

## Christianity and the Hemlock

Fred Chay

The two forces that make up the culture of the West for the last millennium have for most of their life enjoyed a pleasant relationship. The relationship of Erasmus of Rotterdam, a leader of the Renaissance and Luther, the leader of the Reformation can illustrate the point. The Renaissance and the Reformation both played a major part in the history of Western civilization and functioned almost complementarily in many ways. However, we are on the frontier of the third millennium. There is every sign that this marker in history will require not only a new set of calendars, creating trauma for our computers, but also will record and be the harbinger for the greatest cultural and religious change in the history of civilization.

Many of the secular social commentators have chronicled the impact of the past and predicted the change for the future. Perhaps the works of Christopher Lasch have had the most profound impact. Lasch in his long academic career revealed the bankruptcy of the Left and the danger concerning the dogmatism of the Right including the sociological and psychological impact of religious movements. His keen insight of the creation of the therapeutic society and his work, *The Culture of Narcissism*, carried the day for both the political Right, and the religious center. His work on the power of progress in *The True and Only Heaven* was a masterful presentation of the mythical promise and the monstrous power that progress has exerted in the west. His evaluation of democracy in *The Revolt of the Elite* strikes chills into both liberal and conservative as he surfaced the danger of the new rich who have no collective memory of the past. They only seek rights and privilege and know not of social responsibility.

The impact of Lasch can be measured by the imitation of his work by many Christian writers both from the liberal and evangelical camp. Imitation is the purest form of flattery. This seems to be a new genre. Unfortunately, one of the symptoms of the scandal of the evangelical mind, as Mark Noll predicted, is that the best that evangelicals seem to be able to do is listen to the secularist dress it up in the sacred, and sell it. (This entrepreneurial power of persuasion will undoubtedly go down as the major "contribution" of evangelicalism of the 20th century.)

The third millennium will perhaps be witness to the greatest enmeshment of Christ and the Hemlock. This will be seen under the theological guise of soteriological inclusivism and under the sociological guise of tolerance, i.e. "All faiths for one race". The connection of Christ and culture will perhaps be able to transform lives in the temporal world but never able to translate life to the eternal world. The assault on the church will not only come from those who seek a pluralistic answer in a multicultural country. The rise of world religions in the United States has softened Americans to the mindset of tolerance. We must remember, as Dorothy Sayers said, "The result of tolerance is hell". It is both interesting and helpful to ponder the cause / effect relationship of postmodernism and pluralism. But from the Christian perspective the ultimate results are the same. However, it is within evangelicalism that we must also be mindful to perceive the shift that is taking place. Pluralism is being replaced with soteriological inclusivism. This hybrid or halfway form of pluralism has the same end in mind but without the

totally relativistic epistemological means. Inclusivism will allow that Jesus is the way but that there have been and could even now be other ways to God.

One more step has been introduced, as if inclusivism was not enough of a danger to the church. There are those who are optimistic yet agnostic as to the fate of those who respond to the higher power as God. He can reveal himself to the proverbial man of the bush in vision or dream and perhaps even tongues, with the result that salvation is secured if there is an affirming response. To be sure this is closer to Christianity since this brand of particularism insists that Jesus play some part in the transaction. It is also true that God is able to appear in the bush or through the dream. However, it seems that it is at best a loose connection and certainly not that of historic, apostolic, reformational or evangelical Christianity.

For those who are wondering what other option is left, I trust you will find the label of "exclusivist" one that is acceptable even if it has gone out of style and is no longer politically correct. It was Peter who declared, "There is no other name under heaven by which a man can be saved". And it was Jesus himself who said no one comes to the Father but by Me. Besides, the blood of Christ is what was offered and accepted on the cross regardless of the fact that the Koran denies it.

The Cross and the Hemlock is closer in connection than ever before. The face has changed, having mutated from naturalism to the supernaturalism and apotheism of New Age and returning to planetary pluralism. However the danger is ever-present. The words of the apostle John in his first letter strike a chord of concern. "If any come to you and do not have this teaching they have denied the father and have neither the Father nor the Son".

It will take perhaps the wisdom of Solomon to know how to follow the advice of John as he warns the church not even to grant a welcome to those who do not share this teaching, and at the same time not continue the scandal of the evangelical mind by failing to engage the culture with Christ. Richard Neihbur reminded us that it was our duty to engage the culture with Christ. It is left for those of the third millennium to experience the results of our engagement.