

# **Moving Beyond Neo-Hellenistic Times: Re-Thinking Humanism in a Post-Modern World**

**Khoren Arisian**

POST-MODERNISM is an emergent sensibility that's been in the making for roughly the past twenty years on both sides of the Atlantic. What set the stage for this development were the upheavals and nearly worldwide revolt against authority that characterized the 1960s, perhaps the most pivotally original decade of the 20th century. If modernism as a generic point of view eschewed the past in favor of the present, post-modernism is almost completely tense-free, essentially un-historical, tethered neither to a past nor eagerly anticipative of a future. In such a context the very idea of progress becomes moot. This poses a fundamental challenge to humanism, which has largely made common cause with melioristic tendencies and inclinations. The modern idea of progress was rooted in the notion of a linear order, but today we live in an increasingly indeterminate world, either the idea of progress will have to be discarded or a more complex and less logical rigid view of it will have to be formulated. By the same token, if humanism is to be timely but not trendy, reflective of its evolution yet contemporary, it will have to become less oriented toward any outmoded scientific positivism and more flexibly attuned to current modes of inquiry, scientific included, as well as to explicit human needs. Has ours, like the

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Hellenistic period, been a time vitiated by sheer failure of nerve? If so, what are the prospects for getting beyond this predicament?

Anyone who turns from the great writers of classical Athens, say Sophocles or Aristotle, to those of the Christian era must be conscious of a great difference in tone. There is a change in the whole relation of the writer to the world about him. The new quality is not specifically Christian: it is just as marked in the Gnostics and Mithras-worshippers as in the Gospels and the Apocalypse, in Julian and Platinus as in Gregory and Germane. It is hard to describe. It is a rise of asceticism, of mysticism. in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human effort; a despair of patient inquiry, a cry for infallible revelation; an indifference to the welfare of the state,... It is an atmosphere in which the aim of the good (person) is not so much to live justly, to help the society to which (one) belongs and enjoy the esteem of (one's) fellow creatures; but rather, ... there is an intensifying of certain spiritual emotions; an increase of sensitiveness, a failure of nerve.

Gilbert Murray<sup>2</sup>

The period between the wars, when Surrealism flourished, was a time of great political strife and flux; this turmoil is reflected in the figural distortions and desolate landscapes that are hallmarks of Surrealist work. Surrealism rejected reason and logic in favor of the irrational, deriving its imagery from the depths of the unconscious mind. Relying on the theories of Sigmund Freud and using techniques of chance, the Surrealists created disturbing, provocative art that was often suggestive of dreams and fantasies.

The Legacy of Surrealism<sup>3</sup>

2. Murray, Gilbert, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, Anchor Books edition, Garden City, N.Y., p.119.

3. "The Legacy of Surrealism," Walker Art Center monthly exhibitions calendar, Minneapolis, Minnesota, December, 1990, p.3.

## Roots

Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" came to an end in early June, 1987. For 13 years Garrison Keillor created and embroidered a whole amazing mythology about Lake Wobegon, the Minnesota town "that time forgot." A literary romance, Wobegon was presented not as a rustic refuge from the world so much as a real place with real people. Like many midwestern towns, it could be small-minded and mean-spirited; generally, however, it was a self-contained, loving environment, complete unto itself even if far from perfect. Keillor perceived the best in Lake Wobegon, his view being so deeply personal that it struck universal chords in the minds and hearts of millions of listeners and admirers all over America. People pined for Lake Wobegon loss.

