

1987

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Recommended Citation

William J. Byron S.J., *Christian Values and Critical Issues*, 3 J. Contemp. Health L. & Pol'y 11 (1987).
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.edu/jchlp/vol3/iss1/6>

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ARTICLES

CHRISTIAN VALUES AND CRITICAL ISSUES

*William J. Byron, S.J.**

The word “crisis” is overworked in contemporary discourse. There is a widespread tendency to confuse periods of societal transition—which are always taking place, with points of social crisis—which occur far less frequently. Crisis, in popular and personal usage, inevitably raises a question of survival. It will serve as a productive preface to a discussion of critical issues in contemporary society if we take a moment to locate the word in its appropriate etymological surroundings.

“Crisis” is a Latin transliteration of the Greek noun *krisis*, which means a sifting, a separation, a judgment or discernment.¹ It relates to the verb *krinein*, to sift.² The adjective *kritikos* means able to discern, to judge.³ Critic, criticism, criterion and crisis all belong to the same family of meaning.

Perhaps our popular penchant for pessimism has succeeded in freighting the word crisis with negative presuppositions concerning the outcomes of medical, legal, financial, or moral crises in personal experience. Perhaps we project that pessimism onto a larger social canvas. In any case, the word crisis implies a point of judgment. It invites action, preventative or remedial; and it permits inaction, the hapless state of fatalism. Fatalism is unworthy of the Christian; so, the first point to be made in examining critical issues in light of Christian values is this: our values provide us with principles of action, and our actions, following our best judgments, should be directed to the right resolution of those issues we discern to be, in fact, critical. Not every crisis is preventable or resolvable by human effort, although many are. And no crisis, in the Christian perspective, is beyond the reach of prayer. “Thy will be done,” is hardly a fatalistic lament. That it is His will for us to get on with the necessary “doing” (corrective or preventative) is a likely theological reflection on most crisis situations.

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1. WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY 537 (3d ed. 1981).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

I.

I was asked recently by a group of college students what I considered to be the "most pressing" issue their generation would have to face over the course of their collective lifetime. My reaction to the question began with an acknowledgment that "most pressing" could mean "most immediate" or "quite urgent," but that it should not be taken in so short-term a context as to lose sight of that which is truly significant. Immediacy, urgency and significance are not always the same thing. So I chose to take "most pressing" to mean simply "most important" in a time-frame that would be coextensive with the average life expectancy of today's college student. This time-frame pushes the perspective out by at least fifty or sixty years, assuming that life on the planet can extend its lease that long. In a very real sense, the students were asking for an estimate of just how long their lease on life would be. They are concerned about survival.

I was being asked to identify an issue of deepest significance and greatest importance to be dealt with by this collegiate generation over its allotted span of life. Consider the candidates for inclusion on this list of most pressing issues. Foremost in the minds of the young is the question of war—nuclear war with no winners. We will trip over ourselves into war, they fear, if we continue the nuclear weapons build up in a senseless arms race with other nuclear powers.⁴ No one doubts the importance of the issue of war and peace in our time. But is *it* the "most pressing?"

Another candidate for that title is poverty—around the world and around the corner.⁵ Poverty is sustained deprivation. We have to ask: deprived of what; sustained by what or by whom? We can measure deprivation of food, shelter, employment, education and health care against the levels of these necessities which basic human dignity requires for every human person. We know poverty when we see it. We do not so readily recognize its causes. Do systems—economic, political, cultural, and social—sustain the poverty we see? Or, is it sustained by persons; persons other than the poor themselves? Or, is poverty sustained by a combination of systems and persons? How do we get at the problem? How do the poor gain necessary participation in the economic system? How do deprived persons get out from under the oppressive restraints on their human potential? Is this complex problem of poverty the "most pressing" one which our graduating collegians will have to deal with in the decades allotted to them?

4. See Blake, *The Arms Race*, in *THE CAUSES OF WORLD HUNGER* ch. 14 (W. Byron ed. 1982).

5. See Simon, *The Basic Cause: Poverty*, in *THE CAUSES OF WORLD HUNGER* ch. 2 (W. Byron ed. 1982).

Perhaps hunger is the most important problem.⁶ Surely for millions it is at this moment the most urgent. Hunger is the most urgent form of poverty. Chronic malnutrition and severe deprivation of food spell ultimate physical deprivation and denial of life itself. Will hunger be the "most pressing" issue confronting us in the next half century? By the very debilitating nature of the hunger problem, it is obvious that those who must rise to the challenge of eliminating hunger are not those who are afflicted by the scourge of hunger. The same can be said of poverty.⁷

Maybe ecological deterioration is the issue most deserving of attention. If we continue to pollute our streams, abuse our soil, poison our air and lose our croplands to erosion on the one hand and asphalt on the other, we will be without the physical base we need to sustain life.⁸ Sustainability may be the issue for the next half century.

