

The Third Crisis

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Years of Crisis: Collected Essays, 1970–1983, by James Hitchcock, *San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1985. 285 pp. \$10.95.*

TWO CLOSELY RELATED themes are interwoven in these twenty-four essays: the rapid triumphant advance of a militant and openly antireligious secularism, manifested in a wide public rejection of once generally respected moral standards; and the capitulation of many churches to this secularism, an abandoning of doctrines and disciplines that have for centuries sustained the life of the spirit in Western culture.

In his publications and lecturing James Hitchcock, professor of history at St. Louis University, has been a prominent spokesman for Roman Catholics of conservative convictions who criticize the excesses and deplore the direction of many changes promoted in the name of the "spirit of Vatican II." In many of these "reforms" Professor Hitchcock sees a neglect of a doctrine central in historic Catholicism — "that there exists a transcendent eternal realm within which our time-bound experiences are, as it were, a kind of parenthesis." In his view, what has been called a postconciliar "crisis of authority" arises from a more profoundly threatening "crisis of faith," which in its dimensions is for the Church "one of the three greatest in its history,

along with the Arian crisis of the fourth century and the Reformation of the sixteenth."

This crisis of faith has become most apparent in postconciliar developments that coincide with a revolution in morality in contemporary society. The essays on changing moral standards center on issues concerned with family life — the definition of family, and the "sexual revolution" with the widespread rejection, even in the churches themselves, of traditional Christian teachings on such matters as premarital chastity, divorce, and abortion. In several essays Hitchcock documents the steps by which powerful voices in the media — often vigorously antireligious and especially anti-Catholic — have succeeded in bringing about such changes in public attitudes. Viewing the sexual revolution as "the most visible part of a revolt against classical discipline and restraint," he proposes that "one of Christianity's important roles should be to help de-eroticize the culture." The Catholic Church has a "crucial role to play . . . because it has been the principal institution witnessing to the transcendent value of restraint, even to the point of asceticism." On current demands for the abrogation of the celibacy law for the priesthood, Hitchcock observes that "asceticism has . . . been in most religions a precondition for access to the mysteries," and to accede to these

demands at this time “would tend to reinforce the prevailing cultural notion that personal fulfillment is impossible without an active sex life. It would also obscure even further the traditional association between asceticism and transcendental spirituality.”

All Christian churches might be expected to resist the triumphs of secularism, but liberal theology, which has become dominant in some mainline Protestant denominations and is strongly influential within the Catholic Church as well, is “perhaps the single most important force for secularization.” In self-destructive attempts to capture an elusive “relevance” such churches (where the clergy and other officials are typically more liberal than the laity) have abandoned or de-emphasized doctrines that “the great majority of Christians throughout history would have regarded as central to their faith.” The result is a widespread religious illiteracy, and what there is of vitality is a commitment to “all kinds of causes — the rights of minorities, the anti-war movement” and the like. Such causes, Hitchcock admits, might be compatible with the mission of some churches, but “for the contemporary liberal denominations these are virtually the only things worth serious attention.”

Although these trends are most visible in some mainline Protestant churches, Hitchcock observes that in the 1970s “American Catholicism adopted more and more of the attitudes of liberal Protestants.” Moreover, in Catholic internal debates energy is expended on questions like ecclesiastical government, parish councils, and the like — not unimportant, but the “core problems — salvation, damnation, fundamental moral values, prayer, sanctity — are neglected.”

In the writer’s view, those reformers who brought about sweeping liturgical changes in the postconciliar Church have not understood that the Roman Catholic Church “perhaps more than most societies was a vast network of subtle relationships developed over centuries.” He undoubtedly speaks for many Catholics in regretting

that “so many powerful images from the past — verbal and iconographic — have been allowed to fade.” The “general decline of faith which is so evident in the Church cannot be unrelated to the experiences of so many people in having their most sacred and familiar traditions wrenched from them by those who they had naively supposed were the guardians of those same traditions.”

In more personal terms Hitchcock observes that he “has always been attracted to the rather astringent, sin-conscious Gallic piety represented in recent times by Mauriac, Bernanos, and Claudel,” and “concepts like ‘sin’ and ‘repentance’ seem much closer to human reality than talk about ‘growth,’ ‘fulfillment,’ or ‘potential.’” He finds nothing in the “new church” more “ill-conceived than the apparent general optimism about human nature which is now so pervasive.”

Two essays trace developments in Catholic colleges and universities and address the problem of finding the balance between openness and a commitment to traditions and values that will justify their existence. Unfortunately, among Catholic college students “there is a disposition to pay little attention to anything having to do with religion between the New Testament and the Second Vatican Council.” A related essay will be of interest to those who wonder what has happened to the Catholic intellectual Renaissance of which a good deal was heard in the 1930s and 1940s. Hitchcock recalls the prominence in that period of the philosophical work of Gilson and Maritain and the historical studies of Dawson, and explains why these writers are now generally neglected in Catholic circles and have no successors comparably respected by non-Catholic intellectuals. Gilson and Maritain lectured at Harvard and Princeton, and Dawson was appointed to a chair at Harvard, but they would not be welcomed in those universities today.

