

# Strangers to Ourselves

Patrick Reilly

In our time, solidarity has become a term increasingly used by people in relatively affluent parts of the world to express their sense of pity for, of sympathy with, of reaching out to, some oppressed or disadvantaged section of fellow human beings, invariably so submerged that they are unable to speak for themselves: the starving masses of Africa, the exploited poor of South America, the new underclass who live, surplus to requirements, redundant ciphers, without hope or dignity, in the decaying ghettos of our great western cities. Some such sentiment is the driving-force behind liberation theology—the conviction, justified by that unforgettable passage in St. Matthew's Gospel, that if we are to find Christ in our world, it can only be in the dispossessed and wretched of the earth (when you did this to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me); together with the chilling corollary that when we ignore the poor, we are slighting the Saviour himself, telling the Son of God that his sufferings are no concern of ours.

It is no purpose of mine to disparage or belittle liberation theology, to fault the modern Church for its wholly admirable decision to identify with the poor, to choose Lazarus above Dives—this is, after all simply a copying of the Master, the imitation of Christ. If *he* chose to be born powerless, it would be foolish and idolatrous for his followers to worship power. If he spoke so trenchantly about the risks of wealth, his Church, far from admiring, should feel a special compassion for those poor rich people so at risk of suffering the same catastrophe as the wealthy fool in the parable.

But my intention is not to urge solidarity with imperilled millionaires, rather, to propose a new, more inclusive definition of solidarity, wide as the world itself—not with some subset of humanity, however abject or afflicted, but with humanity itself, with the very idea of the human being in what constitutes and comports his essential, irreducible selfhood. The aim is not to decry liberation theology but to extend the realm of its relevance, to cast wider the net of its salvation so as to include the full tally of those requiring rescue; it is a piece of outrageous complacency to assume that only the Third World needs liberation.

We are assailed today from every side with dire warnings about environmental pollution, ecological disaster, an earth plundered and laid

waste. Our tabloids, quality newspapers, scientific journals, all echo the same message of a begrimed, beleaguered planet: ozone layer depletion, dwindling of the rain forest, contamination of air, earth and water. Animal rights groups announce the threat to endangered species, the imminent and irrevocable extinction of certain life-forms, of beast, bird and fish. We do well to heed these warnings—soon it may be too late to halt, to reverse, this process of pollution and extinction.

But the truly endangered species in our world today, the creature most at hazard, is man himself—not in the sense that he may, taking the dinosaur's trail, vanish from the earth, but that he may be irretrievably deformed in his essential self. It is not, despite the atrocities of totalitarianism or the horrors of destitution in the Third World, some subdivision of humanity that is at risk today—it is mankind itself, the very idea of the human person as traditionally defined for us in the West in Judaeo-Christian thought. This image of man in the Judaeo-Christian sense, bequeathed to humanism by religion—those attributes which have for two millennia constituted our idea of the human—are presently under severe attack from all sides and from rival philosophies which have nothing else in common save their enmity to traditional truth. We are witnesses today of a world-wide conspiracy to demean man which takes different and, indeed, completely opposed forms.

One of these forms, totalitarianism, now blessedly in retreat and disarray, has supplied the gruesome stage for the most spectacularly dramatic displays of dehumanization known to history. This is the real meaning of the Nazi death-camps. They incarnate a challenge to the basic tenet of Christianity and humanism alike: the supreme, inalienable dignity of the human being, the inviolable worth of the individual person. The initial aim was to turn human beings into trash, thereby revealing human life to be not merely cheap but worthless, of no value whatsoever. How could the Christian claim retain credibility when set against those appalling mountains of ash and bone? Those intent upon demolishing the claim had only to point to the ash-heaps and ask derisively how anything of worth could be there, let alone the highest created value in the universe.

But the real, the completely novel, aim was not merely to reduce humans to a bag of filth but to compel them to internalize this judgement, to accept the humiliator's demoralizing assessment. It is a strategy chillingly embodied in Orwell's dark masterpiece, when O'Brien, high-priest of the new religion, drives the would-be rebel, Winston, still defiantly proclaiming himself the last man in Europe, before the mirror, to see, and to be broken by, the reflection of his own poor ruined body. The real tragedy of the text is that Winston lacks the spiritual resources to

sustain him against such degradation. An inadequate humanism leaves him helpless; in the sickening finale he loves Big Brother—which is to say that he has forsaken forever his futile attempt to defend the dignity of man against the humiliator. The bravery of Orwell's atheism is that he courageously confronts the unnerving truth: without specific spiritual resources, man is doomed to be a loser. In the soulless reductionism of the totalitarian state, the individual has no chance, no rights, even, at an Orwellian extreme, no existence—he loses self and soul simultaneously. The first person is simply a grammatical fiction, a survival from a discredited myth. The human being, centrepiece of Christianity and humanism alike, is a mere cog in a state machine, useful as long as he functions, discardable when he can no longer serve. It is the ethos of beehive or anthep made applicable to human beings. The collective is the supreme value. Whoever denied or resisted this was to be broken, humiliated, degraded—the process so brilliantly dramatized in the mirror incident in *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

