

REKINDLING HOPE

By GIBSON WINTER

The changing urban scene of the past decade

MANY TRENDS IN URBANIZATION came to a head in the past decade. Social and economic forces which were at work for generations reached a critical point. They converged in such a way as to transform the urban scene. Transportation and communication welded together the disparate regions of the country. The media became a dominant factor in all phases of American life. We became one great city, if we take city to mean interdependence in economic, social and political life. Unfortunately, we operated politically as though we were balkanized republics. 'City' became a dirty word or a place to be feared and avoided. At the very moment that we were becoming one great city, the federal government abandoned the dense urban areas, leaving them to shift for themselves. Without adequate resources, they soon fell into bankruptcy or cut their services to the bone.

Urbanization of this national metropolis is also reaching a new level of concentration. Suburban areas are rapidly urbanizing into strips and regions of relative density. What are called the 'cities' are now the most densely urbanized and generally the most deprived sectors of the great city. These dense sectors continue to be the dynamic sources of creativity in culture and finance, but as habitat they are neglected, sheltering so far as they can the impoverished peoples of this great metropolis.

Long-standing divisions among our people are being exacerbated by destructive trends in our economy. Older patterns of discrimination and segregation continue to plague our common life. The technical transformation of the society from industrial to service and techno-scientific work shunts more and more people into marginal employment. Much of our blue-collar work is displaced abroad to cheaper, non-union labour markets. The net effect is to force African Americans and Hispanic peoples into unemployment or marginal work in the secondary labour market. Women, caught in the age-old pattern of gender discrimination, are the primary victims of distortions in our economy. They have minimal access to good training and job opportunities. They are paid roughly two-thirds of the pay of

men for comparable work. In most situations, they lack adequate child-care to work and care for a family. Moreover, they suffer disproportionately through exclusion from the health care system. They now comprise two-thirds of the urban poor. Thus, a whole generation of women and children is at risk through poverty and homelessness. At the same time, contempt for the natural environment and refusal to deal with our energy crisis have come home to haunt us. Our air, water, soils, natural environment and wildlife are perishing at an alarming rate, facing us with a difficult alternative: radical change in our life-style or watching this beautiful land decay and die.

These economic and political pathologies now threaten our moral and spiritual fabric as a democracy. The deeper threat is to the very soul of America. We are like the householder who filled his barns and then received the message, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you . . .'. We have stored up goods and weapons while masses of our people were without health care, homes, food on the table, decent clothing, heat—the barest necessities of life. We are afraid of their suffering and ban them from begging in our subways. We, as a nation with a proud if badly scarred history, are entering upon a time of reckoning and our soul is being required of us.

Denial and escape

All through the 1980s we engaged in a national denial of what was happening in our common life. I say 'we' because none of us is separate from this people which refused to face and deal with these critical problems. Whatever you or I may have thought or done personally, the reality is that we, the people, are living in denial of our condition.

Perhaps the election of Ronald Reagan to two terms as President of the United States in the 80s symbolizes most dramatically this era of denial. The government wrote 'hot cheques', to use Senator Bentsen's phrase, in order to conceal excessive military expenditure and largesse to the rich. We chose a master of illusion to conceal the facts from us. Reagan had spent his life creating illusions for Hollywood fans. It was natural that a people fleeing its reality would choose him to give them a few more years in a never-never land. Denial can be useful to children who are suffering severe traumas. It can even be a means of survival for a time. But, sooner or later, the denial has to be confronted and overcome or the person's life is crippled and sometimes even destroyed.

We church people also practise denial. Our church experiences may vary considerably, yet we know that there is a widespread conspiracy of silence in our churches and social groups about the suffering of women, children, minorities and many others in our urban areas.

The alcoholic addiction which pervades our society is only a symptom of the widespread abuse of alcohol and drugs in our society, not to speak of addiction to gambling, shopping and television. This addictive syndrome is no respecter of persons or social classes. It goes from the richest to the poorest, youngest to oldest sectors of the society. This addictive process is a way of withdrawing energies from the productive, relational life of the community, of removing the flows of energy which make life possible for a people.