Among the many losses of this painfully transitional century, now mercifully in its terminal decade, is loss of a sense of place, we live such mobile, temporary, often inconclusive lives. Santayana once remarked somewhere that faith means a reverent attachment to the roots of one's being. Geographically speaking, nostalgia for the Lake Wobegon syndrome notwithstanding, it's not necessary or even desirable to live indefinitely where one was born or grew up. If one internalized the experience of one's early years, it can serve as part of the ballast of the rest of one's life. Cellist Pablo Casals, a world citizen self-exiled from his native country for much of his lifetime, carried Spain in his heart and mind wherever he went. Neither will Garrison Keillor forget his Wobegon roots whether he lives in Denmark or New York City? Which doesn't mean he wants literally to go back to them. When Keillor returned to his hometown of Anoka, Minnesota, in June, 1990 to give the high school commencement address, he remarked: "I have not come back to Anoka often, but I've always felt I've belonged here. I've never been tempted to move back, but I still live here. I think about it constantly."<sup>4</sup>

Roots are where we come from, not where we are going; they deserve to be outgrown rather than rejected. I myself grew up and went to school in Boston. I found the whole experience immensely stimulating but, like Keillor, I have no desire to go back and live where I was born. Nonetheless

<sup>4</sup> Minneapolis Star Tribune, June 7, 1990, p. 1A.

Boston is permanently etched in my memory, it was a formative element of my roots that I carry with me wherever I may go.

What kind of world do we live in today? Where is it going? Is not the whole world rapidly becoming everyone's neighborhood - the proverbial global village - and is not universality the underlying axiological premise of any humanist outlook on life? Surely this means we have to travel light while seeking personal security in ourselves rather than in particular places.

### **The Post-Modern Age**

With the unraveling of the Soviet empire that began in earnest in 1989, the present age entered a post-modern phase of great hope as well as great danger. For the world's former leading superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, it has become a time of unaccustomed self-searching for their new place and destiny in a volatile, not always controllable global environment. If it's increasingly true that economic and not military power will provide the chief geopolitical leverage in the post-modern era (by "modern" I refer to the period of intellectual transformation and industrial development in the West from the 17th and 18th centuries to 1989), then Iraq's blitzkrieg invasion and occupation of Kuwait in the summer of 1990 was a jolting reminder that the era of military initiatives had not passed entirely.

An upsurge of fear - fear of technologically advanced warfare and of consequent massacre and barbarism - always accompanies any rise of totalitarianism. Thus, for lifting the weight of nuclear fear from the shoulders of much of the modern world, especially in eastern Europe and in his own country, Mikhail Gorbachev deserves the world's lasting approbation, irrespective of the economic fate of perestroika or his own personal political fate. But if fear, because it is a form of laziness, creates lethargy, so does lack of purpose and clear direction. The Soviet Union - one-sixth of the world's land mass - now finds itself in a state of continuing uncertainty and/or deterioration, while the same is true of the Arab countries variously affected or devastated by the overwhelming American military victory in a conflict that lasted barely two months of 1991, from mid-January to mid-March. Meanwhile so-called Third-World nations, burdened by sizable foreign debts and crumbling domestic infrastructures, keep sliding

down the slope of entropy. It has suddenly become an unpopular world in which the U.S. dominates uneasily.

It's hard to avoid bringing up here the Nazi legacy that continues to bedevil the very foundations of modern civilization. Indeed, Nazism represented a total, unapologetic assault upon civilization. It glorified nihilism, meaningless conflict, unrestrained violence. Bereft of inner serenity, the Nazis, a cruel and restless breed, sought outward security in the savage establishment of perfect order whose ultimate symbol was the concentration camp; their dream was that of a slave society. In attempting to create rigid hierarchical relationships, they inspired a bottomless fear of freedom and therefore of being oneself. Fear not only creates lethargy and retreat; it also diminishes compassion. As Adolf Hitler openly admitted: "I have not come into the world to make men better but to make use of their weaknesses."<sup>5</sup> In pursuing this inhuman end, Hitler and his henchmen almost killed love itself, bequeathing spiritual oblivion to the postwar era.

