

THE MALAISE OF AMERICA

Failing to Find God and Failing at Humanity

By the Most Reverend Dr. Chrysostomos

With regard to general problems of the Church's mission in America, I would like to observe that there is a malaise in this society that is an impediment not only to the spread of Orthodoxy, but to the maintenance of the society itself. America is in many ways sick, and everyone, religious or not, is beginning to recognize this. The Supreme Court recently forbade the mention of God in a religious or "worshipful" way in public school graduations and thus abolished the American tradition of preceding these ceremonies with a religious service, the "Baccalaureate." This is a symptom of the sickness of America, since the Supreme Court strives to reflect society's values. In fact, I am sure that many of the justices personally disagreed with the decision that they made, but nonetheless fulfilled their duty to reflect, in the decisions of this land's highest court, the prevailing values of American society.

Part of our sickness is directly related to the motivations behind this Supreme Court decision. The ancient Greeks believed that what separated an animal from a man was not only the soul, but the ability of humans to reflect on their existence. Thus Plato says that an unexamined life is not worth living. Those who, like animals, go through life collecting things, feeding, mating, and waiting for tomorrow as though life and death were not profound philosophical things to be studied and examined—such people can never know

The comments from which this article is taken were solicited from Bishop Chrysostomos by a Priest of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese for a conference of clergymen and laymen concerned about the failing mission of the Church in America. His Eminence's observations are sobering, instructive, and worthy of reflection.

God. They have no use for God. They are like the classical “idiot,” the person turned in on himself, who, if he does think of God, only thinks of God in a negative way, as something that stops him from being the selfish, stupid animal that he is. I can think of no better examples than contemporary Americans, when looking for evidence of this animal. Our Supreme Court justices seem to agree with me, for it is for this animal that they made their sad decision. Indeed the God whom a thinking, philosophical human being finds in his efforts to fathom the meaning of life and death—this God is not available to most contemporary Americans. If they even care about God, they can only come to believe, as we have said, in the “great thwarter of selfish aims” or, in the case of those of an evangelical bent, the “Big Daddy” who gives them things. The Orthodox God is as far away from them as “Velveeta” is from cheese or plastic is from gold.

Americans have not become idiots and the worshippers of an anthropomorphic God accidentally. They have created a society which dwells on the self. We read magazines which appeal to the “me generation.” Television characterizes salvation as self-satisfaction and attributes such satisfaction to drinking the right “refreshment.” Big houses, money, and cars are the goals of human action. And if some Americans know that there is something wrong with their country, it is only because their houses are not nice enough, their cars are too old, or they have too little money. It never occurs to them that these things in and of themselves are what is wrong with America.

All of this distortion of values begins with child-rearing. A few decades ago, it was unthinkable for an Orthodox boy or girl to engage in the American “dating game,” let alone before eighteen years of age. In most families, as long as children were living at home they could not dress in obscene clothes, stay out late at night, or engage in any unsupervised activities. Young girls were not permitted to wear make-up, spend time in the bathroom curling and spraying their hair, or doing what, as the witless expression goes, “all girls do.” Knowing that the teenage years are formative years, parents were careful to expose their children to an atmosphere that was disciplined, if not almost monastic.

Young people a few decades ago did not, of course, like the restrictions imposed on them any more than young people do today. I remember, for example, taking several opportunities at that age to break the rules set down by my parents and to rebel. But the restrictions remained. Thus, in later years, when I was free to make my own decisions and set my own rules, I had an internalized sense of

discipline and self-control. This is lost on today's young people. While parents talk about rules, they allow their children to violate these same rules in the name of a "stage." Stages, however, are not spontaneous; they are "set." Thus children learn, in a subtle way, that the values that they are being taught are hypocritical ones: values to be talked about, but not followed. In the past, the most rebellious Orthodox children—even those who went astray—would, in later years, remember the discipline of their teenage years and appreciate the fact that their parents had remained firm in their values even in the face of resistance from their children. This sense of appreciation would often lead them back to the Faith. These same children would today have nothing to look back on but hypocrisy and a value system that never went beyond their parents' lips.

Hair spray, cosmetics, the latest fashions, dates, dances, popular music—the "essential" things of American teenage life—are, like it or not, the foundations of the idiot generation which we are breeding. It is here, in the teenage girl preening before a mirror, learning about vanity and self-interest, that the death of our Faith begins. Cars, computer games, the latest running shoes, secular summer camps, diversions—the "normal" things of American teenage life—are, like it or not, the building-blocks of a generation which has substituted the adornment of the ego for the formation of the soul. It is here, in the teenage boy frittering away his time on senseless entertainment, that a godless society begins. If these things existed at all in the past, they existed on the periphery and were allowed only in limited circumstances. They were secondary pursuits, coming after Church, study, reading, and chores. Children who were attracted to them were considered rebels. And when these rebels matured, as I have said, they turned once again to the enduring pursuits of the Church, study, and work, knowing that these build values. Today, however, things have changed. Fruitless and unproductive pursuits are primary. Disciplined efforts are not only secondary in the minds of parents, but many have come to think of them as harmful.

