# Correspondence

## VALUES & CONSENSUS

To the Editors: I find myself in sympathy with the concerns evidenced by Valentin Turchin in his article, "The Institutionalization of Values," in your November issue.

On the one hand, who could seriously dispute that values willy-nilly *are* institutionalized; or, conversely, that institutions do embody value-perceptions and claims? Only a sclerotic liberalism could complain, in the name of some abstract individualism, of the effort to achieve consensus concerning those values that serve the common good.

On the other hand, two obvious difficulties arise at once: One of them is philosophical, the other political. Firstly, what *are* the values that genuinely subserve the common good and are thus, in this sense at least, ultimate? Secondly, who or what is to be the bearer of this discernement (in Mr. Turchin's words, the "intellectual and spiritual integrator of society"), a role filled in the past by the Church but now, in Mr. Turchin's vision, devolving upon a "metaparty" or "metachurch"?

Mr. Turchin is, of course, aware of these two issues; but he appears more sanguine than I about the possibility of their resolution (though his piece does seem to take on a more somber tone at the end, when he speaks of contemporary Western society's suspicion of "integration" and its relegating of "ultimate values" to the purely private sphere). I must pronounce myself decidedly unoptimistic about the prospect. I can find no reason to rescind Philip Rieff's portrayal of contemporary Western culture as marked by "the triumph of the therapeutic." In such a climate, values are scaled down to narrowly utilitarian and self-serving dimensions and "absolutes" appear as rather unfortunate holdovers from the unenlightened days of metaphysical and religious intolerance (a prejudice from which Mr. Turchin, for all his good will, does not seem entirely free) What serious discernment concerning values can be carried forth by a society in which the immediacy and superficiality of emotional reaction becomes the unique yardstick for the true and the good?

Further, I find the author's proposal for the creation of a metaparty or a metachurch to be utopian in the invidious sense of that term. Alfred North Whitehead suggested years ago that "if you want to make a new start in religion, based upon ideas of profound generality, you must be content to wait a thousand years." Despite its possible hyperbole, Whitehead's view does raise skepticism concerning Mr. Turchin's strategy. For my part, I have opted to direct my energies not toward the creation of the metachurch but toward the reform of the Church. In this I have recently been confirmed by the epigrammatic conclusion to Alisdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue*. (Whether Mr. MacIntyre would support my appropriation of his intuition is beside the point.) He writes: "We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict." To that active waiting I have committed myself. Its strategy may entail not the achievement of a cultural consensus but the declared opposition to the actual consensus. From this base, a new integration may ultimately come forth; but it suffices if it but makes possible some witness to light in the present darkness.

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To the Editors: Prof. Turchin has made an important statement of the two requisites of a social system: That there must be a "metaconsensus"—that is, a consensus on the need for a consensus on ultimate values—plus a set of such shared ultimate values and institutions for protecting and fostering them. In fact, however, American society has all these. Our religion is what Prof. Turchin calls "antireligion." We are united in our acceptance of disunity. Our shared ultimate values are individual freedom, the right of privacy, and the like. Prof. Turchin has, indeed, offended this code of ultimate values by speaking of the collective, public need for such a code; the code itself conceals its collective, public character. Also we have a "metaparty," namely, the Establishment, our public opinion leaders. The metaparty guides the institutions through which the consensus is protected and fostered: our legal system, our educational system, our science and technology, our press, and others. This is indeed our "single political network."

It need not be assumed that the failure of many people—and perhaps especially so-called liberals—to understand how a system works necessarily affects adversely the working of our system. The United States has managed to avoid disintegration partly despite and partly because of the shared skepticism concerning philosophies of integration.

There is serious danger, however, in speaking of the need to agree on ultimate values without specifying the ultimate values that need to be agreed upon. That is, indeed, reminiscent of the experience of Italy and Germany in the '20s and '30s of this century, when people were told that what was needed above all was a militant unity, a single will, a single set of values—and the leader would say what those values are. This is, of course, the opposite of what Prof. Turchin wants: He wants "a genuine consensus on the ultimate human values"—but then he fails to tell us what he thinks those ultimate human values are.

What is wrong with us is that our values are too superficial. We have overstressed the individual and understressed the collective. We have overstressed acquisition and satisfaction and understressed service and sacrifice. We have overstressed the present and understressed the past and the future. We have overstressed the physical and emotional sides of personal and social lives and understressed the spiritual side. We have overstressed love of ourselves and understressed love of God and neighbor. *This* is the true "decay of the value system" that needs to be reversed—not the decay of *any* value system, which conceivably could be replaced by *any other* value system, but the decadence of our particular—flourishing—value system, which needs to be replenished and revalued.

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## SOUTH AFRICA & REFORM

To the Editors: Not having read André Brink's *A Chain of Voices*, which Ross Baker reviewed in September, 1982, I have no criticism of the critique of the book. Judging by Brink's other work, it seems the review is accurate in its praise. What I would like to comment on is Baker's generous view of the cur-

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