To be sure, Jung, Freud and Albert Schweitzer independently noted in the 1930s a generalized nervousness, an almost paralyzing anxiety as the hallmark of the age, a growing estrangement from self and society, a widening spiritual vacuum which would sooner or later invite the entrance of totalitarianism. This state of affairs, however, was only accentuated by WW I: for Marx had long before spoken of the individual's alienation from the work of one's hand, of being reduced to a thing, a commodity, of being perceived in terms of functions and roles; Emile Durkheim had subsequently espied and analyzed modern anomie, and Ferdinand Tonnies, yet another sociologist (the 19th being the century of sociology as the 20th is the century of psychology), who reconciled the organic and social-contract conceptions of human culture, pointed out how *Gemeinschaft*, or natural organic society, was being gradually edged out by *Gesellschaft*, rational self-hold and was proceeding apace. No wonder the 20th has increasingly come to be a century in search of intimacy, a century in which emotion and intellect have been dangerously separated and placed at odds.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted In *Scene*, Twin Cities public television magazine, May, 1991. p.17.

## The Present Predicament

Try to picture two helicopters in the distance. Something is hanging from one of them, although we can't yet make out what it is. As the helicopters come closer, we finally see that a statue is dangling grotesquely from one of them. They fly past a modern apartment complex on the outskirts of Rome. In the second helicopter we see a photographer and two other men. The 'copters hover for a moment over a group of sunbathers on a roof garden below. They shout back and forth, the bikini-clad bathers asking, "Where are you taking the statue?" The statue is a figure of Christ, turning in the wind, arms outstretched as if in perpetual benediction. The men call down for the young women's telephone numbers - while Jesus, as it were, waits and dangles. Everybody laughs as the helicopters continue their journey to deliver the statue to St. Peter's Square. So begins Federico Feillini's towering film, "La Dolce Vita," translated into English as *The Sweet Life*," a film often described as the most gripping, sorrowful commentary - a veritable requiem - on the 20th century's continual loosening of its spiritual moorings.

For Fellini, Western civilization had become a sinking ship; like all great satirists, he is a conservative at heart, a moralist for whom such loss is almost inconsolable. Writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery once raised the question: how can a spiritual significance as well as a spiritual discontent be restored to this century's bruised and dislocated humanity? Refrigerators, politics and balance-sheets, he once avowed, are hardly enough to feed the spirit. The merely mundane - the merely superficial and transitory - do not suffice. Fellini, in essence, was protesting the same thing - that "the sweet life" of a hedonistic technological society too often turns sour owing to its indifference toward the human factor, creating, in consequence, fresh spiritual hungers.

There is nothing new about the content or thrust of Fellini's pessimistic outlook. T.S. Eliot concluded shortly after WWI that modern life had become a spiritual "wasteland." In a widely-reviewed book of the 1970s, *The Human Prospect*, economist Robert Heilbroner pointed out that the West had lost its assurance that social problems could be rationally solved anymore - a theme reflexively reiterated today. Subsequently, in a sizzling Harvard Commencement Address in 1978, Russian novelist and expatriate, Aleksander Solzhenit-

syn, proclaimed that Western liberal culture was on the wane and deservedly so; that the West as a whole had run out of steam and gone soft, weakened by enervating affluence and secular indifference to human spiritual needs.

Solzhenitsyn has no use for the humanism of the West - the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, both of which, he believes, despiritualized human consciousness. The gist of his analysis is that Western culture, in revolting against admittedly heavy-handed ecclesiastical rule and its exaggerated emphasis on the supernatural and the material impoverishment it often sanctified, ended up in the modern era materially satiated and therefore spiritually impoverished, exactly the point made by Fellini and St. Exupery. Furthermore, declared Solzhenitsyn, we cannot substitute hope in social and political reforms for the spiritual life, which is *sui generis*, "our most precious possession."<sup>6</sup>

### **The Spiritual Wasteland: A Short History**

Starting in the 1880s in Europe one could discern an inward turning toward the subjective and away from the outside world owing to mingled discontent and envy with the onward march of science and industry. Many, of course, hailed this development as the West's proper destiny and a justification for endless optimism, "onward and upward forever" being one of 19th-century Unitarianism's contentedly satisfying phrases. On the other hand, in various philosophical, religious, literary and artistic circles, a revolt began to set in against such scientific positivism.<sup>7</sup>

