the most destructive war in history. Estimates of the dead range as high as fifty-five million. The material costs were equally staggering. Everywhere cities were in ruins. Bridges, railroads, waterways, highways, harbors, factories, and mines had all been destroyed. Farmland was laid waste and livestock slaughtered.

At the same time, millions of homeless and hungry men, women, and children wandered through city and countryside, many of them forcibly displaced from their homes, their communities, their nations. Members of families searched for one another, not knowing whether their loved ones were among the living or the dead. Prisoners of war tried to make their way home, while Jewish survivors of the death camps, or those Jews who had spent the war in hiding, struggled in vain to resume normal lives.

Compounding the human misery and the physical devastation was the political degradation of Europe. The Second World War produced a monumental shift in the international relations of power. The dominance of Europe, based as much on European prestige as on European power, was at

Mark G. Malvasi teaches history at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, and is the author of *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

an end. The war showed that power now resided outside of Europe, with the two most important offspring of European civilization: the Soviet Union and the United States. By 1945, the age of European supremacy was over.

The Second World War was primarily a European war that neither the Americans nor the Russians wanted. It grew out of European concerns, problems, and conflicts. The First World War had convinced Adolf Hitler that Germany was the most powerful state in Europe. In the east, the German army had defeated the Russians; in the west, the Germans would have fought the French and the British to a stalemate had it not been for the intervention of American troops. From the earliest days of his political career, Hitler dreamed of reversing this humiliating and unwarranted German defeat. Once in power he resolved to destroy the Treaty of Versailles and to forge a vast German empire in central and eastern Europe.

A century shaped by the experience of total war.

Hitler believed that only a war of conquest would win for the German nation the territory and security it required and that the German people, as a superior race, deserved. War was thus an essential component of Nazi ideology from the outset, because for Hitler the First World War had never ended. The Second World War was incontrovertibly Adolf Hitler's war.

Like a terrible earthquake, the Second World War shook European civilization to its foundations. Yet the First World War, not the Second, was the single most important event in shaping the history of Europe during the twentieth century. The Great War altered the course of Western civilization, deepening the spiritual crisis that had helped lead to its outbreak.

For the First World War differed fundamentally from the wars that had preceded it, although the Crimean War (1854-1856), the American Civil War (1861-1865), the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), and the Russian-Japanese War (1904-1905) all provided some indication of things to come. By 1914 war had become total, requiring the complete mobilization of civilians at home in support of the national war effort. Workers in the factories became just as important to ensuring victory as soldiers on the battlefield. Woodrow Wilson understood the tragic significance of this development, even as he prepared to commit the United States to the conflict. With entire nations armed, Wilson commented on the eve of American entry into the war, "the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into every fiber of our national life."

The monumental battles of 1914, 1915, and 1916, especially Second Ypres, Tannenberg, Verdun, and the Somme, attained a level of destructiveness and horror never before experienced in war. Efforts to achieve rapid and decisive victory degenerated into battles of attrition in which the object was to dissipate the opponent's human and material resources. In such battles, casualties were calculated on the same basis as expenditures of materiel. No matter how high, casualties were acceptable as long as losses inflicted on the enemy were proportionately greater. In an absurd extension of this logic to its ghastly conclusions, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace assigned a monetary value to the lives of soldiers from various countries. Based

on the productive capacity of an individual balanced against the amount he would consume during his estimated lifetime, an American life, for instance, was worth $4,720, a French life $2,900, and a Russian life only $2,020. Under the prevailing conditions of modern warfare, human lives had become one more entry in the quartermaster's ledger, to be accounted for like uniforms, rifles, ammunition, and fuel.

Modern technology had enabled the combatants to kill with unprecedented efficiency. Democratic nationalism had infused civilians and soldiers alike with the determination to fight until they had administered a crushing defeat. Exercising wide control over its citizens, modern states mobilized all of their human, material, and spiritual resources to wage total war. As the war devolved into a grueling and savage fight, statesmen did not press for a negotiated, compromise peace but instead demanded an escalation of the war and ever more sacrifices from their people.

