

The Vertical Barbarians

This sermon was preached in the city of New York by Dr. R. Maurice Boyd in 1991.

We all know about the horizontal barbarians; if we think of barbarians at all, they are the sort we think of. They crossed the Rhine, or the Alps; the Irish Sea or the English Channel; the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, to invade, pillage and destroy. I think of my own little island, modestly described by one with a notable gift of understatement as a land of saints and scholars, and how we suffered from the Vikings and other invaders, mostly the Scots.

It has been worse in our time. The horizontal barbarians have been at it on a scale and with a ferocity unequalled in history. Of course, they don't call themselves barbarians; they call themselves, or are called, Fascists, or Communists, or Nazis. Whatever their name, their nature was barbarous, and whether their enterprises succeeded or failed, the cost of resisting them was enormous.

The modern barbarians whose horizontal invasions we remember and lament were armed, not only with tanks and guns, but with philosophies of race, or history, or economics. The conflict was not merely or always a clash of military power, but of ideologies, values, manifestos. That is why Karl Barth once described the "isms" of our time as "disguised religions" with their own sense of destiny or election, with their own saints and heroes, shrines and holy days, rituals and martyrs, prophets and holy books.

These disguised religions may attack a civilization horizontally, by coming in behind an invading army, but that is not the only way they may invade. Ideas can attack a culture from the bottom up or from the top down. Malcolm Muggeridge had a recurring nightmare in which Britain become a totalitarian state, not as a result of military invasion by a hostile totalitarian regime, but by lazy thinking, indifference to values, by spiritual and political lethargy. The freedoms men and women fought and died to preserve were handed away with no appreciation of their worth or care for their preservation. Civilization went out with neither a bang nor a whimper, but with a shrug and a grin.

It is always easy for us to undervalue what we have, and take for granted, and give away, what others died to preserve. What is achieved at enormous cost may be carelessly held and lightly handed over without any awareness of what has been lost. Muggeridge goes on to notice that some of the crimes for which Nazis were condemned at Nuremberg may now be found among our humanitarian ambitions. Euthanasia, for example, a "crime against humanity" at Nuremberg is now gaining acceptance in Western society. Solzhenitsyn is right: the barbarians no longer need to invade horizontally and take us over. The dragon roars at a distance and we willingly surrender anything, for we have lost our will; and our weakened character, having confused its own values, cannot recognize anything worth keeping.

The Spanish philosopher, Ortega Y Gasset, recognized the nature of this attack on culture and civilization. In a superb sentence he speaks of the invasion of the vertical barbarians. Their attack does not cross over, but comes down, or rises up;

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the assault does not come from without, but is launched from within. Yet the outcome is similar in the devastation of culture and the weakening of civilization. This sort of assault goes on in society all the time. The Philistines we have with us always in those who have imagination and no taste, who think in slogans and talk in clichés, who have zeal, but not according to knowledge.

It is not this that alarms us. Society can cope with such threats as it always has done. What we find disconcerting is that the attack on our culture and civilization is being made by those who have been the traditional defenders of it; those responsible for the education of our children in churches, schools, colleges and universities. That is why we need to remind ourselves that this democracy of ours is rare both in time and in space, and can be preserved only by appreciation, care and vigilance. It may be threatened without our ever being aware of it.

So be clear about my function. "Watchman, what of the night?" Part of the preacher's work is to bring to our attention matters that should be noticed. Others are better equipped than I am, by gifts, temperament and training to deal with what threatens us; and they have opportunity to do so in places I cannot reach. But let me ring a bell and wave a flag to signal my alarm. And if *The Vertical Barbarians* seems too strong a title, then consider this observation from "A Note on The New Criterion," written in 1982:

In everything from the writing of textbooks to the reviewing of trade books, from the institution of kitsch into the museums to corruption of scholarly research, the effect on the life of culture has been ongoing and catastrophic.

Four matters are of concern to me:

I. The first is the increase and pervasiveness of "politically correct thinking."

Solzhenitsyn tells of a man who was sent to a concentration camp in the Gulag for the crime against the state of smiling while reading Pravda. We are horrified, of course, but that is just the sort of thing we know happens in a totalitarian society. We tell ourselves that there is no danger that it could happen here, and grow superior and complacent in our attitude. That sort of thing could happen here; in The University of Connecticut, for example, where students may be disciplined for "inappropriately directed laughter." In the University of Michigan those who were guilty of "offensive speech" were threatened with such stiff discipline and restrictions so severe that a federal judge found them unlawful. When a student in the University of Pennsylvania wrote of her deep regard for the individual, the professor assessing her paper commented that this statement was a racial remark. Formal discipline for such politically incorrect thinking may become part of a student's academic record, to be passed on to any employer who might be thinking of giving him a job.

