

Protagonist Corner

Signals From The "Caribbean Basin"

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I had the good fortune of paying another visit to North America earlier last year (1982), and for the fourth time I followed an itinerary that included Toronto along with some United States cities. Religious programming on television in Toronto on Trinity Sunday produced a surfeit of American preachers assuring their audiences that their money-making God was willing to share his secrets with them provided that they followed some codes and spiritual guidelines. A cathedral sermon in Toronto made it abundantly clear that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity could be expounded without relevance to current fears of nuclear war, rising unemployment, proliferating bankruptcies, increasing crime and human loneliness, or even rapidly expanding functional atheism within the churches. North American religion, both on the media and in church, appeared to have gone off on a Columbia Space-shuttle flight on that day—Trinity Sunday. But it is wrong to judge merely by appearances.

American society, unlike most European societies, lacks the basic sub-streams of *common* cultural, historical, and anthropological antecedents which help to create and sustain genuine consensus, and indefatigable national determination and resolve. In a real sense America appears to be still in the formative (ancestral?) stages of its new social history, since, after all, what started in the seventeenth century as a colonial experiment could not be expected to emerge as a true society by the twentieth. Historically, most societies have evolved through the "out-of-many-one-people" route; America appears to consist of the "out-of-one-America-many" social formula. It is difficult to predict how this formula will work in any given era. America seems to be comprised of many Americas, some small, some great; and each appears to contain its own vitality and vision. How then does the one gospel of Jesus of Nazareth find place in each America? Or can it do so at all?

The various patterns of human livelihood in America today seem to indicate that there is a constant occurrence of similar types of pressures and challenges, in spite of the social pluralism. These pressures and challenges manifest themselves in ways directly related to the kind of America in which one lives, or is struggling to live. They constitute genuine problems for human livelihood in the context of the gigantic social experiment in America, but they may also present new and varying opportunities for the deepening of faith in God, in whom most Americans still claim to trust. What are some of these problems of human livelihood? Space permits mention of only six of them:

- (1.) *Wealth* — its acquisition and distribution, its aura and imperatives (of class and crime), the distinctive ethical and spiritual structures it generates, the challenge to genuine human happiness which it proliferates.
- (2.) *Technology* — its precision, power, and promise all tend to inflate the col-

lective human ego and to reduce the vitality of a theistic foundation for the building of the good life.

(3.) *Super-Power Consciousness* — this permeates through many dimensions of American life, particularly in the media and in foreign relations, even at the person-to-person level: the American is usually a Super-person among others, especially in touring parties.

(4.) *Minimization of the Human Spirit* — perhaps this is a result of growing materialism and the personification of inanimate objects (car, TV, gadgets); the value of the human spirit can never increase where the verb “to have” means more than the verb “to be.”

(5.) *Computerization of Social Relationships* — the computer has apparently assumed full presidency of America and the Americans, and so much has been programmed and packaged into neatly arranged social systems that the age-long doctrine of the “*imago Dei*” has faded from functional efficacy, at least for the time being. Industrial ethos now requires men and women to accept the faith that the computer answers prayer.

(6.) *Vulnerability of the Person* — people are much softer now, apparently as a result of these other problems. They are preoccupied with the avoidance of hurt, pain and suffering because the social experiment provides less and less scope for the survival of the weak and the weakened, and more promise and pleasure for those who can remain strong enough to escape the inherent frailty and susceptibilities of human personhood. The American scenario of litigation is perhaps one clear reminder of how vulnerable the human person has become.

The Caribbean preacher who dares to utter all that has just been said may very well be “talking through his hat,” since the reality may be quite different from the appearance. America continues to be a social experiment that has so far succeeded industrially, technologically, militarily, and politically. Success is still to be achieved in other spheres of social experience. Besides this, it has promoted the spread of Christianity quite extensively in this century in the face of the European promotion of Communism. It still remains the most magnetic place of refuge and opportunity in the world today. Its 1776 Declaration of Independence still remains a working ideal that provides both a social agenda and a warning light at the same time. It is a country of immeasurable paradox. The gospel of Jesus of Nazareth also consists of an incalculable paradox of life-through-death, but the God and Father of Jesus cannot be recreated in the American image. America itself shares in the historical reflection of God’s creative activity.

The American preacher is thus faced with an enormous challenge of Christian witness. The theological and evangelical task does not consist in rationalizing and sanctifying current systems of any sort, but rather in perhaps plumbing the depths of human response to God’s American call, and of human responsibility for God’s American activity in the face of the inevitable advancement of the world’s largest and most comprehensive social and industrial experiment. The American preacher must be equipped and prepared to identify, collect and preserve the many fragments of divinely-related humanity—both large and small, both societal and individual—which will outlast the

tremendous pressures of today and tomorrow, and which may well constitute the evolution of a true and cohesive American society through the “out-of-many-one-people” route, when the experiment is over.