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PROFILES IN FAITH

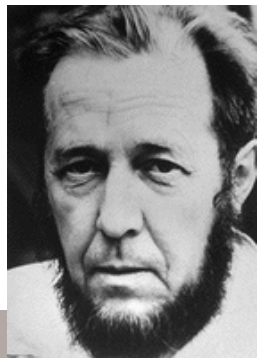
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (b. 1918)

Russian Author & Nobel Laureate

PART II: A World Split Wider Apart:

Solzhenitsyn's Harvard Speech Twenty-four Years Later

by David Aikman, *Author & Speaker*



Many people were offended by [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's commencement address at Harvard, June 8, 1978]. *The New York Times*, in an editorial two days after the speech, declared Solzhenitsyn "dangerous" and "a zealot" because he was convinced, like some Puritan of old, that he was "in possession of The Truth."[1] *The Washington Post* asserted that Solzhenitsyn not only didn't understand Western society, but carried his concern for human rights "to an unacceptable extreme." The paper declared, "He speaks for boundless cold war."[2] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., then Professor of Humanities at the City University of New York, and formerly a speechwriter for President John F. Kennedy, attributed to Solzhenitsyn a political ideal that was closer to parody than reality: "a Christian authoritarianism governed by God-fearing despots without benefit of politics, parties, undue intellectual freedom or undue concern for human happiness."[3]

Conservative Americans, by and large, applauded Solzhenitsyn, as did many ordinary Americans. When *Boston Globe* columnist Mike Barnicle wrote a broadside against the Russian, 94 of the 100 letters he received in response disagreed with him. Columnist George Will suggested that, far from displaying irascible Slavic eccentricity—a common theme of many of the critics—Solzhenitsyn's "ideas about the nature of man and the essential political problem are broadly congruent with the ideas of Cicero and other ancients, and those of Augustine, Richard Hooker, Pascal, Thomas More, Burke, Hegel and others." Michael Novak, resident scholar in religion and public policy at the American Enterprise Institute, described the commencement address as "the most important religious document of our time." Solzhenitsyn, said Novak, "was saved by faith in the power of simple truth. His was not solely a salvation for his soul through faith in Jesus Christ; it was also a ray of light for the entire race of men."[4] Not surprisingly, critics in principle of religion objected precisely to Solzhenitsyn's religiosity. "Theology is irrelevant not only to democracy and capitalism and socialism as social systems," Hook insisted, "but to the validity of morality itself."[5]

Solzhenitsyn was obviously perceptive in his denunciation of a spirit of defeatism that afflicted much of the U.S. after the American debacle in Saigon in April 1975. Democratic President Jimmy Carter himself had spoken publicly, before the Harvard speech, about a "malaise" of spirit in the country. Even before the U.S. hostage crisis in Iran, which began in 1979, one year after the commencement speech, many observers wondered whether the U.S. had now become a "helpless giant" in the international arena. Yet, in hindsight, though Solzhenitsyn cannily grasped the flimsiness of American morale among the country's intelligentsia, he under-estimated the nation's formidable internal resilience. This American quality became apparent when the electorate selected Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. Reagan rejected the view that Soviet communism was something that could, at best, be "managed," and was here indefinitely. He was as convinced as Solzhenitsyn was that the entire doctrine and system was destined to end up on the garbage heap of history. Americans in the 1980s might not have been convinced that SDI would actually work, but they unquestionably rallied to Reagan's robust challenge to Moscow to bring to an end its grip upon the nations of Eastern Europe. In effect, Americans, consciously or not, absorbed Solzhenitsyn's denunciations of cowardice and readjusted their approach to their Cold War adversary.

Yet Solzhenitsyn's critique of the vulgarity and weakness of American popular culture, including its media, surely is as applicable today as it was in 1978. Very little has changed for the better since then. In 1978, Solzhenitsyn insisted that "the right of people *not to know*, not to have their divine souls stuffed with gossip, nonsense, vain talk" was more important than insisting that the First Amendment right of freedom of speech permitted absolutely anything to be said at any time.[6] A bare 15 years after Solzhenitsyn

spoke at Harvard, American fascination with the tawdry reached its nadir in the TV coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial and later, the Lorena Bobbit affair. The news network CNN actually interrupted its regular "news" programing to let viewers know that jurors had reached a verdict in the Bobbit trial. More recently, we have been subjected to an endless panorama of network "reality shows," 24-hour camera coverage of the trivial, the vulgar, and the mean in situations artificially concocted to force participants to scheme against each other. Solzhenitsyn today would certainly have censured the networks; but he might also have excoriated America's jaded couch potatoes as well.