This revolt was directed against the spiritual indifference of the newly enriched bourgeoisie which technology, born of science, had made possible. The real religion of Europe and America was coming to be the worship of machine-generated affluence, the secular religion of things and money. Essayist and poet Matthew Arnold particularly lamented the sharply increased materialism of the industrialized society of Victorian England. French painter Gauguin left in disgust for Samoa, Europe's externally sensate yet spiritually sterile culture offering him no instinctually honest satisfactions. Gauguin felt that in the wake of the decadent sensuality that mate-

<sup>6</sup> "Is Solzhenitsyn Right?" *Time*, June 26, 1976, p.22.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes, H. Stuart, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*. Vintage, New York, 1961, pp. 33-66.

rial prosperity had brought, the European sensibility was being drained of true and deep feeling which was being supplanted by superficial, less stable emotions. A comparison between Beethoven's Ninth symphony at the end of the first quarter of the 19th century with Gustave Mahler's Fifth at the end of that century throws up some startling contrasts. In 75 years' time European music had moved from a clearly stated, confident, triumphant joy to escapism, insecurity and nostalgia, an unstable alternation of despair and ecstasy, of uncertainty and confidence. Mahler seems virtually inundated by emotions out of which he tries to thrash his way. He makes it in the end, but not without considerable anguish, suffering and doubt. It's as if such music were a metaphor of Western civilization's growing palpable doubts concerning its own rationalist credentials.

It's easy to forget what a cumulatively devastating effect the Industrial Revolution had on many millions of people both in Europe and America. A way of life that had been largely agricultural and settled for thousands of years was suddenly uprooted. The rhythms of daily life changed radically with the onset of industrialism. Human beings had to accommodate themselves to the new, unfamiliar machines and assembly lines. Kinship ties were strained and often broken, social cohesion shattered by the unrelenting demands of the new market economy. The family became less and less a center of stability and strength. "The inner temple of human life was despoiled and violated," says R.M. McIver.<sup>8</sup> The modern technocratic state and the market soon made common cause, a union that gave rise to the god of consumerism. In short, the foundations of the Western world as we know them today were being laid throughout the last century, often at considerable human expense. As Karl Polanyi brilliantly describes it in the title of his classic work, it was "The Great Transformation."

If industrialism sounded the death-knell of human community as it had been experienced for so long, Darwinism, many felt, had killed God, whereupon Nietzsche promptly delivered the eulogy at God's funeral. Actually the "death of God" motif was theological shorthand for the spiritual malaise people were beginning to feel over the loss of human community and therefore of the deep experiences of connectedness from

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Polanyi, Karl, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, 1957, p.X.

one generation to the next. The individual was now severed from such connectedness and had only his or her own emotions on which to rely. This loss was so devastating that the urban proletariat would turn in massive relief to doctrines of socialism that challenged capitalist industrialism by promising to restore human community.

Evidences of the pain induced by these developments could be seen in fin-de-siecle culture. In 1893 Norwegian artist Edward Munch produced his famous drawing, "The Scream," denoting the horror of psychologic isolation and retreat. Organized religion was beginning a comparable retreat into the private realm, the Protestant Social Gospel and Pope Leo XIII's encyclical on social issues being but minority protests against the hardships foisted upon the poor by the nascent market economies of the West. We have already noted Mahler's retreat into musical privacy and Durkheim's 'anomie,' the word he coined to denote the psychological deprivation resulting from the evisceration of traditional supportive social bonds which development of the modern industrial state implied. We can see the same phenomenon in Third World countries today as they industrialize at the behest of authoritarian rulers, often themselves pressured by the exigent demands of the West and its main financial lever, the World Bank.

