

The Democratic Prospect

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I wish to explore, first of all, the nature of the crisis of liberal democracy and will argue that it is essentially a crisis of meaning. If, as I believe, we are entering a new period of ideological candor and contest, we must examine some inhibiting factors in making the case for liberal democracy. These factors are in large part internal to Western thought, but they are also increasingly vulnerable to our perspective on the future of the "third" and "fourth" worlds, that is, to the poor. Finally, I wish to suggest some directions that could sustain and enliven our hope for the democratic prospect.

The first twinges of anxiety have turned into a torrent of rumors building toward a new consensus that democracy is now on the defensive and probably in decline. What some view with fear and others with hope is not all that sudden or all that new. The "crisis of democracy" is a sturdy perennial. It is the dubious and apparently infinite gift of modernity to mint and market the sensations of crisis. This is notably true of American society, which is, as they say, "the lead society" of the modern industrialized world. Here, it is thought, the hopes and alarms of the global future are first perceived and most loudly sounded.

Among American intellectuals there seems to be virtual unanimity on the premise that ours is a time of crisis. There is no reason why the democratic faith should be exempted from the exquisite sensation of imminent collapse. Old verities are assaulted by, among others, the environmental crisis, the energy crisis, the food crisis, the population crisis, the equality crisis, and the crisis of rapid development in the Third and Fourth worlds. Crisis calls for decisive response, for rational planning and resolute action, for an exercise of control that brooks neither diversity nor delay. Democracy is

therefore an idea whose time came and has now gone away. Its cumbersome preoccupation with checks and balances, its scrupulousness about individual rights, its endless discourse in search of public policy, its refusal of final solutions—all these marks of democratic society are deemed ill suited to a time such as ours. Small wonder that today not more than a fifth of the world's nations practice or pursue what we would call democratic government. In times of crisis, it is suggested, democracy is a luxury nations can ill afford.

The present crises that are now said to be throwing democracy itself into crisis may, in some respects, be new. It is wise, however, to nurture a robust skepticism toward the manufacture of crises. The inconveniences and the disciplines of democratic governance have always seemed burdensome to many—especially to those concerned with the seeking and keeping of power—and are viewed therefore as dispensable upon the slightest excuse. The excuse is always called a crisis.

In the late 1920's and 1930's, in both this country and in Europe, many intellectuals proclaimed the obsolescence of democracy in the face of the challenges of the modern world. The modern models of efficiency were Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, and, most especially, Stalin's Russia. We now know that Mussolini did not in fact even make the trains run on time. The celebrated Autobahn is slight compensation for the madresses inflicted upon the world by the Third Reich. And, after fifty-eight years of the glorious revolution, Russia is now equaling the per capital agricultural production of the Czarist years, while those fortunate citizens not trapped in the Gulag Archipelago may stand in line to pay a week's salary for an ordinary woolen blanket. Yet the myth persists that efficiency requires the sacrifice of liberty. Curiously, the myth for the most part is marketed by those who possess the liberty to dissent from societies that do not subscribe to it. Those dissenters who live in societies that do subscribe are seldom heard from in the debate about the obsolescence of democracy.

In *The Democratic Experience* (published in 1969 although largely written in 1963) Reinhold Niebuhr affirmed his "pessimistic faith in the democratic ideal."

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One biographer of Niebuhr, obviously more offended by Niebuhr's faith than by his pessimism, spends several pages apologizing for *The Democratic Experience*. He implies that after Vietnam, Watergate, another decade of the racial crisis, and sundry other disillusionments Niebuhr would have been less naive about the universal values of democracy. I prefer to believe that today Niebuhr might be more pessimistic but no less faithful in asserting the democratic ideal. In perhaps his best-known aphorism Niebuhr declared: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." I believe nothing has happened to warrant changing that judgment.

I would go beyond Niebuhr, however—perhaps in some ways behind Niebuhr—to the vision of the Social Gospel movement, which Niebuhr so brilliantly, if unfairly, excoriated. That is, I suspect democracy is a possibility beyond necessity; it is more than the least evil of rotten options; it participates, albeit partially, in that new community to which the Christian Gospel points in the coming of the Kingdom of God. Elsewhere I have tried to make the case for taking democracy, including the American democratic experiment, with religious seriousness. I shall not repeat that argument but simply note that, if the argument is true, the growing consensus that democracy is on the defense or in decline poses a challenge of theological stature.

The democratic idea we refer to here is, of course, that of liberal or constitutional democracy. It is the democratic experience that has been forged and honed chiefly in the histories of Great Britain and the United States, with, to be sure, important contributions from other peoples. It is that form of governance that is accountable to a prior definition of human rights, that is premised upon a balancing of obligations, that is admittedly more certain about process than about goals, that exercises self-limitation in the practice of the politics of the provisional. It is the democracy for which Woodrow Wilson prayed the world would be made safe.

