

THE BEWILDERED SOCIETY

By George C. Roche III

Dr. George Roche was inaugurated as the eleventh president of Hillsdale College October 9, 1971. Prior to becoming Hillsdale's chief executive, he was for five years director of seminars at the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. Before that, he taught history and philosophy at the Colorado School of Mines in Golden, Colorado.

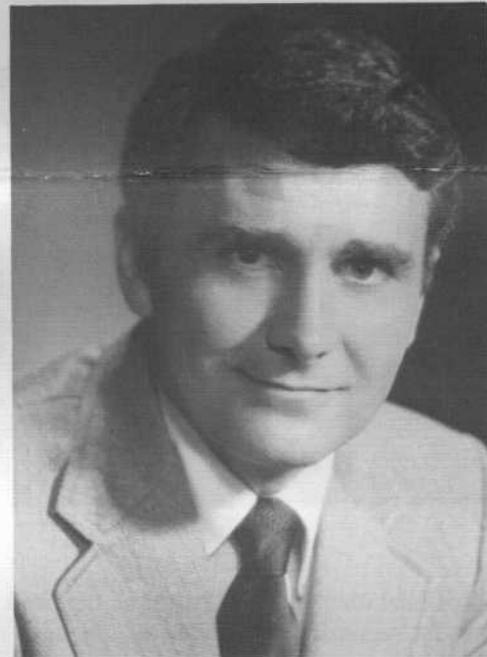
A native of Colorado, President Roche grew up in the Rockies and until the eighth grade attended a one-room schoolhouse. After receiving his bachelor's degree in history from Denver's Regis College, he spent two years as a Marine Corps officer. His M.A. and Ph.D.—both in history—are from the University of Colorado, where he also taught.

Dr. Roche is the author of five books: Education in America, Legacy of Freedom, Frederic Bastiat: A Man Alone, The Bewildered Society, and The Balancing Act: Quota Hiring in Higher Education. He has also contributed several hundred articles to many national and international journals and magazines.

President Roche delivered the following presentation on October 4 in New York City before a symposium of The Society for the Preservation of the Book of Common Prayer.

I have been invited here to discuss *The Bewildered Society*. This title derives from a book I wrote several years ago, outlining the economic, political, technological, social and moral bewilderments of our time and some of the reasons for those bewilderments.

Today the typical American finds himself confronted with "bigness" on an unprecedented scale. Our lives are institutionalized and regulated on every hand. Each of us is becoming a smaller and smaller chip floating on a more and more enormous ocean. The individual finds himself under great pressure from every quarter to "adjust" to the new life—to find a place in "the system."



Since all the institutions of our society make the same demand, the individual has no place to turn. He is confronted with a truly bewildering situation. On every hand he meets a denial that the individual is genuinely significant; on every hand he is confronted with vast institutional enmassments that seem beyond both his control and his comprehension.

Modern theorists have used many words to describe the resulting effect: words like *alienation* and *angst*. For me the word *bewilderment* is an ideal description of the present human condition. It describes our reaction to a world whose *scale* has changed. Self-determination seems to be leaving us—the world grows larger and larger, our institutions grow larger; and in the process there seems less self-determination for individuals and a constantly growing role for big business, big labor, big

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things).

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education, big foundations, big TV networks, and above all—big government. The cultural, social, economic, psychological and technological impact on our lives has been profound.