Is population growth the most pressing problem? What about the problem of economic development⁹—without which problems like overpopulation and undernutrition will never be brought under control?

Should the memory of the Holocaust in Germany serve to remind us that an ever present problem is our capacity to hate, to murder, to disregard and destroy human life and dignity? The contemporary "life" issues like abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment offer additional nominations for the top spot on our list of "most pressing" issues.

There are other pressing problems, of course. I think of family instability, the break-up of marriages, the loss of a sense of commitment in our lives and relationships. One of the most difficult words for today's youth to utter is "forever." I see a widespread problem of purposelessness in America's young. The nation offers them no central project; the economy tells many of them they really are not needed. The nuclear cloud and the survival syndrome contribute ambiguity rather than clarity of purpose to their lives.

Other problems—all pressing, none open to simple solutions—deserve a place on our list. This final set of problems falls into what I like to call the "isms" category. The suffix "ism" throws a noun into boldface or italics. It signifies a bias, an emphasis, and almost always a disproportion.¹⁰ Racism, sexism, militarism and terrorism would be good contemporary examples.

6. See Byron, *The Causes of World Hunger*, in *THE CAUSES OF WORLD HUNGER* ch. 1 (W. Byron ed. 1982).

7. See Hehir, *Population and Poverty: Exploring the Relationship*, in *THE CAUSES OF WORLD HUNGER* ch. 15 (W. Byron ed. 1982).

8. See B. COMMONER, *THE CLOSING CIRCLE* (1971); Ensminger, *The Complexities and Consequent Neglect of Agricultural Development*, in *THE CAUSES OF WORLD HUNGER* ch. 5 (W. Byron ed. 1982).

9. See generally G. GILDER, *WEALTH AND POVERTY* (1982).

10. *SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY* 1049 (2d ed. 1939).

Are the problems they connote high or low on the list of “most pressing” issues of our times?

Atheism is surely a pressing and significant problem for this or any age. If the problem of atheism were attended to, would solutions to the other problems more readily fall into place?

Other “isms” will occur to anyone interested in taking inventory of the really important problems in the world in which we live. The list, then, is long. It is not the point of this exercise to collect, but to choose. The original question put to me by serious and appropriately concerned students was: “What is the most pressing issue you see for us in our generation?” My answer to them was, “materialism.” This is the “ism” to be feared most.

It seems to me that the common denominator underlying the candidate for inclusion in any inventory of urgent, pressing, important and significant problems to be dealt with by the generation now coming out of our educational system into our social, political, economic and cultural systems is materialism. The word reminds us of the present and constant danger of over-emphasizing the material side of our existence to the exclusion of the spiritual. To have becomes more important than to be. To possess is better than to share. To do for self takes precedence over doing for others. Property takes on more importance than people—other people, that is. And things, rather than ideas, assume a controlling influence in the lives of the materialistic majority in a materialistic society.

As the problem becomes all-pervasive, it touches virtually everyone. This, of course, means that virtually anyone can make a direct contribution toward a solution. Anyone can assess the extent to which the material has displaced the spiritual in his life, and decide to take corrective action to restore the balance. Anyone can take a self-administered test to estimate the relative importance of things and ideas in his life, the relative importance of library cards over credit cards, the eagerness to acquire over the willingness to share. Anyone can notice neglect of the soul and obsession with the body. Soul and body belong together, but they belong in balance. We are for the most part a quite unbalanced people in contemporary America. An unbalanced materialism has produced an unbalanced commercialism which permeates our recreation—our re-creative activities—and is now stifling our spirit.

We are a people drowning in a sea of materialism, and we are not really aware that something deadly serious is afflicting us. So we bemoan our fate, buy better locks, withdraw from the needy, and escape these suffocating realities by freely permitting ourselves to become addicted to dependency devices of one kind or another, some more harmful physically and

psychologically than others, also, however, taking their toll at that pay-station which is me—the individual, unique human person. And it is precisely there, with the person—the unique, free individual who has the power to choose—that the solution must begin.

II.

