

January 23, 2005
St. Paulinus of Nola

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of my least favorite slogans is "what will be will be." What is expressed in this slogan may appear, of course, in other disguises, some rather sophisticated. For instance, it can be found dressed up in the language of the social and psychological sciences, delivered in the professional tones, and with the authority, of full professors at famous institutions.

The idea itself is a bad one, nevertheless. Let me suggest that none of us would really want to live in the world this slogan describes. At the very least, it would take all the fun out of life.

"What will be, will be," a philosophy popularized by Doris Day if memory serves, means that everything is predetermined anyway, so we should not fret ourselves about it. In other words, the events of our existence are prescheduled, so there's not a whole lot we can do about it. This is, in essence, the theory of Fate, found in works as diverse as the Oedipus of Sophocles and the Lolita of Nabokov.

To see why this is a bad idea, let us be sure we understand its implications. To assert that everything is predetermined is to say that everything happens of necessity. It must happen. Let us think very hard about this. Necessity and possibility are mutually exclusive. Therefore, if everything is necessary, then it follows that nothing is possible. If it is true that "what will be will be," then of nothing can we say, "maybe it will and maybe it won't."

Furthermore, if necessity covers everything and possibility covers nothing, then free choice is illusory. In such a universe there is no room to maneuver; life is so tight, so controlled that there is no "give" nor "play" in it. All conclusions are foregone conclusions. Should I decide to purchase a new bonnet, it would be just old hat.

Now as a matter of elementary logic, one can hardly conceive any idea less favorable to really new beginnings than the thesis that life has no possibilities, or that everything has already been determined anyway, whether such determination is caused by God's relentless will (as in Islamic doctrine), or by an impersonal fortune (according to many writers from Homer to Schopenhauer), or by material and mechanical forces (taught by Hobbes and others), or, more recently, by social dynamics (according to the popular theories of, say, B. F. Skinner).

I am not sure I can imagine any notion less compatible with the biblical and Christian teaching on history than the assertion, "what will be will be." To say, as the Bible and the Church have always insisted on saying, that we are responsible beings answerable to God for our lives and our moral decisions, is to assert that our choices are really free, that we have a genuine say about what will be, that we do not simply

act from compulsory forces outside of our control, that what comes forth from us is not just the sum total of the influences brought to bear upon us, that "it is not what enters a man from without that defiles him."

If (by way of illustration here) I take a hammer and fling it at the unsuspecting head of my friend Ralph, the hammer itself, having no say over the matter, cannot be held responsible for what happens to the skull of that unfortunate gentleman. But if "what will be will be," if my throwing of that hammer has been predetermined, if my deed is only the sum total of the influences brought to bear upon me, if the action is simply caused either by God's will or by social dynamics or by anything else, then I am no more responsible for the act than is the inert hammer. If my free human choice really does not exist, the hammer and I are equally unaccountable for the fate of poor Ralph and his grieving head.

We have it on the highest authority that "not what enters into a man from without defiles him but what proceeds from his heart." In very large measure, what will be will be what we choose it to be. Human decision is a true beginning, not an end result. "The error," said G. K. Chesterton, "is in always treating the soul as a product and never treating it as an origin."

The Moslem, the Stoic, and the social determinist all say "what will be will be," but the Christian will insist that the future is really fertile with new and genuine possibilities, things that truly may or may not be, attainable realities open to the heart's choice. The biblical and Christian dogma of human freedom, then, is one of the indispensable components of all new beginnings.

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