In short, starting in the last century, the individual was beginning to feel atomized, dried up, controlled - this is what social determinism expressed, a process that would continue into the 20th century at an accelerated pace, giving rise to a sense of lost identity, moral drift and spiritual disorientation. Nonetheless these early apocalyptic forebodings oiled well beneath the surface of everyday Victorian life. Publicly, it was an era of robust confidence and material achievement. In Germany the overt optimism of the day was expressed by Gerhard Hauptmann in his play, *Before Sunrise*; in England, in the confident writings of Norman Angell. Of course, it all came crashing down in a few short years in WWI. In contrast to Mahler, Ravel would unambiguously depict the West's evolution from 19th-century confidence and gaiety of spirit to despair and downfall in his orchestral masterpiece, *Valse Triste*.

Much of the period since the 1920s has consequently been marked by accelerating spiritual crisis and confusion, political selfishness and duplicity, and periods of social fear or appre-

hension. Thus, of May Day rallies in Poland in 1987, Lech Walesa could say of the then Communist Polish authorities who put them down with desperate brutality that they were simply "fearful of society."<sup>9</sup>

Fearfulness has multiplied everywhere - fear of war, fear of AIDS, fear of strangers, fear of crime, fear of Communism (now succeeded by fear of greater instability in the wake of its ideological weakening), fear of losing one's material well-being, fear of other people's opinions. Now and then this generic fearfulness has been punctuated by apocalyptic intensity. Far-right fundamentalists who are frequently frightened by the whole modern era are in as much spiritual desperation as anyone else. Their desperation gets calcified and magnified in their dogmatism. The sexual turmoil in the Protestant evangelical empire but a few years ago was merely the most recent manifestation of normative Christianity's inherent inability, because of its eschatological predilections - its preoccupation with the end of time and of history - to reconcile holiness and the natural world.

By the early years of the 1980s hard-core millennialism became rampant.<sup>10</sup> Not only did televangelist Pat Robertson tell us that Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June of 1982 would somehow lead to a Biblically prophesied final conflagration with the Soviet Union - self-styled economic wizards like Joe Granville, Howard Ruff and Douglas Casey, self-appointed new deans of apocalyptic finance, were also listing the principles of "crisis investing" - how to profit from people's fears. The ultimate desecration of social bonding was reached, perhaps, in the so-called survivalist movement which preached that Number One indeed comes first, and to hell with everybody else.

To give up on humanity is, in truth, to give up on oneself, but such self-awareness was lost on most survivalists. Moreover, by the 1970s and '80s it seemed that we had dulled our capacity for moral discourse - we hardly had a sophisticated moral vocabulary left, this at a time when ethical dilemmas in private and public life were becoming more acute and more complex than ever.

<sup>9</sup> "May Day Is marked by celebrations In Moscow, crackdowns In Poland," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 20, 1987, p. 14a.

<sup>10</sup> Martin, William, "Waiting for the End," *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 1982, p. 35.

### **Neo-Hellenistic Loss of Nerve**

The loss of spiritual self-confidence leads to ethical illiteracy - thus it was an easy step from Watergate to Contragate, let alone to Wall Street's insider-trading scandals and the bottomless greed epitomized by the machinations of an Ivan Boeskey or a Michael Milken. Absent the self-governance born of moral principles culturally transmitted to us and modified by our own experience and understanding, we become merely willful, slaves to whim, passion and fancy, impervious to ethical limits on our actions or behavior. In other words, besides the various losses thus far enumerated, we must also include that primal loss, the loss of sheer nerve - an almost endemic unwillingness to hold ourselves - and others - accountable.

Consequently, we have been living, I submit, in new-Hellenistic times, the kind of era in which many feel orphaned and adrift, an era inaugurated, or at the very least punctuated in the post-war period by the horrible public assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November, 1963.