It is worth asking ourselves whether the philosophical core of Solzhenitsyn's 1978 complaints about popular culture is not applicable in today's world. Godlessness—the absence of any cultural awareness of responsibility to the divine—is as abundant in national life in the U.S. today as it was a quarter-century ago. Solzhenitsyn categorized it all as "the prevailing Western view of the world which was born in the Renaissance and has found political expression since the Age of Enlightenment." "Is it true that man is above everything? Is there no Superior Spirit above him?" Solzhenitsyn asked.[7]

There is little doubt that Solzhenitsyn at Harvard was already pre-figuring the "culture wars" of the 1990s. Today, as in 1978, there is a muted, usually subterranean war between intellectual forces on one side who describe themselves as "progressive" and those on the other who are advocates of a Judeo-Christian world view. The former deny the possibility of moral absolutes or a divine mandate for cultural values; the latter believe that a rejection of these very things will lead to moral and social chaos.

The repudiation of post-Enlightenment optimism about human progress was one aspect of the Harvard speech that provoked the fiercest response from Solzhenitsyn's critics, even among those who agreed with other aspects of the Solzhenitsyn cultural critique. We have already cited Sidney Hook. The element of post-Enlightenment thought that most offended Solzhenitsyn, in the speech, was the "way of thinking" which "did not admit the existence of intrinsic evil in man" and which envisaged no higher task for the human race "than the attainment of happiness on earth."[8] Strikingly, Solzhenitsyn took issue with the core outlook of post-modernism, a term that was not even in general currency in 1978. As the concept has come to be defined, it almost invariably implies rejection of the existence of moral absolutes and the idea that personal taste is a self-validating principle for choice in human behavior. In this respect, had Solzhenitsyn been making the Harvard speech in 1998, he would surely have mentioned post-modernism by name.

It is reflective of the shadow that the Cold War cast upon America back in 1978 that critics of Solzhenitsyn at the time focused more on the particulars of his critique of America and the West than on the underlying premise. The world, this Solzhenitsyn premise held, was "split apart" because the post-Enlightenment divorce of humankind from its responsibility towards God had affected both the "materialist" world of communist nations and the "materialist" lives of people living in nations that still enjoyed political freedom. Though Western nations were indeed free, Solzhenitsyn argued in the first few paragraphs of the Harvard address, they would have to pay a sizeable historical bill to the countries that they themselves had subjected to colonial rule in the past. Solzhenitsyn warned that there was "Western incomprehension" of cultures that were "ancient and deeply-rooted, self-contained." He specifically referred to China, India, the Muslim world, Africa, even Israel, as belonging to this category.

In retrospect, it is probable that Solzhenitsyn would have forcefully attacked globalization, not in the sense of wishing to deny to diverse nations the fruits of global economic integration, but because he is likely to have deplored in this phenomenon the unregulated global spread of the lowest common denominator of cultural trash created in the West. In a speech to the Russian Duma (parliament) in 1995, Solzhenitsyn deplored the spreading into Russian society of some of the worst cultural vulgarity manufactured within capitalism.

As he looked into the future in 1978, it is unlikely that Solzhenitsyn had more than the vaguest sense of how a worldwide Islamic revolution would be unleashed by the coming to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran early in 1979. But much that has happened globally since the terrorist attacks on America of September 11, 2002 has validated his misgivings and confirmed his prescience. Americans who have asked themselves in magazine editorials, "Why do they hate us?" in reference to global Islamic anti-Americanism, have obviously not reflected on what Solzhenitsyn at Harvard called "the riddles and surprises" the West would likely encounter from non-Western nations in the future. Such "riddles and surprises," in Solzhenitsyn's view, derived from one simple fact: the West has systematically denied the "special character" of many global cultures, complacently assuming that the whole world was simply waiting to follow in its own particular pathway of development.

