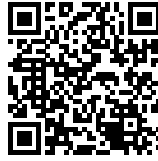




CURING THE REAL DISEASE

Posted on July 1, 2021 by Father Stephen Freeman



It was in the years following the Civil War, America was hard on the path to "becoming great." The industrial revolution had moved into full swing, railroads criss-crossed the country, immigration was gaining speed, and wealth was accumulating at a rate never seen before. We were slowly moving from our original agrarian economy towards life as an industrial nation. The middle-class was growing, education was increasing, and the life of management was the aspiration of many. We were also getting sick in new ways.

In 1868, the first article on the term *neurasthenia* was published. Though the word had been around some thirty years, it was making its debut as a more wide-spread diagnosis. The symptoms associated with it were: fatigue, anxiety, headache, heart palpitations, high blood pressure, neuralgia, and depressed mood. If all of that sounds familiar, it's because it never went away. We simply call it by different names now. And, speaking of names, William James (*Varieties of Religious Experience*), called it "Americanitis."

This "disease" was blamed on a variety of causes. Many of them had to do with the modern lifestyle and more generalized circumstances of our existence. America, in the late 1800's was already "losing its religion." There was some vague sense that the religious ideas of earlier times (America's earlier times) were inadequate. There were many new denominations (results of the various revivals of the 19th century). There were also a large wave of cult-like movements (Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Science, etc.). Pentecostalism had much of its birth during this same period. Of little note to some was the rise of Anglo-Catholicism in this period, a movement within mainline Anglican thought that looked back to times prior to the Reformation for its inspiration. A number of leading figures in things like the Arts and Crafts Movement came from this religious background. They were looking for an older spiritual model (and an economic model) to treat the disease that modernity had unleashed.

It has to be acknowledged, I think, that many of us today are inheritors of the same interior sense that "something is wrong." Early in the 20th century, writers such as GK Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc offered criticisms of "modernity" drawn from a traditional, Catholic worldview. Serious thinkers have continued that same narrative (not all of them Christian) ever since. And so we have *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Jung, 1933), *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1946), and other such major works, decade by decade, fumbling towards a way of speaking about the emptiness of modern life. The modern liberation movements, as well as the youth movements of the 60's should be read in this same light even though their critiques, in time, were themselves to become symptomatic of modernity.

A tragic attempt to address the malaise of modern neurasthenia was a sense that American men were growing too soft and unmanly towards the end of the 19th century. There were conversations that spoke of the need for a “good war” and of a “great cause” to regenerate what had become lacking. Such sentiments certainly played a large role in the Spanish-American War, the unabashed launch of America's soft colonialism. The themes of that time have been replayed in every subsequent conflict. Whether we have been “making the world safe for democracy” or simply uninstalling various hostile regimes, variations of the same explanations and marketing have accompanied our efforts. Such explanations were plausible in World War II, but have rung increasingly hollow ever since.

Having largely lost our religion(s), modernity has seen fit to create new ones. If we wonder what constitutes a modern religion (or efforts to create one) we need look no further than our public liturgies. Various months of the year are now designated as holy seasons set-aside to honor various oppressed groups or causes. It is an effort to liturgize the nation as the bringer and guardian of justice in the world, an effort that seeks to renew our sense of mission and to portray our nation as something that we believe in. It must be noted that as a nation, we have not been content to be one among many. We have found it necessary to “believe” in our country. It is a symptom of religious bankruptcy. As often as not, major sports events (Super Bowls) are pressed into duty as bearers of significance and meaning. The pious liturgies that surround them have become pathetic as they try ever-harder to say things that simply are not true or do not matter. This game is not important – it's just a game.

The difficulty with engineered religions, or causes that serve as substitutes, is that they fail to transcend. Regardless of how great many moments or ideas might be, they easily die a thousand deaths as their many non-transcendent failures come to mind. In the late 1960's, the singer Peggy Lee registered a hit single, “Is that all there is?” It is a song with the lilt of a French chanson, à la Edith Piaf. It moves through the great moments of life, including love and even death itself, but offers its sad refrain:

*Is that all there is, is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is*

This is our context, the world of modernity. It is also our sickness, an empty lassitude whose hunger invites never-ending experiments of conferring meaning on our world. The “better world” that modernity pursues shifts relentlessly and changes as though it were directed by Paris fashionistas. At

the same time, it is met with increasing anger and frustration, a predictable response to what are essentially imposed religious views.

William James offered the interesting observation that war is a "sacrament" of the nation state. He had in mind the larger conflicts of his time. War grants a unity and a sense of purpose and participation to the country that is almost unrivaled. In our time, the response to the attack of 9/11 comes the closest to that sacramental purpose. However, with conflicts that dragged on for two decades, it began to wane in its effectiveness. It remains a touchstone at present, an event to which others are compared in efforts to foster another occasion of sacramental war. All of these sacramental efforts and the public liturgies that surround them, however, fail to serve any transcendent purpose. The nation state and modernity itself (which is primarily a form of economic activity) simply do not and cannot rise to the level of eternal significance. Indeed, their ultimate banality mocks us.

I am often asked, when writing on this topic, what response Christians should make. What do we do about the state? How do we respond to modernity? For the state – quit "believing" in it. We are commanded in Scripture to pray for those in authority. We are not commanded to make the state better or participate in its projects. We are commanded to serve our neighbors as we fulfill the law of God. However, I think it is important to work at "clearing the fog" of modern propaganda regarding the place of the nation state in the scheme of things. I would frame a response to modernity in this manner: we are not responsible for foreign religions. Though Christian language and carefully selected ideas are often employed in the selling of modernity's many projects, it is a mistake to honor its false claims. Make no mistake, modernity will offer no credit, in the end, to Christ, the Church, or to people of faith. Its interests lie elsewhere.

The proper response to these things will seem modest. Live the life of the Church. The cure of modernity's neurasthenia is found not in yet one more successful project, but in the long work of salvation set in our midst in Christ's death and resurrection. Our faith is not a chaplaincy to the culture, or a mere artifact of an older world. The Church is the Body of Christ into which all things will be gathered, both in heaven and on earth. It is the Way of Life as well as a way of life. It is not given to us to control how we are seen by the world, or whether the world thinks us useful. It is for us to be swallowed up by Christ and to manifest His salvation to the world. We were told from the very beginning that we should be patient, just as we were promised from the beginning that we would suffer with Christ.

I think the sickness that haunts our culture is that we fail to know and see what is good and to give thanks for the grace that permeates all things. When that is forgotten, nothing will satisfy, nothing will transcend. There is no better world to be built, nor great wars to be won. There is today, and that is enough.

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The [featured image](#) shows the progress of cholera; watercolor, dated 1831.