We must specify what we mean by democracy, else it would make no sense at all to say that democracy is in crisis or in decline. If we do not specify what we mean by democracy, it might be thought that Wilson's dream has been vindicated beyond his furthest hopes. Not only has the world been made safe for democracy, but it would seem that democracy has hardly an enemy left; for there is barely a government in the world today that does not claim to be democratic, or on its way to becoming democratic. The almost complete diffusion of the notion that governmental legitimacy derives from "the people" is one of the most stunning developments of the twentieth century. But in dismal fact this diffusion lends little support to the democracy for which we hope.

As J.L. Talmon so chillingly analyzed in the *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, the democratic idea is almost infinitely malleable. As Christianity has persistently emphasized, the demonic is the other side of the sacred. Many of the regimes that call themselves democratic today are heirs to Rousseau's notion of the "general

will" in which, as in the French Revolution, the authority of the people is interpreted and exercised by a revolutionary élite. As Solzhenitsyn and a host of witnesses would tell us, if we had but ears to hear, the Great Terror derived from that notion is far from over. In the Soviet Union, to take but the most long-standing example of totalitarian democracy, the authority of the people is exercised exclusively by a self-perpetuating and carefully selected élite of some 5 per cent of the population, an élite which in turn is controlled by the much smaller élite of party leadership. To suggest that the decisions of this élite be made accountable to popular sentiment is to violate the dogma upon which the Communist system is constructed: the People are God and the Party is the Vicar of God on earth. Implicit is a claim to authority that, by comparison, makes Innocent III look like a lackey to his social betters.

The battle might be described, then, as one between two traditions of democracy: the totalitarian and the constitutional; the politics of the absolute and the politics of the provisional. Totalitarian democracy, like Nazism, claims to be self-authenticating; it need not be vulnerable to the people, for it embodies the will of the people, or the only will of the people that is legitimate; it cannot be vulnerable to the judgment of God, for it is itself the exclusive bearer and instrument of the transcendent hope for history's fulfillment. As distinct from authoritarian regimes of various political shadings, as unattractive as they may be, totalitarian democracy makes a claim over the whole of life and the whole of society. Being absolute in its legitimacy, it lays claim upon the soul of man. It is prevented from exercising the total control it claims only by its own bureaucratic inefficiency and by the fear of rebellion. The rebellion may come from those possessed by another transcendent faith for which they would die, or from the regime's pressing too hard those who have reached the recklessness of despair through disillusionment with a system that is the antithesis of its boast, or from those deceived into believing they could count on help from the outside (as, for example, Hungary 1956).

But, in general, totalitarian democracy does not press to the breaking point the total control it claims as its right. This is so, in part, because the fervor of functionaries is directed more toward security in office than toward apocalyptic fulfillment. And in large part this is so because there is the quiet confidence that through the rigorous privatizing of religious faith, through the regularizing of despair, and through, when necessary, the brutal repression of dissent, the control that is necessary can be secured. On the record to date, that quiet confidence seems to be well placed. Certainly it is better supported by evidence than is the optimistic assumption of a few years ago that life in, for example, the Soviet Union would slowly but inexorably give way to greater and greater liberalization. Indeed, lest there still be illusions on this score, the Soviet leaders have in the past two or more years tried to make it perfectly clear that détente with the West on military questions must be accompanied by intensified ideological confrontation internationally and by more rigorous discipline domestically.

Of course it is exceedingly unpleasant to speak of these things. Some will object that it is downright dangerous to talk in terms of a contest between liberal democracy and communism. And indeed we must take care that we do not excuse as candor the invocation of the darker side of what was called the cold war. The Western self-righteousness and the crusading passions of that era were not only militarily dangerous, but also contradicted the most elementary virtue of liberal democracy, which is to be ever self-critical, ever self-limiting, ever under judgment. But if, as one hopes, the earlier cold war era is behind us, then also behind us, sad to say, is its short-lived successor.

We have been shorn of the comforting illusion of some kind of inevitable convergence of interests and values between East and West. Once again the most fetching fantasy of secular Enlightenment liberalism has been exposed, namely, that all self-interests are finally complementary and harmonious, that all conflicts can be synthesized by rational people of good will. We are again brought up short by the reality that in this incomplete and disjointed universe, still so far from its promised fulfillment, we must struggle with contradictions and contend for truths partially perceived, relying on forgiveness and vindication that is beyond our devising.