Do those who administer such rough justice sound like the "thought police" of the dystopias we abhor? I know a Canadian university where a faculty member was

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disciplined, and whose career hit a wall, not because of anything he said or did, but because of what his judges thought he was thinking. I know a lawyer whose political career was brought to an end and whose career as a lawyer was severely hindered, not because of anything he said or did, but because of the way he looked at someone. Are these the "official straighteners" C S. Lewis warned us about in *The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment* as long ago as 1949? If I had children in any American or Canadian university, I'd want to know whether what they were receiving was education or political indoctrination.

Our concern puts us in very distinguished company. Not long ago President Benno C. Schmidt of Yale wrote an excellent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, in which he stated that the greatest threat to freedom of thought and expression in America today is found in our university campuses. President Derek Bok of Harvard made his annual report to the university an expression of concern about the pressures to conform to politically correct thinking. When statement or argument is met, not by counter-argument and debate but by authority and punishment, freedom of expression is inhibited. Arthur M. Schlesinger has just written a book on the subject; and Chester E. Finn, Assistant Secretary of Education from 1985 to 1988, describes the university campus as "an island of oppression in a sea of freedom."

President Bush, speaking recently at the University of Michigan, lamented the inordinate pressure to conform being exerted by our universities. Freedom of thought and speech are threatened by it. Yet one of the great values of the university to our society is its disinterested interest in truth by which ideas are thought and expressed, and are met by other and contrary opinions, and argued without fear or favor. In this way, theories are tested, ideas refined and truth discovered. Orthodoxies must be defended against all comers and are valid only until they are discredited. For three hundred and fifty years the University has successfully resisted strong pressure from Church and Government, from wealthy alumni and powerful business interests, to restrict intellectual freedom and liberty of conscience and speech. Always there were those who tried to bully it, or buy it, or otherwise use it for their own ends. And now the University, having strenuously resisted all these outside pressures, is handing over its freedom at the initiative of faculty and administrators with their own agendas, and with the cheerful cooperation of students who know everything and understand nothing. Those who would be quick to sniff the slightest whiff of censorship from the Right, who would bristle at the thought of any theological orthodoxy, are preparing their own social and political orthodoxies of the Left, and with their own inquisitors. Rather like the major denominations of the Church in which one may deny the resurrection of our Lord without raising an eyebrow, but dare not depart from the correct view of, say, the politics of Central America. So it is that the greatest contribution of the University to our culture, that of a liberated and humane mind, is being lost. The faculties and students of many American universities are treating of little worth the freedom Chinese students died for in Beijing.

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Listen to what Roger Kimball has to say about the goings on of the Modern Language Association at its annual convention held in Chicago at the end of last year. The Association is the largest and most influential academic organization in the United States. The tenor of the profession, says Kimball, is set by tenured professors who view the teaching of literature as an opportunity for ideological activism of a variety of sorts. Pre-eminent among them are the radical feminists and the champions of ethnic studies. The teaching and study of literature is an instrument of political imperatives. The varied forms of radicalism may compete, but all are intolerant of dissent. Words now mean their opposite, so that diversity stands for unity and tolerance is for those who share one's point of view. This "correctness" is a politically motivated betrayal of literature. The idea extends even to illness. AIDS is politically correct while cancer is not.

II. My second concern is about the teaching of Western civilization in our colleges and universities.

Someone once said that a teacher is one who takes many live wires and sees that they are well grounded. But grounded in what? Tell me what you make of this statement: "To praise the Constitution, a seriously flawed document, is vulgar and revolting." The Constitution referred to is the Constitution of these United States of America, and the view that sees it as vulgar and unworthy of praise is not that of the Soviet Union, or the Government of Cuba or of China, but of those who prepared the New York State Education Department report recommending changes in the curriculum taught in our public schools. Your tax dollars helped to pay for that report, and so did mine.

I have little doubt that the recommended changes will be adopted in some form, and that in the name of tolerance and the celebration of "difference" another blow will be struck against the values of Western civilization and its importance in the shaping of our nation. Yet the first requirement of teaching is that what it teaches should be true; and the truth is that our political institutions and ideals, our understanding of our nature, our philosophy and literature have been formed by Western civilization. They reach us from Athens and Rome, from Sinai and Galilee, from Spain and Germany and Britain.

This is well demonstrated by the name of one of our great American blacks, in whose honor January the fifteenth has been designated a public holiday in most states of the Union. I am speaking, of course, of Martin Luther King. Both he and his father before him are named for a German reformer whose work is inseparable from our culture, faith and politics, Yet the National Endowment for the Humanities tells us that students may graduate from seventy-eight per cent of American colleges and universities without having taken a course in Western civilization. Don't miss the significance of this. Our university students are among the brightest of our young people and should be the best educated of them. They will become our politicians, teachers, lawyers, physicians and ministers of religion. Soon they will be the leaders of our nation. How are they to understand our institutions and culture; how are they to know who they are and the movements of history that made them; how grasp the

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opportunities and fulfill the responsibilities of citizenship, if they do not know the philosophy, art, literature and faith that formed our country?