The forward perspective I have been suggesting here ranges over five or six decades. I now want to go back six decades to a statement of the question which still faces college students today; it was phrased in the 1920's by Willa Cather in an essay written to mark the end of the pioneer era in her beloved state Nebraska.

We must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun The generation now in the driver's seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in an automobile, scudding past those acres where the old men used to follow the corn rows up and down. They want to buy everything ready-made: clothes, food, education, music, pleasure. Will the third generation—the full-blooded joyous ones just coming over the hill—be fooled? Will it believe that to live easily is to live happily?¹¹

This is a question with the potential to rescue us from materialism. The “full-blooded joyous ones” who came up in the 1920's had an inadequate answer to that question. Their counterparts who are coming up today will have to take that question much more seriously if the pressing problems of their life span are not to do them in. Materialism is not the answer. We seem to be incapable of recognizing that fact. Materialism is, in fact, the question—the most pressing, significant, urgent and important question with which the present generation has to deal.

I have presented, up to this point, a fairly generous array of critical issues and my selection of materialism as the one to top the list, as well as my presentation of all the others, implies a point of judgment, a crisis point, a criterion, grounded in Christian values. The ultimate Christian value is love; love's minimum requirement is justice.¹² Those two values, love and justice, must inform the actions one chooses to take—corrective or preventative—in the face of those issues judged to be critical.

When we come to the point of action we also find ourselves at the portal of prudence. Not every action is wise and prudent. Not every wise and pru-

11. Cather, *A Lost Lady*, as quoted by Henry Steele Commonger in *THE AMERICAN MIND* at 154 (1950).

12. See Marcin, *Justice and Love*, 33 *CATH. U.L. REV.* 363 (1984).

dent action for others is appropriate for me in my particular circumstances. I must judge; I must choose. I may not, however, choose to do absolutely nothing. Recall that no crisis, in the Christian perspective, is beyond the reach of prayer which, in some cases, will be the only thing you can do.

One of our first choices with respect to most, if not all, critical social issues relates to the question of alliances—joining others in a search for a solution. Inevitably, this search will raise the complicated question of the appropriateness of translating shared values into public policy. Should we legislate morality?

Richard McCormick restated recently what John Courtney Murray first observed with characteristic clarity in 1960:¹³

A moral condemnation regards only the evil itself, in itself. A legal ban on an evil must consider what St. Thomas calls its own "possibility." That is, will the ban be obeyed, at least by the generality? Is it enforceable against the disobedient? Is it prudent to undertake the enforcement of this or that ban, in view of the possibility of harmful effects in other areas of social life? Is the instrumentality of coercive law a good means for the eradication of this or that social vice? And since a means is not a good means if it fails to work in most cases, what are the lessons of experience in this matter?¹⁴

When evil spawns a crisis situation, action related to the crisis should include unequivocal condemnation of that evil. Moreover, moral persuasion directed toward persons unaware of, implicated in, or hardened by the evil is appropriate when based on factual judgments and when conducted with respect for the dignity of the persons perceived to be in need of persuasion. Legal coercion may be appropriate but, in a representative democracy like our own, only when there is a consensus strong and wide enough to support it. I do not intend to lobby for laws against materialism!

One of the outcomes of effective moral education is the production of a consensus strong and wide enough to enact legal protection for shared values, when such protection is judged to be necessary. The broader outcome of good moral education is a heightened sensitivity throughout society to the social requirements of love and justice. To demonstrate what I see as the present need for this heightened sensitivity and thus for the moral education capable of producing it, I cite some findings from the Fall 1984 report of *The American Freshman*, the annual survey of college freshmen that was begun

13. J. MURRAY, WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS 166, 167 (1960).

14. McCormick, *Therapy or Tampering? The Ethics of Reproductive Technology*, *America*, Dec. 7, 1985, at 396, 397-98.

twenty years ago by Alexander Astin and others at the University of California in Los Angeles. The survey is national in scope, not limited to UCLA.

The movement in student values toward material concerns and financial security continued this year, reaching an all-time high. Fully seven students in ten (71.2%) indicated that "being very well off financially" was an important personal goal. The 1984 figure is up from 69.3% in 1983 and only 43.5% in 1967. In contrast, student interest in "developing a meaningful life philosophy" was at 44.6% this year, up very slightly from the 1983 low of 44.1% but well below the peak of 82.9% in Fall 1967.¹⁵

There is a job to be done in moral education. I think it should begin with an examination (and condemnation) of the evil of materialism. Once an individual becomes sensitive to his own materialistic tendencies, he or she can begin to see a personal link to many societal problems of crisis potential. If one knows himself, he also knows "where to begin." Deciding to take personal action against one's own personal portion of the problem is an indispensable first step. It must be followed by many other steps with many other persons—sometimes in social movements, sometimes through institutionalized effort, sometimes through the enactment of laws—before our pressing issues and critical problems can be satisfactorily managed or suitably contained.