Sobering evidence of the end of that illusion of automatic convergence is to be found in the demise of the Christian-Marxist dialogues so hopefully celebrated only a few years ago. Some critics of that effort argued that it was doomed from the start; that it was conducted chiefly by Marxists who either did not believe in Marxism or were cynically determined to co-opt Christians for their cause, and by Christians who either did not believe in Christianity or were utterly naive about the manipulative intentions of their Marxist partners. No doubt there is some merit to that argument. One thinks of Roger Garaudy, whose synthesis of Christianity and Marxism earned him formal excommunication from the Communist Party, or of the participation of the many so-called Christian atheists, who effectively excommunicated themselves from the believing community. But let us allow that the dialogues—which perforce were chiefly a European phenomenon, since few Marxist interlocutors could be found in this country—were motivated for the most part by sincere desire to discover a common basis through adventuresome crossings of the lines of confrontation. Certainly it was a moving and worthy vision that offered the hope of discovering a new foundation for human solidarity across the great ideological divides that mark our age.

Yet today we are compelled to acknowledge that the Christian-Marxist dialogue, at least in its earlier form, is ended. In addition to those who have been formally or effectively discredited as representing Marxism or Christianity, other partners on the Marxist side have been silenced as, especially since 1968, the socialist regimes have returned to a more confrontational posture. Still others have died or have removed themselves to the West, resigning themselves to the poignant career of criticizing the West through the prism of their remembrance of socialisms that might have been.

To be sure, especially in the form of sundry Latin

American “liberation theologies,” a kind of Christian-Marxist dialogue continues. Some of its proponents, however, practice a winsome candor that admits their enterprise is not so much a dialogue as it is an accommodation of Christianity to “the scientific analysis of reality offered by Marxism.” And, I believe it necessary to say, those who are not so candid are often equally accommodationist in result, if not in intent. We can take seriously their contention that the socialism they have in mind will not be built upon any existing model, whether Soviet, Cuban, Chinese, or even Allende redivivus. And we should, of course, be open to new proposals for truly democratic socialism, for “socialism with a human face,” whether in Italy, in France, or among some intellectuals in this country. The problem with proposing this idealized socialism, of course, is that it can readily be countered by an idealized capitalism or idealized liberal democratism that have nothing to do with our unhappy knowledge of CIAs, mindless consumerism, or Indochinese wars. In the game of dehistoricized idealizations any number can play.

The more realistic and demanding view, I believe, is for all of us—whether we call ourselves socialists or not—to recognize that our world is largely divided between the conflicting ideologies of totalitarian and liberal democracy and that this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. If it is dangerous to be candid about this conflict, if we run the risk of invoking the darker side of cold war confrontation, it is even more dangerous to delude ourselves about the magnitude of the differences that exist.

One of the unhappier features of this presumably enlightened age is that the perceived alternative to whatever may be the madnesses of liberal democracy is the greater madness of Marxist socialism. I for one am persuaded that the Christian message—especially in its insistence that social reality be kept radically open to the judgment of the future—places me on the side of liberal democracy. Nor do I doubt—and here I am influenced by friends in Europe, Asia, and Africa—that in this contest the United States of America has a most singular responsibility. This does not mean we are engaged in a holy war. We have neither revealed promise nor empirical evidence to suppose ourselves the unique chosen instruments of God’s purposes in history. That said, however, I do not hesitate to assert that the promise of God’s coming Kingdom has a stake in this contest. Although his purposes far transcend our certain perception, the belief that there can be a meeting point between his purposes and ours is inescapable if we believe that what we mean by “God” is *in* history and *for* history.

Two hundred years ago, or even seventy-five years ago, these ideas about liberal democracy proposed by an American religious thinker would have been deemed unexceptionable. Beginning perhaps with a certain day in August, 1914, and continuing through the most recent exposé of CIA assassination attempts, these ideas have been severely tempered for all but the most fanatical “defenders of the free world,” and

for perhaps a majority of Western intellectuals they have been thoroughly discredited. Disillusionment with unbridled euphoria about the universal mission of liberal democracy may have been both inevitable and salutary. From the experience of disillusionment we might have wrested maturity; instead we have too often and too much resigned ourselves to despair.

I believe it not mere patriotic piety but a careful reading of the contemporary world that compels agreement with Abraham Lincoln that history is a "testing [of] whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." Our testing is not only in a civil war, although civil war is part of it; it is a global contest in which the chief weapons are ideological. I therefore agree with a much earlier Lincoln, the Lincoln who declared in 1838: "If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time, or die by suicide." If the present crisis of liberal democracy turns out to be terminal, the judgment of the future will no doubt take into account the external factors that contributed to it. But the essential judgment will be that it was a case of suicide: that we had grown weary of the burden of freedom; that we lightly, even happily, tossed aside the liberty that the modern era had achieved through such great cost and daring; that we laid at the feet of pseudo-scientific progress a dream and a dignity that we no longer had the spirit to sustain. Perhaps Lincoln said too much; it may not be "the last, best hope of earth." But surely he was right in thinking it would be nobly saved or meanly lost. There is no later or better hope on the horizon of this our painfully provisional moment in time. And unless there is something like a renewal of faith in the democratic ideal and in the religious truths by which it is shaped and sustained, I have little doubt that it will be meanly lost.

