

CHANGE AND THE CHANGELESS

There have been many claims in our day that philosophy and theology are no longer really relevant. To dispute these claims one might attempt to plumb the philosophical and theological dimensions of modern problems like total war, demography or cybernetics. Each of these, and other problems, are pregnant with philosophical and theological implications, but I think one might far more easily take as a point de depart, a much more fundamental approach, one that really gave birth to philosophizing in the ancient tradition of Western culture, the notion of change and the changeless.

Some of the greatest philosophers of all times have taken the idea of change as their best springboard into the world of philosophy. The more they pondered change, and sought an explanation of change, the more many of them were led almost inevitably to a quite opposite reality: the changeless. In fact, it is difficult to comprehend changing reality without some recourse to changeless reality, if there is to be any rational meaning or direction to the world in which we live, some refuge from the emptiness, anxiety, and the frustration that besets so much of personal existence today.

One can, of course, take quite another tack and say that all is changing and nothing is changeless. Or, one can turn the proposition around and say that all is changeless and nothing is really changing. You will recall the famous French quip: 'le plus ça change, le plus c'est la meme chose - the more things change, the more they are the same.

A man should sooner or later declare himself. I prefer sooner. It will come as no surprise that I take a stand for both change and the changeless in reality, and find the reality of change quite meaningless without the reality of the changeless.

It seems to me that of the two notions change is by all odds the most obvious, maybe the only obvious notion of the two. For example, all education is at base a change, hopefully for the better. There is no straight line here, otherwise our curricula would not be in such a constant state of flux, with experimental programs abounding on all sides. Evolution is essentially a process of change and, like education, evolution has its false starts, one might also say its frustrated and miscarried dreams. Culture is a long series of changes, again hopefully in an ascending direction, but not always with equal pace and certainly not without end. Unfortunately, the last change in most cultures is generally spelled history or oblivion or the limbo of meager archeological finds. All of astronomy is a story of change, and the farther out we look, the faster the speed of change.

Change is the heart of fashion, the key to chemistry, the story of the life of all men and every man. Change is at the center of the mystery, the drama, the tragedy of the world in which we live. And the hope of every human being is somehow locked onto the aspiration that out of all this change will come something better, be it better education, better culture, better chemistry, or ultimately, a better life.

This has been a very short and superficial look at change. If you care to take a more profound look for yourself, try to think of any human activity, any material thing in all the world that is not characterized by change - be it thinking or loving, an ocean, an animal, a flower, or even a stone. All these change and we change.

I think that all the world would be a monstrous insane asylum, and all of us inmates, if we could see no meaning for change, or no direction for meaningful change in our lives.

Take a disaggregate set of present day facts, resulting from change, and ask of each fact a question, and you will understand more fully what I mean by this last statement: that changing reality needs the changeless for meaning and direction. First a fact: We now have developed physical power to such a degree that its destruction potential is really limited only by what is capable of being destroyed: man and all that he has achieved of civilization these past several thousand years. And now the question: Is there any reason why all this should not be destroyed, and man with it? If so, change and the results of changing power capabilities now cry out for something changeless - some values to justify saving man and his achievement from senseless destruction, some ultimate wisdom to find a way of avoiding this, some other power, divine grace, if you will, the gift of prayer, to touch the hearts of those who might insanely flick the switch signaling destruction.

Another fact that change has wrought: Never before has man had such sophisticated instruments of communication: satellite relays, world-wide radio, television with color, high speed rotary presses, memory recall in nanoseconds, scramblers and unscramblers, thousands of newspapers and radio stations, millions of telephones, books, magazines, films and kinoscopes, mimeographs, multiliths and even lowly thermo-fax. The question: Has all of this communication brought better understanding between men, between husbands and wives, between children and parents, between different religions and cultures and races, between nations and people. That would be a meaningful change, but to achieve it would require something changeless - a deeper human commitment to some spiritual realities, such as understanding, compassion,

charity, peace, justice, freedom under God. Or ask another question of this change in widely expanded communications facilities: What is the quality of what is being communicated? To answer this, one again is forced to invoke the changeless: to make the propaganda, the falsehood, the sham, even the hidden persuaders face the truth; to confront the superficial, the shoddy, and the scurrilous with ageless beauty. The purveyors of paperbacks often unconsciously do this when they put the plays of Shakespeare on the same rack alongside of Mickey Spillane.

Take another entirely different kind of change, more human than technological: The world situation that has developed since the war. The fact: A troika world, one third Communist, one third Western in the broadest cultural and political sense of that word, and one third neutral, largely underdeveloped, uncommitted, and nationalistic. Hovering over this world, seeking commitment, are two ways of life, two antipodal philosophies. The question: Are we making a good and persuasive presentation of our view, from this new bastion of the West? Again the judgment involves something changeless. Our view makes little ultimate impact upon the uncommitted unless we relate it to a changeless spiritual fact: the nature and destiny of man, his inner God-given rights that transcend the power of the state to give or abrogate, his inner dignity as a person, a res sacra, his innate worth in time and unalienable destiny in eternity. Our adversary is on the other side of each of these changeless realities. For him, all is change, dialectical materialism, the blind, inescapable rhythm of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

To return to the question: Are we in fact holding out to the world a vital picture of how these changeless propositions we hold make life and

its social and political organization more meaningful? I think not. Our face to the world is largely the face of materialism, the root of change, instead of the image of spiritual reality, the heart of the changeless. Our tactic is more often dollars and deals than ideas and ideals. We plan to win the cold war by economics alone. We often fail to impress other nations and other people intellectually, culturally, morally, and spiritually, because we really are not sure of ourselves on these higher levels. Economics is safer ground because we demonstrably do have a larger bank account. And so, we image to the world of poverty the title of Karl Marx's classic - DAS KAPITAL.