Human communities survive by the everyday work of parents, children, teachers, industrial and service workers, and the myriad other kinds of productivity which keep our human world going. It is our co-labouring which makes us a people. As Kahlil Gibran put it so well, 'Work is love made visible'. Our daily work, even our struggling through an illness, unfolds the love that binds all of life together in a co-labouring community. Addictions are strategies of withdrawal from this world of love and work. They are, at the same time, signs of our search for some spiritual meaning beyond an empty or tortured life. Addiction is a deluded but desperate reaching for transcendence. It is a misguided attempt to transcend meaningless, frustrating reality. The wide-ranging spread of this vain, pathetic search is signalling to us the depth of the crisis of soul into which we have fallen.

There is a tragic, self-destructive side to the addictive process which especially besets the most vulnerable sectors. Those with little access to skills or opportunity are readily lured into the underground economy of drugs, prostitution and violence. Alcohol and drugs afford them an alternative life-style. Anger over economic exclusion and spiritual emptiness erupt into senseless violence. Finally these sectors of the society begin to die from internal bleeding.

There is a deep yearning in the human spirit for freedom from domination, for a voice in one's community, for an opportunity to love and work. This is essentially a spiritual aspiration for wholeness of life. Korean liberation theology (known as *minjung* theology or theology of the people) speaks of this passion as *Han*—a term from their traditional philosophy. That symbol probably cannot be adequately translated, but it refers to this deep yearning for freedom, for

one's place in life. They speak of it as 'fire in the frost'. This is the anger that is burning underground in the impoverished urban areas, erupting from time to time in terrible violence, making the life expectancy of young African Americans lower than that of soldiers on the front line in the Vietnam war. This is the indirect cost of our denial of social and moral responsibility, a price paid with the lives and blood of a whole generation.

To recognize this widespread pathology is not to deny the patient labour of parents, children, teachers, social workers, pastors and many others in every walk of life who make our society work and keep it going despite these deep distortions. If the withdrawal of energies was general in the society, as happened in Eastern Europe, then the whole economic and political order would come unravelled. That may yet have to happen here, but for the moment denial holds sway and most folks are labouring in quiet desperation to make life possible. Yet, all around them the plague is spreading. How many churches and agencies are swamped as they try to make up for the failure of the society to meet the needs of the poor and homeless! How many teachers are barely managing to keep going against almost hopeless odds! How cruel are the prisons overflowing with young and old men and women who never had a chance to find a decent life and now find themselves warehoused in our cement concentration camps! This is not to deny the punishable evil that we do to one another and for which there has to be confinement. However, we know that masses of these imprisoned men and women were more victims than victimizers, more sinned against than sinning.

As happens so often in our time, we find ourselves turning to the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous for clues to overcoming our destructive addictions. Their first step toward healing is an important clue for our society today. Healing begins when we can admit that our addiction is interfering with part or all of our life and relationships. Not only admit it in the secret of our closet but share this admission openly with others who have begun to acknowledge their condition. It is time for all of us to open the door on these pathologies which are undermining our whole society. It is time to end this era of denial.

Our denial continues because we are afraid to raise serious questions about the organization of our economic life. Our economy is our Golden Calf. It is to be revered, not to be questioned. For those who question these arrangements, the spectre of Eastern Europe is raised. See what happened to them! They experimented and look

where they ended! But these are not our only options. We do not have to choose between a casino economy that benefits the privileged, excludes the poor and vulnerable, drains the resources of the Third World to fill our larders, and fills our streets with homeless men, women and children or—horror of horrors—a command economy in which no one is free and everyone stands in line for scraps of food. That command economy was nothing more than transferring our privatized system of privilege to a state system of bureaucratic privilege. Certainly, there is more civil and political freedom in our society. We can thank God for that grace. Yet, these two systems place control in the hands of the privileged, leaving the rest of society to fare as best they can.

There are other alternatives. There are ways to build co-operatives and local community investment, many of them already proposed in the Episcopal Church by the Urban Bishops Coalition and in the Michigan Plan, 'Action Proposal for Economic Justice'. Moreover, an excellent proposal for 'Environment and Sustainable Development' has been forged for the coming General Convention of the Episcopal Church. These proposals as well as documents from the Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United Church of Christ are only a few of the extant proposals to strengthen and humanize the market system. We have not begun to use our ingenuity in devising an economic system that empowers productivity while building a common wealth. Community life is trivial if it is confined to the interpersonal networks in which we are comfortable. Community means the total system of interdependent rights and opportunities by which a people orders its common life and sustains its members.

