Correspondence

VALUES & CONSENSUS

To the Editors: I find myself in sympathy with the concerns evidenced by Valentin Turchin in his article, "The Institutionalization of Values," in your November issue.

On the one hand, who could seriously dispute that values willy-nilly *are* institutionalized; or, conversely, that institutions do embody value-perceptions and claims? Only a sclerotic liberalism could complain, in the name of some abstract individualism, of the effort to achieve consensus concerning those values that serve the common good.

On the other hand, two obvious difficulties arise at once: One of them is philosophical, the other political. Firstly, what *are* the values that genuinely subserve the common good and are thus, in this sense at least, ultimate? Secondly, who or what is to be the bearer of this discernement (in Mr. Turchin's words, the "intellectual and spiritual integrator of society"), a role filled in the past by the Church but now, in Mr. Turchin's vision, devolving upon a "metaparty" or "metachurch"?

Mr. Turchin is, of course, aware of these two issues; but he appears more sanguine than I about the possibility of their resolution (though his piece does seem to take on a more somber tone at the end, when he speaks of contemporary Western society's suspicion of "integration" and its relegating of "ultimate values" to the purely private sphere). I must pronounce myself decidedly unoptimistic about the prospect. I can find no reason to rescind Philip Rieff's portrayal of contemporary Western culture as marked by "the triumph of the therapeutic." In such a climate, values are scaled down to narrowly utilitarian and self-serving dimensions and "absolutes" appear as rather unfortunate holdovers from the unenlightened days of metaphysical and religious intolerance (a prejudice from which Mr. Turchin, for all his good will, does not seem entirely free). What serious discernment concerning values can be carried forth by a society in which the immediacy and superficiality of emotional reaction becomes the unique yardstick for the true and the good?

Further, I find the author's proposal for the creation of a metaparty or a metachurch to be utopian in the invidious sense of that term. Alfred North Whitehead suggested years ago that "if you want to make a new start in religion, based upon ideas of profound generality, you must be content to wait a thousand years." Despite its possible hyperbole, Whitehead's view does raise skepticism concerning Mr. Turchin's strategy. For my part, I have opted to direct my energies not toward the creation of the metachurch but toward the reform of the Church. In this I have recently been confirmed by the epigrammatic conclusion to Alisdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue*. (Whether Mr. MacIntyre would support my appropriation of his intuition is beside the point.) He writes: "We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict." To that active waiting I have committed myself. Its strategy may entail not the achievement of a cultural consensus but the declared opposition to the actual consensus. From this base, a new integration may ultimately come forth; but it suffices if it but makes possible some witness to light in the present darkness.

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To the Editors: Prof. Turchin has made an important statement of the two requisites of a social system: That there must be a "metaconsensus"—that is, a consensus on the need for a consensus on ultimate values—plus a set of such shared ultimate values and institutions for protecting and fostering them. In fact, however, American society has all these. Our religion is what Prof. Turchin calls "antireligion." We are united in our acceptance of disunity. Our shared ultimate values are individual freedom, the right of privacy, and the like. Prof. Turchin has, indeed, offended this code of ultimate values by speaking of the collective, public need for such a code; the code itself conceals its collective, public character. Also we have a "metaparty," namely, the Establishment, our public opinion leaders. The metaparty guides the institutions through which the consensus is protected and fostered: our legal system, our educational system, our science and technology, our press, and others. This is indeed our "single political network."

It need not be assumed that the failure of many people—and perhaps especially so-called liberals—to understand how a system works necessarily affects adversely the working of our system. The United States has managed to avoid disintegration partly despite and partly because of the shared skepticism concerning philosophies of integration.

There is serious danger, however, in speaking of the need to agree on ultimate values without specifying the ultimate values that need to be agreed upon. That is, indeed, reminiscent of the experience of Italy and Germany in the '20s and '30s of this century, when people were told that what was needed above all was a militant unity, a single will, a single set of values—and the leader would say what those values are. This is, of course, the opposite of what Prof. Turchin wants: He wants "a genuine consensus on the ultimate human values"—but then he fails to tell us what he thinks those ultimate human values are.

What is wrong with us is that our values are too superficial. We have overstressed the individual and understressed the collective. We have overstressed acquisition and satisfaction and understressed service and sacrifice. We have overstressed the present and understressed the past and the future. We have overstressed the physical and emotional sides of personal and social lives and understressed the spiritual side. We have overstressed love of ourselves and understressed love of God and neighbor. *This* is the true "decay of the value system" that needs to be reversed—not the decay of *any* value system, which conceivably could be replaced by *any other* value system, but the decadence of our particular—flourishing—value system, which needs to be replenished and revalued.