Before turning to a consideration of the religious truths that are at the heart of the crisis of liberal democracy, something should be said about the nature of the discussion that is likely to succeed the fast receding era of dialogue, détente, and convergence. It has been said that the period ahead of us must, for all its somber realism, not invoke the darker side of an earlier cold war. We may, however, as some have suggested, be entering a second cold war. If so, let us hope that we will have learned something from the experience between the two cold wars. From the period of dialogue-détente-convergence we should have learned to be more self-critical of the present stage of development of liberal democracy in the world. Wisely and urgently applied, that lesson can contribute to its further development.

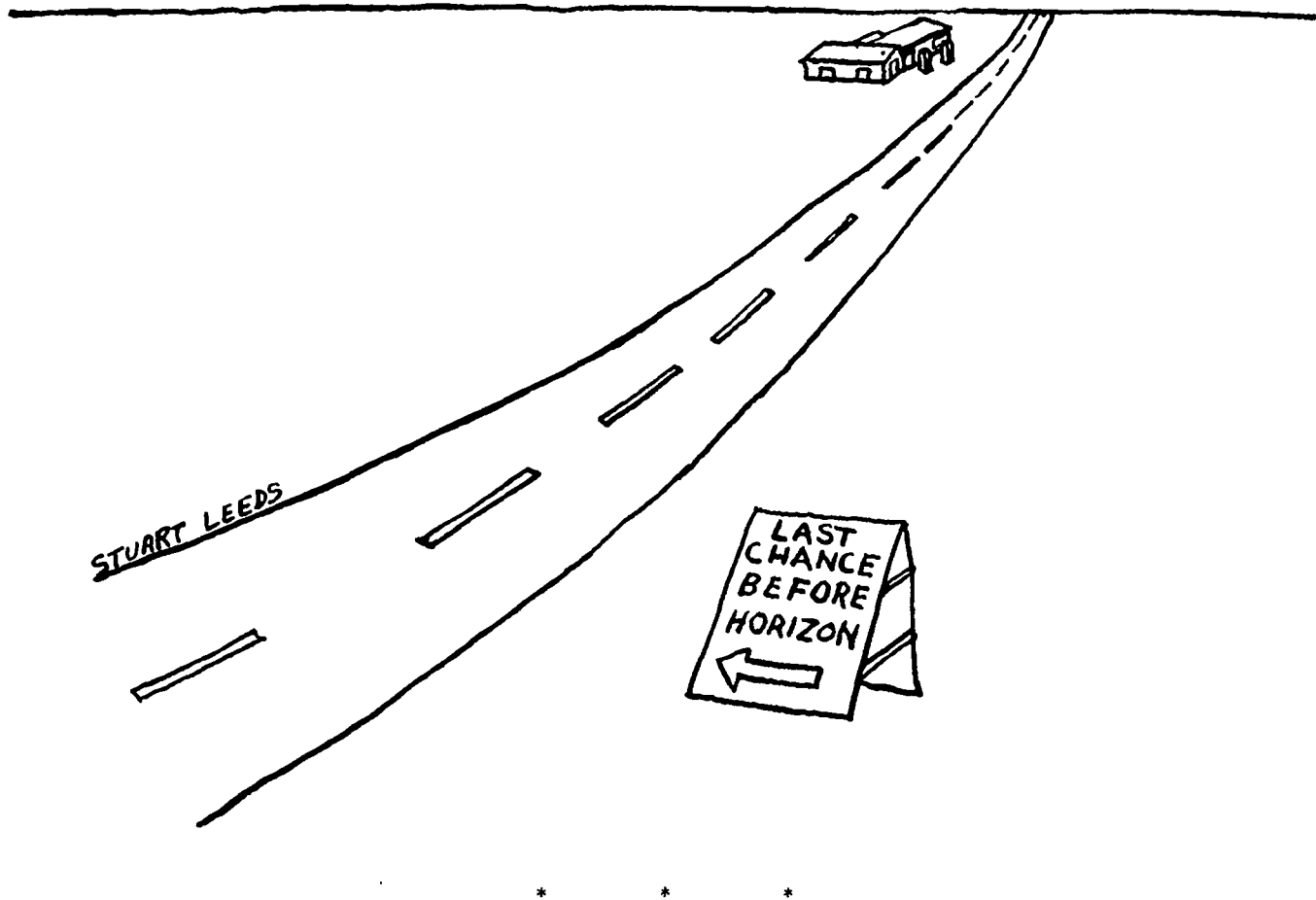
Certainly many Christians have, as it is said, reached a higher level of consciousness, not only about the particular failings and abuses of our kind of society, but also about its structural shortcomings. For example, the limitations of the purely formal idea of liberty embraced by so much bourgeois thought have become manifest, pointing to the need "to establish liberty in life as well as