Nearly ten million died in the fighting and an additional twenty-one million were wounded, crippled, blinded, or otherwise impaired. The war not only created a political but also a moral and spiritual vacuum. It destroyed the old civilization of Europe without offering anything with which to replace it. To many Europeans it seemed that the world had become an ethical wasteland in which all the formerly immutable verities were, after more than a thousand years of civilization, cast into doubt and disrepute.

The war left many with the sickening feeling that Europe had lost its vitality and was destined for decline and collapse. The First World War shattered the hope that civilization in the West was making continuous progress toward a more rational and enlightened world. For the post-war generation, the war destroyed not only the assumption of European superiority, but the conviction that material and moral progress was inevitable or even possible. How could people speak of the inviolability and sanctity of human life when war had transformed Europe into a slaughterhouse? How could people emphasize the primacy of reason when they had witnessed the spectacle of a civilization destroying itself in a festival of organized violence? Thoughtful Europeans marvelled at the extent and depth of human irrationality, ruthlessness, and hatred.

As a result of the war, there emerged a sense that Western civilization was fragile, vulnerable, and impermanent. Despite their extraordinary accomplishments, Europeans came to the realization that they had not, after all, progressed very far from barbarism; the supposedly civilized men of the twentieth century had outdone in savagery the barbarians of all preceding ages. In 1927, the French writer Paul Valéry captured the mood of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety that tormented his generation when he wrote:

> We think of what has disappeared, and we are almost destroyed by what has been destroyed; we do not know what will be born, and we fear the future, not without reason. We hope vaguely, we dread precisely; our fears are infinitely more precise than our hopes; we confess that the charm of life is behind us. There is no thinking man...who can hope to dominate his anxiety, to escape from this impression of darkness.... But among all these injured things is the Mind. The Mind has indeed been cruelly wounded; its complaint is heard in the hearts of intellectual men; it passes a mournful judgment on itself. It doubts itself profoundly.

Earlier, in 1919, Valéry had confessed that "we...know that we are mortal.... We realize that a civilization is as fragile as a life."

II. The Failure of Communism

The events of the twentieth century proved communism to be a colossal failure. The

fundamental weaknesses of international communism and of the Soviet regime in Russia, however, were not immediately apparent at the end of the First World War in 1918. The various fascist movements that emerged in Italy, Germany, and elsewhere during the 1920s gained such diverse and widespread support precisely because their leaders vowed to be the most ardent, intractable, and effective opponents of communism.

Like his enemies, Nikolai Lenin initially assumed that the Bolshevik Revolution portended a worldwide Communist movement, and as such would be followed shortly by revolutions in the other industrialized countries. Immediately upon assuming power in 1917, the Bolsheviks launched an extensive program to advance this international revolution. The opportunity for such large-scale revolutionary activity was short-lived, however, arising only in November 1918 after the Allied and the Central Powers had signed the armistice. The demoralization that spread across Europe after the war, especially within the defeated nations, provided fertile soil for the sort of social and political upheaval the Communists envisioned. This situation permitted the Russian Communists to achieve a few impressive, if transitory, successes.

In early November 1918, German Communists initiated mutinies in the German army and navy and formed workers' and soldiers' soviets in several German cities. The Communists staged an uprising in Berlin in January 1919, and in April proclaimed the existence of a Soviet republic in the German state of Bavaria. Throughout 1919 Communist agents promoted violent agitation in Austria. In Hungary, Lenin's associate Béla Kun overthrew a liberal government and founded the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Civil and military authorities promptly suppressed each of these movements, with the exception of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which managed to survive for six months.