Not long ago I preached at Yale University on a weekend when The New York Times reported that the university had received a gift of twenty million dollars to endow a Chair to teach the history of Western civilization. I was delighted that the gift was made and that the President of the University accepted it warmly. It was a pleasant change from the attitude of the Stanford University students who not long before had chanted, "Hey, ho! Hey, ho! Western culture's got to go!"

When I arrived in Canada from Ireland in 1959, one of the first things I did was to take a course in Canadian history at a Canadian university. I thought it was as little as I could do to acknowledge the hospitality of a country that had received me and made available to me, without restriction, all the privileges of citizenship. In this way I refreshed my knowledge of the events that made my new country, and of the people who shaped its colorful history. Yet nowadays people come to our country and show little interest even in learning our language. They watch television in Spanish or Chinese, and seek to retain a culture they chose to leave. How does one accept the responsibilities and grasp the opportunities of citizenship without knowing the language? Without the words one cannot understand or assimilate a history or culture. The United States is a country of one language, and the invitation it extends to us is not to remain what we once were, but to become Americans.

When I was in Canada, a student wrote to the weekly newspaper of the University of Western Ontario objecting to the singing of "God Save The Queen" at events he attended. He complained that he should not have to do this, for Canada was not his country of origin, and he owed nothing to the Queen or anything Her Majesty symbolized. The answer to the young man's question and complaint is massively simple. He doesn't have to sing "God Save The Queen" if it offends him. He doesn't have to stay in Canada. He can go back to where he came from, and get his education there, and find employment and make his living there, and save us all the pain of having to listen to him.

I cannot tell you how pleased I am that every week the "Teaching English" program of this congregation helps immigrants learn our language. The students are deeply grateful to those who teach them, and to the nation that has opened its arms to them. Without a common language there is no common culture, and society is fragmented. If each nationality, or race, or sex, or religion is interested only in its own origins and concerns; if blacks are interested only in blacks and whites only in whites; if Koreans care only for Koreans and Christians have no appreciation of Judaism, we become divided and estranged. The only special interest that is wholesome is a care for the well-being of the whole.

To say this is not a failure of appreciation. It is not to deny the richness that has come to us from many races and varied cultures, or to weaken our sense of indebtedness to them. Who would wish to do so? We are here to allow our diversity to enrich our common humanity and to make us good Americans.

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The writers of science fiction tell us again and again that the utopias which are the stuff of their stories disintegrate because each constituent part is interested only in its own affairs and has no concern for the total society.

I have seen it happen in churches. I know a church with a distinguished history that is now divided into many groups, each with its own agenda, and with little sympathy or understanding of the legitimate needs and purposes of the others. Some of the groups don't talk to each other. Church life is in a perpetual state of tension and rivalry. When announcements are made in worship, each faction demands equal time, and the church notices become an extended exercise in public relations. No group is happy. All feel neglected. Each is resentful.

It is futile to speak of the "unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace," or of love "binding everything together and completing the whole." So the medium denies the message. The manner of faith denies the matter of faith, actions speak louder than words, and Christ's body is divided.

III. The third thing I find alarming is a lack of appreciation of our Nation.

I say this to you as one who recently came to this country from Canada and whose sense of appreciation is therefore fresh and keen. Americans share with Canadians a tendency to diminish their nation but for different reasons. Canadians do it from a sense of inferiority; Americans from a sense of guilt.

Our guilt begins with our prosperity and with the temptation to think that our abundance is a result of our virtue. Yet knowing that pretension is the sin of all good people, we guard against it by reminding ourselves that our prosperity is fortuitous, not a sign of divine favor or moral accomplishment. We are right to do so, just as we are right to remind ourselves that all nations come under the divine judgment and that all governments are fallen and imperfect. But it is easy to go too far and to suppose that because all governments are fallen, all governments, whether democratic or totalitarian, are equal.

This is a mistake. The doctrine of original sin declares that the fallenness of our nature is universal and pervasive. This does not mean, however, that one government is just as good, or just as bad, as another. Totalitarian regimes and democratic republics are not moral equivalents, for totalitarian regimes destroy freedom while democratic nations seek to preserve and increase it. When President Reagan spoke of "the evil empire" of the Soviet Union, the liberal Left in this country reacted with outrage, alleging that the President saw the Soviet-American tension in simplistic terms, the virtuous against the totally evil. President Reagan knows better. His point is valid if he meant what I think he meant, that there is a fundamental moral distinction between totalitarianism and democracy.

