

Daniel Quinn's Analysis of Our Culture of Death

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A dozen persons have changed my life. But only a few books. The Story of B by Daniel Quinn (1996) is surely the most significant among the latter. This book is deceptive. On the surface, the book appears to be a fictional story about a priest who has been sent to modern-day Germany to discover whether the man known as "B" is the antichrist. Just below the surface, however, one is gently pushed into a seductive rehearing of the Cain and Able story that reveals the hypocrisy of Western Civilization: "You are captives of a civilization system that more or less compels you to go on destroying the world in order to live." This book, along with the author's earlier Ishmael (1992) and My Ishmael (1997), have become book-circle classics

According to B, the origins of Western Culture do not rest in agriculture itself but in a peculiar form of "totalitarian agriculture" (1996:151-155) that was never practiced from the beginning of the world save by one culture, our own. According to totalitarian agriculture, the food produced is not only set aside as "off limits" to all others, but we actively destroy every species of animal, bird, or insect that persists in trying to forage in our fields. Since this totalitarian form of agriculture produced predictable food surpluses, the society practicing it grew in numbers and in strength. Agricultural domination thus necessitated territorial expansion that, in its turn, justified wars of domination and the enslavement of "weaker" cultures in order to forward the expansion of aggressive agriculture. The "stronger" culture, that of the Takers, thus survived and flourished while the "weaker" cultures of the Leavers were swept away by the territorial and cultural expansion of emerging Western Culture. From the vantage point of the winners, every other culture was made to appear

"primitive" and "localized"--terms deliberately crafted to suggest how "expendable" and "vulnerable" aboriginal tribes were when they came up against Western Culture.

The expansion of Western Culture has continued unabated for nearly ten thousand years. As a result, the Takers have extended totalitarian agriculture into every sector of life. Even the notions of "divine election" and "missionary zeal for the salvation of the whole world" so prevalent in Christianity and in Islam have been infected with the disease of Western Culture. The Agricultural Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution that moved forward by leaps and bounds during the nineteenth century were also manifestations of aggressive agriculture extended to new arenas of application. Within Western Culture, meanwhile, the rich were naturally rewarded for exploiting the poor, the powerful were naturally rewarded for exploited the weak. At the same time, the excess populations no longer needed by the agricultural-industrial-military complex at home poured out into the colonies where they sought to prosper by extending the practice of Western Culture in new worlds. Any tribal culture hindering this process of "manifest destiny," was either pacified, converted, or eliminated. Thus, in the course of only six generations, the cultural mythology of Western Civilization came to dominate all the best portions of agricultural land and mineral deposits on the face of the inhabitable world.

One would have thought that the systematic destructing of primitive cultures by disrupting their way of life would have caused moral outrage during the period of colonial expansion. But no! If Buffalo Bill Cody obliterated hundreds of buffalo each week, so much the better. Their hides were in demand. No one seemed to care that thousands of pounds of meat were left rotting on the plains. For a brief span of twenty years, therefore, the buffalo hunters used their Yankee ingenuity and made windfall profits selling their hides. No one seemed to care that the "red savages" of the plains had been selectively harvesting buffalo and wisely feeding, clothing, and housing their families on this principal resource for untold generations. Too bad. If the dumb savages didn't have the savvy to make a fast buck by killing the buffalo, then leave it to the Americans to show them how. This

same story, in its multiple forms, has effected the way that Western Culture greedily grasps and uses up any and every natural resource on the face of the earth.

Then, again, one might have thought that there would have been an overwhelming moral outrage at the unsanitary conditions, the unfair wages, and the extended use of child labor when the cotton mills were first introduced. But no! Allowing young girls to work ten to twelve hours each day was a blessing to their families who could barely survive in the new urban economies. Allowing their fathers to work in the mines was a sign of progress and a way to let them build the future. Most of the minors and mill-workers had been forced to sell their family farms because they were structurally inefficient, and the price of grain was falling due to the mechanization possible on larger farms. Here again, no one seemed to care that a way of life was being destroyed. Those who suffered, after all, were not the "savages" any longer. Give them charity, yes, but every form of inefficiency had to be punished by the market forces that favored progressive new means of production. One can't hold back progress. The same story was repeated over and over again as "bigger is better" become the order of the day.