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SOUTH AFRICA & REFORM

To the Editors: Not having read André Brink's *A Chain of Voices*, which Ross Baker reviewed in September, 1982, I have no criticism of the critique of the book. Judging by Brink's other work, it seems the review is accurate in its praise. What I would like to comment on is Baker's generous view of the cur-

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religious beliefs and practices of Islam concerning women serve the economic interests of society: "Thousands of *dayas*, nurses, paramedical staff and doctors...make money out of female circumcision." However, her Marxist version of woman's power role in prehistoric times is outdated; most anthropologists reject for lack of evidence the notion that matriarchy gave way to patriarchy when private property came to be concentrated in the hands of men. The book also suffers from repetitiousness and, on occasion, from defensiveness—as when the author attempts to relate the oppression of Arab women to a seemingly eternal and common fate of women everywhere. And sometimes the anecdotes are too obviously sensational.

Yet the book is an important work of research and interpretation, and its impact on the reader is considerable. One fervently hopes that Dr. Saadawi, who has been stripped of official duties and imprisoned for her outspoken criticism of the state, will be released to continue such investigations.

—*Margery Fox*

Correspondence *(from p. 4)*

rent regime in South Africa, which I think gives an *inaccurate* picture of the situation for black people. He does admit difficulty knowing "what South Africa's nonwhites think," although he correctly suspects they see some of the so-called reforms as belated and as a tactical ploy to weaken the black population by co-opting the "Coloureds" and Asians as toothless lapdogs on the side of the whites, against the majority Africans.

These moves toward giving certain hand-picked Coloured and Asian stooges positions on the President's Council (advisory only) fall far short of "enfranchisement of Coloureds and Asians" as a whole—and the mass of these population groups are rejecting these phoney overtures for what they are: attempts to *entrench* white power, under the guise of "reform."

The plan to attach the Swazi "homeland republic" (new phraseology, legitimizing another phoney concept) to Swaziland is not even being touted by the *regime* as a concession to anyone, and yet Baker sees it as such. He is impressed with these proposals being "almost breathtaking in their boldness by the standards of past regimes" (meaning governments formed by the same Nazi-like Nationalist party since 1948—see his preceding paragraph).

He goes on quite accurately about the threat from the Afrikaners' extreme Right, but I ask myself why someone writing in the name of a Council on *Religion* and International Affairs should be so complacent and accepting of such a vicious regime. Does the fact that this regime *professes* to be Christian and is a part of Western democracy or the "free world" mean that it is therefore somewhat less evil than the totalitarian regimes of the East or of the Communist bloc (because they profess atheism)? And why are even the worst forms of capitalist exploitation seen by certain "Christian" commentators not for what they are but as somehow more Christian than even the best forms of socialism—even though socialism would appear to be a fairly obvious political interpretation of the New Testament, and even of the Old.

It seems to me there is something very strange going on and I wish someone could give me even a partially honest justification for these distortions of Christianity and Religion. I suggest these are merely manifestations of human greed and an attempt at securing special privilege rather than out of any real altruistic sentiment.

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Ross Baker Replies:

The letter of Dr. Dommisse reminds me of the story of the disobedient dog who would run away and, upon his return, receive a beating from his master. The story is told to illustrate the fact that, as far as the dog was concerned, he was being punished for returning, not for running away. The notion that South Africa be punished even more harshly when it attempts—albeit belatedly and inadequately—to reform its political system suggests a rather thoroughgoing ignorance of the principles of behavior modification.

We lectured South Africa about integrating sports, and, after their initial refusal followed by a protracted period of foot-dragging, they finally agreed to interracial sports. They were then told by the international sports community that integrated South African teams were not welcome on the grounds that there can be "no normal sports in an abnormal society." To be sure, South Africa is an abnormal place, but why rebuff them when they make a modest gesture toward normalization?

The reasons for the lack of credibility of South Africa's reforms are largely of that country's own making. For so long did they dig in their heels and refuse to countenance modifications of apartheid that their belated efforts have been greeted with the understandable cynicism reflected in Dr. Dommisse's letter.

But those who sense that there is more than meets the eye in Prime Minister P. W. Botha's constitutional proposals to draw Asians and Coloureds into the electorate—and I am one of them—are under an obligation to make the case that what Botha has proposed is not just some public relations scam designed to deflect the tide of international indignation.

My fundamental belief that Botha does want to move South Africa off dead-center is based on the conviction that he runs a real risk of splitting Afrikanerdom over the question of according political rights to two nonwhite groups. He is already faced with the emergence of a new right-wing political party under the leadership of Andries Treurnicht, the former National party leader in the Transvaal, and with the continuing opposition of the Herstigte Nasionale Partei. In the recent by-election in the Germiston district, the two right-wing groups amassed more votes than the National party candidate although the split conservative vote gave the seat to the Nats.

There is no doubt in my mind that if South Africa pulls out of Namibia as the result of the negotiations with the Western contact group, the combined effect of that shock with the constitutional proposals could well produce a right-wing majority in the next national election. Would Botha risk a repetition of the schism in Afrikanerdom akin to the one that took place in the 1930s just to gull world public opinion? I seriously doubt it.

Botha's problem, as I see it, is that having embarked on a modest process of reform, he is now condemned, simultaneously, by those who want no movement at all and those who see his efforts as tokenism. His most immediate and serious problem is with the former group, but it is doubtful that he will ever get the approval of the latter even if his future proposals are broadened to encompass South Africa's black population.

The latter group—as represented by