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# The Conflict for the Mind

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*G Wyn Davies*

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## The Deepening Conflict

In my *Contemporary Values and their Danger for Christians*,<sup>1</sup> I sought to outline the development and nature of the 'increasingly acute tension between the values commonly held in our society and those eternal values, deriving from the character of God, which are at the very heart of the Christian faith'. In doing so I was persuaded of the accuracy of Carl Henry's analysis of Western culture: based particularly on observation of the United States but equally true of Britain. In *THE TWILIGHT OF A GREAT CIVILIZATION*<sup>2</sup> he reproduced an essay written 18 years earlier entitled *The Barbarians are Coming* in which he warned that the widespread rejection of its Judeo-Christian foundations had opened the doors of Western society to a new barbarism. In 1988 he concluded that since the barbarians now openly and actively 'seek to reverse the inherited intellectual and moral heritage of the Bible, the Christian world-life view and the secular world-life view engage as never before in rival conflict for the mind, the conscience, the will, the spirit, the very selfhood of contemporary man'.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, in the light of the above analysis, I found the Reith Lectures of 1991 made very interesting - and disturbing - reading, since in these lectures, entitled *THE PERSISTENCE OF FAITH*, the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, 'discussed some of the problems of an age characterised by the apparent paradox of deepening secularisation on the one hand and resurgent religious extremism on the other'.<sup>4</sup> He concludes that 'the entire cast of mind in which biblical ideas found a home' has disappeared under the pressure of a science-led transformation of work and society and that 'the central religious assumption that there are moral absolutes which are given, not chosen, has been sent into cultural exile'. He therefore sees a secularised and materialistic Western society as being 'caught between two ages, one passing, the other not yet born, and the conflicting tendencies we witness - deepening secularisation on the one hand, new religious passions on the other - are evidence of that transition. The next chapter is impossible to predict'. In other words, 'the conflict for the mind', as Henry calls it, has entered into a new and intensive phase, the outcome of which is still to be determined.

On the face of it, since the above analysis was made, the dramatic collapse of Communism, reflecting the demise of Marxism as a credible intellectual theory, has substantially changed the balance of power in favour of Christianity and other religious faiths. Insofar as it has resulted in greater freedom of action, of speech and of worship in countries where they were previously forbidden - in practice if not in theory! - and even the Russian leader speaks publicly of the benefits of periodic church attendance, - this may be true and very welcome. However, I believe that to suggest this has invalidated the identification of the end of the 20th century as a particularly critical phase in **the unremitting battle for the mind** is to misunderstand the nature and range of the spiritual forces which are at work and the intensity of the present day conflict.

The New Testament warns us that the battle for the mind and hearts of men and women will continue throughout this age. The Lord Jesus Christ made that clear in such parables as those of the sower and of the tares in Matthew 13 - and spelled it out in uncompromising detail in his delineation of this age in Matthew 24. It is in the midst of a continuous history of varying degrees of persecution, suppression and false teaching, as well as social and natural disturbances, that 'this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations' (Matthew 24:14). Whilst the tactics employed and the ferocity of the battle varies, the battle itself is unceasing and the advances of the enemy are halted and reversed only through the proclamation and practice of revealed truth in the power of the Holy Spirit - manifesting the victory which Jesus Christ has already achieved over all such powers. Is not this why, when he commands his disciples to go and preach the gospel, the Lord makes clear that the only - but sufficient - hope for survival and success is his own powerful presence? 'All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye **therefore**, and teach all nations. . . and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world' (Matthew 28:18-20).

Many of us have lived our lives in Western societies which have benefited greatly from the Reformation and the revivals of the past, as well as the daily faithfulness of generations of Christians, which curbed the powers of confusion and darkness and brought to bear the influence of biblical principles on the economic, political and moral-cultural systems which form the structure of our societies. We have also witnessed with grief - and apprehension - the deliberate and continuing efforts to remove Christian beliefs and standards from a place of influence in our societies, in the knowledge that such rejection leads to the widespread licentious and violent barbarism which are identified in such passages as Romans 1:18f. as the inevitable consequence of rejecting God and his revealed truth.