The original Hellenistic age dates from the waning years of the fourth century B.C.E. and the centuries following upon the death of Alexander the Great. This was a period when a complacent external prosperity through the eastern Mediterranean concealed a widespread inner failure of mind, heart and spirit. Beneath the exterior comforts of the day festered the spiritual gangrene born of powerlessness. A general withdrawal from the civic and political realms revealed itself in both daily life and in the popular arts; a fatalistic view of external events prevailed. As the classical scholar, Gilbert Murray, eloquently explains. One couldn't do anything to solve nagging problems, the main questions being, how does one cope and survive in an insecure world? In religion there was frequent resort to the goddess Tyche, or Chance. Then, as now, the human spirit was scarred by wreckage in the wake of impotent efforts.

Today's post-modern, me-centered, new-Hellenistic generic injunction seems to be in effect: if at first you don't succeed, withdraw, don't try again; if you fall, don't get up, stay down, cover your rear, forfeit responsibility, let someone else take the rap. Sound familiar? Where life is reduced to coping, surviving or kidding, no one is growing or contributing very much.

## New Age Consciousness

We all know that things carried too far tend to produce their opposites. Thus in delayed optimistic reaction to what might be termed the pessimistic new-Hellenistic syndrome, New Age consciousness, or new Age spirituality, has emerged in our time. Its modern roots go back to the so-called "Age of Aquarius" of the late 1960s, although one could theoretically trace some of its origins to the romantic movement of the last century.

New Age consciousness represents, philosophically, a new kind of populist pantheism. Everything, everyday life, is deemed sacred - shades of Kahlil Gibran! But if, according to Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, everything is permitted if there is no God, then by the same token, if all is God, the same logic holds - anything goes. The trouble with pantheism is its failure to secure ethics and therefore to point toward a definite political stance. New Age spirituality is all over the map, a smorgasbord of Eastern mysticism, Western occultism, quantum physics, reverence for Nature, fascination with near-death experiences, reincarnation, "positive thinking," guided imagery, the oneness of nature and humanity, and the idea of mind as absolute. Clearly, the common denominator of these disparate Gnostic inclinations - aided and abetted by deconstructionist dogmas that words have no objective signification, that truth is elusive if not absent, and history pointless - is solipsism, self-deification. Some familiar watchwords co-opted by New Age thinking are: holistic, networking, synergy, community, and so on. This does not mean that one using such words is necessarily a devotee of so indiscriminating an approach to life. New Age-ism, in sum, is more a sensibility than a distinctive movement even though parts of it have permeated a great many facets of contemporary American culture, including religion and business.

I agree with the New Age observation that in its severance of holiness from creation, the Judeo-Christian tradition opened Nature to exploitation: God is thrust between humanity and the earth.<sup>11</sup> In this regard one might remember former Interior Secretary James Watt. Devoted to a vision of apocalypse, he admitted he did not know the arrival time of the Second Coming, but in view of that inevitability, why not

<sup>11</sup> Burrow, Robert J.L., "A Christian Critique on the New Age," *Ume Reader*, no. 20, March/April 1987, pp. 86-96.

plunder Nature's resources and get what one could from Nature, since it would all go up in flames sooner or later anyway?

When the Church severed the human body, and therefore the human spirit, from the empirical realm, from the world of the senses - the world of time, space, history - it revealed its supernatural preferences. The anti-physical bias of the early Church was notable. It would be a long time before Christianity's narrow-minded authoritarianism would be countered by the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, precisely those vast worldly movements of protest and liberation that Solzhenitsyn decried in his Harvard Address of 1978.

### **Science, Nature and Subjectivity**

Science registered its own potent protest as well. In fighting ecclesiastical tyranny and theological obfuscation, Western science necessarily became mechanistic, banishing subjective human response from the realm of value, while humanism as its philosophical counterpart became totally secularized, eventuating, in a country like France, in a militant atheism. The so-called warfare between religion and science became a competition for power.<sup>12</sup> In consequence, supernaturalism, at least for the worldly elites of the time, came to be morally discredited and intellectually indefensible by the end of the 18th century. Still the spiritual foundations of humanism remained implicit at best, while its negative critiques of supernaturalism came to be regarded as its dominant characteristic. It would not be until a generation or two passed that a naturalistic spirituality, for instance, in the Transcendentalist outlook of Ralph Waldo Emerson, would begin to take shape. Liberal religion could then emerge as a conscious, organized attempt to deny that reason and religion, mind and heart, had to be at odds.

