

THE FEAR OF CRISIS *by John P. Sisk*

In the November 1986 *Encounter*, the Princeton University economist Harold James sets out to tell us "Why We Should Learn to Love a Crisis." His explanation is not quite what we would expect from a champion of a market economy. In that economy, he says, crises serve a necessary function; states should not try to avoid them out of a reluctance to risk since they can be purgative and therapeutic; most importantly small crises may be ideal ways of avoiding major crises.

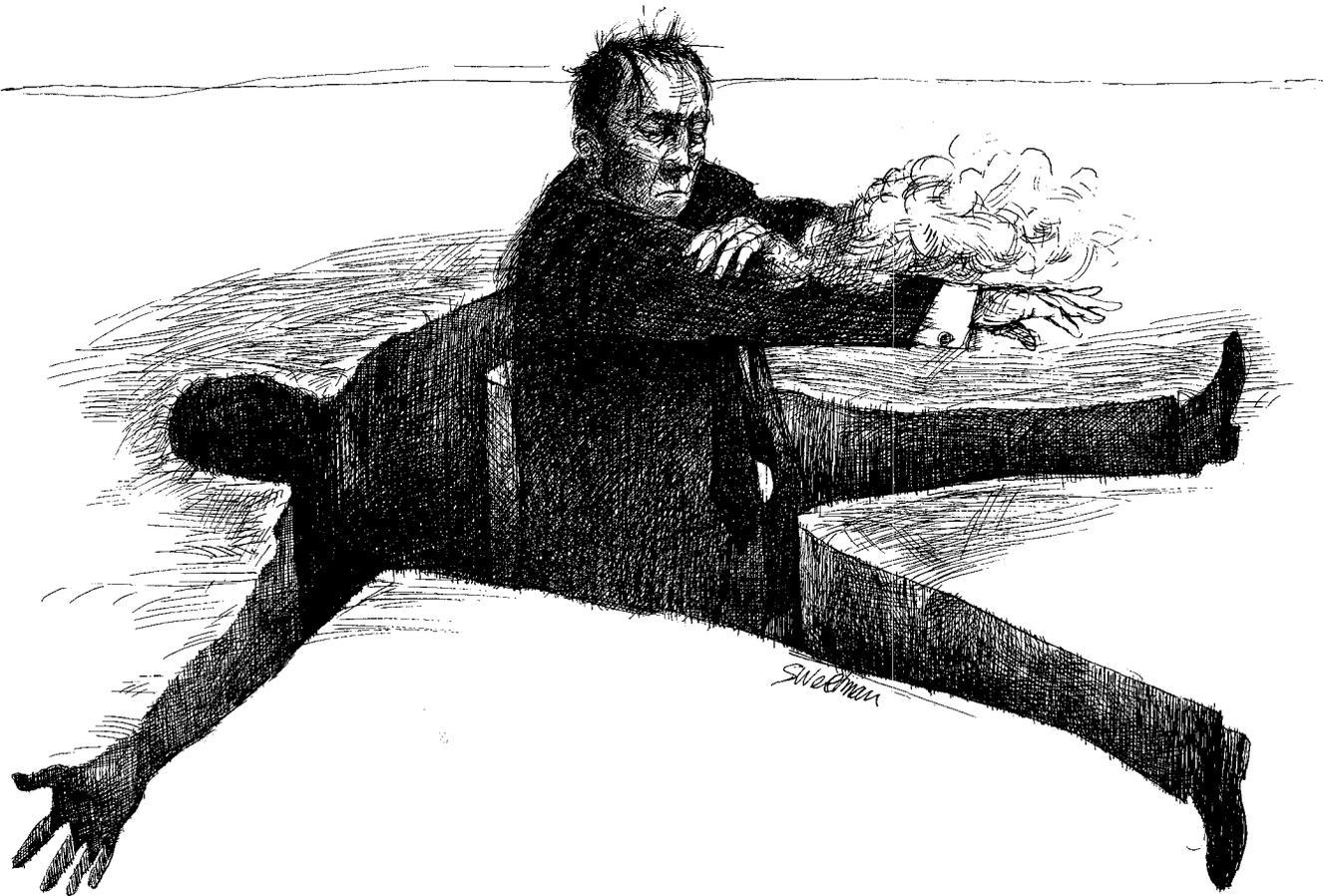
Professor James stays pretty much within his own discipline, but because he stays there so competently and readably we get the impression that there is much to be said about the relevance of his thesis to the understanding and management of crises generally. Certainly, he will encourage many readers to extrapolate his essay into the worlds of politics and religion. There in more familiar territory they are likely to ask the sort of questions that James's fellow economists may be asking him.

First is the question of scale. It may be that small crises are good for us because they help prevent big crises; but how do we tell them apart when they are happening? Even the layman, for whom economics is, as it was for Carlyle, the dismal science, can see the difference between the

inside trading scandals that periodically rock Wall Street and the stock market crash of the early 1930's—especially when Dow Jones quickly indicates that the economy has received no mortal wound from the former. But when we were going through the Iran arms crisis, was it properly identified as major or minor? Where on a scale ranging from Watergate to the discovery that the government had been using disinformation against Libya should it have been placed? The consequence for the nation depended on that placement, and that placement depended on the extent to which we could or could not see it in a perspective of major events since World War II.