This was clearly demonstrated not long ago. One celebrated American visitor to communist China described it as "benevolent totalitarianism." But when Chinese students quoted Lincoln, Jefferson and Thoreau, and demonstrated in the Square at Beijing for freedoms which American students take for granted, they were shot, some in the Square during the demonstration, and others later. These young men

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and women had made a model of the Statue of Liberty. They were in no danger of confusing the moral values of totalitarianism and democracy.

In 1993 Russia will liberalize its immigration policy, which means that it will allow more people to leave. Guess where many Russian people seeking freedom will wish to come. Nothing has been more touching to me than to talk to refugees from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Berlin and other countries under communist rule, and to hear their praise of freedom.

I knew a dishwasher in a Canadian restaurant who had been a university professor in Eastern Europe before fleeing to Canada. He told me he had come to Canada not primarily for its higher standard of living, but because it is free and he wished to be free and to raise his children in freedom. Our country is not perfect and our government is not without fault. Those who are critical of them will have plenty of grist for their mill. It is right that we should listen to them, and that they should be free to speak. But that, in itself, sets us apart from totalitarianism. We are committed to preserving freedom of speech. No violation of human rights is an expression of our government's policy, but contrary to it and a violation of it. However imperfectly our ideal is realized, we are committed to providing equal opportunity for all citizens. Those who protest against the violations of human rights in our country are not resisting our constitution but expressing it.

Let us not take for granted, or undervalue, what has become ours at great cost. I cannot tell you how wonderful it is always to have lived in a country where I have enjoyed the unrestricted freedom of the Christian pulpit. We have much to make us penitent, and there are periods and episodes in our history of which we are properly ashamed. They will keep us from being puffed up. Yet, though far from perfect, our country is free, and stands as a symbol of freedom to all who are in bondage.

IV. The last concern I wish to mention is that we should not lose the fine art of non-conforming.

When Henry Wallace called this century the century of the common man, it led Edward Weeks to ask whether we were producing the uncommon man in sufficient quantity. His question reminds me of the words of Kierkegaard:

When truth conquers with the help of ten thousand yelling men, even supposing that what is victorious is true, by virtue of the manner of their victory, a far greater untruth is inculcated.

No one resisted the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, more strenuously than he. We must practice and refine the art of non-conforming. Two necessary elements of it are a sense of self and a sense of humor. When everyone agrees, it is time to be careful. All the great ones, from Buddha to Thomas Hardy resolved not to think and say things just because others thought and said them. Nowadays we are afflicted by those whose conversation is a consensus, who accept uncritically the basic assumptions of the age and will climb on any passing bandwagon provided it is moving slowly enough for them to catch it. All the great and terrible "isms" of our day have sought to diminish the individual in favor of the unthinking crowd. The non-

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conforming man sets himself against this trend and resists it to the death if need be. Muggeridge astutely reminds us that the Gaderene swine raced in a herd over the cliff to their destruction, while Bunyan's Pilgrim set out alone. Muggeridge's friend Hugh Kingsmill put it beautifully:

Collective remedies do not heal the ills produced by collective action.
Those who set out alone for the Kingdom of Heaven will reach it together.
Those who seek it in company will perish by themselves.

I often find myself longing for a Kierkegaard, or a Chesterton or, now that he is no longer with us, a Muggeridge to mock the pretensions and absurdities of our time. They should be living at this hour. We have need of them.

A sense of self, and a sense of humor. "Every joke is a tiny revolution" writes a perceptive journalist. Someone has said that the German people might have been saved by a sense of humor when the Nazis came to power. They would have refused to take seriously the goose-step and the heil-Hitler!

Laughter refuses to allow tyrants too much authority. That is why they fear it. King John, hungry for power calls it, "That idiot laughter, so hateful to my purpose." Cathedrals have not only saints, but gargoyles to make fun of them and to save them from sanctimoniousness. You can lose the fear of others' laughter by laughing at yourself. Free societies love humor. It is no threat to them.

Christians have a splendid example of this art of non-conforming. Indeed, not only do we have our Lord's example before us, we have His power within us. Think of His words to His disciples before His death:

Look, the hour is coming, has indeed already come, when you are all to be scattered, each to his home, leaving me alone. Yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. I have told you all this so that in me you may find peace. In the world you will have trouble. But courage! The victory is mine; I have conquered the world.

When Thomas Carlyle read those words, he wept and called them the most gallant words in all literature. But they are not only the most gallant, they are the most triumphant, for they are the world's salvation.

If something of that quality of courage is in us, then Lincoln's dream will be splendidly fulfilled, and "government of the people, by the people, for the people will not perish from the earth."

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