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The Crisis of Our Age: An Update

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ASOCIAȚIA DE GEOPOLITICĂ "ION CONEA"

THE CRISIS OF OUR AGE: AN UPDATE¹

Ph.D. Steven Alan SAMSON*

Abstract Liberalism as a political philosophy and system of governance is the product of Western Christian civilization. As liberal ideologies divorce themselves from their Christian roots, they tend to displace the public expression of Christianity and become comprehensive secular creeds; often taking the form of what Michael Polanyi called a "moral inversion" that provokes a cultural crisis in the West.

Thomas Hobbes's conception of sovereignty, combined with his political hedonism, helped lay the intellectual groundwork for the modern liberal administrative state and the mischief it begets. But it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who placed compassion at its center, like an altar. Frederic Bastiat's analysis of what he called legal plunder [*The Law*, 1850] shows how, in the name of some variety of "false philanthropy," the state comes to redefine morality for the sake of its own interest, an enterprise that Hobbes himself endorsed. A prevalent method of redefining morality is to make people dependent upon whatever ideological potion the state happens to peddle in the name of "political correctness," much as "soma" was used in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. *The Economist* published a piece in February 2012 on "state capitalism," which, among potions, seems to have become the perennial favorite.

John Calvin recognized the moral hazard that arises when people are induced to act contrary to their consciences. Perhaps all the buzzing, blooming confusion of our modern media culture has become simply a mechanism for demoralizing the population, by making all of us accomplices in people's bad behavior, by assaulting, weakening, and gradually undermining our moral defenses. As David Chilton characterized it: "If this is a culture, it belongs in a Petri dish." People with bad consciences are more easily manipulated as they become fatalistic and slavish in their attitudes. Many people grumble about the corruption they see, but then simply roll over and go back to sleep.

Four decades ago two social revolutionaries, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, wrote a book entitled *Regulating the Poor*: a subtle exercise of guilt-manipulation in the guise of social analysis. The key ingredient in any behavior-modification potion is the state of dependency it encourages: that is, the means whereby it makes people dependent upon a state or an identity group for their sustenance, education, worship, or employment. Whatever a state or other group wishes to regulate may be redefined as a privilege that requires permission. Then the dispenser of favors can take the moral high ground and regulate the objects of people's desire that many soon enough come to regard as a right.

During that same period four decades ago I witnessed the development of the New Age and New Left counterculture while I was at the University of Colorado. I watched how one professor in particular, Edward Rozek, was treated as a scapegoat because he was willing to speak out against the rise of mob rule on campus, having seen much the same in central and eastern Europe.

Such radical social movements were soon enough embraced by the academy and became essential components of the political mechanism that has been steadily de-Christianizing our culture and consequently enthralling the general population through a hedonistic socialism. The spread of this cultural revolution might have been slowed in America if it had retained the decentralized federal system with which it began. But the Progressive movement of a century ago carefully laid the foundations for a centralized federal bureaucracy and, ever since, has bent it to its own purposes. So the name of the game has become what

¹ This piece was inspired by recent readings. It is not an essay on geopolitics, but it draws on work I have done for several decades. The essay certainly has implications for the cultural geography of the West and the destabilization of a civilization that was essentially imagined by and created by professedly Christian religious and political institutions.

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Gary North called "Capturing the Robes"-capturing, that is, the symbols of authority-and, with them, the levers of power. Gareth Garrett was ahead of the learning curve when he rigorously analyzed the still novel situation in "The Revolution Was" in 1938.

In *Vernon v Bethell* (1762) 28 ER 838, Lord Henley wrote that "necessitous men are not, truly speaking, free men, but, to answer a present exigency, will submit to any terms that the crafty may impose upon them." Henley was later quoted by Franklin Roosevelt to justify his proposal for a Second Bill of Rights. But in the name of helping the needy (and later it included, as J. Budziszewski puts it, the "merely wanty"), Roosevelt helped construct the very sort of social service state that compels us to submit to any terms the crafty may impose on us. It is a clever form of entrapment. Pondering the ingenuity of this scheme reminds me of what Reinhold Niebuhr observed about the willingness of "the children of darkness."

Herbert Schlossberg referred in his book *Idols for Destruction* to this kind of regulatory regime as "khadi law." Who could have imagined back then that, amidst the West's infatuation with red tape, *sharia* would also begin blossoming so soon in the West, almost as an addendum to the common law? Here we see the old dialectic at work - the hedonistic Eloi are now increasingly preyed upon by power-hungry Morlocks in our updated version of H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*. This is the circle of life. It is what makes the world of the Petri-dish culture go round. But whether it takes the form of a virus or a parasite, every successful revolutionary movement eventually succumbs to its excess.

Marcello Pera's *Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians* provides a framework for understanding the moral crisis of our age: specifically, what Pitirim Sorokin in *The Crisis of Our Age* (1941) characterized as "chaotic syncretism." Even in 1919, William Butler Yeats recognized that the center could no longer hold. Indeed, Flannery O'Connor put a mummy at the center of the new cult she described in *Wise Blood*. The diversion of liberalism by "European wizards" like Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx from its foundation within a Christian culture has led to its conversion into what Pera calls "the secular equation." This equation may be characterized as liberalism and latitudinarianism taken to the extreme, as can be seen in the treatment of Edward Rozek, which Sidney Hook in 1969 condemned as "totalitarian liberalism." Indeed, the increasingly illiberal liberalism, which takes the form of what Michael Polanyi called a "moral inversion," is much the same phenomenon Plato analyzed and attributed to the democracy of Socrates' day-alluring, multicultural, free, egalitarian, and permissive-in Book VIII of *The Republic*.