



The Ars Vitalis Forum

Reenchanting the world and rediscovering the foundations of life and art.

Creative Subversion

By Hector J. Ramirez Martinez©

Throughout history there have been moments at which the Church and Christians in general, have had to face insurmountable challenges. From the catacombs and the Roman Circus or the crosses used to kill those stubborn dissidents who would not bow before Cesar or the pagan gods, to the decadence and corruption of the Medieval Church and its subsequent outburst of spiritual reformation. Not to mention, the massacres and genocides in modern times in the Soviet Union and China in the 20th century, and many other places where thousands of Christians had to pay with their lives, for their obstinate faith in the Christian God of redemption, love and forgiveness.

Yes, there have been dire and daring times for the Christians, but probably none like the crisis brought about by the *Modern* and *Postmodern* silent revolutions in the Western countries. And this is the case because the drastic, subtle and silent changes many of our countries have undergone in recent years; not only affected the social or political structures, as happened in the communist regimes. The postmodern revolutions that had been quietly breeding, first manifested in the 1960s, and slowly but surely finally produced “the melting in the air of all the values that were once considered solid and sacred”, at the end of the 20th century. Amazingly enough, this demolition actually took place in the way that Carl Marx had wanted, and Antonio Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School had predicted and hoped for. This change in paradigm was aimed at altering humanity itself; and it has, therefore, produced a new anthropological conception of man, in such a way that humans can now be altered, manipulated, controlled, cancelled or even kill at will with no remorse at all for doing anything wrong. This has been done before our very eyes, and has taken place with the complacency and silence of a great number of Christians and Christian organizations and denominations.

The West has fallen! The West has fallen! We could cry now if we still had some moral character and spiritual reality in our hearts, as it was heard throughout the Western world after 410 AD when the Visigoths invaded the Eternal City; or in 1453 at the Fall of Constantinople. But, as it happened at the fall of the Roman Empire, we did not and we do not have any kind of moral or spiritual courage or resistance in our inner selves, anymore. Therefore the supremacy and dictatorship of unreason, of opinions over ideas, of feelings and emotions over fortitude and responsibility, of vacuity over profound reasoning and thinking, of pleasure and thrills over joy and transcendence, of desires and ambitions over morals and ethics -these have all been successfully imposed and finally implemented in the Western liberal democracies.

In light of all this, what is the place of the church and the individual Christian who find themselves in the midst of this devastating situation? Of course there are different ways in which this challenge can be tackled, but before we are able to do that, there are some basic premises that are worth thinking about. The first has to do with the seriousness of the situation we are facing, and our impossibility to deal with it from a merely human stand point. There is no nominal, conservative or traditional Christianity that can be of any help in the midst of this critical post-Christian mindset. The second premise is that it is crucial that we understand and discern the times in which we live. *John Stott*, the British theologian and pastor, believed that Christians needed to do what he called a “double listening” -listening to the *Bible* and listening to the *world* in order to understand what people really think. He believed that although many Christians study the Word of God, not many study the world to understand it with the goal of relating the Word of God to the world in a way that will be relevant to their particular situation. This is one of the reasons why the dramatic changes that have taken place in the West have caught most Christians by surprise.



The Christian background and heritage of our Western culture have been snatched from us in the blink of an eye. Saint Augustine and most of the people of his time were absolutely shocked and in awe at hearing and seeing the fall of Rome, The Eternal City. But in our case, the radical change in paradigm has happened so subtly and cleverly, that Christians were unable to realize what had been going on, until it exploded in our faces. In the words of the Lord Jesus to the people of his time in Matthew 16: ³ *“O you hypocrites, you can discern the face of the sky; but can you not discern the signs of the times?”*

Indeed the Christian consensus that once existed in the West has disappeared, and even though it looks like it is too late to do something about it, as Christians we must get hold of God and pray and think of ways to be able to live our lives in victory and be the testimony we need to be in the midst of this new situation. Let us not continue to be surprised, amazed and bewildered by what has overtaken us. And, above all, let us not continue to expect and demand from a postmodern immoral, corrupt and depraved mindset, a Christian behaviour they are unable to produce; much less, expect from a corrupt government to implement Christian rules and laws by which the majority of a senseless society does not want to abide by anymore.

There is no rationale any longer, not a Western world of common sense, Christian morals, ethics, civility and respect. No more are people interested or concerned with sin, morality, hell, heaven or repentance. As people like D. Bonhoeffer, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton and others, had been warnings us “the problem with modern people is not that they have rejected God, but that they have lost their minds”. Yes, whether we like it or not, we are not dealing with an outlook on life that is based on *reasonableness* or common sense anymore, but, rather, with the most characteristic feature of the postmodern mindset, which is folly and an ever increasing disinterest in moral and ethical values. This implies that people raised and living in this new mindset, are mostly guided and ridden by emotions, feelings, personal ambitions, desires and opinions. In short, in regards to the gospel, most people are not open, not interested and not needy anymore.