The proper placement of a crisis on a proper scale is, of course, crucial in every walk of life at any time. This is no doubt why the literature of crisis management, however called, is as extensive as it is now, when, as it may seem to us Americans, our complex and information-crammed world condemns us to a crisis-rich environment. However, people in any democratic society have a notorious capacity to turn small crises into big ones, to say nothing of a perverse capacity to become addicted to crises of all dimensions. This is in part because crises are relief from boredom, and boredom in democratic societies, where it is easy for the individual to become alienated from boredom-reducing communal structures, is always an important determinant of political and social history. But even apart from such alienation, life in a democratic society, relative to more

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authoritarian societies, is crisis-oriented by its very nature, which is only to say that in it establishments of power and privilege are constantly and excitingly open to challenge. In such a political environment, a certain dependence on crises is inevitable and even desirable, and the inability often to distinguish between small and big crises is, for better or worse, part of democracy's ongoing effort to remind itself that it is embarked on a precarious enterprise. Perhaps this is why Jefferson once wrote to Madison that "a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical."

Now as always the media make their contribution to the nation's effort to identify itself through the management of crises. The success of a democracy depends on the free flow of information and the capacity of citizens to bear a heavy burden of interpretation—a burden that has increased as the media have multiplied and become more sophisticated. The First Amendment makes the nation crisis-prone, and may have been the Constitution's way of saying what Jefferson in effect said to Madison, that we ought to love a crisis, and perhaps too its way of identifying boredom as a major enemy of democracy.

Since the earliest days of the Republic, the media have been accused (often enough rightly) of misevaluating crises, either by blowing small ones into big ones or missing the big ones altogether because they developed without newsworthy handles or appeared small because their implications for the future could not be foreseen. This is not that the media are fundamentally irresponsible, biased, or shortsighted, but in considerable part it is that the media, fearing and hating boredom as they do, are themselves crisis-prone. The communicator in any democratic medium is especially free to take into account the strong possibility that his hype-wary audience is listening with only half an ear, is distracted by competing messages with competing interpretations, or is likely for one reason or another to miss the full import of the message. As a consequence, the media resort to those proven boredom-resisting and attention-getting devices of the storyteller, the poet, and the advertiser. As the ancient rhetoricians knew, these devices are not necessarily incompatible with clear and honest communication. If they were, it would be impossible to try to relate the *National Inquirer* to the *New York Times* on a credibility scale, and meaningful communication would be impossible.

Nevertheless, given the proliferation of and competition among the media, it is inevitable that media people will often and rightly be accused of encouraging in the public a misevaluation of a crisis. To judge from such publications as *Pravda*, *Soviet Life*, *Soviet Literature*, and *World Marxist Review*, the media of the Marxist-Leninist world should get much higher marks for crisis management. Unhampered by a First Amendment, the party can benevolently assume the burden of interpretation of events and control the crisis scale. Indeed, to judge from such controlled media, the societies they report on do not have to distinguish between big and small crises since such crises that get into print appear small and easily manageable. The big danger, then, is that someone will leak the suppressed truth, as the truth of the Gulag was leaked, effecting a major crisis on the French Marxist left.

Those familiar with the excitements of a crisis-prone

democratic society may suspect that life in totalitarian societies is a very dull affair, but they fail to take into account the extent to which shortage, privation, and surveillance can compensate for the excitements of a First Amendment. It may be apparent enough from the outside that totalitarian societies suffer from economic, social, and managerial crises, big and small, but within those societies crises tend to be so institutionalized that they cannot be isolated for public scrutiny and divided into big and small. And that which ceases to be subject to division soon ceases to have a public existence. The excitement associated with crisis in a free society thus goes underground and comes out as the thrill of the riskily obtained extra ration of meat or bottle of vodka. Under these circumstances, there is not much chance of learning from small crises.

It is worth noting, however, that Professor James's essay clearly assumes that there is something like a universal wish not to be put in the situation of having to learn from even small crises. There is a sense of fragile all-aloneness in a democracy relative to older and more authoritarian forms of government. Democracies normally begin in a crisis relationship with one of these forms and from that point never cease to be a test of nerve. In these circumstances, a crisis that would be small in a monarchy can be big in a democracy and bring with it the fear of a demoralized return (as has happened often enough in Africa) to an earlier authoritarian condition. Therefore, people in a democracy may experience a particular crisis as exciting, purgative, and therapeutic and yet hope that the last one will indeed be the last one. That "should" in James's title is, after all, only a subjunctive, and inside every subjunctive is an indicative trying to free itself from the clutch of the subjunctive—so that "We should love a crisis" gives way to "There will be no more crises." James's essay is then unavoidably a preachment against the utopian impulse, and an assertion that the desire to get beyond crises can be as great a threat to democracy as it is an exploitable advantage for the indicative totalitarians.

