

Bernard-Henri Levy: Rediscovering Liberalism

By ROGER KAPLAN

Fittingly Bernard-Henri Levy opens his new book, "The Testament of God," with the comment, "It takes some insolence to continue to speak of hope in the century of the gas chambers and the concentration camp." Banal as it may be, the observation is surely correct. But it provides a point of contrast with, and a departure from, Mr. Levy's widely acclaimed contri-

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"The Testament of God"

By Bernard-Henri Levy. Translated by George Holoch. Harper & Row. 302 pages. \$15.95.

tribution to the "nouvelle philosophie," the radically anti-Marxist current of thought that hit the French intellectual world with the force of the mistral a few years ago.

The characteristic note of that contribution, a book called "Barbarism With a Human Face," had been unrelenting pessimism. Mr. Levy concluded then that the idea of social progress was a terrible mistake; it was inevitably taken over by fanatics who in the name of abstract concepts of humanity brought down unspeakable miseries on human beings. Nevertheless, he suggested that one must persevere in living ethically. In effect, Mr. Levy adopted a stance reminiscent of Albert Camus, to whom he referred reverently. "The anti-barbarian intellectual will be a moralist," wrote Mr. Levy. His purpose in his new book is to establish the principles of an "anti-barbarian" stance.

To do this Mr. Levy anchors himself in two major traditions: political liberalism and ethical monotheism. He wishes to show that there is a political theory available to modern man that offers the means to re-

sist the disastrous consequences of the "fascist" ideologies. (He uses the word fascist loosely, but it is clear from the historical examples he refers to that he has in mind Communism and Nazism.) He wishes to show that an ethic is available for the taking in the Bible and in Jewish tradition, in which, allowing for a few contradictions in his text, he includes Christianity.

The discovery of constitutional democracy, the "formal liberties" and the importance of private property as bulwarks against totalitarianism may strike Americans as about as exciting as a half-cooked omelet, which is indeed the nonliterary object Mr. Levy's book most closely resembles. And his reduction of the Jewish ethical tradition to a somewhat vague paraphrase of the Noachic code may strike American Jews as *deja-vu*—namely, *deja-vu* in 19th Century Reform Judaism. One is hard-pressed to find anything in this book that has not been said elsewhere more profoundly and rigorously.

Thus one finds himself agreeing with most of what Mr. Levy has to say about the institutions of liberal democracy, and at the same time wishing that instead of spending so much time demonstrating how original and clever he is Mr. Levy had simply acknowledged that it is indeed possible to rebel *into* a tradition and that the next step is a respectful and thoughtful study of the basic texts of the tradition.

Mr. Levy's rhetorical manner can be irritating. In the short chapter in which he discovers the virtues of constitutionalism he writes: "A democratic constitution is not, as we still believe [who are "we"?], the opposite of an aristocratic or oligarchic constitution; it is the opposite of caprice, of the state of arbitrary decisions; it is the form of the universal against the anti-legality of leaders and the blind terrorism of crowds." This statement is followed quickly by a digression on theocracy; a wild and dubious statement to the effect that "... a good constitution is one which

... venerates the Law so much only, because it is known to be strictly inapplicable"; a remark that revolutionary politics are theocratic in nature; and a comparison between St. Augustine and Joachim of Flora.

Mr. Levy's inability or unwillingness to follow through on sound premises prevents him from understanding fully what was wrong with his earlier ideas and leads him to disingenuous attempts at justifying past positions, which serve only to diminish the importance of what he is saying now.

Consider, for instance, his brief comments on Indochina. He believes it was both right to resist the intervention in Vietnam by American "imperialism" and right to assist the "boat people." What sort of nonsense is this?

Mr. Levy has meditated approvingly upon the effects of liberal institutions without thinking very deeply, if at all, about what it takes to sustain those institutions. His intention is instead to find the tools with which to "resist" the totalitarian evil against which the good man, the good people, are basically always on the defensive. Leaving aside whether this is true, it gives Mr. Levy very little to say about the major force for liberty in the world, which is the United States. Indeed, Mr. Levy has managed to write a treatise on political theory which is liberal in inspiration yet ignorant of most of the basic liberal texts.

The eccentricities of this important book are even more apparent in Mr. Levy's attempt to draw sharp lines throughout the Western tradition between monotheism and polytheistic paganism. It is an extremely important issue in the history of ideas that he has reopened here, with more than a little courage.

The rather tortuous way in which Mr. Levy reaches the conclusion that "monotheism is the thought of resistance of our age" reminds us that he is writing against traditions in European political thought that have shown nothing but contempt for liberal political theory. Whether glorifying the "people" or glorifying the "nation," these traditions, by vesting in a single party a special legitimacy due to its supposedly extraordinary ability to interpret what is needed (by the "people" or by the "nation"), have no small responsibility in creating the concentration camps and the reigns of terror of our times. These fanatical, secular, absolutist faiths are what we must resist, Mr. Levy tells us. Good.

Notable & Quotable

Don Hewitt, producer of the CBS-TV news magazine show "60 Minutes," in a talk to the New York State Publishers Association in Rye, N.Y.:

After 29 years in broadcasting I am for

Austin of the United States and Andrei Vishinsky of Russia, and the caption says it's a picture of the two of them discussing the Berlin situation. You and I know that's a picture of Warren Austin and Andrei