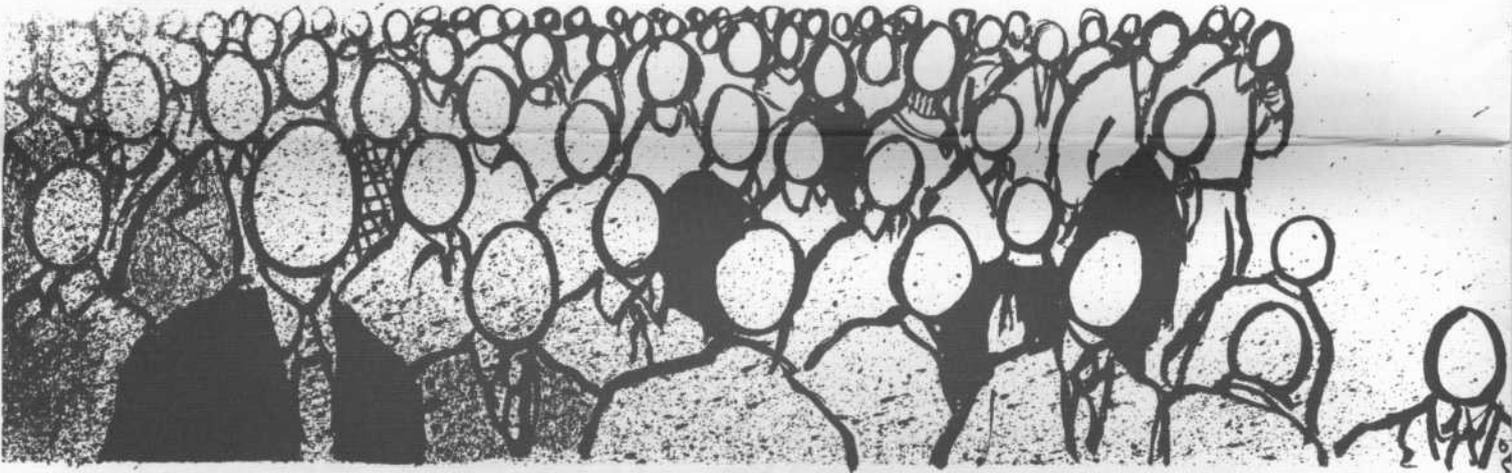
What happened? I believe that what happened is a fundamental change in how we view ourselves and our institutions—a new collective view of human nature and society which originated in political processes but has then spread throughout the institutional structure of the country. Ultimately, we are faced with a moral crisis containing vast consequences for us and for our world.

I do not intend to subject you to a massive analysis of

process as it has occurred repeatedly in human institutions. One of my favorite descriptions is that offered by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*:

Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce a universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

The steadily growing trend toward moral failure seems to advance at the same rate as the older ideal of self-responsibility continues to decline. As John Stein-



all the institutional changes I described in the book, but I would like to suggest the profound change in the American character which has accompanied our rush from individualism to collectivism—a change producing the results which we now find so bewildering.

Please think this through with me.

Within the traditional Western framework of *Natural Law* our forebears have generally recognized a realm of spiritual value, beyond the laws of natural science and beyond the trappings of society. It is this recognition of the *spiritual dignity of the individual* which gave birth to the concept that each individual had certain rights which no man or collection of men would be justified in violating.

Modern society, acting in the name of “the people,” has been increasingly willing to override such guarantees of individual freedom. In the process, absolute power has steadily replaced individual rights.

At the point at which the individual is lost in the mass, the mass-man comes to identify himself with the state and becomes as corrupted by power as those who themselves exercise that power. In such a society, so completely divorced from the creative capacity of the individual, the way is paved for a social decline of great magnitude. Artists over the millenia have described the

beck has phrased it:

The American has never been a perfect instrument, but at one time he had a reputation for gallantry, which, to my mind, is a sweet and priceless quality. It must still exist, but it is blotted out by the dustcloud of self-pity. The last clear statement of gallantry in my experience I heard in a state prison, a place for two-time losers, all lifers. In the yard an old and hopeless convict spoke as follows: “The kids come up here and they bawl how they wasn’t guilty or how they was framed or how it was their mother’s fault or their father was a drunk. Us old boys try to tell them, ‘Kid, for Christ’s sake, do your own time. Let us do ours.’” In the present climate of whining self-pity, of practiced sickness, of professional goldbricking, of screaming charges about whose fault it is, one hears of very few who do their own time, who take their own rap and don’t spread it around. *It is as though the quality of responsibility had atrophied.*

With that atrophy has come a compelling social decline. So it has been in each social order faced with a fundamental change in its moral precepts. Ancient Rome, for example, which in its declining years had so many similarities to present-day American society, suffered from the welfarism, the economic decline, the

