

## *The Failure and the Hope*

WALKER PERCY

Those of us in the South who call ourselves Christians have come face to face with the most critical and paradoxical moment in our history. The crisis is the Negro revolution. The paradox lies in this: that the hope for the future — and both the hope and the promise, in my opinion and for reasons which shall follow, were never greater — requires as its condition of fulfillment the strictest honesty in assessing the dimensions of our failure.

What lies at issue is whether or not the South will bring to bear its particular tradition and its particular virtues to humanize a national revolution which is in the main secular and which is going to be accomplished willy-nilly with or without the Christian contribution—or whether it will yield the field by default.

The failure of the Christian in the South has been both calamitous and unremarkable. And perhaps that is the worst of it: that no one finds the failure remarkable, not we who ought to know better, not the victims of our indifference who confess the same Christ, and not even the world who witnessed our failure. No one was surprised. The world which said many years ago, "See how the Christians love one another," would presumably have been surprised if these earlier Christians had violated each other or turned their backs upon the violation. Now as then the children of the world are wiser than the children of light: they witnessed the failure we concealed from ourselves and found it not in the least remarkable.

The world in fact does not think badly of us. It holds us generally speaking to be good, an

asset to the community. The sickness of Christendom may lie in fact in this: that we are judged by the world and even to a degree have come to judge ourselves as but one of a number of "groups" or institutions which have a "good" impact on society. One thinks of those panel programs and seminars on educational TV which set out to explore the means of combatting juvenile delinquency, crime in the streets, drug addiction and so on. Someone on the panel usually gets around to listing the forces for good in the community which can be enlisted in the battle. There is the home, the schools, the labor unions, the business community; and there are the churches . . . .

And in the matter of racial injustice, the churches are treated with the same respectful impartiality. The media approvingly report the news that such and such a bishop has integrated the parochial schools or that this or that minister has joined a bi-racial committee, in much the same tone with which they report that IBM has set up its own Fair Employment Practices Committee. The bad behavior of Christians is not treated as any worse or more scandalizing than bad behavior anywhere else. When God is invoked by the Klan and the Citizens' Councils, when ministers open the meeting with a prayer; when white Catholics in Louisiana get in fist fights with Negro Catholics on the church steps, nobody cries shame. The world does not laugh and in fact is not even pleased. Because, as everyone knows, churches are, generally speaking, on the list of good institutions and

do in fact make valuable contributions to the community — along with the home, the school, the media . . . .

Christians in the South should, of all people, know better. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that if they don't know better then Christendom is indeed sick unto death. But in their heart of hearts they do know better. Because the South, more so than the rest of the country, is still Christ-haunted, to use an expression of Flannery O'Connor. Whatever the faults of the South, it is perhaps the only section of the United States where the public and secular consciousness is still to a degree informed by theological habits of thought, the old notions of sin, of heaven and hell, of God's providence, however abused and shopworn these notions may be. Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic novelist, counted it her great good fortune to have been born and raised and to work in the Protestant South. In the Catholic novel she claimed, "the center of meaning will be Christ and the center of destruction will be the devil." The South has always known this, even when its morality was mainly concerned with sex and alcohol to the exclusion of ordinary human cruelty. And the Southerner is apt to inherit, almost despite himself, a theological turn of mind. More likely than not he has grown up in a place drenched in tragedy and memory and to have known first hand a rich and complex world of human relationships which are marked by a special grace and a special cruelty and guilt.

Our region, I submit, is to a larger degree informed by theological habits of thought than the rest of the country. And those of us who are professing Christians have better reason than most to understand the theological basis and consequences of our actions and less excuse to fall victim to the sociological heresy which sees the Church as but one among several "good" institutions which can be used to engineer a democratic society.

It is all the more shameful then that the failure is precisely a theological failure. How much more tolerable would have been our position if it had fallen out otherwise, if we could have said to the secular liberals of the Northern cities: yes, it is true that we differ radically from you in our view of the nature of man and the end of man, that we have reservations about your goal of constructing the city of God here and now; further, we don't like some of the things you tolerate in your perfect city. But we applaud your attack on the perennial evils of poverty, inhumanity and disease, and we too believe that men can be reconciled here and now but that they can only be reconciled through the meditation of God and the love of men for

God's sake. We strive for the same goals; we say only that you deceive yourself in imagining that you can achieve these goals without God.