III.

Several years ago, the Congressional Clearing House on the Future sponsored a lecture series by authors of new books dealing with critical issues facing America. The first lecturer was Dr. Daniel Yankelovich and his topic was, "Critical Issues Facing America."¹⁶ It is interesting to note his approach to the topic for he identifies four changes taking place in America (or more accurately, in Americans) at the beginning of the decade of the 1980's.¹⁷

The first change relates to the fact that, as a nation, we are growing older. In the 1930's there were nine people in the work force for every one person over sixty-five years of age who was not working.¹⁸ The so-called dependency ratio in the 1930's was nine to one.¹⁹ As Yankelovich spoke in 1981,

15. See Meyer, *Most of This Year's Freshmen Hold Liberal Views, Study Finds*, Chron. of Higher Educ., Jan. 15, 1986, at 34-35.

16. The lecture was given October 21, 1981, and is reprinted in 128 CONG. REC. H200-02 (daily ed. Jan. 26, 1982).

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.* at H200.

19. *Id.*

it was three to one.²⁰ By 1990 it will be two to one.²¹ Of course, Social Security was unheard of as the decade of the 1930's opened. But today, even with Social Security, there is a societal stress developing between the young who work and the old who do not, and there is, as I see it, a fear among the elderly that their money is going to run out and that there will be no one to care for them. The tendency is strong to cling to the money they have, to put their faith in money, and to put their hearts where their diminishing treasure lies. Understandable and regrettable as this tendency may be, it is, nonetheless, another instance of materialism in our times.

The second change observed by Yankelovich relates to events in both the economic environment and the area of foreign affairs.²² As the present decade began, Americans were experiencing a new and growing vulnerability. By the end of the 1970's, inflation brought an actual decline in the nation's standard of living. The long ordeal of our hostages in Iran and the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan made Americans feel both frustrated and vulnerable, and ready to commit more resources to defense. In the opinion surveys Yankelovich and his colleagues conducted in 1980, seventy-two percent of the public were found to believe that "this land of plenty is becoming a land of want." Moreover, the majority of Americans surveyed were expressing the opinion then that "ten years from now" they would be unable to buy a new home or to own a home of their own.²³

The third change is described by Yankelovich as the absence of an "interpretative framework."²⁴ People have a desperate need to understand why reversals are happening, particularly why they are happening to them. Before we began feeling these new vulnerabilities, most of us thought we could enjoy our affluence. When reversals related to inflation, the energy crisis, the success of foreign economic competition and similar happenings came upon us, the people were shocked and unprepared for changes they did not understand. They found themselves off-balance and disoriented. They had no interpretative framework. As Yankelovich stated:

We are living through a change that many observers have characterized as a shift to the right. I see it less as an ideological shift than an emotional one. Let me explain what I mean. There is some evidence from surveys of a growth in conservative attitudes, but there is much confusion and contradiction in the evidence. I interpret the surveys as showing that the public is suffering from

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*

temporary disequilibrium by virtue of being thrown off balance. In seeking to regain their sense of control, some new attitudes are conservative; others are not. This is quite a different matter than an enduring swing to the right. Americans are confronted with a novel situation that no one has explained and they are filling in that void with whatever explanation lies at hand. Now, the most popular explanatory framework that people have embraced is "get government off our backs." Swollen government bureaucracies and budgets explain some of our problems and contain some element of truth. But any single explanation is limited. What happens when you blame government and things don't improve? I believe that in the 1980's we will see much wild experimentation with explanatory frameworks, of which blame-the-government is only the first. It's going to be a very confusing period; politically, it will be wide open to political leaders who meet people's need for a credible explanation of what is happening, why it is happening and what we should do about it.²⁵

The fourth change factor relates to social morality.²⁶ In the 1950's and into the 1960's, Yankelovich points out, Americans could be divided into two groups—those who put their families first, and those who put their jobs first.²⁷ We did not really see ourselves thus divided until the late 1960's produced a third type of person—"people who put their own self-fulfillment ahead of family or work."²⁸ This new value of self-fulfillment was related to affluence, to materialism. Many in the nation fell into the trap of consumerism. Yankelovich noted that:

We were lulled into believing that we could afford to neglect the problems of keeping the economy vital. Many Americans assumed that we had enough affluence so that the problem, say, of making a living was "a piece of cake"—you lost your job, so what, get another one. This attitude became prevalent in the 1960's and the 1970's, rooted in the conviction that there was no need to make the kinds of sacrifices one's parents had to make. It wasn't so much that people were unwilling to make the sacrifices as a feeling that there's no need for sacrifice. Why not live a little? Let us shake ourselves free of attitudes rooted in the past. We can have more of everything, and in fact we're entitled to more of everything.²⁹

This was a rejection of older values. It was a rejection reinforced by materialism. "We have challenged," says Yankelovich, "the values of traditional

25. *Id.* at H201.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.*

duty, sacrifice for others and self-denial, experimenting instead with a new ethic based on duty-to-self. That new ethic simply isn't working."³⁰

Now, in the decade of the 1980's, we are putting together a new social morality. We are reclaiming some of the old values and combining them with some new ones. In the opinion of Yankelovich, we are rediscovering the future — admitting to ourselves that there is a future.³¹ Hence, we are becoming concerned about the future once again and, consequently, we are rediscovering quality, excellence, and skills. Interest in the future generates interest in quality. Rediscovery of skills will enhance our chances for economic survival against foreign competition.³²

We are also taking another look at technology. It is becoming more acceptable as our recent passion for nature and the natural begins to recede. We are beginning to believe that technology can pull us out of our economic slump. We are also rediscovering moral and religious values. Americans are beginning to see that many of our troubles including crime, violence and economic weakness "have their roots in a flabby social morality."³³

IV.

"What, then, is new?" asks Yankelovich. "If these are some of the older values that are now re-emerging, what are the new values that will combine with them?"³⁴ The first new value he identifies is "an intense desire to retain freedom of choice in one's lifestyle. Seventy-three percent of Americans say that greater choice is what differentiates their own lives from their parents' lives."³⁵ Another "new value" is a desire to reach beyond the self and become part of a larger community; people are showing signs of a greater readiness to cooperate in pursuit of common goals.³⁶

It is interesting to observe that Yankelovich has confined his "critical issues" to those that have thrown the American people off balance, into a disequilibrium they cannot, without an interpretative framework, understand. I would call that disequilibrium unbalanced materialism.

It is of equal concern to note that the "new values" of freedom of choice and a readiness to cooperate open up opportunities for religion in America. Religion depends on uncoerced choice; religion provides the context of community, a community of faith, for those who want to cooperate in works

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

related to faith. (True faith can never be content not to do justice.) And religion, I would argue, can provide the interpretative framework Americans are struggling without today. Religion must speak to materialism. In speaking to materialism, religion will be addressing the root cause of most issues. Materialism will inevitably guarantee unwise choices. Materialism will turn cooperation into collusion intent on selfish purposes. Choosing wisely has always been the way through crisis; nothing impedes wise choice so effectively as a selfishness grounded in materialism.

A concluding story will illustrate this point while serving as a reminder that the "Christian values" that underlie my entire argument have Judaic roots. The story comes from rabbinical literature. The moral of the story provides the interpretative framework needed in America today. Under the title of "The Window and the Looking Glass," this story comes from the Hassadim, pious Jews who lived in Polish ghettos at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

A man whose heart was hardened by wealth and who was discontent and unhappy, went to the Rabbi Eisig. The rabbi took him across the room and said to the man, "Look out there," he said. And the rich man looked into the street. "What do you see?" asked the rabbi. "People," answers the rich man. Again the rabbi takes him by the hand, and this time leads him to the mirror. "What do you see now?" he says. "Now I see myself," answers the rich man. Then the rabbi says: "Behold — in the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver; and no sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others but see only yourself."³⁷

By scraping away the silver of materialism, we will be less preoccupied with self, more aware of the needs of others, and more likely to reach out to meet those needs. This, I think, is what Carl Sandburg had in mind when he wrote, "Tell him too much money has killed men and left them dead years before burial."³⁸

If we take appropriate safeguards against materialism, we will find ourselves to be a good deal happier, less vulnerable, more balanced, and in possession of the tools to deal with most of the critical issues of our day.

37. L. NEWMAN, *THE HASIDIC ANTHOLOGY: TALES AND TEACHINGS OF THE HASIDIM* 425 (1963).

38. See *THE COMPLETE POEMS OF CARL SANDBURG* 449 (1st ed. rev. & expanded 1970).

