

WHAT IS THE REAL CRISIS?

Today the peoples of the Western democracies are striving with all their might to preserve their way of life against the attack of the so-called barbarians of the East. We are engaged in a crusade against Communism. It is indeed a crisis. But is it the most important, the most real, crisis that confronts us? Many leading thinkers believe that it is not, for they see that Marx's strength lies, not in what he promised, but in what he attacked. Communism owes its magnetism to the weakening of the Western way of life, rather than to its own inherent attractiveness. We must fight Communism, true. But in the long run, the consequences might well be far more serious for us, if we forget, as we are likely to do in the midst of this hysteria over Communism, that we can and do face internal dangers as great as those from without. In the light of this, then, we ought to pay particular attention to the danger of internal decay.

This summer more than a hundred young men and women of twenty nationalities spent five weeks in the consideration of the internal menace to the West. The place was Pontigny, a French village south of Paris, and the occasion the Third International Summer Seminar of the Canadian Student Service. This group came together to discuss the Crisis in Western Culture, which had been made the theme of our Seminar. The Crisis was dealt with from the standpoints of many disciplines. Every professor lectured in his special field, and the idea was that every one should orientate his talks towards the theme, so that the Crisis would be dealt with from the viewpoints of theology, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, economics, law, art, and natural science.

A distinction that is prerequisite to the understanding of the Crisis is that between culture and civilization. Culture must not be tied down to specific institutions or specific countries or a specific time; it is rather the ideas and ideals which inform many civilizations, civilizations being the expression of cultural ideals. But, though culture and civilization are distinct in meaning, they should not be kept apart. And here the world has gone wrong. Lutheranism, as one of our lecturers pointed out, led man to separate civilization and culture, for Luther took religion out of life by making it a purely personal affair, and thus removed culture from civilization. On the other hand, Catholicism, which was rejected with the great revolt, endeavors

to make man's religion inform his social life, and thus unites culture with civilization. When the medieval unity of mind and body, religion and life, civilization and culture was dissolved, the seeds of our present crisis were sown.

In spite of the fact that the Crisis in Western Culture can be dealt with from many aspects, its basis is in the realm of theology and philosophy, for, as Christopher Dawson maintains, the centre of culture is cult. Keeping this in mind, then, it will be seen that the treatment given the Crisis by one of our lecturers was particularly good. He considered the cultural crisis from the threefold viewpoint of the crises in religion, in intelligence, and in morals. I can do no better, I feel, than to treat briefly of the crisis under these headings.

One of the absolutes involved in religion is the notion of God. It is most evident that a very marked change has occurred in man's conception of God, for we are no longer agreed on what we mean by God. The Greek-Hebrew-Christian tradition considered God above all as a real being, almighty and complete. But the revolt against Christian society and the growth of experimental science led to a new concept of God which is only too prevalent in contemporary society. The tendency to consider God as a mere tool or device first appeared with Descartes; with Kant the new conception of God as an idea rather than a reality became even clearer.

Concomitant with the change in the notion of God has been a change in man's relationship with God. The desires to explain God which arose with Feuerbach, Comte, and Nietzsche is a direct threat to a fundamental concept of our culture. God, the Creator and Father of men, has become identified with man in much of modern thought. Generic man, or even individual man, is God. Nietzsche went so far as to proclaim the death of God. Thus changing conceptions of and attitudes to God present a threat to our way of life.

In the realm of intelligence or philosophy strong tendencies have developed against the traditional Western philosophy. Greek thought, which reached its pinnacle with Aristotle, and which was later perfected by the medieval genius of Aquinas, has been rejected by only too many of those who mould present-day opinions. For Aristotle man's intellect could achieve certain knowledge, and there were

different kinds of certitude possible in the various sciences. Descartes substituted for the traditional multilateral meaning of science a new unilateral approach, and set up geometry as the basis for all science. This application of geometry to science has resulted in mechanism, and from it springs the modern philosophies which threaten our culture—those concerned with consistency rather than with truth. In the nineteenth century Comte placed the emphasis on statistics. Many others have, then and since, denied reason altogether. The rejection of the traditional notion of our culture that man is a rational animal capable of discerning truth in all things has indeed created a grave crisis.

It was inevitable that in morals too a crisis should come about, for it is evident that Christian moral values would not long be followed where Christianity was rejected, and where right reason, the true standard of morality, was thrown out. The modern answers as to what should be the guide of our conduct have followed two main lines of thought. One school has sought to base moral values on the various social sciences. The other solves the problem by denying the stability of values: Existentialists say that the only thing stable is freedom; American pragmatists deny all absolutes. It can easily be seen that all these new ideas on morals are incompatible with the original moral of our Western culture. The values which have been symbolical of the West are being challenged.

We must not think that a crisis is peculiar to our age. Every age faces a crisis of some sort. But what is peculiar to our age is a crisis which threatens the very existence of our culture. It is not a phenomenon which has been generated out of thin air; it is rather the product of four centuries of gradually growing secularism and atheistic humanism. It is a cancer which has been apparent for generations, but not until now has it grown to such a size as to endanger the life of the body politic. Our Western culture is basically Christian, and in proportion as our way of life is not Christian, to that extent are we trying to substitute another culture. This conflict of culture is our crisis. Indeed, our main trouble is that our age has cut itself off from the source of the culture it professes. That is the real crisis.

—MARK MacGUIGAN '51