But we can't even say that. The defect has occurred on the grounds of our own choosing. The failure has been a failure of love, a violation of that very Mystical Body of Christ which we have made our special property at the risk of scandalizing the world by our foolishness. A scandal has occurred right enough, but it has not been the scandal intended by the Gospels. The failure, that is to say, has occurred within the very order of *sin* which we have taken so seriously and the world so lightly. Where we have failed worst is not in the sphere of community action wherein little store is set by theological values. Churches indeed have not done at all badly in discharging their sociological functions, combatting juvenile delinquency and broken homes and alcoholism. The failure has been rather the continuing and unreflecting cruelty of Christians toward the Negro, the Negro considered not as beloved household pet ("Cruelty? No! Why, I would do anything for Uncle Ned and he for me!") but considered as member of the same Mystical Body, freed and dignified by the same covenant which frees and dignifies us. The sin has been the sin of omission, specifically the Great Southern Sin of Silence. During the past ten years, the first ten years of the Negro revolution, a good deal was heard about the "good" people of the South, comprising the vast majority, who deplored the violence and who any day would make themselves felt. But these good people are yet to be heard from. If every Christian era has its besetting sin, the medieval Church its inquisitional cruelty, 18th Century Anglicanism its Laodiceanism, the 20th Century Christian South might well be remembered by its own peculiar mark: *silence*.

The default of the white Southern Christian was revealed in its proper ironic perspective by the Civil Rights movement itself. When the good people of the South did not come forward when they were needed, their burden was shouldered by, of all people, the liberal humanist who, like the man St. Paul speaks of in his epistle to the Ephesians, is stranger to every covenant, with no promise to hope for, the world about him and no God—but who nevertheless was his brother's keeper. In the deep South of the nineteen sixties, the man who nursed the sick, bound his wounds, taught the ignorant, fed the hungry, went to jail with the imprisoned, were not the Christians of Birmingham or Bogalusa but were, more likely than not, the young CORE professionals or COFO volunteers, Sarah Lawrence sociology majors, agnostic Jewish social workers like Mickey Schwerner, Camus existentialists and the like.

It is possible for a Southerner to criticize his region in the harshest possible terms, not because he thinks the South is worse than the rest of the country and can only be saved by the Berkeley-Cambridge axis but for the exactly opposite reason: that, in spite of her failures, he suspects that it may very likely fall to the destiny of the South to save the country from the Berkeley-Cambridge axis. If this should prove the case, it is not simply because cities like Los Angeles and New York are exhibiting an almost total paralysis and fecklessness when confronted with Watts and Harlem, while at the same time Atlanta and Greenville are doing comparatively better. (Truthfully I think the South is "doing better" for an odd mixture of Southern and Northern reasons, none of which have much to do with Christianity, for example, Southern good humor and social grace plus a sharp Yankee eye for the dollar and the "public image.") No, the criticism is levelled and the game is worth the candle because, at least in one Southerner's opinion, the ultimate basis for racial reconciliation must be theological rather than legal and sociological and that in the South, perhaps more than in any other region, the civil and secular consciousness is still sufficiently informed by a theological tradition to provide a sanction for racial reconciliation. (By contrast, the Catholic Church in other parts of the country also provides a powerful sanction but it is a purely religious sanction and not necessarily reflected in the habitual attitudes of civil bodies such as legislatures and school boards.) The South can, that is, if she wants to. She can just as easily choose the opposite course, like Protestant South Africa.

## II

The thesis that it may fall to the South to save the Union just as it fell to the North one hundred years ago, might appear not merely paradoxical but in the highest degree fanciful. Yet there are, I believe, good and sufficient reasons for entertaining special hopes for the future, not the least of which is the coming into being of peculiarly Southern groups of Christian churchmen. Like Israel, the South is still killing God's messengers, men like Reeb, Daniel, and Morrisroe, but at least she is killing them and not ignoring them, or worse, conferring upon them lukewarm Civitan honors. And now she may have new prophets.

There are also historical reasons which are largely negative and have to do with the failure of other "good" traditions, traditions which, noble though they might have been and still are, do not perhaps possess the interior resources of renewal which seems to be the perennial and saving gift of Christianity. These failures have cleared the

ideological air as it has not been cleared since the first slave came ashore in Virginia. In the failure of old alternatives, future choices become plainer.

The traditions in question and their respective historical difficulties are: (1) the collapse of the old-style "good" white man in the South and the dramatic disintegration of his alliance with the Negro, and (2) the on-going demoralization of the secular urban-suburban middle-class society, the very culture from which so many of the Civil Rights activists derive.