in law," which was the slogan of the 1968 Poor Peoples Campaign that was aborted by the tragic death of Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition, we might welcome and hope to sustain the widespread openness to the particular protests launched by our ideological opponents against our failures to live up to our own democratic creed. No matter how selective and self-serving such protests may be, they should not be dismissed casually as mere anti-Americanism but should be seen as a tribute to the power of the ideals we profess and a challenge to us to approximate more closely those ideals in our practice.

Since the earlier cold war we have also, it may be hoped, come to a new awareness of the historically conditioned and ideological character of our social beliefs and ideals. It seems unlikely that we would revert to the notion that ours is a nonideology confronting the ideologies of the world, that we stand at some Archimedean point of objectivity against the sundry "isms" of our time. A more candid acknowledgment of the ideological content of the contest facing us can, if we do not lose our nerve, lead to ideological developments beyond the alternatives presently available to us. Especially for the churches, it is important that we continue to stress that supposedly apolitical and nonideological postures have, in fact, enormous political and ideological implications. We must attend with a fresh sense of urgency to the ideology, the view of the world, that supports and holds accountable our experiments in liberal democracy.

Finally, it is imperative that this second cold war, if that is what it is, not be marked by the military brinkmanship of an earlier period. While military testings will not give way completely to economic and ideological competition, in a world under the shadow of "mutual assured destruction" such testings must be sharply limited. One can only hope that this doctrine will continue to be accepted by the leadership in Moscow. Further, one can only hope that it has finally been accepted by what may be a newly emergent Right in American politics. There is reason to believe that among the critics of détente, of all political shadings, there is little yearning for another Cuban missile crisis or for other "High Noon" posturings in international conflicts.

These, then, are some of the marks of the period immediately ahead. It is not an unrelievedly gloomy picture. To be sure, we are a long, long way from the confidence reflected in the 1795 toast at Boston political banquets to "one great democratic society comprehending the human race." We are now on the defensive, at least numerically. There is little hard evidence that liberal democracy is anything like the wave of the future. In some respects we are embattled, and will continue to be so. Yet we must resist the temptation to give in to a siege mentality. We have hardly exhausted the resources required for the contest ahead. Indeed, now that we have been disenthralled of the notion that there is something self-evidently universal and automatic about the progress of liberal democracy, we may for the first time begin to mine the resources needed for the cause we would champion. The surprising fact is that the more we recognize the particularist character of liberal democracy, the greater is the chance it may become a more universal option.



If we are to be braced for this new phase of the contest between liberal democracy and its opponents, it is important that we recognize there is nothing historically inevitable about the minority status of our belief. Things could have been different, and our determination can make a difference in the future. Some alternative ideology other than Marxism might have appeared with such great force in the nineteenth century. Marxism could have—indeed, according to “scientific” analysis, it should have—triumphed somewhere else than in Russia, thus precluding the present convergence between revolutionary ideology and continued czarist imperial ambitions. Other equally uninevitable factors contributed to our present situation.

Daniel P. Moynihan has argued that the present situation was largely brought about by the British socialism espoused by the London School of Economics and diffused through the more than a quarter of the world formerly comprising the British Empire (“The United States in Opposition,” *Commentary*, March, 1975). While Moynihan may weight the argument with more than it can bear, he has no doubt put his finger on one force that has tended to set in opposition equality and liberty, and to favor centralized planning over the market exchange of both economics and democratic politics. It should be added that the impact of Third World claims upon the conscience of the developed West has tended to reinforce the moral stature of this essentially Western socialist ideology now fed back to us from these former

colonies. Whether these new nations can develop more indigenous, home-grown, social theories, or will finally surrender to the totalitarian camp, is yet to be seen.

I hasten to add that I am not very sanguine about the development in the Third World of social systems that will favor material well-being, humane governance, liberty, and openness to correction. The continuing pressures of great and superpowers upon these nations militate against such indigenous development. In addition, the authoritarian claim to efficiency, with which we began our discussion, seems especially persuasive to regimes so imperiously pressed by the sense of crisis involved in the demand to “enter the modern world.” And of course, notably in Africa, the attempt to build nations along intertribal lines imposed by nineteenth-century colonialism understandably gives low priority to the democratic values of diversity and dissent.