Gloria Steinem, the radical feminist, in her recent book, *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (Boston, Toronto, and London: Little, Brown, & Co., 1992), flatly condemns discipline, obedience, submissiveness, the "old values," and the very child-rearing techniques which have for centuries formed our Orthodox Faithful. She points out that these things thwart independent growth and form within the adult an abused, suffering child. By indulging children as most do today, she suggests, we allow them to blossom forth into

well-adjusted individuals. She cites, among other examples of such self-adjustment, a married woman who found her Lesbian identity. In other words, the “old values” had locked a mature adult into the world of an “abused,” restricted child who yearned for perversion and an abnormal way of life. Here we have a clear statement of the sickness of American society. Steinem admits that obedience and humility thwart perversion. She tells us that remaining a child, the product of discipline, is an impediment to the realization of that perversion. Scripture also teaches us these same things: that the child-like qualities of humility and obedience will lead us to a life of virtue and free us from perversion.

But Christianity teaches us that this end-product is good, whereas Steinem sees it as something evil. She tells us that we must be arrogant and self-assertive and that we must erase from ourselves the “child within.” In effect, her revolution is not a revolution from “within,” but a revolution fueled by all of the values and perverse things that come from “out there.” Hers is an external perversion, not an internal revolution. Her book is a firm verification of what I have said: that the modern way of child-rearing is meant not to build Christian character, but to produce grotesque, self-oriented individuals for whom even perversion—if it is something that they happen to want—becomes a good. Such individuals, again, neither care about the Church nor will they ever return to it if they knew it at all when they were young. And if they have formed their values in an atmosphere which claimed to be Orthodox, but in which rules of conduct and behavior were not enforced, they will simply attribute this conflict between spoken values and a permissive attitude to the hypocrisy of religion in general—a hypocrisy above which they will supposedly attempt to rise in their ascent towards self-esteem (read: solipsism, self-centeredness).

If we are to have a true Orthodoxy in America, we will have to confront the problem of child-rearing. We will have to restrict teenagers, focus their attention on the Church, and instill in them a desire for monasticism, service to the Church, and Christian sacrifice. When they rebel, we will have to treat that rebellion as an illness, not as something natural and temporary. We will have to enter into that age-old warfare by which children are rescued from the deadly temptations of the world that come with the age of maturity. We must stand up as real guardians of our children, if we are to produce those true humans who can believe in a true God. Otherwise, there will be no Orthodox missions in this country; for, where there are no

children, there is no future.

America has also completely destroyed the concept of “priority” in Christianity. Scripture tells us that we should worry about spiritual things and let worldly things take care of themselves. Translated into practical language, this means that we should not consider the Church an addendum to our jobs and families, but our jobs and families as things that serve the priority of the Church. If we are ill, being the indulged people that we are, we use this as an excuse to stay away from Church. True Christians need and seek out the Church when they are ill. When we have economic woes, we revile God, feel sorry for ourselves, and forego Church attendance, so that we can concentrate on solving our money problems. If we resolve them, then we go to Church to thank God. If we cannot, we curse God. A true Christian, however, depends on God for all that he has. His efforts are always in cooperation with God. So, in times of shortage or want, he intensifies his attendance at Church. That is why, over the centuries, our Churches were filled with the lame, the sick, the suffering, and the poor, all placing themselves in the hands of God. Even the well-fed and wealthy attended Church fasting and humbly dressed, so that they could participate in the cry of these “unfortunates,” who are loved more than any others by God. Now, however, our Churches are filled with the wealthy, showing off their furs and expensive clothes. The sick call the Church to them, rather than calling on and going to the Church. With such distorted priorities, placing health and money above and beyond the domain of God, how can the Church itself have any meaning? And how can missions succeed?

Again, if we are to have true Orthodoxy in America, and not the plastic spirituality of “mainstream” Orthodoxy (a *mélange* of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism spiced with Orthodox art), we must teach our people to live humbly, to thank God for every deprivation and every adversity, and to concentrate on spiritual things. Only then will they know that God gives them what they need, and not necessarily what they want, and that spiritual things are best pursued when the belly is empty and the bank account low. We must teach our people that sending their children to college, having nice homes, and buying big cars are impediments to spiritual growth. College is fine for those who wish to serve the Church. It is death to those who wish to follow the trends of society, especially since colleges and universities no longer educate children or teach them values, but instill in them a deep desire for a life soaked in liquor, satu-

rated by sexual passions, and dedicated to the satiation of base desires. A home and a car are fine. But they should be simple, functional, and of secondary importance. A man's wealth, an ancient Greek adage has it, is measured not so much by what he possesses as by that which he can with dignity do without. "Baptized" by the revelation of Christianity, this classical wisdom confirms the Christian way of life: a life lived philosophically and outside the distractions and idiocy of material comfort and the false priorities which it engenders.

To be Orthodox in America is to view man in a different way and to imitate that which has produced, not the insanity of a society which elevates perversion to the level of the heroic, but the humble Saints and courageous confessors who adorn our Faith: true human beings. Herein lies our goal: to be a peculiar and genuine people, a people apart, looking at the examples of the Orthodox past and not the already spent future of the American dream turned nightmare. And all of this begins, as I have said, with the values that we instill in our children. A tree grows from its roots. If those roots are cut off, then we produce a distorted, ghastly mass of rotting matter—the kind of rot which characterizes a country that can allow filth and pornography to fill its theatres but which cannot countenance the mention of God in its educational institutions. Until we Orthodox become true people, succeed at simple humanity, and begin to nurture our children to be truly human, we will never free ourselves from the sickness of American society and find God. Then for us the question will not be whether we should countenance the mention of God's name, but whether God will countenance the mention of our names.