To expect that a democratic society can be crisisless is to expect from it what is commonly expected from religion. Religion is what you are supposed to get when you pass through a crisis experience, after which you are able to observe the crisis-racked secular world with an ironic if charitable equanimity. This is why theocracy, that condition where religion and government have interpenetrated one another, has so often seemed to be the ideal response to the fear of crisis (and why it is the very model of the secularized and crisisless terminal condition that Marx imagined). As we know from our own New England beginnings, theocracies could break up in the big crises that developed during the small crises from which they had learned nothing. However, this development has not kept Americans from identifying the experience of true religion as a crisisless affair.

American democracy, which to exist must find ways to check its utopian impulse, has thus been the spawning ground for religious and pseudo-religious groups in which that impulse, being protected by the Bill of Rights, is free to expand—even to the point where it threatens to break through the barrier separating Church and State. Ironically, that barrier, one of whose aims is to protect democracy from the temptations to theocratic totalitarianism, is itself a

War Generations

by Gavin Ewart

Youth's uniform was smartish
and tartish were our thoughts,
there were too many Ought-nots;
we liked instinctual Oughts.

Thou shalt not seemed quite boring,
like snoring, irksome too—
a thing that older people
seemed most inclined to do.

Yet six years' war came bubbling
and troubling all our lives,
as hot as hell and sharper
than pointed butcher's knives.

We lost our early beauty,
so fruity and unlined,
the brave and cowardly drowned in
those seas both deep and mined.

Back forty years or fifty,
once nifty and unstained,
we gaze with eyes so moral.
The hypocrites look pained

to hear the young things singing
and clinging with a sigh
to their so brief enjoyment
before they come to die.

generator of crisis. There is ultimately no way to keep religion out of politics—not when the Constitution itself protects religious freedom; nor is there any reason to believe that democracy would be better off if the barrier were utterly impregnable. If it were, what Richard J. Neuhaus has aptly called the naked public square might soon become a secular wasteland in which the most sinister crisis managers would be free to put into practice their conviction that even the small crises of democracy make politics a thoroughly bad thing.

Protestant Christianity has been a state of crisis since the Reformation, in the crisis conditions of which it was born. Its genesis has a good deal to do with the multiplication of sects and with the intensification of the conviction, as we see it expressed in 17th- and 18th-century American millennialism, that religion is authentic in proportion as it makes possible here and now, not only in the hereafter, a life beyond crisis. This is the assumption of that rousing millennialist war cry “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which despite its anti-Catholic origins is now included in many Catholic hymnals.

Catholics can be no less crisis-prone once they are convinced that the authenticity of the Church depends on its capacity to enable the faithful to experience harmonious unity. In this view, crises are what happen when the

individual is not sufficiently Catholic—unless they are simply the misidentifications of malevolent outsiders. This attitude had a good deal to do with events in Church history that led up to Vatican II, before which the fear of harmony-disrupting crises made it easy to overlook or misinterpret the small crises from which the Church might have learned how to avoid the big crises that made the Council necessary. Certainly it might have learned that, as Peter Steinfels puts it in “Vatican Wars” (*The New Republic*, December 8, 1986), “a Church that makes large claims is sure to have large problems.” And the changes in Church policy made by Vatican II created more crises, not all of them small, for those Catholics who remained attached to the old image of the harmonious Church universal—so much so that some, in an attempt to get beyond crisis again, cast their lot with such comforting imitations of the pre-Vatican II Church as the Tridentine Latin Rite Church.

But even those who accepted the Council joyfully soon learned that the resolution of some crises caused new ones. For a generation now, Catholics have had to live with the crises caused by birth control, abortion, the position of women in the Church, the celibacy of the clergy, situation ethics, the extent and nature of Papal authority, changes in the liturgy, and liberation theology. Most recently, American Catholics have had to adjust to what proved to be controversial positions of their bishops on nuclear arms and the option for the poor—to say nothing of the cases of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen and Catholic University theologian Father Charles E. Curran, which have caused tension between the bishops and Rome.

To some American Catholics it is as disillusioning now to find differences of opinion among the bishops, and between them and Rome, as it was to see differences of opinion at work during the Council. Differences of opinion are not only likely to result in crises, but the efforts in the Council to make particular opinions prevail also convinced many Catholics that the Church had become corrupted by that secular evil, politics. This scandalized, if naive, reaction was often enough an indication that such Catholics had a low opinion of democracy, which is nothing if not political, and were at heart as theocratic as the old Protestant millennialists. This attitude, potentially crippling to Catholics in the free world everywhere, not only in America, was vigorously attacked by people like Jesuit John Courtney Murray, who had Chapter 4 of *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* for support.

In any event, the use of terms native to politics and cultural criticism in an effort to understand conflict of opinion in the Church is by now commonplace. As Peter Steinfels points out, antinomies like liberal/conservative and dissent/authority make it easy to miss the subtleties of a dialectic that is seeking not the triumph of one party over another but a viable center. Nothing could impede such an objective more than a hounding apprehension of the crises that might result if all does not go well. It is this apprehension in secular as well as religious deliberations that so often dictates the censorship, stonewalling, or electronic eavesdropping that only lays the ground for unanticipated crises. It also prepares for the embarrassments institutions most subsequently live with as best they can—for instance, the distinguished philosopher Jacques Maritain not being