It is not surprising therefore that in his recent assessment of democratic capitalism, Novak concludes that 'it is more likely to perish through loss of its indispensable ideas and morals than through weaknesses in its political system or its economic system. In its moral-cultural system lies its weakest link'.<sup>5</sup> As our societies consume their indispensable Christian foundations, 'the stresses of a culture without shared meanings are already mounting, and we have to count the human costs. We see them move from a morality of self-imposed restraint to one in which we increasingly rely on law to protect us from ourselves'.<sup>6</sup> It is not only the underground wells of a rain starved South-East England which are running dry: having cut off our moral and spiritual inheritance from its source of renewal, it too is in danger of exhaustion!

All this highlights the fundamental effect which ideas and thinking have on human well-being and illustrates the biblical pronouncement that we are what we think (Proverbs 23:7). It is not surprising, therefore, that the New Testament should emphasise how important it is that Christians should not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2). The mind is the arena where that battle takes place which tests out true loyalties and determines how as individuals and nations we live and relate to one another and to our God. In his paper *Ideas Have Legs*, Professor Wolters argues that 'ideas have legs in the sense that they are not the highfalutin ramblings of some ivory-tower academic, but are real spiritual forces that go somewhere, that are on the march in somebody's army, and have a widespread effect on our practical, everyday lives'.<sup>7</sup> He goes on to draw attention to Paul's warning to the Colossians: 'Have the roots of your being firmly planted in him, becoming increasingly confirmed

in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with thanksgiving. See to it that no one makes you captive by his so-called philosophy and vain deceit, based on human tradition, in line with the guiding principles of the world, but not in line with Christ' (Colossians 2:7,8). Paul is warning that pagan philosophies can enslave us and that their ideas are on the march in the service of spiritual powers, against whom we are to safeguard ourselves by communion with the Christ who frees, enlightens and keeps those who live and move and have their being - with thanksgiving - in him.

In order to be better able to understand, to stand firm in this conflict, let us, therefore, survey the battlefield in this post-Communist world. What is the nature of this spiritual crisis at the end of the 20th century: this transition between two ages 'one passing, the other not yet born' which Sacks identifies? Who are Henry's 'barbarians' and with what do they threaten us?

### **The Nature of the Transition**

In *Contemporary Values* I attempted to identify the dangers arising from a 'moral and spiritual ecology',<sup>8</sup> which is dominated by secular humanism. This showed that Christianity faces a deepening crisis in its traditional, Western strongholds - and this in itself would warrant Sacks calling the present time a 'transition between two ages'. However, it is not only Christianity which is now being challenged but both the *scientism* which has been its main protagonist since the Enlightenment and the democratic-capitalist socio-economic order which has, in part at least, risen from Christianity and has become for many a substitute for it.

Scientism assumes that the scientific method is uniquely the way to discover truth and that it is capable of providing us with a complete picture of reality, without any reference to God, whom it generally dismisses as a figment of unenlightened and immature minds. It views man as being 'in charge' and through scientific discovery and control to be capable of solving humanity's problems: progress is therefore to be measured by an advance towards creating a heaven on earth. This belief is now under attack from a number of directions. For example, some quantum physicists now spurn the intrinsic intelligibility of nature and take pride in advocating "the chaos behind the law" whilst others, such as the Nobel Prize winner Steven Weinberg, question whether scientific research is worthwhile: 'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless'.<sup>9</sup> Others question the results of scientific endeavour, because of the cost at which advances are achieved and the unprecedented danger in which they place the human race, both directly through the destructive potential of nuclear, biological and genetic discoveries and indirectly through the environmental damage which results from their exploitation. Furthermore, the New Age Movement claims - amongst other things - that we are approaching the end of science as we know it and that by entering into 'the higher dimensions of human experience' we can become partakers of a new science the principles of which we will intuitively know or feel to be right.<sup>10</sup> The New Age Movement seeks answers to the meaninglessness and the human and environmental consequences of scientism in Eastern mysticism, occultism and pre-Christian paganism.