The critical question for Christians is then, how are we going to be able to present the gospel to this new postmodern, post-Christian generation? We must agree that God has not been caught by surprise, and that He never runs out of ideas in his desire to bring humanity back to him. Maybe we have to think about the way God deals with people at critical times of civilizational crises. This is what Os Guinness calls *creative subversion*, a way of turning things upside down so stubborn crazy people see them the right way up.

In the 1940s, 50s and 60s, as a consequence of the Avant-garde movement that gained momentum at the beginning of the 20th. century, and that greatly influenced the subsequent artistic movements; there were artists and free thinkers who understood that given the situation of consumerism, shallowness, materialism and opulence that had began to be accepted and popularized in the West, the arts had become mere entertainment and a way of escapism. So these artists and intellectuals came up with provoking ideas and approaches to their artistic enterprises, in order to surprise and shake people up. Some of them were people like Berthold Brecht, Salvador Dali, Albert Camus and other artists, but probably the most shocking ones were the writers under dramatists grouped under the name of *theatre of the absurd*. These were people like Samuel Becket, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco and others. They used different approaches to the creation of a dramatic play in order not to offer a well structure plot with a beginning a middle and an end.

The audience found itself instead in a complete state of alert not knowing what to expect next. The situations did not make sense most of the time and people were pressed to think about the meaning of life. By putting things upside down, they were making people see their own superficiality and insignificance, in the way they were leading their everyday lives. This is actually similar to one of the ways God has used dealing with the stubbornness of our human nature at some times in history. It is the method used in the Garden of Eden with the serpent—the woman that was tricked and



deceived by the Enemy— will become the one who will be used to destroy him. *Genesis 3:15* says "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he shall crush your head, and you shall bruise his heel." It is also the method used at the Cross again. Who could ever have thought that God, the maker and creator of the universe, would let himself be mistreated, mocked and killed like the vilest of criminals, in order to save his creature. That is the answer no one could have ever expected and hence, the one that caught everyone by surprise.

This was also the way the Lord Jesus used to try to pierce through the blindness of the religious people of his day. A very good example of this is when the Lord, having been invited by an upright and stiff Pharisee (a keeper of the commandments and decrees of the law) to have dinner with him at his home allows a strange, sinful woman – a harlot – not only to wash his bare feet and perfume them, but to kiss and dry them with her hair. (Luke 7:36-37) In the eyes of the Pharisee contemplating this scene in his own home, it was a voluptuous and very improper act; and not one that should be allowed by a good, upright Rabi. But by doing this the Lord is turning the comfortable, upright and well-ordered world of this Pharisee upside down, in order to open his eyes and teach him a lesson he needed to learn.

In the context of the new paradigm shift in which we find ourselves in the West, there is a lot we can learn from this subversive approach. The western apologetic approach of reasoning an argument based on logic, the concept of truth, absolutes and moral and ethical values, may well be a way of approaching a psychologically healthy society used to engaging in honest, social and intellectual discourse; but when this is not the case anymore, and what has become pervasive everywhere is emotions, feelings, insanity and irrationality, God has still other means of reaching into people's hearts, that may even have to override reason.

Consequently, we must find with God, how creative subversion can be used to prepare hearts for the introduction of the gospel message. And this is where the arts can become magnificent tools. The arts and beauty are, in fact, two of the most precious faculties given to humanity; and probably the most powerful and efficient ones in helping Christians accomplish the task of speaking in a persuasive and subversive language. The Arts can reach into the most sensitive inner parts of the human soul, and touch and play the imaginative strings in such a way that, at times, people are able to have a glance at heaven itself. The arts can also incite people to reflect and ponder the crucial issues of life, and help provide an environment, a platform for contact and conversation on the issues being debated in our society.

Dealing with the tough issues that are being debated in society nowadays in an artistic way, and offering a Biblical perspective without being religious or offensive; is one of those ways in which artists can become prophets that can help prepare the way. Music, theatre, dance, painting have always helped people in healthy societies laugh about themselves, and about their own stupidity and shortcomings; they have also been instrumental in providing a place for the aesthetic experience to take place, an experience that contributes to awaken the awareness for the transcendental aspect of life. The arts, when used in the proper way, have also provided an atmosphere for reflection, and kept away the degrading misuse of any of their manifestations for mere entertainment, evasion or propaganda.

Let us pray, fast, think and open our hearts and imagination to God, so He can enable us with what we need to fulfil his command and be the light and testimony we need and must be, even in the midst of this decaying, crumbling society. Postmodern humanity may be out of its mind, but it is still made in the image of God, and it has in its heart of hearts, if even in a faint way, that divine spark that God has kindled in them.