Totalitarianism is an especially graphic form of degradation—a 'hard' oppression, naked and brutal. Equally conspicuous, though in a different way, is the degradation suffered by human beings in situations of natural disaster such as flood or famine, hurricane or earthquake. The images currently coming out of Somalia are distressingly reminiscent of those that issued from Dachau and Auschwitz; Africa is nature's concentration camp—though here, too, men and women must often share responsibility for the catastrophe, since famine can be worsened by human agency: by war, the murderous greed of arms dealers, the fecklessness of incompetent farming. These are the 'hard' oppressions, the blatant degradations, impossible to ignore. It is all too easy to see the insult to the human being, tortured in a police cell or dying slowly of starvation in some arid wasteland. It is difficult to hold fast to a belief in the overarching dignity of the individual person against the backcloth of such dread reality.

But there are other modes of oppression, other forms of degradation, less visibly shocking, less spectacularly revolting, yet in the end no less subversive of human dignity, no less insulting to the essence of man; as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* reveals, there can be comfortable degradations, hedonistic humiliations, pleasure palaces as demeaning to the human spirit as torture chambers. Perhaps Huxley was, as he claimed, a truer prophet than Orwell.

The most disconcerting aspect of this type of degradation (again Huxley is our mentor) is that it can pass unnoticed, be taken for granted as the norm. Amid our justified rejoicings at the collapse of Communism, misgivings occur. Why—for what reasons, in what sense—did

Communism fail? We are forced to admit that the collapse was economic rather than moral; Communism failed to deliver the goods. The bankruptcy of Communism in the East is inseparably linked to the triumph of consumerism in the West. Those in Eastern Europe who concluded that Communism must be jettisoned did so because they looked enviously at the superior productive achievements of western capitalism;—the triumph of the ‘free’ world is, in reality, the triumph of the free enterprise system. There is, to be sure, no immediate cause for lamentation here; but neither is there any justification for euphoric self-congratulation. That people can now eat Macdonald’s hamburgers in Moscow or Kentucky fried chicken in Beijing is not in itself an infallible sign that decency and justice have come to live among men. Is the West, after all, such an exemplary model for imitation today? We display all the indices of a diseased, perhaps even a terminally ill, society; the statistics on abortion, child-abuse, Aids, drugs, alcoholism, divorce, mental illness, crime of every variety but, significantly, rape and assault, all reveal a frightening increase. Our prisons have never been so crowded yet our streets never less safe. Yet crisis for us means the pound’s failure to maintain parity within the ERM. All else we take in our stride; this alone brings us to bewildered impasse and we look round accusingly for the culprits who have brought it to pass.

In our elation we risk forgetting that there is more than one kind of degradation; or that when people love or have grown used to or no longer notice their chains, there is the most debilitating tyranny of all. Consumerism—man reduced to a trolley for transporting goods from the supermarket—is such a tyranny, a ‘soft’ oppression in contrast to the brutality of the police-state, but no less an oppression for all that. The insult to the human being, so unmistakable in death-camp or famine, is not nearly so obvious when he is well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed. Yet the warning comes to us from the highest of authorities: what doth it profit a man if he gain the world and lose his soul? Consumerism has much to say about full bellies, but is mute and uncomprehending on the subject of empty souls.

Yet, simply to be human, we must be more than a consumer of goods, a purchaser of products, a target of the advertisers, moulded and manipulated to the requirements of a market economy. In a mall in America, I came across a card which paid tribute to Our Lady of Perpetual Shopping, an invocation for which you will scan the Litany in vain. It is a banal, a harmless, blasphemy—even to mention it is to give it more attention than it deserves. Yet, trivial though it be, it points to something radically awry in our civilization. Say today, if you dare, that a woman’s place is in the home—you will call down upon your

injudicious, luckless head the fury of feminists and the ire of progressives everywhere. Substitute for this irreparably offensive remark the statement that a woman's place is in the mall, and you have simply uttered a platitude, a truism. Except that it is not just women; men, too, must take their appointed place in the mall—or else persuade the women to do the shopping for them. We are all shoppers now, all consumers. Our first duty is neither to the God of traditional religion nor to the totalitarian idol, but to the market economy whose servants we are. This is why, welcome as we must the bankruptcy of Communism, we should be concerned that the East is scrambling to imitate those aspects of western society which are our concern rather than our commendation.

The ideology currently ruling the West is consumerism masquerading as democracy; the model of man that dominates our practices and policies is man the consumer. Voting itself is a function of consumerism: elections are won by those deemed most capable of managing the economy—which is code for enabling people to buy more of the goods that the advertisers convince us are indispensable to our well-being. The party that can be successfully labelled by its enemies the party of taxation is certain to lose. We reject those who would decrease our purchasing power. Nothing is more important than the sum in our purses: our most prized possessions are our credit cards; we queue for the autoteller, not the confessional. So complete has been the triumph of consumerism, so total the mutation from pilgrim spirit to purchaser of commodities, that we no longer even notice it; it is a datum of life, the element in which we live, breathe and have our being—how else could we live? In recent weeks we have been very properly horrified by a fearful phrase coming out of the Balkans: ethnic cleansing. We do right to shiver at so ominous an expression. Yet a far more radical, more chillingly ubiquitous 'cleansing' proceeds apace throughout the western world—human beings are being stripped of those spiritual attributes which have hitherto defined their true identities; they are being transformed from pilgrims to purchasers.