Thus, it was only when Western Culture was at its best that the cracks in our cultural mythology began to appear. According to B, this took place during the time of the post-war boom:

In the late forties and fifties, the people of our culture . . . were still confident that a glorious future lay just ahead of us. All we had to do was to hold on to the vision and keep doing all the things that got us here. . . . In 1950 there wasn't the slightest whisper of a doubt about this anywhere in our culture, East or West, capitalist or communist. In 1950 this was something everyone could agree on: Exploiting the world was our God-given right. The world was created for us to exploit. Exploiting the world actually improved it! There was no limit to what we could do. Cut as much down as you like, dig up as much as you

like. Scrape away the forests, fill in the wetlands, dam the rivers, dump poisons anywhere you want, as much as you want. None of this was regarded as wicked or dangerous. Good heavens, why would it be? The earth was created specifically to be used in this way. It was a limitless, indestructible playroom for humans. You simply didn't have to consider the possibility of running out of something or of damaging something. The earth was designed to take any punishment, to absorb and sweeten any toxin, in any quantity (1996:278).

Then came the Great Awakening:

I've said that this new era of the collapse of values began in 1960. Strictly speaking, it should be dated to 1962, the year of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the first substantive challenge ever issued to the motivating vision of our culture. The facts Carson brought forward to detail the divesting environmental effects of DDT and other pesticides were astounding: DDT didn't just do its intended job of killing unwanted insects; it had entered the avian food chain, disrupting reproductive processes and breaking down egg structures, with the result that many species had already been destroyed and many more were threatened, making it not unthinkable that the world might someday wake to a silent spring--a spring without birds. But *Silent Spring* wasn't just another sensational exposé. . . . With a single powerful blow, it shattered for all time a complex of fundamental articles of our cultural faith: that the world was capable of repairing any damage we might do to it; that the world was designed to do precisely this; that the world was "on our side" in our aggrandizement . . . that God himself had fashioned the world specifically to support our efforts to conquer and to rule it. The facts in *Silent Spring* plainly contradicted all these ideas. . . . The world was not supporting our cultural vision. God was not supporting our cultural vision. The world was not unequivocally on our side. God was not unequivocally

on our side (1996:281f).

So, in the end, when no one could say no to the steady march of Western Culture, God stepped in and said, "Enough." This, then, is the message of B in Quinn's book.

Quinn does not go into detail regarding the report of the Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth* (1972), that generates various computer models forecasting how natural resources, population, food production, and pollution will interact during the next hundred years. Given the limited world reserves in key natural resources (coal, oil, iron, chromium, etc.), each of the computer generated models showed that the rise of population and of prosperity would continue unabated for one or two generations before experiencing a quick decline once the supply of readily available resources began to taper off. Before every home had indoor plumbing and long before even half of the world's inhabitants owned a car, therefore, the supply of resources needed to pipe water and to manufacture cars will have been stretched thin and the lakes, rives, and atmosphere will have become horribly polluted with industrial waste and toxic emissions. The Report was widely criticized for being overly pessimistic and for not giving due account to new sources of clean energy that have yet to be discovered (Körtner:168f).

The *Global 2000 Report* (1981) commissioned by President Carter, however, repeated most of the earlier warnings and extended them into areas not even considered by the Club of Rome. The year after this report was released, scientists became alarmed at the thinning of the ozone layer that shields the planet from dangerous forms of radiation and the trend toward climatic warming arising from the burning of fossil fuels and the continued deforestation of the planet. The *Global Agenda for Change* (1987) produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development further consolidated all of the earlier data and showed that excessive consumption by the developed countries along with rapid development by the under-developed countries has created new pockets of poverty and of environmental degradation. Meanwhile, the new global

marketplace wherein trade barriers have been vastly reduced or entirely disbanded has led to the multiplication of multinational corporations who seek to evade the strong ecological safeguards of the developed countries and to exploit the weak safeguards, weak safety standards, and weak unions of developing countries. Bent upon creating products and creating a perceived need on the part of buyers to purchase their product rather than that of their competitors, multinational corporations have no special interest in harmonizing their operations within a local culture or a local economy save to the degree that it contributes to their annual profits (Chomsky 1999:25-40; Mander:319, 329). While transnational corporations sometimes devote large amounts of their advertising dollars to persuade the public that they have humanitarian aims and that the future of the planet is a precious gift to be safeguarded, the nature of economic competition insures that the policy decisions that implement such laudable programs only goes so far as it offers an economic advantage over their competitors (who may not be perceived as environmentally conscious)(Mander:316f). Meanwhile the machinery of government in democratically elected countries has to continue to promise increased wealth, increased products, and increased opportunities for its citizens (Ewen:26-33). No political lobby group speaks for future generations of our children who are being impoverished today because the non-renewal resources of the planet are being squandered by a few generations addicted to luxury and to license. In many respects, therefore, the recent reflections of the Club of Rome are sobering:

Living as we do at the onset of the first global revolution, on a small planet that we seem hell-bent to destroy, beset with conflicts, in an ideological and political vacuum, faced with problems of global dimensions that the fading nation states are impotent to solve, with immense scientific and technological possibilities for the improvement of the human condition, rich in knowledge but poor in wisdom, we search for the keys to survival and sustainability (King:193).

