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Book Review

Standing Up to the New Totalitarians

By LARY MAY

The Testament of God by Bernard-Henri Levy (Harper & Row: \$15.95)

Ever since the end of World War II, Americans have wondered: Where did history go wrong for the modern age? The question has concerned Europeans since the turn of the century, but after 1945 the issue found home in this country, because for the first time we held responsibility for the fate of Western civilization. Perhaps that concern explains why the "new" anti-Marxist philosophers in France should gain such notice in contemporary America.

Bernard-Henri Levy's "The Testament of God" is the latest offering from this French school of thought. Now Levy goes beyond a mere criticism of communism to explore why Western man's ethics have been insufficient to resist modern totalitarianism. He argues that society is weakened by its tendency toward "paganism." Because people gave in to irrational, sensual impulses, they succumbed to the equally degenerate mass movements that created so much havoc in this century. In order to restore the power to resist these forces, the author believes that we need to return to the pure monotheism embodied in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Levy is in tune with two strains of belief popular in America today: the rebirth of religious enthusiasm and the zealous individualism of the "me" generation. It is therefore important to examine his book for clues to the political implications of these trends. Early in the book he claims that there is a "new liberalism," and he is concerned with a "renewal and reshaping" of liberalism as a tradition.

National Heroes Part of Tradition

Here is a faith to which Americans can relate. National heroes, including Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, all were part of this tradition, affirming man's ability to master nature and himself. Convinced that history was on their side, liberals revolted against tyranny and injustice, in quest of the good society based on law, property and the free market. In our century, as Levy points out, rationality has declined as psychological impulses have erupted, giving rise to fascism, communism, and the greatest horror of our era, the Holocaust.

Levy marshals this central idea through what can only be called a massive assault upon the reader's intellect. As evidence, he draws on all of European thought and politics. Unfortunately, none of his examples is presented in the form of argument, or letting the reader understand how he reached his conclusions. Rather, the mode is bold assertion. If the reader is inclined to disagree, he or she is forced to overcome the intimidating yet narrow presentation of complex thinkers such as the Greek tragedians, Stendhal or Marx. The machine-gun effect of heavy name-dropping is used to assault the reader with the overpowering "I" pervading the book. In other words, however great these historical figures were, Levy has the final word. Although the prose often is incomprehensible, the form does fit the content, for the author forces all evidence to fit his own individualistic perception of the world.

Discounts Validity of Mass Movements

In spite of his style, Levy's message for modern liberalism is clear: "There is no better definition of freedom than that of the 'private' man; and being 'private' means first and foremost being deprived of all power." He elaborates upon this testament in a chapter he calls "The Seven Commandments." They add up to a belief in a rational man who affirms a God of reason, and thereby remains detached from the political "barbarism" of mass movements.

In his affirmation of privatism, Levy abandons the old liberal attachment to the common people and historical progress. While he discounts the validity of all mass movements, he also leaves the readers with no understanding of why people join mass movements in the first place. Levy suggests that only a rejection of ethics could lead a person to join a political crusade. He even fails to mention that economic oppressions or social dislocations might make people angry enough to take to the streets. Since Levy focuses only upon intellectual motivations, we might wonder why millions of peasants who never read Marx or Greek tragedians would join the Chinese revolution, or any major uprising of the 20th Century.

Probably Levy's greatest limitation as an ethical philosopher is that he provides no means of distinguishing a just mass movement from a dangerous one. The American Revolution, for example, was fueled by people whose emotions were enraged. Similar feelings have fed union organizing, the Civil Rights and antiwar crusades, and even the grass-roots neighborhood politics of today.

Yet the most telling oversight in Levy's analysis is that he points to the Holocaust as the result of a mass movement while ignoring one force that opposed it most effectively: Zionism. The Zionists did not solely preach the liberal creed of reason. Rather, they combined mass outrage with a sense of religious mission. When the founder of the Zionist crusade, Theodore Herzl, spoke in Eastern Europe, one observer noted that "the halls shook with enthusiastic cries and waving of pennants. The 2,000-year dream of our people seemed to be approaching fulfillment; it was as if the Messiah, son of David, stood before us." Here was a mass uprising drawing on all those passionate impulses the author deplores. The Zionist cause did for the oppressed Jews of Europe what all of Levy's rational individualism could never do: It saved them from total destruction.

Nevertheless, the questions Levy addresses are extremely important. A sense of crisis in the material and spiritual aspects of liberalism continues to face us today. Some may think we need a new Testament of God. Unfortunately, Levy's book is false prophecy.

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