The thesis of this article, for which there is not room to lay the proper ground, let alone defend, is that the major ideological source of racial moderation in the South has not been Christian at all but Stoic, that this tradition has now collapsed, that in spite of its nobility (or perhaps because of its nobility) it possessed fatal weaknesses and therefore served as a distracting and confusing alternative to racism, and finally that its collapse has confronted Christians with a crucial test the outcome of which will be unequivocal triumph or unequivocal disaster. The chips, that is to say, are down and it is time they were.

The degree of reconciliation achieved under this noble and mainly non-Christian ethic was more considerable than is generally realized. As a result of the old "fusion principle", as it was known, the Negro in the deep South enjoyed more civil rights in the period immediately following Reconstruction than at any time afterwards—until the last few months. Restaurants and trains were not segregated. Congressman Catchings of Mississippi, one of the noblest of the Old Redeemers, reported that there were more Negro officeholders in his district than in the entire North. This alliance, it is important to note, was struck between the Negro and the white conservative against the poor whites and the Radical Republicans. It has been this same white conservative leadership which in many parts of the South exerted a more or less consciously moderate racial influence even after it was politically overwhelmed by the latter-day Populist-racists, Vardaman, Heflin, Bilbo and their followers. The old alliance with the Negro was in part politically motivated. But it also had a strong moral basis. It is the contention here that this morality was paternalistic and Stoic in character and that it derived little or none of its energies from Christian theology. Even in those instances where the best Southern leaders were, like Robert E. Lee, professing Christians, James McBride Dabbs has shown that there was a strong Stoic component in their character formation. Perhaps the most distinguishing mark and, as it turned out, the greatest weakness of the Stoic morality, was its exclusively

personal character and its consequent indifference to the social and political commonweal. The Stoic took as his model, either consciously or unconsciously, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius who wrote in his *Meditations*, "Every moment think steadily, as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity and a feeling of affection and freedom and justice." Such a moral ideal, lofty as it is, has largely to do with the housekeeping of one's interior castle, specifically the maintenance of its order and the brightness of one's personal honor. In the light of such a code, the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ wherein each of us is a member, one of another, and no one is inviolate in the precincts of his soul, must remain incomprehensible.

But it was they, the Stoics, who lived by their lights and we who did not. The best of them kept the old broadsword virtues while the Christians by and large egregiously sinned against their own commandments, through commission and omission—in the latter case through an impoverished morality restricted largely to rules for the use of sex and alcohol. It was the Christians in the South who supplied the main ideological support for slavery. It is the Christians now who still underwrite segregation with Levitical quotations and Ham-Shem sociology. Nor is it enough to say that Christ was no social reformer and that St. Paul wasn't worried about freeing slaves. Where the Southern Christian failed was on his own ground, in his own performance in the face of here-and-now cruelty and suffering and inhumanity.

Even when the Christian did come to the aid of the afflicted and abused Negro, he often did so for Stoic reasons, with the old benevolence and the sense of personal bond toward Uncle Ned and Aunt Jemima but without that larger and more mysterious charity which at one and the same time binds men close and sets them free, one of another, and does not keep books on gratitude.

Most of us have known the old tradition first hand and recall it with affection and admiration. I remember in the most vivid way long conversations with my uncle about the plantation system. At that time—in the 1930's—the sharecropper system was coming under heavy attack from "Northern liberals." As a planter, my uncle felt that the attacks were unjust. He believed that the sharecropper system was an outgrowth of a natural partnership between the Confederate veterans who had nothing left but the land and the Negroes who had nothing but their labor. No doubt he was right. To justify its use in modern times, he cited his own experience and that of his friends, who dealt with their tenants, more than honorably,

serving also as father and friend. To behave with dishonor was to these men a detestable thing, but to mistreat a Negro was unthinkable, precisely because the Negro was helpless. But other men, a great many other men, were not so scrupulous. And the Negro remained helpless, precisely because he had no entity in the public order of things and neither law nor religion felt constrained to underwrite such an entity.

We may speak now of the old tradition without fear of patronizing it, because it was it and not the Christian tradition which fleshed out some of the noblest men this country has produced. We may go even further. As Dabbs wrote in his remarkable book, *Who Speaks for the South?*, the final evidence that there was something wrong with the South as a society, that in the last analysis it was not a great society, was that it produced neither saints nor great artists.