The overall prospect for the planet is bleak. The prospect for our children's children is also bleak. As the readily available non-renewable

resources begin to give out, the cost of garnishing resources will increase in direct proportion to their scarcity. The increased cost of production will be passed on to the consumer. Real wages will drop. The standard of living of all wage earners will drop. Social unrest will occur. Persons who have been led to believe in progress and to demand more and better products will be reluctant to accept less and less. The powerful industrial nations and the large transnational corporations (Karliner:5-7) will promote binding trade agreements bent upon insuring a steady supply of raw materials for their industrial development while denying it to others. Raw power and military intervention will then be used in order to insure that the economic and social elites do not have to suffer from the growing menace of scarcity. But this is just to delay the end. For, as non-renewable natural resources become scarcer and growing numbers fall below the poverty line, then even the industrialized nations will feel pressure to reduce their measures to control pollution. In so doing, peoples everywhere will suffer a decline in their prospects of good health, a decline in their experience of clear water and clean air, a decline in their standard of living. Meanwhile, accelerated depletion of the ozone layer and buildup of carbon dioxide will stunt many agricultural areas causing massive scarcity, starvation, and social unrest.

Given the current corporate practices, not one wildlife reserve, wilderness, or indigenous culture will survive the global economy. We know that every natural system on the planet is disintegrating. The land, water, air, and sea have been functionally transformed from life-supporting systems into repositories for waste. There is no polite way to say that business is destroying the world (Paul Hawkins as cited in Karliner:13; also Ewen, Hynes, Tim Johnson).

Meanwhile, as the whole world is suffering signs of collapse, middle-class American teenagers still aspire, by and large, to own their own cars by the time they graduate, and their proud parents want to save and scrimp to help make this possible for them to achieve. After all, owning one's own car was the status symbol that gave these parents an enormous sense of emotional well-being in their youth and they want their children "to enjoy

the best things life has to offer." They want to still believe, after all that has happened, that America is "the land of opportunity" and, accordingly, they naturally wanted to secure their share of the good life before all the oil wells run dry. Thus corporate greed will be matched, in the end time, by family pride bent upon providing children with the best that life has to offer. As for their grandchildren, who knows? There may be no tomorrow for them!

Let us say, for the sake of discussion, that this represents the end time scenario that more and more people see as inevitable. What will result? Many of course, will make their fortunes producing newly invented water purifying systems and automobile engines capable of squeezing fifty miles out of each gallon. Many others, however, will curse their government, their scientists, and their God when they contract new diseases or suffer new forms of repression necessitated by scarcity. Other will vigorously organize so as to pressure the world governments to curtail their current wasteful policies, to stop squandering resources on instruments of war, to prohibit the manufacture of goods that cannot be recycled. All these measures, however, will only slow down the inevitable: increased scarcity, doing without, suffering deprivation.

As Western Culture begins to deliver less and less of what it promised, some few will discover that the whole system of totalitarian agriculture and aggressive industrialization was riddled with the Way of Death from the very beginning. Yet, it had to massively succeed in order to discover that it was massively doomed to fail (Körtner:171; Quinn 1996:268-275, 278-282). And this took some time to realize.

Then Prophets will appear proclaiming that Western Culture has been "the world deceiver" that has produced the "signs and wonders" of aggressive industrialization and technology for a dozen generations but at a horrendous price--"the earth" was

The Didache represents a mid-first century document that details how Christians were able to survive and thrive in a climate wherein the brutal realities of the Roman economic and military order were dominant. This era has parallels to our own. Hence, the text of the Didache is here interpreted as though it were addressing the situation that Quinn described above. See www.didache.info for more details.

"betrayed into his hands" and he has done "unlawful things that never happened from the beginning of time" (Did. 16:4b). Still others will search back into the old ways and old cultures that were "inefficient" and that were overrun by booming populations espousing aggressive agriculture some ten thousand years ago. The lost wisdom of "primitive" cultures will be resurfaced. Leaders will rise up who will invite people to abandon the Way of Death and to yield to the old tried and true Way of Life that was abandoned. Many of these leaders will attract followers who will form movements endeavoring to develop ways of being in the world that incarnate the Way of Life.

Then Communities Like the Didache Will Reemerge

At just this point, communities like the Didache will reemerge. These communities will be formed by those who are persuaded that the Way of Death is hollow and deceptive and that they need to get back to a simpler, saner, and sounder way of life. As such, the Way of Life will again be hailed as "the life and knowledge" of the Mother who made the heavens and the earth. Loving "the God who made you" (Did. 1:2) will mean accepting human existence as part of the great mystery of life that pulses in the fish of the sea, in the birds of the air, and in the land animals as well in humans. The norm, "You will not exalt yourself" (Did. 3:9), will then be understood as renouncing aggressive agriculture and commerce. It will also be understood as renouncing the so-called essential superiority of human life and acknowledging that the fish, the birds, the animals also have "their home" here and deserve to be allowed to prosper as their Lord wishes "from her own free gifts" (Did. 1:5). The "dominion theory" will thus fall out completely. "The gentle will inherit the earth" (Did. 3:7).