Beethoven, who believed humanity was blessed with a spark of divinity and therefore deserving of freedom, found solace and stimulation in Nature, the source of his own spiritual grounding. "My nobility is here and here," he once reportedly alleged, pointing to his heart and head: as with the classical Greeks, intellect and passion were in such balance as to be

<sup>12</sup> Newman, James R.. *Science and Sensibility*, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1963, p.3.

forms of one another in his music. <sup>13</sup> Such melding makes for wholeness, the touchstone of any naturalistic spirituality. As Thornton Wilder remarks through one of his characters in the play, *Our Town*, there is something eternal/sacred about each of us, and perhaps that's as far as we can go, or need to go. The greatest sin against life is to pine for another life, either in an assumed supernatural realm or in an earlier period of history seen through rose-tinted glasses. The greatest compliment we can pay to ourselves is to live as fully as we can now, to be present in the present. Clearly, concepts like individuality, community, Nature will all need to be imaginatively recovered, reassessed, and reconceptualized. To be indifferent toward Nature is in effect to be contemptuous of people and society and of oneself. Indeed, left to themselves, people without benefit of clergy will tend in their spiritual evolution toward a religion of Nature rather than of Revelation. As for society, only as we rediscover its primacy and, as Maclver puts it, "the inclusive coherent unity of human interdependence, (can we) hope to transcend the perplexities and the contradictions of our time" <sup>14</sup>

### **The Necessity for a Sense of the Sacred**

All religions that are spiritually vibrant have a sense of the sacred. John Dewey, however, identified humanity's common religious element as a universal quality of human experience, not belief per se. <sup>15</sup> This spiritual dimension comes to life in us as vital feeling that reaches out to the world in the ethical quality of relationships among individuals. In our day and age the individual is never so susceptible to manipulation as when she or he succumbs to the view that the human being is not holy, that the sources of political legitimacy have nothing to do with people and that society is subservient to the state.

If, as the classic Hellenic (as opposed to the Hellenistic) equation would have it, the secret of happiness is freedom, and the secret of freedom is courage, then surely the secret of life is spirit. A naturalistic humanism, not pantheism, is therefore in order: everything and everybody can hardly be accounted as sacred. And a few people, like a Hitler or a monster serial killer, forfeit their sacred potential by their unfor-

<sup>13</sup> *Showcase*, musical notes, April 1987, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Polanyi, Karl, *op.cit.*, p. xU.

<sup>15</sup> Dewey, John, *A Common Faith*, Yale University Press, New London, 1934, p.3.

givable acts. Nothing is automatically holy. Sacredness is an attributed rather than intrinsic quality and entails openness beyond itself.

One of the Democratic Presidential hopefuls in 1988, Senator Biden of Delaware, said he wished to challenge a public "lulled by the anthem of self-interest" in order to "rekindle the fire of our idealism" in a renewed spirit of community, caring and compassion. We thus come back full circle to Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon whose most consistent appeal has had to do with the nourishment that human community at its best can supply. Although the focus on community is a classic conservative tenet, that category of designation is much less important than the liberating rediscovery that we are social as well as unique beings and therefore cannot achieve spiritual wholeness except as we remain members one of another. If one half of our human destiny is to individuate, the other half is never to forget, in John Donne's imperishable words, that "each of us is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

### **An Unscientific Personal Postscript: Deconstruction Denied**

Not long ago I was much taken with a televised interview of a group of black teenagers one of whom blurted out movingly, in explanation of the mounting violence, personal as well as racial, that marks contemporary encounters, that there's no love coming their way; that on a broader societal level people have become less and less compassionate, not caring to connect with human beings who look different from themselves. At this late stage in history, don't people matter just because they're people? It still does not seem so. The plight of the Kurds in the wake of the American/Iraqi war is a case in point on a very large scale. Whenever the sacredness of persons is cynically cast aside, anything can be done to them - they literally don't matter. The 19th may prove to have been the last century in the West (not necessarily elsewhere) when a sense of the sacredness - the "indefeasible worth" (to quote Felix Adler) of every individual - was more or less commonly held, taken for granted.

