

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

Vol. 2, No. 4

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Me, Rebellion and Autonomy

A poll in December of 2005 found that just 1% of French voters said they wanted President Jacques Chirac to stand for re-election in 2007. It had not been a good year: economic torpor, electoral setback, and, in November, a fiery eruption in the suburbs of Paris that soon spread to other major cities.

Trying to restore his authority, Chirac used his customary televised New Year's address to the nation to say, "We must believe in France." His pathos-filled speech was quickly lampooned by the nation's cartoonists and columnists.

Before other world leaders have a moment of *schadenfreude*, the German term for enjoying the misfortune of another, an article in *Time* suggests that the French President's rock-bottom ratings are an extreme example of a corrosive trend in public opinion that poses just as much of a threat to President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and their colleagues in dozens of other countries, as well as to the heads of global institutions and corporations from IBM to the International Monetary Fund.

At hand, writes *Time* reporter Peter Gumbel, is the mistrust of authority – and an increasingly vocal disrespect for it – which has gone global. "Deference is dead, replaced by sniping, cynicism and an outpouring of open protest." However, *Time* rightly notes that the global culture of disdain is fraught with risk, for it "gnaws away at some of the fundamentals of human society." "Trust matters," concludes *Time*. "If the world habitually distrusts authorities that are accountable,

however inadequately, we may find ourselves ill prepared to meet the huge challenges posed by globalization."

Actually, that will be the least of our problems.

A few years ago, I was listening to public radio and heard an interview with a juvenile court judge. He said that in his court, he had seen violent juvenile crimes triple over recent years. The reporter asked him why he thought that was happening. He replied, "First, kids lost the *admiration* of authority. Then, they lost *respect* for authority. Now, they've lost the *fear* of authority."

The displacement of authority's role in culture flows from an increasing autonomous individualism. To be "autonomous" is to be independent. The value of "autonomous individualism" maintains that each person is independent in terms of destiny and accountability. Ultimate moral authority is *self-generated*. In the end, we answer to no one but ourselves, for we are truly on our own. Our choices are solely ours, determined by our personal pleasure, and not by any higher moral authority.

I recently heard a professor at one of the Claremont colleges in California speaking to autonomy's central place in our world's mind. He quipped that it has produced a new argument against the existence of God: "It is a two-step proof," he suggested. "One, I am not living in a way that would honor a God, were he to exist. Two, therefore he does not exist."

Compare this to the Christian idea, famously articulated by Dutch leader Abraham Kuyper, that there is not an inch of any sphere of our lives that Christ does not declare, "Mine!" To this the current thinking would respond, "How dare you!" Or even more to the point, "Who do you think you are?" The answer Christ would give, of course, is "God," but that would be the point of contention.

Theologian Carl F.H. Henry titled his six-volume magnum opus *God, Revelation and Authority*. The title may prove to be prescient, as it increasingly captures the heart of what would appear to be Christianity's most audacious claim in the midst of the current cultural milieu. Yet as the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre argued, "Man is the being whose project is to *be* God."

So lay it next to the book the world would seem to be reading in its place: "Me, Rebellion and Autonomy."

James Emery White

Sources

"Losing Our Faith: At the World Economic Forum, leaders will try to understand why people no longer trust authority," Peter Gumbel, *Time Magazine* (Bonus Section), February 2006, p. A7-10.

Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*.

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