Other factors are also at work, and we should not hesitate to be candid about them. For example, the postcolonial period of euphoria about what would happen once the yoke of former masters had been broken is now far past. Authoritarian forms of nationalistic socialism in the Third World frequently serve as distractions from the dismal failures of postcolonial regimes. Such socialisms are sometimes Marxist to the extent that Marxism provides a continuingly useful scapegoat in the “imperialism” of former masters and, most particularly, of the United States.

In short, what is claimed to be the triumph of Marxist

socialism in much of the Third and Fourth worlds should not be taken at face value. The oriental despotism of Kim Il Sung in North Korea, for example, is about as closely related to Marxism as was Richard Nixon to the tradition of the Quakers. If what we are witnessing is not the wave of "scientific Marxist-Leninism" it sometimes claims to be, it does not necessarily mean it is something more hopeful. Nor, again, does it mean these nations are merely moving through a phase toward either liberal or totalitarian democracy, or toward something new beyond existing options. It may be that a very large part of the world is locked in for a long time to some very old-fashioned forms of tyranny, more or less reinforced by the technological controls offered by modernization. If so, the sobering fact is that the totalitarian wing of democratic thought can both facilitate and legitimate such tyrannies, while liberal democracy will appear threatening to them.

I was personally impressed by the enormity of these dilemmas in conversation a few years ago with President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. Nyerere is, I believe, one of the most astute and humane of Third World leaders. His imaginative proposal for African Socialism, called Ujamaa, is in large part attributable to his strong and informed commitment as a Christian. As with Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Nyerere's move away from multiparty democracy has not resulted in the mixture of police-state methods and intertribal brutality that marks most independent African nations. Yet the relatively humane character of the governments of Tanzania and Zambia seems so perilously dependent upon the personalities, even the idiosyncrasies, of their leaders.

To these two must be added Kenya, where we will no doubt soon witness the severe testings likely to follow the death of President Jomo Kenyatta. The unhappy fact is that in all three nations the leadership waiting in the wings expresses itself as much less patient with the values of liberal democracy, and much more determined to impose "scientific," authoritarian, and presumably definitive solutions upon their countries' problems. I mention these three instances because they have been important to my own thinking about the Third World and because they are paradigmatic of many newer nations that are in the process of deciding their ideological futures.

I am well aware that there are many people who welcome the trends I describe. They not only feel that liberal democracy is a doubtful luxury that poor nations cannot afford, but also that the majority of humankind cannot afford its perpetuation where it is already established. It is their conviction that liberal democracy and the modified capitalisms with which it is associated must not only be extended, it must be turned back or overthrown. Thus they would agree with the ideologically succinct statement of the Latin American liberation theologian José Míguez Bonino: "Development and underdevelopment are not two independent realities, nor two stages in a continuum, but two mutually related processes: Latin American underdevelop-

ment is the dark side of Northern development; Northern development is built on third-world underdevelopment. The basic categories for understanding our history are not development and underdevelopment but domination and dependence. This is the crux of the matter."

I agree with Bonino that he has touched on the crux of the matter. The crux of the matter, however, is whether his description of reality is accurate. This debate must be joined at the levels of both ideology and empirical evidence. Is it true that development is essentially a question of redistribution rather than of greatly increased production combined with a distribution of rewards that is both more fair and more efficient? I think not. But whatever one's answer, the question is very near the crux of the matter. If indeed economics is a zero-sum game in which the wealth of some is necessarily at the price of the poverty of others, one could not honorably contend for the kind of market- and production-oriented economies that have to date been associated with liberal democracy. Many see as one of the great merits of socialism its emphasis upon cooperation rather than competition. It is frequently overlooked, however, that on the issue of global development it is Marxist socialism that insists on the dogma that development is essentially competitive and precludes the possibility of cooperation between the more and less developed, as, for example, in the transnational corporation. Revolutionary dogma contends the world is divided between the oppressed and the oppressors; that the progress of the former is necessarily at the expense of the latter. I believe this dogma both ideologically implausible and empirically contrary to fact. I am further persuaded of the truth of the observation that those societies that have emphasized liberty over equality have done better by both liberty and equality than have those that have emphasized equality over liberty. But Bonino and others are right: This debate is the crux of the matter, and upon it may well depend the outcome of the continuing contest between liberal and totalitarian democracy.

Notably absent from this brief survey of our situation is any mention of what has come to be called the Chinese model. The absence is deliberate. The stunning singularities of China, its society and history, make it extremely improbable as a model for anything outside China. Then too, we really know so very little about China—a fact too often forgotten by those who return from well-guided tours as guests of Peking's power structure. I have a strong suspicion that in the near future, after Mao's departure, we may know much more about China; that then there will be many red faces (if you will excuse the expression) among those who have condemned China as a totalitarian colony of blue ants and among those who have proclaimed China the most efficient, moral, and even Christian society on earth. Suffice it in this context that I break my silence on China only to explain my silence.