In March 1919, with Communist-inspired rebellions in central Europe at their height, Lenin founded the Third, or Communist, International (the Comintern), which was dedicated to the cause of promoting international revolution. Envisioning the Third International as a sort of worldwide Communist party, Lenin named Grigori Zinoviev, one of his most able and trusted confidants, as its executive. At this moment, the sense of optimism among the Russian Communists knew no bounds. Every incident, every crisis, every strike, every manifestation of sympathy toward, or respect for, the new Soviet Union seemed to them to anticipate an imminent global revolution. On May Day 1919, Zinoviev predicted:

> The [international revolutionary] movement progresses with such dizzying speed that one may say with assurance: a year from now we shall begin to forget that Europe had undergone a struggle for Communism, because in a year all Europe will be Communist. And the struggle for Communism will move on to America, and perhaps also to Asia and the other parts of the world.

Zinoviev, of course, was wrong. Worldwide Communist revolution did not come and was never a realistic prospect. Following Karl Marx, Lenin believed that classes were more important realities than were nations. The opposite, in fact, was true. The movement for international communism failed at the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1914, even before the Bolshevik Revolution had taken place. With few exceptions, European Socialist and Communist parties, beguiled by visions of national glory, sustained the initiatives of their governments in the First World War. The reasons for this support, as the historian John Lukacs has demonstrated, are not hard to discern. On the eve of the First World War,

a German workingman had more in common with a German factory owner than with a French, British, or American worker. The same was true of French, British, and American workingmen and factory owners in those countries. All regarded the survival of their nations as more vital and more important than the elevation of their class. In 1914, therefore, the effort to establish worldwide communism suffered a ruinous defeat from which it never recovered, evaporating in the passion of nationalist enthusiasm. The working men of the world then proceeded to slaughter in staggering numbers their working-class brethren from across Europe who were now the enemies of their nations.

Whenever Communists attempted a revolution outside of Russia, they failed. Even when Communist states did appear in eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War they emerged not because of popular revolutions, not because of the overwhelming appeal of Marxist ideology, and not because of the respect and admiration for Russia. Communist states arose, on the contrary, because of the military victory of Russia over Germany in the Second World War, with the result that Russian instead of German troops occupied most of Eastern Europe in 1945.

Too few American politicians and policy makers understood the inherent weaknesses of communism outside of the Soviet Union or the frailties of the Soviet Union itself. Their misconceptions induced them, beginning as early as 1945, to prepare the American people for an everlasting conflict against an intractable enemy. Although as stalwart a foe of communism as he had been of Nazism, Winston Churchill saw communism for what it was: an instrument of Russian national power—a power that he appreciated was not destined to endure.

On New Year's Day 1953, Churchill told his young private secretary, John Colville, that if Colville lived a normal life span he "should assuredly see Eastern Europe free of Communism." Churchill's calculations meant that communism would evaporate sometime during the late 1980s. Earlier, in November 1944, Churchill had answered an anxious query from French General Charles De Gaulle about what to do with the Communists after the war. Churchill agreed that the Soviet Union was a hungry "beast" in the midst of helpless "victims." Yet he told De Gaulle with a foresight that was as remarkable as it was reassuring that "after the meal comes the digestion period. When it is time to digest, the surfeited Russians will have their difficult moments." The Soviets could not easily absorb either the quantity or the variety of peoples and states they had devoured, and afterward would follow a period of violent regurgitation.

III. The Rise of Nationalism

Nationalism, not liberalism, communism, or socialism, was most influential ideology to evolve during the nineteenth century, and nationalism dominated the twentieth century. The essential components of nationalism emerged and intensified during the French Revolution. The leaders of that revolution had argued that the nation was not the private possession of the monarch, but was the embodiment of the will of the people. Citizens, nationalists insisted, owed their primary allegiance and their highest devotion not to a church, a social class, or a single ruler, but to the nation itself. They ought to be united in their devotion to and their love for the fatherland.