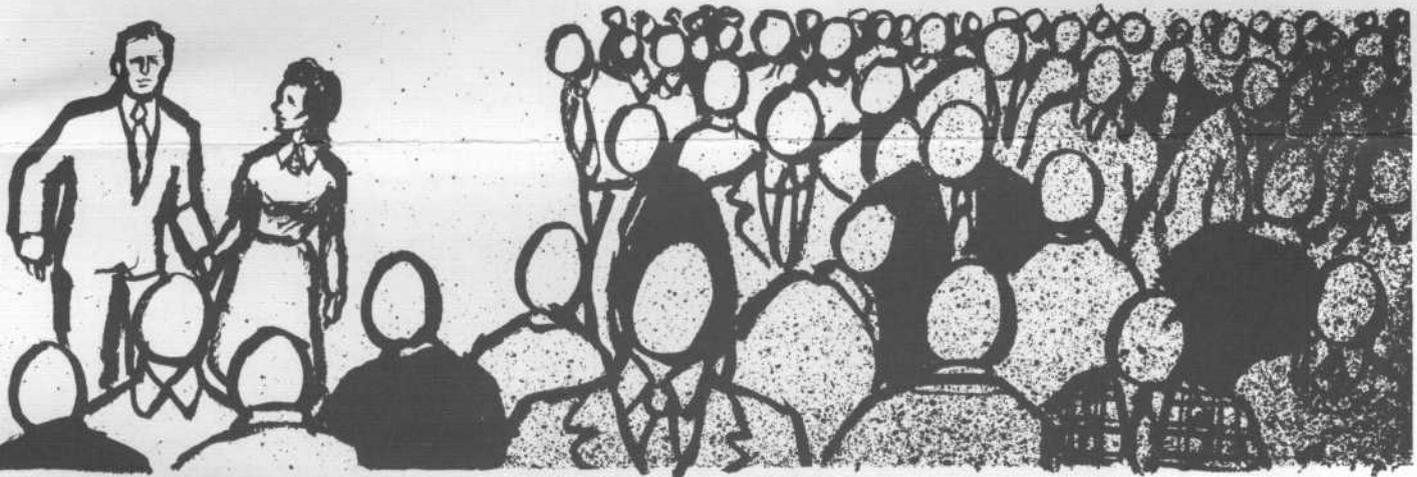
political corruption, the sexual aberration, the collapse of the middle class and all the other failures which today fill our own newspapers.

It is worth recalling that the fundamental Roman virtues which made possible the success of the Roman Republic—*familia, patria, pietas, gravitas*—were the same fundamental ideas from which the Roman Empire turned as it suffered its decline. The meaning of those Roman virtues is familiar to us all: family, country, moral values, dignity and responsibility. These are exactly the values presently suffering decline within our own traditional value structure. It is the decline of those

unviable political schemes and least concerned with the inner spiritual dignity of the individual. The honorable exceptions are so exceptional as to prove the rule. Traditionally, the role of the Church was to confront a failing world with God. Today the struggle of a remnant within the various denominations is to confront a failing Church with God.

In the words of Bernard Iddings Bell:

There is small expectancy, then, that those who belong to the Church will be able to set this reeling civilization of ours right side up and then steady it. The Church and its people too largely conform,



values which this conference is meant to explore.

The result of that decline within our value structure has produced the most complete secularization of culture the world has ever seen. In the absence of inner spiritual values and responsibilities for the individual—the traditional moral framework—we have substituted a modernist faith in externals and social “rights,” to be guaranteed by the collectivity. Modern politics is the natural result of that transition in moral values.

Now, that political structure which promised to be all things to all men is beginning to disintegrate. What the planners of political heaven-on-earth failed to take into account is that lasting political cohesion demands common moral beliefs and attitudes, and such are impossible in a social order which denies the validity of all fixed values. The political regime which cannot discover a universal definition of justice cannot govern justly—and soon cannot govern at all.

