

The Sin of the Moderates



Acts 2:44 "All who believed were together and (they) had all things in common; (and) they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

That rather idealistic description of the first Christians in the Book of Acts reminds me a bit of the Reading Club's

current selection, George Packer's gripping novel, "The Emergency," a book that was written in a manner akin to George Orwell's "1984," but is really more about our current state of affairs in the world today. It's set, though, in some faraway empire in an uncertain time-period, but the parallels to our own circumstances are clear. There's a discredited establishment. The laws that once upheld strict harmony don't fit anymore; and a new philosophy called "Together" has taken hold, as it did in the early church, where they had all things in common, and distributed their proceeds to all, as any had need.

In the novel, the social classes are collapsing, and decisions are made at "We Are One" gatherings for group resolutions, no more aristocracy or patriarchy. 'We are one.' There were lots of pithy slogans and committee titles throughout the book. Even so there are enraged and resentful populists from the countryside and urban wokesters each canceling out the other while demeaning or discrediting them. Some people are addicted to screens, like much of our youth today, only it is connected googles in the story, and others are entranced by the idea that artificial intelligence will produce what they call "better humans". It is astonishing how our own present-day struggles are clearly reflected back in this fictional parable, and in the early Church's struggle to overcome the social distinctions of that time between men and women, for example, but also between

Jews and Gentiles, freemen and slaves, and between the rich and the poor, all against the social norms of their day, selling their possessions and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

The main character in the novel, Hugo Rustin, is a moderate, humane surgeon who pushes back against the extremes of both the left and the right. He believes in cooperation, not domination, and that we can build a decent society if we just talk to one another as human beings. The problem is that the so many on the left and on the right are infuriated by the former social order and the values that the doctor so proudly embodies, and so they begin to tear down the 'old ways', one by one. Then everything begins to change very quickly, too fast for some.

Naturally our sympathies go out to the decent, moderate doctor fighting off vicious extremists. But as the novel goes on, we also begin to see his own flaws. For the doctor had failed to notice as his old order was losing legitimacy. He failed to stand up to the thugs as they tore it down. He failed to adjust to the new climate and the new reality, as he was hooked on his own self-importance, the status that was afforded him by the former entrenched patriarchal and familial society -- that was no more. And he does incredibly stupid and naïve things in an attempt to win that status back.

Many of us are in Rustin's shoes in real life today. If you were born between World War II and 1990, it's fair to say you were born in the era when the stable global international order went largely unquestioned. That order consisted not only of obvious trade agreements and international treaties like NATO, but also a whole system of checks and balances to make democracies function better; not only codes of civility and personal conduct, but also a real respect for truth, and norms of self-restraint, and a commitment to dialogue and faith in institutions.

That order and those restraints are now being whittled down in our own day. People on both the left and the right decided that the old neoliberal order was a hypocritical posture that elites had adopted to mask their own lust for domination. The controls of civility and international law are now being eroded, and we live more in an era of pure will, where 'might makes right'. It's a brutal world out there these days; where some countries and some leaders do whatever they want and govern more by arousing the dark passions of anger, hatred, resentment, and the urge to dominate, rather than by any attempt towards consensus. In this world, trust and civility are for foolish people. If those in authority want something, they simply grab it. Politics, foreign and domestic, is a war of all against all. So, deal with it.

So how are we moderates supposed to behave in this new world of ours? Do we live in the past and pretend the social revolution hasn't happened? Do we just keep our heads down and hope the new ideological enforcers won't notice us? Do we remain blind to our own shortcomings while we show others how morally superior we can be? Do we adjust to the new reality and become Machiavellians ourselves? Or do we seek to build a newer and better system of order and restraints, where we might even have all things in common; and distribute our proceeds to all, as any had need.

This is actually an ancient question that has afflicted many generations. In 1944, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book called "The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness." The children of darkness, in his telling, are the moral cynics who believe life is all about power. The children of light are those driven by ideals to build a just society, like the early Church described in our reading from Acts.

In Niebuhr's view, the children of darkness are brutal, but they are realistic about human nature, while the children of light are admirable, but they are quite naïve about entrenched human selfishness: "The children of darkness," he writes "are evil because they know no law beyond the self. But they are wise, though evil, because they understand the power of self-will. The children of light are virtuous because they have some

conception of a higher law than their own will. They are usually foolish though because they do not understand the consequences of self-interest," Niebuhr wrote.

And the children of darkness have advantages in their struggle against the children of light because they know what they want and they don't have to worry about nuance and niceties. It's easier to destroy a social order than to build one. The children of darkness capitalize on a fundamental human reality: our fear of death and of our own insignificance. They compensate for their fears of insignificance by asserting their pride, and by seeking power and control, even if only vicariously through some strongman.

Niebuhr was rooting for the children of light, but he wants them to be less naïve about human nature: "The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove," he wrote, "The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness, but remain free from their malice," he concludes.

I'm not going to give away the novel's ending, but it reminds us that social orders are rebuilt from the ground up, as decent people keep opening the door for one another. Meanwhile the left progressives and the right populists who seek to tear down the former global order are being shortsighted I believe. Sure, the postwar order was sometimes used as a mask to disguise

American and elite power grabs, but it really did restrain people and our worst habits. As Yale's Oona Hathaway wrote recently, "from 1989 to 2014, battle-related deaths from cross-border conflicts averaged fewer than 15,000 a year. Beginning in 2014, that average has risen now to over 100,000 a year." A great wave of savagery has been released, foreign and domestic. Outrage over these trends should cause moderates to be immoderate. It should generate what Niebuhr called, in another work, "a sublime madness in the soul" — the kind of madness that arises from a fervent commitment to liberal ideas and institutions that constitute the decent drapery of a civilized life. "Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and 'spiritual wickedness in high places,'" he wrote.

Mankind has been able to reconstitute new social orders before after periods of great savagery --- after the 17th-century wars of religion in Europe, for instance, and after the 20th-century world wars. Now that task lies before us again, and everybody who is active in community and public life has a role to play.

The Reading today from the First Epistle of St. Peter notes: "It is a credit to us if, being aware of God, we endure pain while suffering unjustly. (For) if we endure when we do right and suffer for it, we have God's approval. For to this we have been called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving

you an example, so that we should follow in his steps. . . When Jesus was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly, our Father in heaven. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might live for righteousness; by his wounds we have been healed. For we are sometimes going astray like sheep, and (we all) need to return to the example of the good shepherd and the guardian of our souls." Amen.