However, in spite of these attacks, others have an optimistic vision of the future of science and the technology derived from it. For example, David Lyon writes that 'In the late twentieth century many believe we are entering a new phase in human society, based upon the astounding developments of information technology. Although nuclear and other technologies have profound social implications, only the idea of a society structured

around computers and telecommunications actually threatens to displace the familiar term 'industrial society'.<sup>11</sup> In this case the crisis is a different one but there is a crisis nevertheless, and it may be embodied in the question: who will guide these developments, and on what basis, to ensure that they result in the common good and not in feeding the greed and lust for power of the few whilst diminishing the freedom and dignity of many? From a Christian standpoint, it may be reasonably argued that these crises arise from the separation of science from its Christic roots. Cantore argues<sup>12</sup> that science arose only from Christianity because it 'was the only culture which succeeded in developing the humanistic presuppositions of science'. These included the 'transensible structure of nature and its intrinsic intelligibility' and the acceptance of 'the exploration of this intelligibility as both inherently rewarding and obligatory'. The separation of science from these roots lays it open to distortion - as took place through scientism, and threatens to take place again through New Age teaching - and to subversion through its use to exploit, injure and destroy rather than to protect, heal and enrich. The way science is thought of and utilised in the future depends on the outcome of the current debate in which Christians ought to play a vital part by making clear its essential, Christic roots and that the pursuit of science is intended to be a means of discovering the riches of creation and making available those riches for the benefit of creation as a whole, and of human beings in particular. The pursuit of science is one, honourable way in which men and women can fulfil the command of God that we should all be good stewards of the earth (Genesis 1:28f.). Ironically, it may well be left to Christians to rehabilitate science amongst both the Christian community and society generally, by making clear that it is a worthy calling, which faithfully undertaken, complements the proclamation of the gospel of the love and grace of God, by contributing to human physical and social well being.

Pessimistic forecasts of the future predict that the abandoning of its Christic roots, its distortion by New Age teaching and doubts about its 'worthwhileness' could lead science into a new Dark Age. Others see some of the powerful forces unleashed as a result of the collapse of communism as leading in the same direction. It is stating the obvious to say that freedom cannot be ring-fenced. We now know all too well that the events which led to freedom of action, expression and worship in the previously communist states have also led to freedom to express widespread, long suppressed national and ethnic rivalries and conflicts which are deeply felt, very complex and potentially very destructive. The break-up of Yugoslavia is a stark illustration of how 'the cohesion enforced over fifty years of communist government has come to an end in a whirlpool of devastation'.<sup>13</sup> However, what seems beyond dispute is that the break-up of the bi-polar-Soviet/American - and socio-economic system which has dominated the world for the second half of this century faces us with a difficult, dangerous and, probably, long period of transition before a 'new order' emerges. Some see a real danger of dialectical materialism being replaced by 'mail order catalogue materialism',<sup>14</sup> and world domination by the market economy through three competing regional power blocs based on the EEC (Germany in particular), Japan and the USA. In view of the undoubted success of market economies in raising the standard of living of a large number of people within their purview, and giving them unprecedented autonomy,<sup>15</sup> this may appear to many the most desirable outcome from both an economic and ethical standpoint. Others believe that 'there are clear signs that the old ways of thinking economy are not working' and that 'it is the first time in living memory that there seems to be no viable theory of

economy'.<sup>16</sup> Clear signs that the 'old ways of thinking economy are not working' in the traditional strongholds of the market economy include high levels of sustained unemployment, rising poverty and homelessness, difficulties in managing national budgets and international finance, third world debt and deprivation, global warming and ecological damage and the prevalence of corruption and violence. As already noted, responses to this socio-economic crisis have been varied. The collapse of communism and the economic and social chaos which has subsequently come to light is seen by many as the triumph of democratic capitalism. Some writers now argue that centralised socialist economies are by their very nature doomed to self-destruct. For example, Gray argues that 'Theoretically indefensible, market socialist institutions are in practice systematically unstable, tending to revert to central planning or to mutate into something resembling market capitalism'.<sup>17</sup> Others, such as Brian Griffiths,<sup>18</sup> argues that the strength of the democratic-capitalist system is that it is rooted in a Christian world-view. However, in the United States, the arguments between Christians have become bitter at times, with some aligning themselves with the (socialist) left - with liberation theologians at its extreme - and others aligning themselves with the (capitalist) right - with the theologians or reconstructionists at its extreme. Both these extremes have in common a 'this-worldly' focus and an insistence that they have biblical authority for their positions and their proposals.