This materialistic addiction to the changing and this spiritual oblivion of the changeless is reflected in our practice of betraying at home what we preach abroad: our deep consciousness of color and race, and our subtle or not too subtle denial of equal opportunity in employment, housing, education, even in the administration of justice. Walk through our slums and ponder what possible concept of human dignity a child might acquire there. Change indeed has come into the world, and more world-wide changing of sides may well be expected. Whether the next change results in gain or loss for us and for the world depends in very large measure upon our ability to change our tactic of fighting materialism with materialism, spiritual blindness versus **spiritual** blindness. The greatest riches of the West and our best armaments are the spiritual unchanging values that have given thrust and vitality to our revolutionary heritage.

I think Arnold Toynbee has put the case in proper terms, not denying our role in material assistance to mankind, but also not seeing it as all we have to offer:

"The majority (of the people of the world) is revolutionary-minded today because it is suffering not only a political injustice of the kind that provoked eighteenth-century Americans into fighting the Revolutionary War. The majority today is suffering social and economic injustice as well. Two-thirds or three-quarters of mankind are now still living only just above the starvation line, and are still frequently dropping below it. Is America going to offer herself to this hungry majority as their leader? It is open to her to take the lead again in the American Revolution in its present world-wide stage. And, if she decides to do this, she has it in her power to help these aspiring peoples to help themselves. She can help them, in the first instance, to raise their material standard of living. This is not an end in itself; it is a means towards helping them to raise their spiritual standard. But elementary material improvements are a necessary means towards this, because, without them, it is almost prohibitively difficult for the great depressed majority to develop its spiritual potentialities. Will the American people expend itself and its spiritual and material resources on promoting this world-wide revolutionary enterprise? Or will America decide to take the alternative course? Will she concentrate her efforts on trying to preserve the vested interests of the affluent minority of the human race? Will she take, as her measure of success, the quantity, per head, of material goods consumed at home, instead of measuring her success by the quantity of

fundamental material and spiritual needs that she can help the still indigent majority of mankind to satisfy? This is the question that is confronting America today. And this, I believe, involves for America the supreme question of to be or not to be."

"To be or not to be" that is not only the question, but also the issue when one ponders change and the changeless. Change we must, for we are imperfect. But the changeless is both our destiny beyond time and the standard, the value, the rule, call it what you will, by which we plot those changes over which we have control in our times.

Never before have we controlled so much: so much power, so many words, so many people. One might well be frightened by the thought that, to some very real extent, each one of us has something to contribute to this control: something benign or something malevolent. What we contribute is very much a factor of what we are, and what we are is in a large measure a factor of how much our individual lives and views are not tyrannized by change, but directed by the changeless.

Never before in human history has change been so rampant and so rapid. And never is the changeless so important as when change is engulfing us. For when all is changing, it is the changeless that separates the absolute from the relative, the important from the unimportant, the necessary from the urgent, the beautiful from the ugly, the true from the spurious, the genuine from the counterfeit. Why? Because in the midst of rapidly changing realities, the absolutes, the important, the necessary, the beautiful, the truth and the good are changeless. Lose them, and all is motion without direction, activity without meaning.

The changeless is difficult to discern amid so much change just as the spiritual is difficult to sense when all about us has the impress of the material. But ultimately, what is money but a means to the achievement of something much more valuable; what is power but a means to a better life for all who are under power; and what is position or status but again a means to achieve what is far more important for oneself and others. All means are characterized by change, and when the ends are not something changeless, then means become ends in themselves, money, power or status are sought for their own sake, the higher is subordinated to the lower, the material engulfs the spiritual, change conquers the changeless, man is adrift and society degenerates with him.

Our dedication or lack of dedication to values that are changeless will decide the splendor or tragedy of our individual lives, the glory or degradation of our times, the promise or betrayal of our national destiny. I am not being melodramatic when I say this. Look at any saint or any scholar, any martyr or any patriot, any artist or any poet - those who have perduced the test of time were committed to that which is changeless, be it truth or beauty or courage or compassion or honor or sanctity. One might say that everything worthwhile or perduring in every human life and in all of human history is changeless; that which has passed and has been forgotten bears the name of change.

Change is indeed the lot of all of us. It is inescapable, inevitable and omnipresent. But its direction is up or down. And the thrust of change is, with God's grace, at our disposal. This is the deepest inner meaning of Toynbee's or Shakespeare's "to be or not to be" for each of us, for our times,

for our nation. One might ask oneself today whether change is meaningful or not in our life and in our times. If one wants a truthful judgment, I believe that one must have recourse to the dimension of the changeless that guides our fitful movement through time and space. If all is change without apparent meaning or direction, then our life and our times will be impoverished rather than enriched. If, on the other hand, the course of change is directed towards that which is changeless and of enduring value, then the intensity and rapidity of change in our times has no terror but only promise, for in the changeless we find a road through darkness into light, from the vagaries of time to the meaning of eternity, from that which is humanly imperfect to that which is gloriously divine.

Are philosophy and theology really irrelevant today? Or do they not really give us the only possible approach to relevance, the ultimate meaning, the true direction, the real meaning of all that is happening in our times, be it changing or changeless.