Nationalists exhibited tremendous pride in the history and traditions of their nations, often before those nations could properly be said to exist. They commonly believed that God had chosen their nation to fulfill some special mission in history and

asserted that only the nation could give meaning and purpose to the life and actions of an individual. Like religion, nationalism provided men with a sense of community, with feelings of self-worth, and with a cause to which they could dedicate themselves—a cause that was worthy of suffering, self-sacrifice, and even martyrdom.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, liberal thinkers, such as the Czech František Palacký and the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini, were the principal apostles of nationalism. They viewed the struggle for national independence as an extension of the struggle for individual freedom. There could be no individual liberty, these liberal nationalists asserted, if people were not free to govern themselves in their own land and free also from governmental oppression. Liberal nationalists envisioned a Europe composed of free and independent states each peopled by a free and independent citizenry. Liberated from foreign domination, these new states, liberal nationalists hoped, would honor the rights of individuals and promote the brotherhood of nations throughout Europe.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the connections between liberalism and nationalism grew more strained and distant. Since the Enlightenment, liberals had emphasized the universal rights of man that transcended national boundaries, what today we call "human rights." They focused on what all people had in common and preached toleration for differences. Nationalists in the second half of the nineteenth century, by contrast, increasingly promoted national glory at the expense of the rights of individuals and the liberty of nations.

Far from promoting universal harmony, nationalists now fostered hatred between different peoples and different nations. The smoldering nationalist conflicts of the nineteenth century gave rise to totalitarian governments and erupted into world war in the twentieth. For many Europeans in different countries, the love of the nation became a consuming passion, threatening to extinguish not only the ideal of individual liberty, but truth, morality, civilization, and humanity as well. In 1902 the German philosopher Friedrich Paulsen warned of this peril:

> A supersensitive nationalism has become a very serious danger for all the peoples of Europe; because of it, they are in danger of losing the feeling for human values. Nationalism, pushed to an extreme, just like sectarianism, destroys moral and even logical consciousness. Just and unjust, good and bad, true and false, lose their meaning; what men condemn as disgraceful and inhuman when done by others, they recommend in the same breath to their own people as something to be done to a foreign country.

By its very nature the study of history is frequently an antidote to nationalism and a threat to the politics of national identity. Historians seek to learn as much of the truth about the past as the evidence will disclose and support. Alternately, as John Lukacs has suggested, they aspire at least to eliminate as many untruths as possible. Nationalism and its variants, on the contrary, are predicated on omissions, distortions, anachronisms, myths, and, in extreme instances, lies. The distinction between truth and falsehood, however, is not ideological. Exposing, criticizing, and discrediting historical fictions and misrepresentations has always been one of the most important ways in which historians fulfilled their obligations to the rest of society, independent of their own passions, sympathies, and convictions.

Historians must be especially vigilant in the performance of this duty, for the interpretation of history is itself susceptible to ideological abuse. There are today numerous peoples throughout the world who contort the past in an effort to define them-

selves, to legitimate the policies or territorial ambitions of their governments, or to justify the killing of their enemies. Historians, though, did not come into the world to provide ammunition or solace to Americans or Russians, Serbs or Croats, Arabs or Jews, any more than they did to comfort whites, blacks, workers, women, or homosexuals. The task of historians is to quest after the truth, not only about ideas they hate and peoples they despise but about ideas they cherish and peoples they love.

IV. The Ethos of Democracy

The major shift in the history of Western civilization during the last two hundred years has been the passage from aristocracy to democracy, from a world governed by a small, privileged elite to a world governed by the masses. When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* during the 1830s and 1840s, the United States was the only democratic country on earth. At the end of the twentieth century the triumph of democracy has become worldwide and the egalitarian ideals of democracy have become so prevalent that nothing can stand against their advance.