From safety-net to community

We are particularly handicapped in dealing with our communal responsibilities by our individualism. This is the real root of our obsession with minimal government. Many good things flowed from this individualistic tradition, including the establishment of political and civil rights. However, we have seen in the past century how such radical individualism becomes a collective Leviathan when social ills reach a critical point. Neither side of this polarity, individual or collective, is a fair picture of human life. We are communal beings. We are also persons called to freedom in and through relationships. However, we live with a strange illusion that we are autonomous individuals who owe nothing to anyone except that which is in our own interest. Unhappily, this illusion is propagated day by day in our media, even as it is practised on all levels of our economic activity.

At one of his Rose Garden photo occasions, Ronald Reagan was giving a special award to an American Indian woman. He mentioned the great benefits of the safety net in caring for the needy. This was one of the first times that he tried this image on the public. When her turn came to speak, the Indian woman pointed out that her people had no resources and no work, indeed, had almost nothing. This brought the photo opportunity to a rapid close. She was hustled out of sight. Yet the image of the safety net took hold of the American imagination. It became a formula for removing basic services from school children, pregnant women, welfare mothers and others.

The safety net portrays each of us as a tightrope walker, suspended in lonely isolation far above the ground. If we are weak, vulnerable, morally inadequate or unlucky, we may fall. How grossly this image misrepresents human life. Very few of us are tightrope walkers. We actually come to be as persons through whatever nurturing love is made available to us. We learn to think and understand through the language and culture which our people bestow upon us. We learn to work through the skills and opportunities that are handed down by our people and offered to us, if we are fortunate. And we become free, responsible persons as we mature in these communal bonds of support, nurture, loving and working. The enigma of American life is that we have perpetuated this illusion of autonomous individualism despite the everyday realities of experience. The tragic consequence of this illusion is that those who are victimized assume it is their fault if they fail. Perhaps even worse, we Americans heap insult upon injury by laying the blame for their misfortune on the victims. We can truly cherish and build up the rights of individuals as we come to respect and uphold the communal bonds that make individual life possible.

The churches in urbanizing America

The churches are vital institutions for awakening America from its denial and addiction. Whatever our faults, and they are many, we have generations of experience in organizing and building communities. We have a long and rich heritage of spiritual formation and healing. Our main limitation, at the moment, is that we are speaking with an uncertain voice. We are spiritually divided within our own life as churches.

This inward cleavage in our religious life is largely a consequence of several centuries of trying to come to terms with the religious character of the nation states. National life became the centre of

religious hopes and aspirations in the seventeenth century following the Treaty of Westphalia. It was at this point that the Constantinian establishment began to erode. Even the state churches in England and Germany retained their status more in form than substance. In the American experience, the emergence of the Republic initiated the uneasy separation and unity between church and state. Both institutions shared a common sacred heritage. The churches in turn were much influenced by the liberal democratic philosophy. Nevertheless, the dividing line was maintained between the civil religion of the republic and the religion of the denominations. The division of labour between the institutions proved workable most of the time. The churches nurtured virtue and responsibility in the citizenry. The state assumed the obligations of preserving freedom and security. This accommodation centred the ministry of the churches in the private life of the citizens, although they often exercised indirect influence in public affairs.

This privatized style of church life is less and less functional in the emerging crisis of urbanizing America. The personal needs of members in the more stable urban areas are such that they exhaust the energies of their trained ministries. The intrusion of social or political concerns is viewed as inappropriate. These churches all too easily become the bastions of privatized spirituality. They have the support of a long tradition of personal religion. What was once a workable tradition has now become an obstacle to dealing with the denial and concealment in our public life. There are many exceptions, of course, but it is a strong trend in the more privileged sectors of urban America. How often have we heard, 'The churches have no business meddling in economic and public affairs'.