The members of the reconstituted Didache communities will live as they believe. As in the case of their first-century forebears, they will ban together in hope, they will celebrate simple rites, and, above all, they will ground their everyday work in life-giving praxis. Because of their beliefs, they will suffer much from traditional Christians (see, e.g., Barros:99) who

will trot out the standard proofs for the immortality of the human soul and the standard explanations of the Lord's command to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gn 1:28). Thus, "in the last days, the false prophets who are corruptors will be multiplied, and the sheep will turn into wolves, and the love will be turned into hate" (Did. 16:3)(Körtner:173f). But this is only the beginning. For "the creation of humans will come into the burning process of testing, and many will be entrapped and will be utterly destroyed, the ones having remained firm in their faith, on the other hand, will be saved by the accursed burning-process itself" (Did. 16:5). Then the signs of truth will appear. . . .

This then is the truth presented by B:

The people of our culture are used to bad news and are fully prepared for bad news, and no one would think for a moment of denouncing me if I stood up and proclaimed that we're all doomed and damned. It's precisely because I do not proclaim this that I'm denounced. Before attempting to articulate the good news I bring, let me first make crystal clear the bad news people are always prepared to hear.

**Man is the scourge of the planet, and he was BORN
a scourge, just a few thousand years ago.**

**Believe me, I can win applause all over the world by
pronouncing these words. But the news I'm here to bring you is
much different:**

**Man [Woman] was born MILLIONS of years ago,
and he was no more a scourge than hawks or lions
or squids. He lived AT PEACE with the world . . .
for MILLIONS of years.**

**This doesn't mean he was a saint. This doesn't mean he walked
the earth like a Buddha. It means he lived as harmlessly as a**

hyena or a shark or a rattlesnake.

It's not MAN who is the scourge of the world, it's a single culture. One culture out of hundreds of thousands of cultures, OUR culture.

And here is the best of the news I have to bring:

We don't have to change HUMANKIND in order to survive. We only have to change a single culture.

I don't mean to suggest that this is an easy task. But at least it's not an impossible one (Quinn 1996:254f).

"Then the world will see the Lord coming atop the clouds of heaven" (Did. 16:8).

When the Lord-God comes, should we actually believe that he will provide everyone with a new suburban home complete with a washer and dryer in every basement and a brand new fuel-efficient automobile in every garage? Should we actually believe that God will miraculously fill thousands of dry oil wells so that these engines can burn gasoline for another hundred years? What? If God has already said a resounding "No" to Western Culture and its notion of development and well-being, will he/she suddenly change his/her mind on the last day. More importantly, however, even supposing that God did (for some crazy reason) decide to play Sugar Daddy, how would the Lord teach ecological responsibility if he/she used miraculous powers to overcome the results of our greed and waste? The same thing, of course, can be said of modern-day parents who lavish so many clothes and toys upon their children that they promote their thoughtless use and the throw-away mentality that goes with it. Will God, in the world to come, then have to continually save us from our garbage?

But, then, it must be remembered that God will come with his "holy ones" (Did. 16:7). Who will be these holy ones who have been raised from the dead at the Lord's coming? Surely the members of the Didache communities would not expect that the holy ones would be the architects of

totalitarian agriculture and the designers of aggressive industrialization. Nor would they expect the masters of those multinationals who stiffened the pace of destroying the planet in the name of prosperity and of the annual profits declared to shareholders. Surely it would not be the generals and the torturers who pacified the poor masses in developing countries when they complained that their children were dying due to the polluted waters resulting from the runoff of paper mills and petrochemical plants making products designed for export to the prosperous nations. Nor would the holy ones be those who discovered new oil wells and clear-cut forests but never stepped back in wonder and gratitude so as to offer first fruits to the Lord who provided these things. Reading the Way of Death (Did. 5:1f) makes it quite evident that the members of the Didache communities would not expect the holy ones to such as these.

There is not the least indication in the Didache that its members would be looking for holy ones from among those who destroyed their body's normal appetites through rigorous asceticism. Nor would they be looking for mystics and visionaries. Surely they would not expect the holy ones to be those stigmatics whose hands and feet have bleed in imitation of Jesus' hands and feet. Nor would it be those who believe in the cosmic mystery of the pyramids or those who foresaw the future by contacting the spirits of the dead. The holy ones recognized by the Didache communities would not even be those who promoted rosary crusades or distributed papal encyclicals.

If not these, who then?

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