

Then and Now: A Staggering Decline Revealed by Newspaper Cuttings

Compiled by William Stoddart, CreateSpace, 2018, 110 pp.

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos



The passing grains of sand from one end of the hourglass to the other symbolize the ephemeral nature of the crystalizing world of appearances and of all that it consists. The observer will note that nothing in this realm remains the same and that all is fleeting, changing moment by moment. Yet how is the human being to position himself or herself given this transience? It is from the vantage point of hindsight that we can make sense of the past and acquire an understanding of these events. Through metaphysics we can restore our awareness of temporal events in order to be centered on the timeless Present to fully understand the past, present and future.

One of the great art historians of the twentieth century, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), often quoted the phrase of John Lodge that underscores the downward inertia and fundamental decline that characterizes the passage of time: "From the Stone Age until now, *Quelle dégringolade!*"¹ (p. vi) Amid this generally downward trend there are occasional rectifications and reversals. As Stoddart points out, it is not all bad news:

¹ John Lodge, quoted in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Letter to Sidney L. Gulick - May 6, 1943," in *Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, eds. Alvin Moore, Jr. and Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 67.

Here now is an important point: while the emphasis in this book is on decline—and enough evidence has been adduced in support of this—it must not remain unmentioned that not everything in the last 50 - 60 years has declined: *some things have actually gotten better!* (p. viii)

In analyzing the “now and then”, it is easy to be charged with entertaining nostalgic or romantic notions of the past. Most contemporaries would argue that things have always been the way that they are today and that not much has changed. Embedded in this assumption is that not much if anything can come from such analysis as the past is the past. Yet, a probing analysis and understanding can indeed help resolve the escalating complex and compounded crises facing the contemporary world.

The compiler of this work, William Stoddart (b. 1925), was the assistant editor of the British journal, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, and is also the author of numerous books. One of Stoddart’s gifts is his capacity to distill sizable amounts of complex information into a few words and for this reason he has been regarded as a “master of synthesis”.² Stoddart made it his practice to collect cuttings from periodicals dealing with religion and spirituality, ecumenical or interfaith dialogue and social norms spanning the years of 1957 to 1969, including some cuttings from the 1970s. This collection constitutes a valuable storehouse of information that both documents and comparatively illuminates the immense deterioration that has occurred over time. Stoddart explains that “The whole point of this book is the degree to which things have declined in the last 50-60 years.” (p. viii) The nuanced way these article clippings capture this trajectory along with Stoddart’s commentaries on the cuttings is captivating and informative to say the least.

An important dimension of this work is how the clippings overlap with the advent of the Vatican II Council of 1962-1965, which dealt a deathblow not only to the Christian tradition but arguably to all religion. Numerous clippings pertain to the follow-up to the Vatican II and others to the immediate post-Vatican II period. The Vatican II Council falsified the traditional doctrines of the Catholic Church and effectively rendered its sacraments invalid. An example of this is evident in how the Tridentine Mass was replaced by the “New Mass” or *Novus Ordo*

² Mateus Soares de Azevedo, “Book Review: Outline of Buddhism,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Volume 4, Number 2 (Winter 1998), p. 277.

Missae (“New Order of the Mass”) introduced by Pope Paul VI (1897-1978) in 1969, which reformed the Catholic liturgy. This dire situation was not unforeseen by the last traditional Pope, Pius XII (1876-1958), who is reported to have said, “The day is coming soon when the faithful will only be able to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the mass on the secret altar of the heart.” (p. 48) That said, most Catholics are unaware of the devastating impact of the Vatican II reforms, and that the last six “popes” are, from a traditional standpoint, false. The sacred origins and symbolism of the Mass are, according to traditional doctrine, a revealed mystery, supra-human in origin and cannot therefore be changed by man. Through faith, however, the Divine is never absent. As Jesus stated, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (*Matthew* 28:20) Through faithful remembrance of the Divine, guidance subsists, for, as Jesus avowed, “I will lead you into all truth” (*John* 16:13).

The “sedevacantists” (from the Latin *sede vacante*, or “empty chair”) are traditionalist Catholics who uphold that “the See of Peter is vacant”, meaning that there is no true and authentic Pope nowadays, Pope Pius XII being regarded by them as the final authentic Pope. Given how prominently that Pope features in his book, Stoddart notes, “at a quick glance, one might readily assume that this book was all about Pope Pius XII! In fact, his prominence here is merely because it was more or less his century. He played a significant role in it. It was his heyday.” (p. x) He adds, “It is generally recognized by all parties that the posthumous architect of the Vatican II Council was Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955).” (p. x) Even though Pope Pius XII issued a *monitum* or warning against Teilhardism and banned Catholic libraries from carrying his books, after Pope Pius XII’s death, these writings flooded the book market and obtained wide notoriety. Although his so-called findings in paleontology were exposed as fraudulent by fellow paleontologists, he nonetheless maintained his influential hold on Catholic thought, and his views remain popular today.