A long struggle between the "aristocratic" culture of humanism and Christianity and the "democratic" culture of the masses has dominated the intellectual history of Western civilization. This conflict has not been consistently destructive; it has, under the right circumstances, often nourished a salutary and creative tension that helped to produced some of the greatest monuments of Western culture.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, this confrontation entered a new and less wholesome phase. For the first time, these popular movements from below broke through the surface of high culture. Whether these movements were rationalist or irrationalist, spiritualist or materialist, they were all characterized by an indefatigable enthusiasm and fanaticism. Their leaders determined to create a new order and a new salvation from among the masses (Karl Marx), from the depths of the unconscious (Sigmund Freud), or from the mystical union of the folk and the mythical history of the nation (Adolf Hitler). In the era of kings and fathers, this spirit had erupted in a few radical, volcanic, and mystical natures (Francis of Assisi, John Wycliffe, Jon Hus, Joan of Arc, Girolamo Savanarola, Martin Luther, and their followers). By the nineteenth century, though, it had become the driving force of culture, inspiring democratic and nationalist movements and sustaining their charismatic and often demonic leaders.

The civil war between "aristocratic" and "democratic" culture would no doubt have been less violent had the representatives of government and orthodoxy cultivated a dialogue with the "enemy" rather than the persecution of heresies. Europeans gained the awareness that no one possesses the whole truth only after considerable bloodshed, most of it unnecessary. How many millions had to suffer and die before kings and priests came to understand and accept that although many are called to a life of truth few are chosen to bear witness to it, and those witnesses are often the most unlikely candidates?

These regrets notwithstanding, when the old-fashioned guardians of orthodoxy and order burned a heretic or a revolutionary, they knew exactly what they were doing and why they were doing it. They realized that the spirit is explosive and thus potentially dangerous, and acted more honestly and realistically in their assessment of human nature than the liberal advocates of tolerance. I cannot, therefore, quite bring myself utterly to deplore or even to condemn the Grand Inquisitor's resolve to instill the right spirit and to recognize the threat posed

by movements that operate outside of that spirit, as much as I abhor the methods by which he opposed such movements.

These considerations at last prompt reflection on the problem of intellectual and spiritual discipline. Among the fundamental tenets of the democratic age has been the idea that freedom and equality are good and more freedom and more equality are better. The general acceptance of this proposition has released the spirit from all bonds: history, tradition, community, family, and faith. The absence of discipline, indeed a base impertinence, has characterized modern thinkers for a long time. As a consequence, they have become impotent. Intellectuals cannot rule, that is, they cannot mold the spirit of the times or of man, because they cannot govern themselves. All those concerned with the life of the spirit have no choice. Either they will impose discipline on themselves or they will have it imposed upon them.

For if the history of "democratic" Europe in the twentieth century demonstrates anything, it demonstrates that it has been child's play to suppress the intellectual elite. The representatives of this or that totalitarian state made a parlor game of co-opting, coordinating, silencing, imprisoning, or murdering professors, scientists, theologians, philosophers, artists, writers, and poets. Given the history of the twentieth century, is it not better that discipline be imposed entirely by one's own conscience guided, of course, by doctrine, dogma, and faith? Is it not now imperative that we recognize the ultimate and decisive difference between genius and holiness? In our time, nothing would do the average intellectual more good than to show a little reverence for the true priest, not as ridiculous a gesture as intellectuals for the past five hundred years have pretended.

V. The Descent into Barbarism

The influence of the two World Wars on contemporary politics and society may be receding, as John Lukacs has proposed, but those conflicts have left a dark and bloody residue of ruthlessness and violence that has undermined all standards of civility.

As a result of these ferocious conflicts, we have adapted in untold ways to living in a society no longer governed by the rules of civilization. We have now come to accept inhuman conduct as a matter of course, however shocked we may on occasion be by some unusually brutal occurrence. Even the canons that formerly regulated and circumscribed violence no longer apply. As the French philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote in the aftermath of the Second World War:

> In this war everyone—workmen, peasants, and women alike—is in the fight, and in consequence, everything, the factory, the harvest, even the dwelling-house, has turned target. As a result the enemy to be fought has been all flesh that is and all soil, and the bombing plane has striven to consummate the utter destruction of them all.... We are ending where the savages began. We have found again the lost arts of starving non-combatants, burning hovels, and leading away the vanquished into slavery. Barbarian invasions would be superfluous: we are our own Huns.