In this sense, Solzhenitsyn at Harvard was in part prefiguring Samuel Huntington's thesis of the "clash of

civilizations." But only in part. Whereas Huntington was philosophically agnostic on the relative virtues of (predominantly secular) Western civilization compared with other (often theistic) civilizations, Islam, for example, Solzhenitsyn's warning at Harvard was that the West might be in for some unpleasant encounters precisely because of its post-Enlightenment embrace of humanistic autonomy as a core value. Unwilling to acknowledge the existence of evil in all human beings and societies, Solzhenitsyn argued, the West would encounter many "riddles and surprises."

One of those surprises, of course, has turned out to be the transformation of Islam the religion in some parts of the Muslim world to the totalitarian political ideology of Islamism. The writings of Osama bin Laden, his followers, and of other Islamists, make clear that the end of the Cold War in 1991 did not ensure the end of ideology as such. On the contrary, Islamism has emerged as the pre-eminent totalitarian ideology attempting to unite the Muslim world in a global assault not just on the West (the haven of hated Christians and Jews), but on civilization itself. If Islamism succeeded globally, the entire human race would be governed by a theocratic dictatorship unwilling to accept any criticism or dissent that did not first submit to Islamic religious first principles. In effect, all non-Islamic world-views and perspectives would be outlawed. Books would probably be burned, philosophers and writers executed, and their supporters beaten and imprisoned.

But just as the end of the Cold War did away with the need for a principled Western philosophical opposition to totalitarian ideology, so the lack of any major external threat helped nurture postmodernist subjectivism. Critics of postmodernism have argued that it is one of the most dangerous threats to the continuation of civilized life under the law in the Western world. One thing post-modernism does is render subjective social and political judgments that hitherto could be critiqued according to generally accepted criteria. Thus, 24 years after Solzhenitsyn's Harvard speech, the West is now challenged both by a new, vigorous, and dangerously unpredictable new totalitarianism emanating from overseas and by a philosophical deconstructionism from within that appears to challenge many of the traditionally accepted notions of self restraint and virtue.

How, it may be asked, does Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address impact this situation? Almost as if he is responding to this question, Daniel J. Mahoney, in an important new study of Solzhenitsyn's thought, encapsulates the genius of Solzhenitsyn's thought very precisely in his "ascent from ideology." He writes:

As the French political theorist Chantal Delsol has recently observed,

> Solzhenitsyn is the scourge of the Manicheanism that is at the heart of ideological thinking. The failure to appreciate the drama of the human soul—that fact that good and evil pulsate through every human heart—united both totalitarian and postmodernist thinking. The first locates evil in a historically antiquated class that must be overcome and eliminated in order to allow 'humanity' to flourish. The latter finds evil in oppressive structures of racial and gender domination. The ascent from ideology entails first and foremost a rejection of a Manicheanism that inevitably leads to spiritual petrification as well as to violence and tyranny....The ascent from ideology is a precondition for the recovery of philosophy properly understood—for the articulation of those universal experiences that define the human condition.[9]

By rudely reminding us of the reality of evil throughout the human condition and in every human heart, Solzhenitsyn at Harvard jolted the West out of any complacent concept of "convergence" between East and West, or any smug notion that the wrongness of communism automatically entailed the triumph of capitalist democracy. He also pointed out that no civilization is likely to endure without two additional components: awareness of the sense of dependence on the Almighty (which Solzhenitsyn quaintly calls at one point "the supreme complete entity"), and the courage, if necessary, to defend itself to death. If those qualities are still forcefully present at least in American life, then Solzhenitsyn at Harvard should be seen as a prophet whose warnings were indeed heeded, and whose predictions of future catastrophe were thus laid aside—at least for now.

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[1] Ronald Berman, et al., editor, *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard: The Address, Twelve Early Responses, and Six Later Reflections (*Washington D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980) p. 24

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., pp. 66-67

[4] Ibid., p. 105

[5] Ibid., p. 93

[6] Ibid., p. 10

[7] Ibid., p. 16

[8] Ibid., p. 17

The text of Solzhenitsyn's speech "A World Split Apart" may be read online at:

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978html

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