In contrast with the current overarching narrative of conflict between religions, the cuttings document numerous testimonies of friendly attitudes among the faiths. One article quotes from a priest expressing the amity between the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), specifically Christians and Muslims:

You must remember that the Moslems respect our religion because, as they put it, it has been revealed by God—in the Bible, as Islam is based on the Koran. Our Lady, Saint John, and other saints are recognized as men of God by the Koran. The Moslems have a particularly deep veneration for Our Lady... (p. 5)

In another article, we find an important statement about recognizing the legitimacy of faith traditions other than our own: "Respect for each other's religious beliefs does not mean that one has to give up one's own convictions." (p. 9) One can remain faithful to one's own religion and at the same time recognize the validity of other religions. The Roman Catholic Bishops of Nigeria express their deepest affection and connection with Muslims in their common goal: "we are united against tendencies towards materialism and secularism". (p. 21) As the scripture states, "The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (*Psalms* 14:1)

With regard to the Christian and Buddhist traditions, it is recalled that the Burmese Prime Minister, U Nu (1907-1995), wrote to Pope Pius XII, "I have become more than ever convinced that the Roman Catholic Church is a unifying force against the forces of darkness and ignorance which constantly menace the world." (p. 30) U Nu also gave his "solemn pledge" that the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion of Burma would not affect the guarantee of freedom of religion for its people. While the country identified itself as Buddhist, it also permitted its citizens to be of other faiths and to practice those faiths freely, without hindering their participating in the greater society. There was also friendship between Christians and Buddhists in Ceylon (or present-day Sri Lanka) which urged both groups to live in accordance with their faith, creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding and solidarity between them.

Pope Pius XII once made an inspired declaration that is particularly profound given misunderstandings that characterize the spiritual crisis of our age. He acknowledged the piety of Muslims and their peaceful faith of submission to the Deity: "How consoling it is for me to know that, all over the world, millions of people, five times a day, bow down before God." (p. 48)

Stoddart laments the disfiguration encountered within modern art through its dissociation from the Sacred, a matter seldom recognized or pondered today:

Modern art has many forms—but not one of them is legitimate; every one of them is either deviated or degenerate or both. The difference between conventional art (however trite or sentimental) and modern art is blindingly clear, yet this is the “elephant in the room” that enthusiasts for modern art are either unable or unwilling to see.” (p. 63)

An interesting cutting expresses Paul Gauguin’s (1848-1903) vision of art, which differentiates modern art from sacred art: “Primitive art proceeds from the spirit and makes use of nature.” (p. 80) How this differs from naturalism is further documented here, “Nature demeans man’s spirit by allowing him to adore her. That is the way by which we have tumbled into the abominable error of naturalism.” (p. 80)

As an antidote to the contemporary malaise, Stoddart emphasizes the importance of returning to one’s religion and its inner or mystical dimension as informed by its sacred texts, saints and sages. By way of example, he recommends the following for Christians, yet this extends in its own diverse way to people of all faiths in regard to their own scriptures, “People in the West badly need to undertake a *close reading* of the Gospels, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse, and to take careful note of what these Scriptures actually say.” (p. 19) In these turbulent times, any interfaith dialogue needs to be informed by what lies at the heart of all religions and from which they all flower forth.

In these confusing and divisive times, we are burdened with information, often in ways in which the good is masqueraded as the bad and the bad as the good. In such a topsy-turvy milieu, Truth is greatly questioned and in jeopardy of being unrecognized. More than ever, discernment is needed because one is dealing with matters of great nuance, with endless shades of gray.

What emerges for the reader of *Then And Now* is a portrait of the immense decline and “intellectual regress” that has occurred in today’s world. How have things degenerated before our very eyes? These clippings document this gradual process in a compelling way. This book is truly unique and it captures the *signs of the times* through its evident disintegrating trajectory. William Stoddart expresses that the point of view which informs his commentaries on clippings and the themes covered in the book is “unflinchingly that of the *Religio Perennis*.” (p. vii) It is through the timeless and universal wisdom that such clippings are contextualized: “No matter how the times change, Truth doesn’t

change and it is always the source of happiness in this world and the next.” (p. 81) As the often-cited proverb avows, “All good things must come to an end,” as nothing lasts forever in the world of appearances. We can nonetheless attach ourselves to Truth, which does not change with the passage of time and live in accordance with our particular sapiential traditions. As the grains of sand make their way through the hourglass of time, we realize that our life here must be to attune to the timeless—to be in time, but not of it. We conclude with the lines of the English hymn, *Abide With Me*: “Change and decay in all around I see; / O Thou who changest not, abide with me!”³ (p. xi)

³ See Henry Francis Lyte, *Abide With Me* (Boston, MA: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1878)