As the political structure fails in the absence of moral direction, it would seem natural to turn to organized religion for leadership. Unfortunately, the direction of most modern institutional religion is decidedly secular. The institutional enmassment which has attacked so many aspects of our lives has not spared the churches. Today they are among the institutions most oriented to

unconscious that they do conform, uncritically conform, almost automatically conform, to the compulsions of current culture. They seem largely to have forgotten that witness to a divine moral law in the face of a worldly secularist human society which has always constituted, and still constitutes, religion’s right to claim social pertinence. The world, hurtling on toward political, economic, psychic catastrophe, is not going to be saved, if it is saved at all, by the Church if the Church remains an uncommitted host of politely respectable people, willing to be led by professional ecclesiastics whose methods of promotion and administration are just about as worldly as those of the sick society they say they wish to reform but which, as a matter of fact, deforms them almost as easily as it deforms everybody else. If the Church is to help in restoring the world to moral sanity, there must first be revolt and recovery of moral sanity within the Church.

In Christopher Dawson’s monumental *Religion and Culture*, the case is developed at some length that the institutional Church has historically been strongest when it exercised moral leadership by refusing to come to terms with the social order in which it found itself. Conversely, the Church has provided the least moral leadership in periods when it has identified itself most

closely with the cultural synthesis of its society. Today the identification of organized religion and our contemporary culture synthesis is almost complete—with the predictable result that the moral leadership coming from the Church is at a new low.

Individuals seeking spiritual guidance and moral instruction often find themselves cast in the role of reactionaries within their churches. Often such individuals are far more outspoken in defense of religious and moral values than are many of the contemporary clergy.

The time has come for those who still understand the problem to speak up. One of the characters in the concluding volume of the C.S. Lewis space trilogy makes it clear just how necessary it is that we make such a choice and make it soon:

If you dip into any college, or school, or parish, or family—anything you like—at a given point in its history, you always find that there was a time before that point when there was more elbow room and contrasts weren't quite so sharp; and that there's going to be a time after that point when there is even less room for indecision and choices are even more momentous. Good is always getting better and bad is always getting worse: the possibilities of even apparent neutrality are always diminishing. The whole thing is sorting itself out all the time, coming to a point, getting sharper and harder.

And that time has come. As Canon Bell reminds us, "Our present difficulties are so great and so basic as to demand nothing short of revolution, not so much political revolution or economic revolution as moral revolution, a revolution in estimate and pursuit of values."

How is this to be done? I must confess that I do not know. I do know that such goals can be achieved only by people who feel that they *ought* to be achieved. The word *ought*, applied in social concerns, implies the prevalence of men accustomed to thinking in moral terms. Only for the moral man does the word *ought* have any real significance.

Perhaps, then, I am asking for a moral renaissance as the solution to our problems. This may seem an imprecise solution to our present discontents, but there is no other solution. We must insist upon a return to the hierarchy of values which gives primacy to the dignity of the individual and to the institutional forms guaranteeing that dignity.

As we take our stand on behalf of that moral renaissance, it will serve us well to remember that we are not the first social order to have suffered such a crisis. As Rome went down to destruction, there were observers on hand who were moved to think through the moral consequences of that decline. One such figure who lived through the end of an age was St. Augustine, who in his

time watched civilization come down around him. He lived to see the Huns and the Goths and the Vandals and the Visigoths sweep down the Italian peninsula and snuff out the civilization which had been Rome. Augustine was moved to ask what produced such a decline and finally step by step was led to ask the ultimate question for all human affairs: What is it that makes man different from every other animal on this planet? Augustine found that human difference in one word: self-transcendence, *i.e.*, the capacity to transcend, to rise above, the merely material and physical self and to make those moral choices which define his existence to the world and even his existence to his Creator. Augustine perceived that God so loved us that He gave us complete freedom, freedom even to deny our Creator.

For Augustine, self-transcendence meant the power to choose as the civilizing force producing the freely choosing moral agent, the fundamental cornerstone of all contractual obligation, all family obligation, indeed, all the obligations that make up the civilized community. He realized that all civilization is based upon the integrity of the self-responsible individual directed by a view of justice, of restraint, of responsibility stemming from the recognition that each of us is a child of God.

Man alone among the creatures of this earth has the rational capacity for self-transcendence, the quality of mind necessary to stand outside himself and view his own conduct in relation to the world around him. An individual no longer able freely to order his actions, in terms of the insight gained in that self-transcendence, is no longer a free man. It is this view of man as an individual in possession of a God-given soul, rather than as a mere creature of society, that is epitomized in Paul's assertion in his second letter to the Corinthians, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Without that innermost self-knowledge that each of us has, that responsibility to our Creator, without a society and system of government which allows us to discharge that self-responsibility, true civilization is not possible. That is the *sine qua non* of the good society. More important, that is the cornerstone of religious faith as well.