The period since 1914 has been the most murderous in history, and its legacy has been a weakening of the commitment to, and very nearly the obliteration of, such civilized values as restraint, loyalty, magnanimity, honor, and truth. The eminent English historian Eric Hobsbawm has argued that "one of the few things that stands between us and an accelerated descent into darkness is the set of values inherited from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment." The legacy of the Enlightenment, Hobsbawm continues, is "the only foundation for all the aspirations to build societies for *all*

human beings to live in anywhere on the Earth, and for the assertion and defence of their human rights.... The only criterion which allows us to judge rather than merely to record the consequent descent into barbarism is the old rationalism of the Enlightenment."

Determined to instruct men in the powers of reason, the *philosophes* expounded on the ideas of seventeenth-century thinkers that nature and society were founded on universal laws comprehensible to the mind. In their quest to establish and promote order, prosperity, tolerance, learning, and justice, the *philosophes* distrusted ecclesiastical and aristocratic privilege, which they regarded as impediments to reform. In place of these archaic, authoritarian entitlements, they spoke of the liberty, progress, dignity, happiness, and rights of man, and advocated such values as freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and equality before the law.

The moral philosophers of the Enlightenment also redefined virtue. In the Homeric world, virtue denoted physical strength and manly courage. By the eighteenth century virtue had attained a more social bearing. The virtuous man was useful and helpful to his fellow human beings. Virtue was not private, and no longer depended on adherence to an established tradition, morality, or creed. Instead, an act of virtue was rational, public, and political, undertaken solely to increase the sum of human happiness.

The legacy of eighteenth-century rationalism, however, remains far more ambiguous and contradictory than Hobsbawm's analysis implies. The emphasis on the universal rights of man or the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number may be admirable in theory. In practice, though, these convictions tended not to promote respect for diversity but to inspire ambitious programs of social engineering, supposedly organized around axioms to which no one in his right mind could object. The effort to establish a science of society rested finally on the assumption that all human beings were the same, and if they were not they must needs be made so. Universalism thus devolved into uniformity.

This belief in uniformity motivated reforms unchecked by the slightest reservation about the capacity of enlightened legislators to prescribe for all. Armed with a scientific understanding of the requirements of human happiness, the *philosophes* did not hesitate to propose a comprehensive

The freneticism of modern consumer culture.

reconstruction of social and political institutions in which the errors of ages past, fallaciously dignified as ancestral wisdom, would be eliminated. Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon," a penitentiary in which every cell was observed at every moment by custodians located in a central tower, may serve as the enlightened model of social order, a union of benevolence and rehabilitation with rigorous discipline and pervasive surveillance. No rational person, after all, could justly accuse a state designed to ensure the greatest good for the greatest number of enforcing uniformity in the manner of autocratic regimes. On the contrary, Bentham insisted that he sought only to teach men their real interests and thereby to free them from the inherited superstitions and bad habits that prevented them from living healthy, happy,

and productive lives.

Far more decisively even than Bentham's utilitarian calculus, the French Revolution revealed that eliminating ancient beliefs and practices and recasting society according to abstract principles could more easily end in a reign of terror than in the establishment of universal brotherhood and love. Maximilien Robespierre wanted to create a "Republic of Virtue" shorn of kings, nobles, and priests in which the natural goodness of humanity would prevail over greed, corruption, and vice. To herald the coming of this new era in the history of mankind, Robespierre stifled dissent by sending thousands to the guillotine. Robespierre counselled the imposition of a "despotism of liberty" and, in his mind, used terror only to cleanse and purify the people. "Without virtue," he concluded, "terror is useless; without terror, virtue is powerless."

