

Facing the False Middle Option

John Teevan December 4, 2020

Crises like COVID-19, World Wars, and the Great Depression (or the Irish famine or Medieval Plagues), jostle humankind so much that our deepest instincts and assumptions rise to the surface where they puzzle and confuse us. We want to be comforted, but we are troubled as we face ourselves. Where did *that* come from?

Before these crises, we thought we knew who we were as individuals or as a family, nation, or as mankind. But we see others acting strangely and we are revolted at what we see in them and even in ourselves. If crises only unraveled our routines and norms we could adapt and hang on. Instead, we find ourselves filled with fear and dread; we behave in ways that harm others, even ones we love, and we harm ourselves. We drive recklessly; we self-medicate; we hide; we blame; we put our hopes in things like tech or health care or government which have their place but seem empty. Here is my attempt at some insights...for now.

The world in which we live is either the sphere of man's autonomy (we are in control), or it is the sphere of man's accountability (we are not in control). The core of our life is either filled with time and chance as expressed by our soul-less evolution, or the core of our life is occupied by the creator God who revealed himself, who gave us options and watched us fall. That is the sphere and the core, now for the outer edge.

At the end or edge of our lives, beyond our sphere of activity, is a future that is marked by either a destiny of despair and nothingness or by an eternity of hope and forgiveness. These stark options have been expressed by western thinkers for millennia, but we tend to ignore them because daily life can be lived as a middle option where we do not really have to choose between hope and despair; between a creator and none; or between autonomy and accountability. We can be nice and get by nicely.

That safe middle option is a fiction. The choices are actually as stark as they are inescapable. A crisis just makes us face these choices. Timothy Keller says that we are capable of living in that middle option until we ask ourselves three or four important questions about life (like meaning and purpose) or until the time comes when we must walk the last mile of life alone as we face our inescapable death. That is a sobering task. The middle fails.

If we strip away meaningful origins and a hopeful destiny, we are left with human autonomy. We may be confident that we can handle this autonomy, but we cannot. We find ourselves under tyrants or ideologies or the dreadful necessity of choosing our own life down to our own gender. We must get it right; we must find pleasure and fulfillment under the cold hand of our own autonomy. We must assert our power. Read *Invictus*.

If we are accountable, as Jesus and scripture have taught, then we can live our lives as stewards. We can build, work, raise families, get along with neighbors nearby or nations far away. We can fail, hurt others, and find forgiveness and hope. All of mankind is frail and failing; all of mankind has been forgiven by Jesus on the cross. I can choose forgiveness as I face my own failings. Forgiveness is found only here. Read *John's Gospel*.

Miroslav Volf, writing from within the Kosovo crisis in the 1990s, urges us to learn how to look at others not just as disgustingly different threats against whom we build barriers, but as interestingly different people to whom we should build bridges. He had lived with the horrors of violence and murder committed against others by nice people like himself; people for whom the crisis brought out an ugly fight for autonomy rather than a struggle for peace and reconciliation as stewards of the gift of life. Crisis drives out the middle option.

Can we abandon the false hope of the middle option and frankly choose God and life over despair?