The spiritual emptiness of our time continues unabated, and deconstructionist theory, which in my view represents an intellectual can job, merely reinforces that emptiness. Deconstruction is part and parcel of the post-modernist preoccupa-

tion with the surfaces of things and events. There is a noticeable flattening out of feeling to the point of absence in the face of drugs, video and cinematic violence; a dumbing down of the mind; an antinomian insistence that nothing is better or more important than anything else is.<sup>16</sup> Such a posture can only wreak havoc with critical intelligence, which is premised on the ability to discriminate one thing from another. The post-modernist title of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Incredible Lightness of Being*, is apropos. As for so-called New Age music, it too, fits into the post-modernist temper: at first it hypnotizes and soothes but goes nowhere except in louder and louder circles of unsettling sound. Perhaps such artistic expressions are an improvement over coming to a virtual stop while "Waiting for Godot." But if all we settle for is primal evidence of movement instead of meaningful struggle, we will have retreated even more from a purposive humanity.

The post-modern political context is especially instructive: the so-called Reagan Revolution of the 1980s was a masterful post-modernist masquerade. The Reaganites were capitalist extremists. No economic system generates a more obvious fast-forward series of social and technological changes than an unrestrained capitalism. This eventually causes people to want to slow down, to call a halt, even go backwards. The stage is set for nostalgia and a reactionary politics. Exactly this has transpired in the past twenty years.

Ronald Reagan did not always distinguish between real life and the movies. Cinematic values were very nearly the whole of his reality. Reagan purported to be the staunch advocate of so-called traditional values centered around family, religion and neighborhood. These values were in fact belied by his own behavior and personal history. He was an apt pupil at playing a role, performing a function, in a decade in which the docudrama became a TV staple, its purpose being maximum entertainment, not enlightenment.

When real life is thus theatricalized, the legitimate moral charge of hypocrisy is often muted, for all that counts is appearances - in short, surfaces. How does something look? What's a photo-op all about, after all? What's the sheer look of a person, a film - even a liturgy? Prime-time platitudes, sleekly packaged, are all that's needed. This is what comes of an age over-committed to visual imagery and subjectivism -

<sup>16</sup> Gitlin, Todd, "Postmodernism defined at last," *Time Reader*, July/August 1989, p.52.

sincerity is in, honesty is out. No good deed is to go unpunished, no bad deed unrewarded. The post-modern context allows celebrity to replace charisma, demagoguery to replace oratory, facilitation to replace leadership, symbolism to crowd out content. Meanwhile the inner life, that gradual creation of spiritual depth, goes the way of soap suds. With consumerism triumphant, tradition dissolves, all that counts is what's new and what's now; patriotism gets reduced to flag-waving, and the sole value of a Van Gogh painting is the price it can fetch.

How can such a post-modern, deconstructionist atmosphere be resisted and overcome? By exposing its superficiality and nihilism at every turn. By refusing to resign oneself to the world's current claptrap, like the fatuous conventional wisdom which teaches that "perception is reality." We need to reinstate the truth that life has weight, that it's not "lite;" we need to develop more complex sophisticated conceptions of subjectivity and objectivity; we need to stress the social foundations of individuality as the most enduring source of community. We need to develop a philosophy of Nature responsive to the ecological demands of the earth and at the same time resist the temptation to escape into Nature. We need a new humanist politics. In short, we can't afford to be resigned but instead be eager to join in the struggle to reshape tomorrow's humanism - in tomorrow's, not yesterday's, context. The first essential step is that we move beyond Neo-Hellenistic times.