As Gay shows very clearly in his helpful study of evangelical debate over capitalism in the United States, 'while those on the right have tended to defend capitalism under the banner of liberty, those on the left have condemned it under the banner of social justice. Even the evangelical mainstream, so often associated with political and economic conservatism in America, has become troubled by the issue of capitalism, confused over the natures of liberty and justice, and increasingly torn between right and left on social and economic matters'.<sup>19</sup> Others maintain that whilst individual Christians should be encouraged to become actively involved in economic and social policy, the church as such ought not to become involved and that 'the identification of Christianity with any particular political-economic system represented a serious error'.<sup>20</sup>

Central to the crises in both scientific and socio-economic thinking is the world view which informs such thinking. I have previously argued<sup>21</sup> that the central temptation for men and women in every age since the initial temptation (Genesis 3:5) is to consider themselves 'as gods' and agree with Walsh and Middleton<sup>22</sup> in identifying as the climax of humanistic thought, and the unique characteristic of the modern, secular world view, that 'For the first time since the Renaissance we have in the West a whole civilization gradually coming to the belief and assertion that humanity itself is God - we need neither God nor images'. The implications of such a world view they summarise as follows: 'With mankind as god, and nature as the pre-existent stubborn matter we must subdue in order to bring forth our creation, there is even a secularised redemptive history and an eschatology of progress toward a final state of blessedness. The modern world view is a religion that has borrowed much from its Christian heritage but is itself nothing short of idolatry: man himself has become the idol.' This being so, the collapse of communism confronts us as Christians with a humanism which is every bit as idolatrous clothed in the tailored suits of capitalism as it was in the cloth caps of socialism. We can no longer pretend that barbarians were only bred in the Kremlin: violence, hatred, lust and wanton destruction roam our streets. Professing themselves to be wise, many of our own flesh and blood have lost a sound understanding of truth (Romans 1:22) and the barbarism of

God-forsaking hearts (Matthew 15:16f.) is unleashed and threatens the very foundations of our post-Christian Western civilization.

Sacks sees evidence that this secularising and brutalising of the dominant world view is not a 'one-way street'<sup>23</sup> in the rise of fundamentalism in Islam and Judaism as well as in Christianity and argues that the final outcome of the present conflict is, therefore, far from certain. This adds a further dimension to the transition which we now experience in that the conflict for the mind is not confined to a struggle between a secular and religious world view but also involves a struggle between different religious world views, each one claiming uniqueness and universal validity. Growth within Islam, Judaism and cults such as New Ageism - as well as Christianity - comes through those who hold a fundamentalist position, i.e., those who are convinced that their faith is uniquely the truth of God. Whilst they may therefore agree that secularism, and its off-spring the pluralistic society, is their main enemy, not only is it highly unlikely that they will agree on any major tenets of faith but it appears that increasing religious conflict is inevitable. One of the marks of false faiths, whether based on secular or religious world views - including a degenerate Christianity - is that the end justifies the means. Therefore, evangelical Christians have been - and are - experiencing loss of jobs and promotion, imprisonment, persecution, and murder in many parts of the world and there are no guarantees that the growing hostility to biblical faith and conduct in both Europe and the United States will not result in discipleship becoming as costly in these countries as it is now proving for many Christians in Africa, Asia and South America. Whether or not an idolatrous secularism gives way to (another) false religion, the conflict is likely to intensify and if we are to survive as Christians then not only have we to understand the nature of the battle in which we are engaged but also how to wield the weapons with which we have been provided to fight it.