Having surveyed briefly some of the forces shaping the world within which the contest will be waged, permit me yet more briefly to touch

on factors that will influence the way it might be waged. Without denying the impact of economic, military, and other factors, I believe the contest essentially political. Further, it seems true that political decisions are choices among options created by the culture—that, in a very real sense, politics is a function of culture. Moreover, I agree with those who perceive cultures as being centrally determined by their belief systems, or, if you will, religion. And so we return to the proposition that the future for which we hope depends on something like a renewal of faith in the democratic ideal and in the religious truths by which that ideal is shaped and sustained.

This is to say a great deal more than the obvious, namely, that the future of liberal democracy requires restored confidence in liberal democracy. There is no self-evident reason for confidence in liberal democracy. The times call for more than turning up the volume on our declarations of truths we hold to be self-evident. We must be prepared, to use the phrase from I Peter, “to give a reason for the hope that is within us.” Without such reason our democratic declarations of confidence will sound more frantic and more unreal as we, slowly or quickly, slide into the siege mentality of those who champion history’s lost causes.

For American intellectuals in particular there are objective causes that have eroded or shattered confidence in the democratic ideal and in the possibility or desirability of doing battle with its opponents. The code words “Vietnam” and “Watergate” carry an enormous freight of outrage, disgust, and fear, and rightly so. (Incidentally, I do not agree with those who say Watergate demonstrated that the system “works.” It was more serendipity than system that halted, at least in part, a very real and chilling drift toward authoritarianism. The chief and saving accident was the pathological egotism of one man who irrationally persisted in wanting to preserve his words for posterity.)

In addition to Vietnam and Watergate and all that is associated with those references, we are inhibited from joining the debate by the understandable fear of reviving the old cold war. That fear is connected with our admirable aversion to witch-hunting at home (as in everything associated with “the McCarthy era”) and, even more compelling, with our eminently rational fear of nuclear confrontation. We have not heard from the “better dead than red” debate in some time, but surely it continues to shadow our thinking. Can any contest, even over the most important of human ideals, justify entertaining the prospect of nuclear holocaust? And if we cannot even entertain the prospect, are we not giving away the game in advance? Such excruciatingly difficult questions mock the ease with which some call for restored confidence in the contest with totalitarianism.

The very structure of the debate itself would seem to place us at a severe disadvantage. This is true because of the very nature of intellectual discourse in the modern world of the West, and because of the moral imbalancing of the debate.

The job of the intellectual is to dissent and debunk. That liberal democracy nurtures this intellectual enterprise is both its strength and its sickness. The inescapable

dilemma, indeed the exquisite dilemma, is that any effort to impose a cure upon the sickness is to destroy the strength. What is called the alienation of the intellectual is in some respects necessary to his or her critical function in society. There must be a distancing from the conventional wisdoms, the established orthodoxies, the taken-for-granted realities. Thus there is an element of the adversarial inherent in the intellectual enterprise as practiced in our modern Western tradition. The risk, of course, is that the adversarial dimension becomes so total and so established in opinion-shaping circles that it precludes the legitimacy of any change short of revolution. I do not think this is generally true of American intellectual discourse today, but there have been many signs in the last ten or fifteen years of the potential for its becoming true. Among some who view themselves as most alienated there is certainly a profound attraction to ideologies and social systems that hold out the promise of overcoming alienation in a definitive way. Both reason and historical evidence suggest that such an overcoming involves the liquidation of the life of the mind as a critical vocation. That intellectuals should so zealously pursue the course of self-liquidation is, of course, nothing new. It is a risk liberal democracy cannot exclude and remain liberal democracy.

The second disadvantage has to do with the moral imbalancing of the debate. Marxist socialism has what might be called a “guilt edge” over liberal democracy. This is true in part because the deeds that people should feel guilty about are much better publicized when perpetrated by the West. In keeping our sins ever before us we have the enthusiastic help of our opponents, while theirs remain largely hidden under repression or are absolved by “revolutionary necessity.” Deeper than that, the Marxists have no category of guilt, while the heirs of Christian civilization are awash in it, much to the tactical delight of the Marxists. Notions of sin and guilt assume the incomplete and open character of reality; there is a transcendent referent by which present action is relativized and made morally accountable.

Marxism, like certain streams of secularized liberalism, takes a more “scientific” view of reality. Reality is already complete, all interests are in principle harmonious, the world awaits only the rational reordering that is historically guaranteed by the revolution’s sure success against the unscientific contradictions of capitalism. There are mistakes made and they can be rectified, but there is no sin to be forgiven. Every injustice in the world can be explained in terms of resistance to the revolution, and the chief resister, of course, is the United States of America.