Meanwhile, the institutional forms which were so useful in building a congregational life in rural America are proving cumbersome, too expensive and too individualistic in their style of ministry to survive in the deprived urban areas. Many clergy and their families receive inadequate personal and institutional support for their difficult, urban ministries. Solidarity with the poor and exemplification of communal life in the midst of such suffering require a more communal ministry. Perhaps our 'cities' need to be dioceses with bishops working as pastors to teams of lay and ordained ministries. At least, our traditional styles that fitted the older America simply do not work in this new urban world.

The experience of the churches in the struggles of Eastern Europe sheds some light on our new situation. The movement in the East

toward a free society came as a surprise to many of us in the West. It seemed to come out of the blue. However, we have since learned that there had been underground preparation for this upheaval during many years. The churches played an important role in this underground movement. The pastors were often spokespersons for the silenced resisters. The churches furnished a kind of a shelter or protective roof under which critical discussion was possible. The churches gradually became communities of loyal resistance to the socialist state. These were not grandiose projects but limited attempts to build a different kind of communal life. The churches gained credibility through their solidarity with the people who were suffering under the dictatorship. The public agenda of the people was incorporated into the agenda of the churches.

This does not imply direct assumption of political authority by the churches. That issue was settled several centuries ago in America. The churches of Eastern Europe are now tempted to move back to their status as part of the establishment, but their contribution to the struggle for freedom grew out of their independence. The contribution of our own churches will come in this kind of freedom through solidarity with the struggle of the poor and excluded. This means building communities of resistance and communities of healing liberation. Such an agenda excludes no one, rich or poor, man or woman, adult or child, for all are liberated when the moral and spiritual pathologies of our society are overcome.

The agenda of salvation-liberation

The U.S. intervention in the Gulf complicates the future of our dense urban areas in a troubling way. This military step on 17 January 1991 would not pose such difficulties, if it could be treated as a momentary aberration from a long-range policy of economic and social improvement. However, the decision to intervene with massive military power seems to signal a geopolitical decision of major importance. The U.S.A. has been at a crossroads for many months with the fading of the Cold War. It is not merely that the global balance of power shifted radically toward the U.S., but the Japanese and emerging European economies were outstripping the U.S. productive system. Meanwhile, the U.S. was confronting serious capital shortage and saw little hope of regaining its economic pre-eminence. As Michael Klare noted in *The Nation* of October 1990, the U.S. seems to have made the decision to take the geopolitical option.

If this is the decision, then economic development will play second fiddle to the maintenance of U.S. superiority as *the* pre-eminent

military power in the world. This geopolitical strategy involves the emergence of the U.S. as a global security state. Corporate and transnational enterprises will then depend upon the U.S. to suppress any post-colonial struggles for independence. These struggles for liberation will no longer be allowed to interfere with corporate control of resources and markets. The U.S. policy of domination of the resources and governments of Latin America will now become a global policy. The 'new world order' will be a western order imposed upon the southern region of the world through military might. The U.S. will regain its hegemonic position in the world through a geopolitical rather than an economic strategy.

This geopolitical strategy is not cast in concrete. It has been in process of formation for at least a decade, but there are dissenting voices in high places and much uneasiness throughout the society. More and more people are aware of the pain and suffering in our dense urban areas and decaying rural communities. We in the churches cannot afford to be silent on this issue. Too much is at stake for the people of this land and for the struggling peoples of the Third World. Above all, the poor and needy who will bear the burdens of this betrayal of the American dream will need our presence. However we manage our outmoded institutional structures in order to be present among the poor, somehow we shall have to do it. We shall have to find some way of sustaining the ministries of our ordained and lay people in these decaying urban and rural areas.

During a Council of the dissenting groups from the churches of East Germany, in a time of gloom, one of the leading bishops made a remark which is important for us. He reminded the Assembly that 'Hope is learned in the Way'. This term 'Way' is significant in the Christian heritage. It is the symbol with which the early church spoke of its faith, of being in the Way. Where else can we as faithful people look for spiritual renewal and new life for our 'cities' but in walking in the Way? This is our work of healing liberation in these difficult times. Our liturgy is the renewal of life and hope, not great works but being present as the healing and liberating work of Christ.