The French Revolution discredited the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which had helped to engender it. Even before the terror reached its bloody culmination, Edmund Burke had published his classic apology for inherited wisdom against reckless innovation, the "merely theoretical system" that "sophisters," "calculators," "declaimers," "metaphysicians," and "revolutionists" devised. Burke vindicated "prejudice," which was "ten thousand times" to be preferred to the "evils of inconstancy and versatility." The *philosophes* had damned prejudice as the nemesis of reason but, Burke thought, they had underestimated its value as a source of moral restraint capable of preventing men from committing the most appalling crimes. According to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which Burke disparaged:

> All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which by a bland assimilation incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded, as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

It is thus in part to the "wise prejudice" of custom and tradition, rather than to what Burke termed "naked reason," that we must turn to arrest and, if possible, to reverse the descent into barbarism.

Burke's predicament was that custom and tradition by themselves were inadequate to contain unalloyed reason. Customs and traditions changed constantly and their endowment was always open to dispute. The mutability of custom and tradition induced Burke to search for an authority that was beyond the fatal critique of reason and that could thereby sustain the "ancient, permanent sense of mankind." Burke found what he was looking for in Christianity, which he regarded as the "basis of civil society" and "the one great source of civilization amongst us." Custom and tradition grounded in a common faith, he hoped, could inure men against embracing schemes of perilous innovation.

For the reasons Burke delineated, the most, and perhaps the only, hopeful course that remains to modern civilization is again to become Christian. That prospect will doubtless involve a certain degree of inconvenience, even anguish. But as T. S. Eliot observed in *The Idea of a Christian Society,* "here as hereafter the alternative to hell is purgatory."

Whether a task or a gift, a predicament or a blessing, life is emphatically not a challenge to the power of men to extend their dominion by bending the world to their will. Greatness of soul, as Montaigne wrote more than four hundred years ago, "is not

so much pressing upward and forward as knowing how to set oneself in order and to circumscribe oneself." The refusal to acknowledge the limits of human existence, the desire to be like unto God, is the essence of original sin. "Everything that we are in a positive sense is by virtue of some limitation," argued the brilliant Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. "And this being limited, this being crippled, is what is called destiny, life. That which is missing in life, that which oppresses us, forms the fabric of life and maintains us within it." Ortega was insinuating not only that life and history were, by themselves, incomplete, but that men respond more readily to need than to abundance, more decisively to obligation than to caprice, more ardently to the failure of today than to the promise of tomorrow.

To the extent that we have mastered nature and won our freedom, we have rejected the limitations of the human condition. No longer compelled to beseech God, we are confident that we are gods unto ourselves. Yet every day we witness the terrible consequences that follow when men, who no longer see the virtue of imitating Christ, arrogate to themselves the role of God. It has in some ways become more difficult to believe in the historical and human attributes of Christ, which requires the emulation of His conduct, than it is to believe in the eternal and divine attributes of Christ, which may require nothing more than credulity. At the end of the twentieth century, therefore, we suffer the consequences of an almost total emancipation from the moral heritage of Christianity.

Modern ideologues, whether of the right or of the left, have vowed to make irrelevant the appearance of Christ in history by somehow returning us to our original innocence. None have made good on their promises. These failures have contributed to the general revolt against civilization and to the desire among many to embrace a life of perpetual irresponsibility and self-indulgence. Increasingly violent alternations between self-adulation and self-hatred, between hubris and hedonism, between a murderous arrogance and a numbing despair, thus have come to distinguish the age.

It would be naive to pretend to optimism about our situation, even the sort of optimism that derives from knowledge of having seen the worst. At the same time, we must resist the temptation to succumb to resentment and despair. There is a theological distinction between optimism and hope that will discipline mind and spirit against these dual iniquities. Optimism is an investment in the future. It cannot survive the inevitable disappointments, failures, and defeats of this world. In the face of those disappointments, failures, and defeats optimism frequently becomes its opposite: cynicism, bitterness, rancor, and desperation. Hope, on the contrary, is a religious attitude not bound to a vision of future success, triumph, progress, and happiness. We hope without reason, even as events in this world suggest that hope is unwarranted and unwise.