

WILL HUMANISM SURVIVE THE POSTMODERN ERA? A PREFACE

Khoren Arisian

*The vitality of thought is in the adventure. Ideas won't keep. Something must be done about them. The idea must constantly be seen in some new aspect. Some element of novelty must be brought into it freshly from time to time; and when that stops, it does. The meaning of life is adventure.*¹

Alfred North Whitehead

The intellectual question that looms over our time is whether the current state of profound metaphysical and epistemological irresolution is something that will continue indefinitely, taking perhaps more viable, or more radically disorienting, forms as the years and decades pass; whether it is in fact the entropic prelude to some kind of apocalyptic denouement of history; or whether it represents an epochal transition to another era altogether, bringing a new form of civilization and a new world view with principles and ideals fundamentally diJJerent

¹ Alfred North Whitehead. *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, The Free Press, 1967). Originally published 1933.

*from those that have impelled the modern world through its dramatic trajectory.*²

Richard Tamas

As this maddeningly volatile century draws to its close, a widespread sense of urgency, nervousness, anticipation and uncertainty is more than a little apparent. Whole systems of thought, overall schemes of interpretation like Freudianism, have given way to fragmentary views that pass before us like meteors. The last great ideological construct of the Western imagination, Marxism, has been essentially repudiated as one Communist country after another has imploded and collapsed since 1989. Enthusiastic advocates of capitalism have bellowed victory here, forgetting that capitalism itself undermines all that it at first touches and finally penetrates—family, community, the individual, democracy itself. As Michael Kinsley of *The New Republic* has succinctly noted: "Even conservative social critics have made the point that free-market capitalism, in its constant stimulation and satisfaction of appetites, is the most powerful force eroding traditional values and social arrangements."

American politics has hardly been left unaffected in this post-ideological period. The 1992 Presidential candidacy of H. Ross Perot, with its by-passing of regular party structures, its resort to a national hook-up of electronic town meetings, its dazzling surface appearance of being open to all points of view—in short, its political eclecticism—marks it as a postmodernist phenomenon.

Increasingly evident since the 1970s, postmodernism is a transitional sensibility characterizing most aspects and levels of contemporary experience whether or not we are aware of this development. Postmodernist paradigms, signs and portents are everywhere. The

² Richard Tamas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991).

original jury verdict in the trial of Los Angeles police officers who assaulted Rodney King, for example, was ultimately won by the prosecution on the grounds that whether or not King was gratuitously brutalized by the police was simply a matter of personal perception—what postmodernist theorists sometimes term "radical perspectivism" as opposed to solipsism, the older philosophic notion that the world is only as *I* see it. Postmodernism suggests that the world is as *everyone* experiences it, hence it is discontinuous and in perpetual flux-in effect, postmodernism carries quantum theory to its logical extreme, which lands it in absurdity. Epistemological skepticism, brought to a fine point earlier in this century by logical positivism (asserting that a statement which cannot be scientifically verified is nonsense), has mutated into its ultimate stage, epistemological nihilism.

Nietzsche, truly the primary parent of post modernism, prophetically anticipated the paralysis that would eventually grip Western culture. Many felt—and still feel—that Darwinism was a mortal threat to Christian theism (especially of the supernatural variety), prompting Nietzsche to announce "the death of God." That phrase, however, should be viewed less literally and more as theological shorthand expressing the spiritual malaise people were beginning to experience over the loss of traditional kinship ties, that is, over the disappearance of deeply stabilizing feelings of connectedness to one another and from one generation to the next. Surely this gradual erosion of the emotional structure of modern society—a fatal fracturing of human community—can be legitimately accounted as one of the preconditions of the escalating random violence of this century. The individual, increasingly severed from secure moorings, having only one's own wits left on which to rely, has often come to feel powerless and helpless. No wonder determinism was to become a common attitude of the age, plunging the validity of the

Enlightenment concept of the free, self-governing, autonomous individual into serious doubt.

The gathering implications of this doubt illuminate why the question of personal identity has once more risen as the crux of the postmodernist dilemma. Postmodernism denies that there is any such entity as a self. Cannot this despairing conclusion be seen as the eventual fruit of the disintegration of human community that we have just noted? The postmodern psychological position holds that once individuality is stripped of its web of relationships (and what else does community imply?), then no residually unique self remains. Alfred North Whitehead, who believed that each of us represents an enduring nexus of relationships, would disavow such terminal nihilism in regard to the self.

Nevertheless all this helps explain the postmodernist critique of objective truth as an impossible and hopeless enterprise. How, according to this critique, can there be any necessary correspondence between knower and object, if, like the smile of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat, the self dissolves even as it perceives? Could there be, however, a more effective recipe for experiencing personal powerlessness, or for understanding the contemporary collapse of public responsibility for the common good? Let's not forget that most of the "Plumbers" who burgled the offices of the Democratic National Committee in June, 1972, when later caught and indicted in the Watergate scandal, uniformly confessed to being mere ciphers in a larger situation in which they simply did what they were told. Seldom did they raise penetrating questions because they didn't "need to know" the larger picture in which they were bit players.

What does all this have to do with humanism? Just about everything! Postmodernism is variously a negative reaction to, or departure from, modernism; to this extent it is a rejection of the whole humanist outlook.

Humanism emerged full-blown in the rational-scientific, urban-industrial context of the last century during which period universal ideals such as a common humanity were deemed paramount. Western culture's modern period stretches from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Now, in the 1990s, metaphorically the first decade of the twenty-first century, we can see ourselves moving into a new era where multiculturalism is edging out the ethical universalism of the Enlightenment; where image and symbol are replacing ideas; where surface appearance is accounted to be the only reality, a reality, moreover, in perpetual process; where it is increasingly assumed, therefore, that the world can legitimately take on whatever character one ascribes to it. A fresh synthesis is far from emerging out of this challenging, unnerving hodgepodge. Consequently, postmodernism is a mosaic of divergent, often contradictory impulses and tendencies which are united-if one can posit a unity at all-by a generic belief in the superiority of the variety of concrete experiences over any *a priori* assumptions.

If a coherent humanist outlook is to survive and flourish in this radically different, eclectic set of circumstances-a situation created by our changing human consciousness-then we must strive to understand the numerous challenges (only a few of which have been mentioned here) presented by this disconcerting confrontation called postmodernism. If a dominant era sooner or later gives rise to its opposite, then we need to learn how humanism helped generate the postmodernist reaction.

Be that as it may, postmodernism is less to be dreaded than envisioned as an opportunity to be seized. This, then, was the very theme, the driving force, behind the 1992 Humanist Weekend held in Minneapolis, Minnesota.