Stoic excellence, in short, was not enough. Its code had little relevance in the social and political order. For not only was there the tendency to wash one's hands of prevailing social evils, there was ever the temptation to *Schadenfreude*, the peculiar sin of the Stoic, a grim sort of pleasure to be taken in the very deterioration of society, the crashing of the world about one's ears. Southern literature is full of direful, eschatological—and pleasurable—reports of the decline and fall of both the South and the United States.

Though it was defeated politically around 1890, the Stoic tradition has persisted until recently. Nearly everyone in the South has known someone like Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* with his quite Attic sense of decency (and his correspondingly low regard for Christianity) and his courage before the lynch mob. It is, however, this very Stoic tradition which has finally collapsed as a significant influence in the Southern community. The old conservative often became the new conservative, that is, a segregationist and "States' Righter." The force for moderation is now more likely to be the business man—the "power structure"—the mayor, the manager of the new IBM center or the NASA complex who wants no part of the K.K.K. or the Citizens' Councils, though for reasons which have nothing to do with Christ or with Marcus Aurelius.

The ideological vacuum created by the failure of the gentle tradition has been filled not by Christians but by other elements, the moderate business community and the secular reformer. The Christian clergy has been increasingly active but the inertness of cultural Christendom is well-known. Is it possible that this well-known lag between clergy and laity can be traced to still viable Stoic

elements in Christendom considered as a cultural artifact which one inherits more or less passively as he inherits language and custom?

There is not much doubt about the existence of such a lag. An increasingly familiar fact of life in the Southern parish, Protestant and Catholic, has come to be the tension between the "radical" new minister or priest and his "conservative" flock. There are the usual grumblings about brainwashing in the seminary. But is this lag to be understood in purely socio-political terms of liberal *vs* conservative? I think not, because this particular bias has proved quite as refractory to pulpit appeals as to political appeals. I suspect that a good deal of the offense taken can be laid to a fundamental Stoic offense to any demand for public appeal and political morality. There is still the old reflex which somehow rules the preacher out of bounds when he talks about social morality as well as sexual morality. The very man who will get up at all hours to get Ol' Jim out of jail and even risk his life to protect Ol' Jim from the lynch mob is also outraged when Jim's sons demand better schools and better police — not come hat in hand but demand them as ordinary rights of a citizen. And of course the fact is that many of the old-style "good" people, both Christian and Stoic, have now turned against the Negro because of what they deem his "insolence." "If the Negro had not become aggressive," a good Christian man told me the other day, "I'd still be on his side. It is these demonstrations, his *demanding* rights of me, which changed my attitude." Of *me*? Here is the heart of the matter certainly: it is where the rights are deemed to come from which causes the offense.

Such a response can be traced, I believe, to an antique Southern preoccupation, not with theology, as a rule of social intercourse, but with *manners*. By manners I do not refer in this context to that courtesy which one Christian awards another by virtue of the infinite value he assigns to the other's person but rather to manners understood as a primary concern with an intercourse of gesture, a minuet of overture and response. It is an economy of gesture which in its accounting of debits and credits, of generosity given and gratitude expected, of face and loss of face, which is almost Oriental. (Note also the similarities of the classic Stoic tradition with certain Oriental moral philosophies.) A great part of the social intercourse between whites and Negroes in the South, I daresay, was founded on a complex and meticulously observed protocol of manners. And it came to pass that an extraordinary social fabric was woven between black and white using these very elements and in the face of the most trying circumstances. Nor is

this to say that this Southern tradition of manners is irrelevant to the problems of the day. It would be a great pity indeed if the ordinary everyday good manners of Southerners, black and white, should be overturned in the present revolution.

But the American Negro in 1965 may reply that the social graces of his ancestors in Alabama didn't in the end do him or them much good. It is his present "bad manners" which now offend his old ally—though in all honesty I must admit that the opposite seems the case: the continued "good manners" of the Southern Negro is nothing short of amazing. The point is of course that in a society based largely on an intercourse of manners even the mildest public and political action taken to redress grievances is apt to be received as a code infraction and hence "bad manners."

The old alliance failed through a fatal weakness which now stands revealed. It was based primarily on personal relationships and never really possessed the interior resources, political or religious, through which the integrity of the Negro's person could be guaranteed in its own right.

