

Western Civilization: To Be or Not to Be?

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

Amid the destructive forces in the Western world, Muggeridge gives a reason for hope. This is from an address given to an American university in 1975.

Our Western civilization was born of the great drama enacted in Palestine 2000 years ago—the drama of the Incarnation, the Passion and the Resurrection—and all that flowed therefrom. This is what inspired and nourished the arts of literature, music, architecture and learning which are the glory of our civilization. If Western man has now rejected these origins, persuading himself that he can chart his own future, then assuredly he and his way of life and all he stood for must perish.

The real crisis is thus about man's relationship with his Creator rather than with his energy supplies, his currency and gross national product, his sexual fantasies, and other passing preoccupations with which the media interminably concern themselves. These are essentially trivial matters.

Never have I felt so much love as I do now in old age for my native English countryside, for the English people and their history, above all for the English language and literature. At the same time, it has to be admitted that our national affairs are in great disarray, if not worse; and that our institutions of government and of justice seem to be afflicted by dry rot. Yet if, in the Gadarene Stakes—the race downhill into the sea—England seems at the moment well ahead, all the other countries of the West are jostling and pushing in the same direction. When men turn away from God, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal said, they must either imagine themselves gods or, aware of the absurdity of such a pretension, revert to being animals and seek their satisfaction in carnality. Megalomania or erotomania,¹ the two

great sicknesses of our age: the clenched fist or the phallus, Hitler or Hugh Hefner.

And now Pascal's equation takes place to the accompaniment of the media, especially television. Future historians, if any, will surely marvel at the tolerance accorded to this immensely powerful instrument of persuasion and its pundit-salesmen.² How I envy the Gibbon who, looking back across the centuries at our decline and fall, will remark on how, as we systematically destroyed the values and restraints of our inherited way of life, we remained convinced that each innovation, each new assault on marital fidelity, on the home and parenthood, was bound to be conducive to our well-being and enlightenment.

A nightmare afflicts me from time to time. I find myself in a broadcasting studio deep underground, while, above, the last vestiges of civilized life disappear in a mushroom cloud. In our studio, the discussion proceeds, and a shrill-voiced lady participant insists that if only the school age might be raised to 20 and the age of consent be lowered to 10, if only birth pills could be distributed to Brownies, if only marriage counseling might begin with the cradle and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*³ get into the comics, all would yet be well.

The barbarians who overran Rome came from without. Ours are home products, trained and suitably brainwashed and conditioned at public expense.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Western man, wearied of the struggle, has decided to abolish himself. Creating boredom out of his own affluence, impotence out of his own erotomania, vulnerability out of his own strength, he himself blows the trumpet that brings the walls of his own city tumbling down. Until at last, having educated himself into imbecility, and drugged and polluted himself into stupefaction,

he keels over, a weary, battered old brontosaurus, and becomes extinct.

Are we Christians, then, to fold our arms in resignation? On the contrary. Actually, a sign has been accorded us, so extraordinary that it amounts to a miracle. I refer to a letter addressed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to the Soviet government shortly before he was exiled. It said that what is wrong with his country is not so much its political or economic system as the Marxist materialism which is its ideology. To this, he insists, the only valid answer is provided by Christ and his teaching; the only possible response to the pretensions of absolute power is the absolute love proclaimed in the New Testament.

As a young journalist in the U.S.S.R. in the early 1930s, I would have found it inconceivable that after half a century of the most absolutist rule, under a regime dedicated to the destruction of the Christian religion and all its works, a voice would make itself heard throughout the world stating once more, in luminous words, the great proposition on which the Christian religion is founded—that through love, not power, men may find their way.

The whole stupendous social-engineering effort, made at such a cost in blood and tears to condition man to a purely terrestrial existence, has thus been a gigantic failure, a fiasco, as such

efforts must always be. Should we not then rejoice that, once more, it has been demonstrated to us that God never abandons us; that however somber the darkness, his light still shines; and that however full the air may be of the drooling Muzak and the crackling of Newzak, truth will make itself heard?

As the old do, I often wake up in the night, half out of my body, so that I see between the sheets the battered carcass I shall soon be leaving for good, and in the distance a glow in the sky—the lights of what Augustine called the City of God. Two sharp impressions accompany this condition. The first is of the incredible beauty of our earth, its colors and shapes, its smells and creatures; the enchantment of human love and companionship; and the fulfillment of human work and of human procreation. The second is a certainty, surpassing all words and thought, that as an infinitesimal particle of God's creation I am a participant in his purposes, which are loving, not malign; creative, not destructive; orderly, not chaotic. In that certainty lies a great peace and a great joy. ■

QUESTION

Explain how Muggeridge's ideas expressed in this essay seem almost prophetic.

MEET THE AUTHOR



Malcolm Muggeridge (1903–1990), one of England's most famous journalists and television personalities, was reared a *Fabian Socialist* and spent many years writing articles for liberal newspapers and magazines. This witty, intellectual, sophisticated media man shocked the world in the 1960s by announcing that he had become a Christian. He explained that he “became aware that there really had

been a man, Jesus, who was also God. . . . He really had spoken those sublime words. . . . He really had died on a cross and risen from the dead. . . . The words Jesus spoke are living words, as relevant today as when they were first spoken.”

Muggeridge had begun to distrust the socialistic ideas of his father's friends during the 1930s when, still in his twenties, he was Moscow correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, a leading liberal journal. As a trained observer of human affairs, Muggeridge saw more and more inconsistencies in liberal thinking as his career in journalism continued.

After his conversion, he wrote several books on Christianity and appeared on television relating Christianity to the world. His most famous books include *Jesus Rediscovered* (1969) and *Something Beautiful for God* (1971). Malcolm Muggeridge became one of the century's most outstanding analysts of the dilemma of Western man and of the solution to that dilemma. “The world is full of fantasy,” he said; “there must be some reality somewhere, and the only reality that I've found is the reality of the Christian faith.”

¹Megalomania or erotomania—psychological disorders characterized by preoccupation with fantasies of wealth or power, or of sex, respectively.

²pundit-salesmen—learned salesmen.

³*Lady Chatterley's Lover*—a novel by D. H. Lawrence dealing explicitly with sex, which was banned in the U.S. and Britain until 1959 and 1960 respectively.