It is a transformation signalled by the replacement of traditional values with an ethic of convenience, an ethics devised for a society of consumers, a bargain-basement ethics in which the aim is the maximum enjoyment at the cheapest price: why pay more than you need? The philosophy that underlies the liberal market theory currently dominating the West is hedonism, the good of society predicated upon the happiness of individuals. Hence the tendency to seek the easy solution, the quick fix, to any problem. In areas like abortion, the legalizing of drugs, the supplying of condoms to prostitutes, the advice on how to combat the threat of Aids, it is invariably the line of least resistance that is preferred.

This capitulation to forces judged too strong to resist is the moral equivalent of what we call appeasement in the political sphere—we cannot win, so why not give in from the start? This defeatism is especially noticeable in the decision to encourage so-called safe sex rather than on the frank admission that chastity, though ideal, is too difficult. A similar resignation underlies the counsel to tackle the problem of classroom pregnancies by fitting schoolchildren with diaphragms or setting up Brook clinics—it is our best response to the dismaying revelation that one third of fifteen year old girls in Britain are sexually active. What else, after all, can we do? It is as if we were to give cat-burglars classes in abseiling: they're going to do it anyway, so let's at least ensure that they do it safely. Underlying all this is the concept of man as consumer; sex is a commodity like any other and human beings are consumers of sex as they are of any other item in the world's emporium. It is as though history had never happened. For we know that appeasement has never worked in politics; why do we delude ourselves that it will work in the social problems besetting us today?

The overriding task confronting us today is to learn anew what it means to be human, to rediscover our lost dignity as human beings. The correct answer to this basic question will bring in its train solutions to all the other problems (social, political, economic, medical) that currently hold us in thrall. Conversely, without a solution to this root problem of human identity—who am I?—all our other strivings will be so much wasted effort. There are 'solutions' to our problems which are, properly understood, no solutions at all, because they are incompatible with the dignity of the creature for whom they are so inappropriately prescribed. Our failures in every region of our corporate life stem from this basic dereliction: we fret over the means of life and give no thought to the meaning; we have become strangers to our true selves—we no longer know what it means to be human.

The paradox is that only in God shall we recover our lost humanity; our share in eternity is the only sure shield against a dehumanizing world, for the heirs of heaven were not born to be slaves of either state or market. Bakunin believed that only by overthrowing God could man become man. Today—it is part of the revolution of our time—we see that the truth is exactly the reverse: without God, man will cease to be man; God is man's best ally, his last, invincible defence against degradation. In the eighteenth century, Voltaire, spokesman for Enlightenment optimism, attacked the Church for slandering human nature in teaching the doctrine of original sin and he called upon mankind to repudiate such pernicious superstition with its own counter-doctrine of human innocence. For Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes*, Christianity insulted human nature.

Today all is changed. It is the modern world that insults human nature, it is Christianity that champions it.

The Church knows that man is forever at risk, always liable to fall—hence her wise insistence upon that belief in original sin so unjustly resented by Voltaire. In ages of presumption, the Church reminds conceited man of the Fall. But the Church knows, too, that sin can be overcome and salvation achieved—hence her equally emphatic insistence that man is the child of God, to be treated with all the reverence that so high a paternity demands. In ages of pessimism, she reminds man of his divine origin and eternal destination. The Church corrects the world by emphasizing that side of man's nature currently being ignored. She knows, as did Pascal, the dangers of presenting too one-sided a view of man, of exaggerating either his strength or his weakness. The *philosophes*, ignoring human weakness, bridled at the imputation of original sin. The modern world, by contrast, in totalitarian and consumer society alike, undervalues the human being, holds altogether too poor a view of his prospects and potential, would confine to transient earth a person born for eternity. Could there be a more disastrous case of mistaken identity? It falls today to Christianity to restore man to his lost self and reinstate him as the heir to heaven. Today we must declare our solidarity with ourselves, with the threatened dignity of the human being.

## Seeking Others in their Otherness

Julius J. Lipner

That we live in a world of all manner of racial, cultural and ideological difference, of profound specificities and contingencies, is a trite fact of existence. Such awareness is nothing new. Indeed it was a containing feature of Aquinas' intellectual perspective. The title of one of his major works—*Summa Contra Gentiles*—indicates as much. What is new in our time is a growing if still somewhat grudging *appreciation* of this fact of difference, and the realisation, still halting on the whole, that there is an important sense in which difference is creative and so must be celebrated. In the role of theologian and scholar of religion, and as a tribute to Aquinas' comprehensive philosophical-theological vision, I propose in this article to inquire into this sign of our times (Mt. 16.3), to assess its