What is the lesson? The lesson is surely that at the very time the old order has collapsed and new social forces are beginning to stir the South from its long sleep, the Christian laity is still responding with old cultural reflexes to a new and somewhat unmannered order of things. Surely also, the remedy is theological, not merely preaching a gospel of reconciliation, but teaching: setting forth, that is, what is the case as well as what ought to be. What is the case is that the Christian porch is no longer habitable, that pleasant site of cultural Christendom neither quite inside the church nor altogether in the street from which one had the best of both, church on Sundays and at Baptism and marriage and death, and the rest of the time lived in the sunny old Stoa of natural grace and good manners. It doesn't work now.

### III

The Negro in the South has a new ally. He is not the old-style gentleman or Stoic or quasi-Christian but rather the liberal humanist who is, more likely than not, frankly post-Christian in his beliefs. The clergy has been active in the Civil Rights movement, sometimes heroically so, but the impetus has not in the main been theological—except among black Southern Christians but even in this case to a decreasing degree, especially among the younger Negroes. Among the volunteers of the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, it was the exception rather than the rule to come across anyone who had come to Mississippi to implement Christian principles even though the project was

sponsored by the National Council of Churches. It was rarer still to find a Southern Christian layman. And yet they were on the whole an earnest and admirable young group.

Here is a point of view, not at all atypical, expressed by one of the volunteers,

Along with my Core class I teach a religion class at one every afternoon and a class on non-violence at four fifteen . . . In religion they are being confronted for the first time with people they respect who do not believe in God and with people who do believe in God but who do not take the Bible literally. It's a challenging class because I have no desire to destroy their belief, whether Roman Catholic or Baptist, but I want them to look at things critically and to learn to separate fact from myth in all areas, not just religion.

There is no reason to doubt this statement—that this young person does not wish Baptists and Catholics to lose their faith—though a good deal could be written about the assumptions and begged questions behind the statement. What is noteworthy perhaps is a lack of seriousness, a certain casualness with which the perennially mooted religious questions are assumed to be disposed of. The old animus against the Christian proposition has been replaced by a shrug. Here, at any rate, is the new “good” man, a person of unquestionable good will and earnestness who explicitly disavows orthodox Christian belief. She places her confidence, not on the old verities, but on “facts” (that is to say, observable and replicable phenomena) and on social techniques.

This secularization of the Civil Rights movement has been largely misunderstood in the South. The failure of Southern Christendom has not only been theological—a default in the duty of reconciliation—but prophetic in its blindness both to what happened and what is to come. Confronted by a revolutionary and to a large degree non-Christian movement and obfuscated by his own Stoic reading of race relations—“we have nothing but love for our Negroes and they for us” etc.—the Southern Christian has all too often made the unhappy mistake of labelling the Civil Rights movement as Communist, immoral, Unamerican and so on. Apparently there are a few Communists involved and apparently there has been some sexual misbehavior, but this is not an occasion for rejoicing. The reason the Christian racist goes to such lengths

to discredit the new allies of the Negro and is so pleased when they uncover sexual sin is not hard to discover. For the bitterest pill for him to swallow is the fact, hardly to be contested and which in his heart he does not contest, that the Negro revolution is mainly justified, mainly peaceful (from the side of the Negroes) and mainly American. For to admit this hard reality would entail *pari passu* a confession of his own failure.

How stands the Christian then vis-a-vis the challenge of the new-style “good” man? Better off than before, I think, and less compromised than he was in his relation to the old-style Stoic quasi-Christian gentleman.

The present hope is to be found, paradoxically as it is often the case with Christian hope, in the very extremity of the failure. The old Christian porch, that is to say, is becoming increasingly uninhabitable by moderately serious persons, which is to say our best young people. It is surely not too much to say that if Southern Christendom does not soon demonstrate the relevance of its theology to the single great burning social issue in American life, it runs the risk of becoming ever more what it in fact to a degree already is, the pleasant Sunday lodge of conservative Southern business men which offends no one and which no one takes seriously.

The larger hope and opportunity of the Christian gospel lies of course in the terrible dilemma of the new “good” man himself, the denizen, we might call him, of the victorious technological-democratic society. A great deal has been written about him and his Twentieth Century sickness. Suffice it here to say only what he has said about himself: that the very urban and middle-class society from which has come so many of the earnest young revolutionaries is itself marked by the malaise and anomie and other symptoms of the new sickness. There is nothing new in this. Indeed preachers speak every Sunday about the emptiness of modern man and the One who can fill the emptiness. And they are right. But God help us here in the South (or in Chicago or Los Angeles) if we imagine that reconciliation is not our business here and now and that all we have to do is convert the Communists and bring Christ to the “empty modern man.” Because these latter are not going to be listening. The fruits, by which they had every right to know us, were too meagre.