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A New Millennium What to Take from the Past, What to Leave Behind

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MICHAEL MEDVED is a film critic, best-selling author and nationally syndicated radio talk show host. His daily three-hour program, emphasizing the intersection of politics and pop culture, reaches more than two million listeners in 130 markets, coast to coast. He also is featured on the Internet at <www.michaelmedved.com>.

Born in Philadelphia and raised in San Diego, Dr. Medved graduated with honors from Yale and then attended Yale Law School, where his classmates included Bill and Hillary Clinton. After working as a screenwriter in Hollywood, he reviewed movies for CNN and later as chief film critic for the *New York Post*. He also served for twelve years as co-host of *Sneak Previews*, the nationally televised weekly movie review show on PBS-TV. Dr. Medved is the author of eight non-fiction books, including the national bestseller *What Really Happened to the Class of '65?* and, most recently, *Saving Childhood*.

Dr. Medved and his wife, Diane, are Hillsdale College Life Associates. They have delivered a total of 11 lectures before Hillsdale seminars both on and off campus. Last year, the College awarded Dr. Medved an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters.

Dr. Medved delivered these remarks at Hillsdale College's All-school Spring Convocation, held on campus in April.

The graduation of the class of 2000 is a momentous occasion for many reasons, but I want to reflect specifically on two aspects of our contemporary world that weren't supposed to be part of the year 2000 at all: nationalism and religious faith. If someone had been speaking at a convocation ceremony a hundred years ago, certainly the consensus would have been that nationalism and religion would disappear entirely, or at least weaken profoundly, during the 20th century. Yet contrary to all informed expectations, they remain significant, undeniable forces in our civilization. Everyone predicted that by the end of this century we would be entering a great era of internationalism, of globalism, of human beings casting aside those old, "outworn" identities as members of distinct tribes or nations. We would all assume new identities as citi-

zens of the world; yet this has not been the case, despite the fact that there was even a language, Esperanto, that at one time early in the century was widely promoted as a replacement for all those other "divisive" languages, such as English, Spanish, French, German, and Russian, that people persist in speaking from time to time.

Look around the world of the new millennium: nationalism has never been more vital, more intense, more impassioned. I am not only referring to the explosion of nationalism in the former Soviet empire—where they have reversed the American motto, "e pluribus unum" ("out of many, one") and effectively adopted "ex uno plurima" ("out of one, many")—and to the old Yugoslav empire, where we have all learned, to our pain and sorrow at points, about Serbian, Bosnian, Kosovar, and Croatian nationalism. Consider as well the benign nationalism of Scotland, Wales, and Catalonia and the not-so-benign nationalism of Quebec. Even as the

European Union issues a single currency, Europe is alive with expressions of national life that no one would have expected to exist in the late 20th century.

The reports of nationalism's demise proved highly exaggerated, and the same has been true of forecasts that religion would wither and disappear from our world as a vital force. A century ago there was a general sense that we slowly would enter the sunlight of pure reason and discard old-fashioned, moss-grown faith. But look around: one of the compelling forces in every corner of the globe is the vibrancy, the reawakening, of religious faith. It cuts across racial, cultural, and geographic lines. Religious faiths that offer a strong grounding in immutable values draw new adherents and energy everywhere. Here in the United States there are countless Evangelical, mainline Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish families in which young people prove profoundly more religious and more engaged in religious tradition than were their parents or grandparents.

Why did the predictions of a hundred years ago miss the mark so widely? They completely misunderstood the impact of science and technology. They assumed that by shrinking the world, by bringing us all closer together through better and faster communication and transportation, technology would erase national boundaries. This was particularly true of people's expectations about mass media. They felt that once the whole world worshiped at the shrine of Charlie Chaplin—the first truly international entertainment icon—and later, once *I Love Lucy* became international currency that was irresistible and accepted everywhere, all the national, regional, and local boundaries would mean nothing. But quite the contrary has occurred. The smaller the world has become and the busier our lives have become, the more we have all needed a place, a set of values, a set of traditions to call home—a distinctive home. By the same token, advances in science, rather than relegating religion to the ash heap of history, have shown us how much more than ever religious faith is needed. The more we understand and master the