People in the West who accept this basic definition of reality—and many do—end up with an earlier generation’s arrogant view of our virtue. That is, as an earlier generation thought the history of the world turned upon the unlimited expansion of liberal democracy, today it is suggested that everything depends upon bringing about revolutionary change in the liberal democracies. Whether for good or for evil, we are probably not as important as all that. The point is that those who do not share our commitment to liberal democracy are well aware of the inhibiting impact that guilt feelings have in

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the pressing of our case. The answer is not to deny the reality of our guilt but to decline the compliment of being so singular in our sinfulness, and to confidently assert our relative moral standing in making our argument for the kind of world we hope for. The “guilt edge” is not so strong an advantage once its presuppositions are exposed. By debunking the dogmas in which they are grounded we can liberate ourselves from the indulgence of guilt feelings and move on to the exercise of responsibility. The politics of guilt feelings has its source and end in envy, resentment, and reparations. The politics of democratic responsibility can address itself with new vitality to cooperation, reform, and shared hopes.

For all the reasons stated that cramp democracy’s style and spirit in the contest ahead, I am not optimistic about the future. I find it all too easy to envision our world moving into a new dark age. This time C.P. Cavafy’s barbarians may arrive on time, and they *will* be some kind of solution. Liberal democracy may become but a memory, if it is even permitted a place in the textbooks. All our devotion to human rights will seem of only antiquarian interest, except in small, subversive, but finally impotent conventicles of eccentrics who somehow resisted the forces of revolutionary reeducation. I can envision all this and more, but I do not really expect it. In 1976, as in 1963, I think it reasonable to affirm with Reinhold Niebuhr a pessimistic faith in the democratic ideal. But that faith is conditioned upon a number of things happening among Western intellectuals generally, and religious thinkers in particular, that will embolden us to radical defiance of the proclaimed inevitabilities of the future.

First, we must accept critical responsibility for our place and time in history. We can only creatively “identify” with the Third World and with the oppressed in our midst if we first identify with the social experiment of which we are part and force it toward the realization of its professed ideals. Those who cannot take this first step are fated to have their influence consumed in real or, in most cases, imagined revolutionisms. They will have little or no part in reshaping liberal democracy to the demands of justice.

Second, we must redefine what it means to be radical. What is called radical today is either trapped in the revolutionary and inescapably anti-American dogmas of Marxism or in the expression of the discontents of the privileged (as in what used to be called the counterculture and continues still in other forms of social decadence). The crisis of democracy is not finally military or environmental or technological or economic; it is a crisis of meaning. The fact is that liberal democracy is

not a radically compelling vision to millions of people in our world. Marxist socialism, in one form or another, is. And such a compelling, even religious, vision is winning adherents by default. The urgent task facing ethically concerned Christians is the construction of a new alternative both to Marxism and to a secularized liberalism that has been cut off from its religious roots and robbed of its power to provide meaning. In this last quarter of the twentieth century we do not need Christian Marxists; we need a Christian Marx. That is to say, for this century and the next we need a definition of reality, an ideology, based on Jewish-Christian religion that is as creative, comprehensive, and compelling as was Marx’s definition of reality for the century past.

What such an alternative might look like we will only know when it appears. But I am sure it will require a resurgence of the public character of religious, specifically biblical, truth claims. At every point the assumptions about the inexorable nature of secularization must be challenged. This will undoubtedly mean a radical rethinking of the role of religion in the public realm and a dramatically different interpretation of the First Amendment of the American Constitution. That in turn makes politically and culturally urgent the imperative to Christian unity, so that religion may be perceived as a unifying source of meaning rather than as a standing threat of sectarian conflict and chaos. It means, further, that we free ourselves from the excessive preoccupation with the centralized state that marks both the secularized liberal and the totalitarian democratic traditions. In America at least this means respecting and empowering, as a matter of public policy, the “mediating structures,” such as neighborhoods, ethnic groups, voluntary associations, families, and churches, in which people generate and transmit the values by which they would live. We will see pluralism not as a residual phenomenon vainly resisting the homogenizing force of history, but as a resource for that diversity in unity that is liberal democracy’s best dream.

One could go on mentioning other elements of such a reconstruction of liberal democracy. Some of them are convictions with me, others merely hunches or intuitions. But of this I am reasonably certain: Unless there is a new and widely convincing assertion of the religious meaning of liberal democracy, it will not survive the next century. In that event the future belongs to the totalitarians, and whether they call themselves left, right, or center, or Marxists or national socialists, they will enslave the people in the name of the people and declare themselves the realization of democratic destiny. And there will be none to say them nay.

It need not turn out that way.