God so loved us that He left us free to accept or reject Him. He sent His Son into the world to show us the way toward that acceptance, to carry the burden none of us can carry alone.

What a gift to each of us!

What a responsibility!

This country once enjoyed such faith in the individual and in the institutional structure and value structure founded upon that faith. It is the erosion of that faith which today destroys us from within. We must recover those moral and spiritual values—and that demands a revitalized church.

We are met to discuss, to identify and to reverse that erosion of our faith.

I leave you with one final thought from Whittaker Chambers:

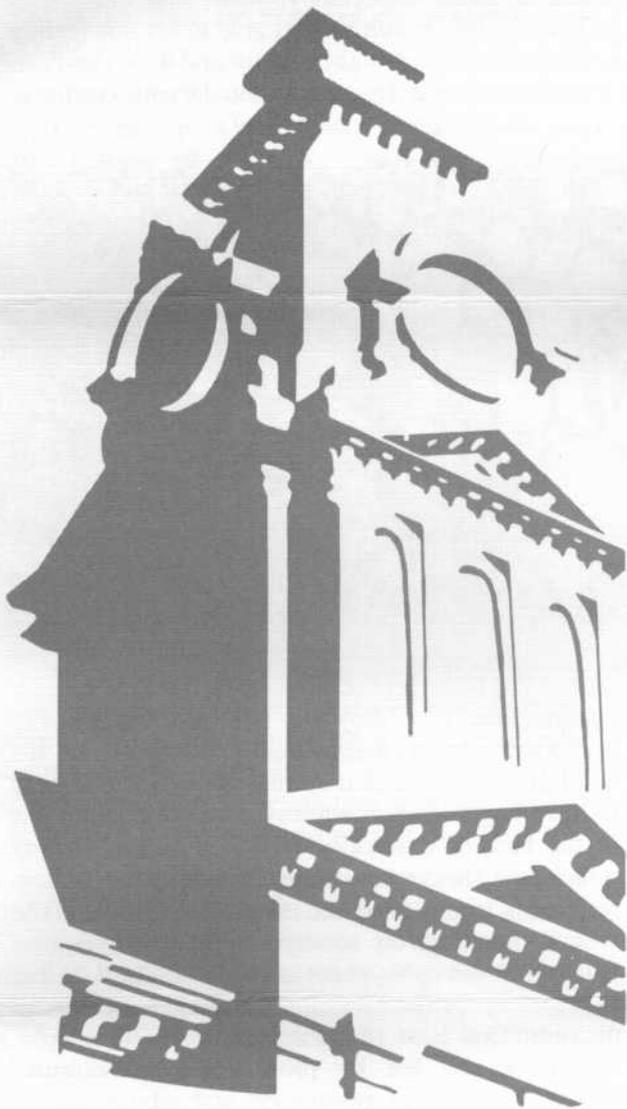
To those for whom the intellect alone has force, such a witness has little or no force. It bewilders and exasperates them. It challenges them to suppose that there is something greater about man than his ability to add and subtract. It submits that that something is the soul. Plain men understood the witness easily. It speaks directly to their condition. For it is peculiarly the Christian witness. They still hear in it, whenever it truly reaches their ears, the ring of those glad tidings that once stirred mankind with an immense hope. For it frees them from the trap of irreversible Fate at the point at which it whispers to them that each soul is individually responsible to God, that it has only to assert that

responsibility, and out of man's weakness will come strength, out of his corruption incorruption, out of his evil good, and out of what is false invulnerable truth.

It takes such faith to believe that free men will prevail. At a time when all the world seems to sanction the denial of individual responsibility, it takes faith to understand that no determinism has ever offered sufficient compensation for the loss of self, for the loss of the chance to be a real person. Such a faith comes only from the recognition of God within each of us. Such a faith promises, in the words of Robert Frost:

Back out of all this now too much for us...
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.
God willing, we can do no less.

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