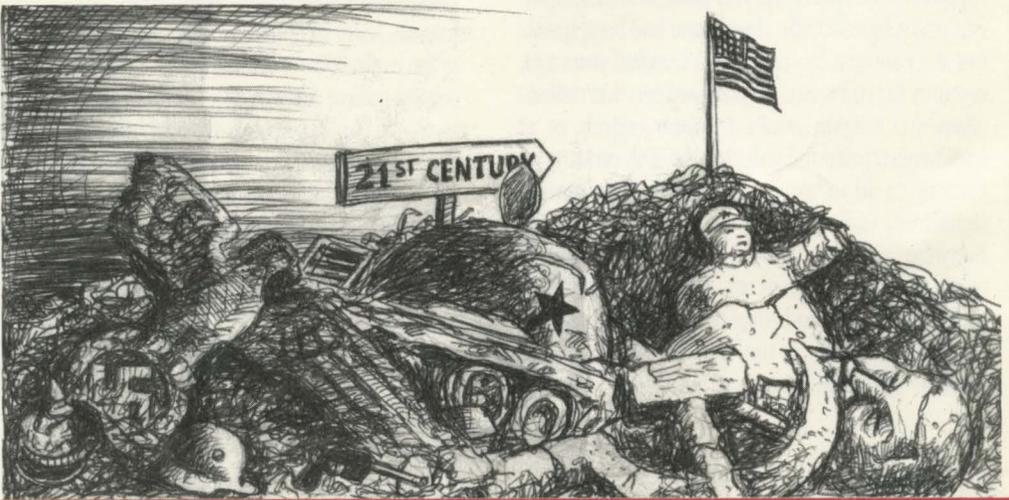
physical universe, the greater our need to come to terms with the spiritual reality behind it.

Is That Your Final Answer?

SHOULD WE celebrate or lament the fact that the vital forces of nationalism and religious faith, which weren't supposed to be part of our world, have survived and will accompany us into the new millennium? To answer this question we need an even broader historical perspective. Go back about a thousand years and look not at Y2K but at Y1K, because there's a crucial lesson to be learned. In the year 1000 A.D., no rational person would have predicted that the next millennium would be dominated by Western European civilization. The largest city in the world was Cordoba, the Islamic city in Spain. It boasted street lamps, an advanced sewage system, and a great university in 1000 A.D. The second largest city was Kaifeng in China. On the Indian subcontinent an ancient civilization was well developed and sophisticated. Any reasonable person would have concluded that these civilizations would continue to lead the world in science, scholarship, the arts, and living standards. Yet these well-developed, powerful, dominant cultures all gave way to the West. Why?

This may count as a terrible over-simplification, but two factors that contributed to the weakness of the cultures rivaling the West involved centralization of authority and an attitude toward change that can only be described as smug and dismissive. China was always centralized, and the Ottoman Turks imposed great centralization on Islamic civilization after they came to control it. In contrast to the top-down, centralized structure of Europe's chief competitors, the West has drawn energy from its diverse, fiercely competitive centers of energy and innovation. The United States has proven uniquely blessed precisely because its constitutional structure guaranteed elements of localism and decentralization.

The other key disadvantage of Asian and Islamic societies related to their certainty that their institutions reflected ultimate, eternal truth. China had gunpowder, fireworks, and a well-organized



bureaucracy, but it also had a basic response to the question for the ages: "Is that your final answer?" That civilization's answer was "yes." Islamic civilization also developed an attitude that the status quo was, to borrow the title of a Jack Nicholson movie, "as good as it gets." In Japan this attitude was so extreme that they closed off the nation from the outside world until 1854. These twin weaknesses—centralization and smugness—should be counted among the features of the last thousand years that we don't want to take with us. That's why we should celebrate the resilience of nationalism: the strongest opponent of centralization, of putting all cultures into a blender and coming out with only one flavor, is a stubborn insistence on nationalism, on unique, distinctive, and irreducible values and traditions. This is a valuable aspect of our civilization, not one to be discarded.

Meanwhile, a unique gift from the religious traditions of the West has helped to preserve us from the static, self-satisfied, and sometimes arrogant sense of

"as good as it gets" that has weakened other civilizations. That great gift is guilt. Guilt sends a message: "You can do better. You can improve yourself. You can improve your world." This questing religious spirit, resisting overall centralization, undermining unchallenged certainties, has characterized the West's triumph over the past thousand years. As long as nationalism is tempered with the knowledge that no national identity ought to be imposed as a centralizing force, and as long as firm religious faith in immutable truths is tempered with the knowledge that the status quo is not "as good as it gets," that we can do better, and that guilt, not greed, is good, we should enjoy new triumphs in the years ahead. In other words, the nationalism and diverse, restless religious fervor so characteristic of the West have not damaged our societies. They have, rather, facilitated the vitality of our civilization in competition with other social structures. These are the aspects of our tradition that we ought to take with us into the millennium ahead.

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