

READERS RESPONSE

Questions From the Inferno

The title is taken from Paul Mojzes' recent book *Yugoslavian Inferno*, and the questions come from what I have read in news reports and books, and what I have seen on television, and what I have heard from people who were there.

Can the situation in what was Yugoslavia be taken as a grim contemporary justification of Thomas Hobbes' view that the life of man is poor, short, nasty and brutish? Or, despite all appearances to the contrary, does it support John Locke's view that men and women are rational except when fits of madness overtake them? Or could it be an example of what Bishop Butler taught, that men and women are egoistic but equally altruistic, except in this situation when altruism is overwhelmed?

Should we say that "morality is endemically and irredeemable non-rational?" Is the situation in Yugoslavia one more example of the problem of evil, so dreadful that it provides a *coup de grace* to religious belief, or is there a theodicy which can account for even this?

These are questions which call for answers even though for a time violence in what was Yugoslavia is on hold. Is the sniper who shot to death a seven year old boy possessed of any redeeming virtues? Can we excuse such a person? Insane? Morally handicapped? The soldiers who gang-raped a twelve year old Muslim girl, killed her, tied her body to their tank, traveling with it as a defiant symbol until it rotted to a skeleton. Who are these people? Who are they really? Is this a contemporary example of the ring of Gyges to prove the truth of Plato's myth? When people are anonymous they will behave how they want to, usually the worst way.

Are the events in Yugoslavia a lesson about freedom, too much of it and it ceases to be; without constraint it gives the advantage to the strongest, the quickest, the best armed, the best financed?

Is this a situation where reason does not apply, which denies rationality, so it cannot apply, except to those who behave in such ways? For them there are reasons which apply and justify. Are we dealing with a different kind of thinking?

Is rationality a shifting perspective, dependent, as one writer put it, on history and society, so that as those vary the nature of rationality varies? Should we accept the implication that brutal behavior, as we account it, is simply the way of life in society where ancient wrongs are today's wrongs, and revenge a moral imperative no matter what the personal consequence, as in the Christian faith forgiveness is a moral imperative no matter what?

Does Christian or Muslim teaching have anything to say to those who are behaving in these ways, those who claim to be Muslim or Christian?

What can we offer more than platitudes about love, and grace and new birth, and hope, when, a nation has been destroyed by irrationality and hate?

Does prayer help at all, those benign expressions during the morning service about the world situation - Rwanda, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland?

Whose inferno is it? Where is the inferno? A student of mine told me recently that her father was murdered in a gangland war, and that one Christmas when her mother was shopping she was robbed, raped, beaten and left for dead. She was pregnant with the student's sister. Where is the inferno? Is it only over *there*?

If we can't address these questions, or some of them, if Advent has nothing to say to us that we can say, if there is no healing, no reason, no hope we can share to bring the spirit of life to the valley of the dry bones of our tortured world. What is the Christian faith?

Or should we not become overly excited, not stir up a crisis, not become irrational ourselves, but do what the Stoics taught and not be disturbed by things we cannot control?

Dane Gordon

Department of Philosophy

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, New York 14623