In answering the question “Does Christianity have a future?” Hitchcock ventures the prediction that by the end of this century some mainline Protestant denomina-

tions "will have ceased to exist or ceased to claim any distinctive Christian character" and will have become in effect community centers offering counseling services and the like. They will do good but good of "a kind which is increasingly done better by many other social agencies." In Protestantism the most vigorous religious life will be found in those currently growing churches that are called fundamentalist or evangelical, but such churches will be "a distinct minority in most of the Western world." As for the Roman Catholic Church, in an essay of 1970 Hitchcock suggests that it "may continue in a condition of stagnation and confusion," though later (1980) he sees some hearty signs of revival, finding the most hopeful note in the role of the papacy. Many liberal churches have achieved a suicidal modernizing, but "the traditionally conservative Roman Catholic Church presents a unique situation — its clergy, including nuns and lay professionals, have become increasingly liberal, while its highest officers in Rome remain firmly orthodox."

Although Hitchcock is defending a tradition, he clearly does not consider it desirable or possible to return to all the practices of an earlier era. He grants that "the true Christian must be both God-oriented and man-oriented" and knows

that historical Catholicism cannot be "fairly accused of discouraging activity in the world." Nevertheless the dominant note of these challenging essays, grounded in an austere theological tradition, is concern for the threatened loss of "a basic note of Catholicism — its preoccupation with eternity" — a concern often silent before more articulate expressions of the spirit of contemporary culture.

Hitchcock admits that "unhappily, the tone and thrust of most of these essays can be termed negative, in that they seek to identify pathologies and to make surgical incisions. That tone is dictated by the prevailing spirit of the culture, which is in a phase of disintegration." Noting that every piece in the collection "treats an issue which is still alive and still debated," he offers no reason to suppose that there will be an early resolution of the issues of the great crisis, either in the larger society or in the Catholic Church. Perhaps his own response to any charge of excessive pessimism, particularly in respect to religion, is best expressed in the conclusion of the essay "Eternity's Abiding Presence," which is offered as "a kind of apologia" for all the others: "It is part of an authentic Catholic faith to be confident that, however much it may be buffeted in this crisis," the Church "will not only survive but emerge stronger."

The Legacy of Leo Strauss

Michael Bordelon

The Artist as Thinker: From Shakespeare to Joyce, by George Anastaplo, Chicago: Swallow Press, 1983. xiii + 499 pp. \$35.00 (paper \$16.00).

"THE PROPER WAY to read depends not only upon a 'method' of reading but perhaps even more upon the suppositions about the good, about prudence, and about human nature on which the soundest reading rests." Certainly the proper way to read Professor George Anastaplo's *The Artist as Thinker* is as a venture in political philosophy rather than as an ordinary attempt at literary criticism. This observation is not as quaint as it may seem. Even a casual examination suggests the book's unorthodox character, with the contents consisting of three distinct parts: (1) a more or less conventional section of thirteen chapters analyzing the works of literary artists ranging, as the title says, from Shakespeare to Joyce; (2) seven appendices dealing with various concerns of philosophy and literature; and (3) a set of 289 footnotes, some of them long enough to be minor essays themselves. As the reader may have guessed, the entire book is broadly political in character, dealing as it does with social life, or life in the polis.

Literary critics may well regard this book as a curiosity. True, Shakespeare and Joyce are present, as well as others such as Melville, Dickens, and Milton. But, strangely, so also are such lesser artists as Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and even Gilbert and Sullivan. Even more strange is the fact that some chapters are devoted almost exclusively to small portions of works or to lesser known or even inferior works by their authors. The chapter on Mark Twain, for instance,

focuses largely on the Boggs-Sherburn shooting incident in *Huckleberry Finn*. Almost the entire chapter on Matthew Arnold is devoted to "Dover Beach." And Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece* receive more attention than his more familiar achievements. In short, *The Artist as Thinker* covers a range of materials varying widely in both character and quality.

While Anastaplo's interpretations are sometimes as uneven as the works he criticizes, the chapters on Mark Twain, Dickens ("A Christmas Carol"), and Lewis Carroll are particularly well done. He has also done his homework. The chapters are well-documented through the extensive use of footnotes and citations included within the text. Nor are the references merely *pro forma*: Anastaplo frequently makes judicious use of his acquaintance with biographical detail and secondary source material.

The best written and most interesting portion of the book, however, is not on a literary figure at all, but on Leo Strauss, Anastaplo's mentor on political philosophy. The chapter is beautifully done. While the author's admiration for Strauss is plainly evident, he has done his character sketch with such depth and fairness and with such respect for detail that one might suspect him of having stolen the description from Plutarch. Anastaplo has given us an artistic rendering of a man eminently deserving of our memory: the description of Strauss shows vividly how a great man can still be very human, and Anastaplo enables us to see both the strengths and the weaknesses of his subject. In fact, some of Anastaplo's colleagues have complained that the biographical essay is not sufficiently prais-