## **Engaging in Battle**

I believe that if we are to engage effectively in this battle we need to remind ourselves that, in spite of all the changes we experience, there is a real sense in which nothing changes. The Bible teaches that this is true of two things which are of vital importance to us in playing our part in the present conflict. First, as we have already seen, our Lord makes it clear that the battle for the hearts and minds of men and women is a conflict which will not cease until he returns, and both he and later Paul make clear that it is not a battle against human beings but against evil spiritual powers: 'the rulers of the darkness of this world' (Ephesians 6:12). Failure to understand this, or perhaps more commonly, rejection of the Bible's identification of the current crises as being a phase in a continuing spiritual battle with real and powerful spiritual forces, leads much of the church to engage in irrelevant and ineffective attempts to recover its authority and dynamism as it attempts to impress and influence human beings rather than wrestle with 'the rulers of the darkness of this world'. The current preoccupation of much of the church with ecumenism, women's rights and other social and political issues, however legitimate they might be, diverts us from the spiritual conflict, of which these problems are but symptoms, and in which victory is only achieved when men and women are freed from 'the god of this world' who has 'blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should shine unto them' and they and we learn to live in 'the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:4,6). In 10:3,4 of the same letter Paul reminds us that although we live in the world, we do not use mere human

weapons but spiritual weapons which have divine power to destroy the enemy's strongholds. In other words, victory in the present crisis, as in every other phase of this deepening conflict, cannot be achieved by trying new weapons of man's devising but by trusting the old ones which God has provided. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul calls the Christians to engage in the battle by being 'strong in the Lord and in the power of his might' and goes on to give detailed instructions regarding 'the whole armour of God' which they must wear in order that they might be able to 'stand' and to 'withstand in the evil day' (6:11f.).<sup>24</sup>

The second matter which the Bible teaches is the necessity of revival. As Arthur Wallis demonstrates in his classic book, *IN THE DAY OF THY POWER*,<sup>25</sup> the Bible reveals that 'God has always worked by means of revivals' and that it is the 'divine strategy, first to counteract spiritual decline, and then to create spiritual momentum'. A study of the scriptures and of the history of the church shows that revival is the sovereign work of God through which he has time and again rescued his people from defeat and annihilation and restored the honour of his Name and that of his Son. The depth of the crisis which we are experiencing at the end of the twentieth century is such that we must surely say once again with the Psalmist, 'it is time for the Lord to work, for they have made void thy law' (119:126). Whilst revival is the sovereign work of God, students of revival agree that there is no recorded revival which has not been preceded by prayer. It is when his people become so jealous for his Name and honour and are ready to break up their fallow ground and seek the Lord until he comes and rains righteousness upon them (Hosea 10:12) that God brings in the day of his power. Unless we learn to wield the weapon of prayer, we can expect no victories. The late Dr Lloyd-Jones put the issue in his own inimitable way: 'Here is the vital question. Have you seen the desperate need for prayer, the prayer of the whole Church? I shall see no hope until individual members of the Church are praying for revival, perhaps meeting in one another's homes, meeting in groups amongst friends, meeting together in churches, meeting anywhere you like, and praying with urgency and concentration for a shedding forth of the power of God. . . There is no hope until we do. But the moment we do, hope enters'.<sup>26</sup>

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## The First Duty

If you are really burdened by the times in which we live, if you are really grieving in your heart as you see the godlessness of the world, if you have a compassion in your hearts for men and women in the bondage of sin and Satan, your first duty is to pray for revival. When revival comes more can happen in a day than may happen in a century of the ordinary work of the Church. When He comes in power the stoutest hearts are broken, the mightiest intellects are broken down, and men and women cry out, asking for mercy and seeking to know the way of salvation. The first task, the first duty, of Christian people and of the Christian Church today is to pray 'with one accord' and plead for a repetition of Pentecost, a Holy Ghost revival, God again coming in authority and might and power into the midst of His people. The Holy Ghost is still at hand in all His power; so pray God to send Him. And when He comes we shall see things that will astound us and amaze the scoffing, unbelieving world that is outside.

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CHRISTIAN UNITY, p 81