

religious themselves and largely unaware that their human chattel had sensibilities nobler than those of their cattle—did not want their slaves converted. Converted slaves might demand their freedom because they had adopted the new faith or else fight for it with Old Testament vigor. Church leaders, to their credit, tried to soften planter opposition to evangelization in the slave quarters. As Wood claims, they argued that Christianity sanctioned slavery and also provided a code of behavior useful for instilling obedience. But these arguments were less a celebration of slaveholding than a strategy designed to gain the masters' acquiescence and thus humanize the whole system.

If, as most human institutions do, Christianity fell short, it also partly succeeded. Post-Civil War church leaders such as Lewis Tappan helped to start hundreds of black schools and scores of colleges. During and after Reconstruction, when secular authorities were indifferent to the plight of African-Americans and white southerners were implacably hostile, the aid of church leaders was indispensable. Yet Wood belabors the missionaries for having sought to "civilize" former

slaves whom they saw as a benighted people. Unable to see shadings in the moral landscape, Wood obliterates the very real tension between church and society.

Throughout, Wood shows little charity for the humanness of the past. For that, we must turn to Bernard Lewis. From Lewis's perspective, both Islam and Christianity, though imperfectly practiced and interpreted, provided far more human consolation than their critics will allow. Western Christianity, Lewis further reminds us, was a major factor in the movement to abolish the scourge of slavery. Islam contributed nothing to its demise. "From a Muslim point of view," Lewis declares, "to forbid what God permits is almost as great an offense as to permit what God forbids—and slavery was authorized and regulated by the holy law." Lewis, who writes history, makes possible this kind of insight. Wood, who writes polemics, does not.

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Missionary Positions

THE NATION, 1865–1990: Selections from the Independent Magazine of Politics and Culture. Edited by Katrina vanden Heuvel. *Thunder's Mouth*. 534 pp. \$21.95

When I worked at the *New Statesman* in London in the 1970s, there were always those rounds of after-hours self-mockery, during which we subjected the production of a supposedly highbrow leftist weekly to a gin-sodden and masochistic review. One phrase from that period has stuck with me. "We are," said a future editor canting amid the bottles, "nothing more than a missionary outpost to the middle classes." Dismal as this objective sounded—as if some Fabian tutor had us

all on a permanent weekend retreat—it still had a certain nobility to it: a sense of calling. Nevertheless, it left open the question of who the missionaries were and how they recognized one another.

The *New Statesman* was founded by Fabian and Bloomsbury types on the eve of the Great War; the *Nation* by Harvard types a half-century earlier, at the close of the Civil War. In both instances a sort of elevated optimism was in evidence that ignored the contradiction of reformist journalism. Most reformist journalists believe in liberty and in human reason, in letting the truth speak, but they also have a mission or policy which directs how that truth shall be used to fight injustices.

In order to avoid the taunt that he is merely utopian or irrelevant, the "progressive" must at times be arrogant and even *dirigiste*, if not actually authoritarian. (Anybody who has spent time on the Left knows that those supporting the status quo always seem to be smugly waiting to consign him to one pit or the other—that of the authoritarian or of the irrelevant.) The antislavery fight of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, an early *Nation* figure, provides a salient example of the need for arrogant extremism in politics, as does the 20th-century battle against fascism. The reformist journalist's mission is not to speak truth coolly but rather to speak it forcefully in the face of hostile power—while partly hoping for power to be exercised by people more like, say, himself.

There are no solutions to this basic dilemma. Instead there is some outstanding journalism from the literary and intellectual tensions it creates:

The belief that fashion alone should dominate opinion has great advantages. It makes thought unnecessary, and puts the highest intelligence within the reach of everyone. It is not difficult to learn the correct use of such words as "complex," "sadism," "Oedipus," "bourgeois," "deviation," "Left"; and nothing more is needed to make a brilliant writer or talker.

That was Bertrand Russell in the *Nation*, January 1937. He helped clarify a point often unexamined by the radical intelligentsia; namely, intellectual public opinion can be as thoughtless as any mob.

It's easy enough, for leftists, to imagine confronting a mob of racial bigots, McCarthyites, or religious fundamentalists. The harder test is resistance to "public opinion" in one's own camp. The pressure of "solidarity," with its quasi-moral claim on the loyalty of the embattled remnant, is one that must be felt to be appreciated. A classic recent case—and one that finds no echo in this anthology—was the *Nation's* brief but acrid debate over the propriety of criticizing the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Those critical of the Sandinistas were invariably described by their ene-

mies as (apart from the routine charges of being dupes and traitors) making their objections from a "comfortable" position.

It is easy in theory but difficult in practice to define the radical or dissenting journalist as one who does not care what anybody else thinks. Even this high-sounding definition is often made to seem "elitist" or undemocratic. All innovations in science and politics and literature and ideas, however, have to be made by the free intelligence, whether that intelligence requires the integrity of a Galileo or the individuality of a Flaubert.

Neither Galileo nor Flaubert feature in this selection of past *Nation* essays, but Henry James, Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound, Dalton Trumbo and I. F. Stone all take a bow. So do Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gore Vidal. I pick these contributors not because of their correctness but because they remind me of Orwell's view that the essence of truth-telling involves telling people what they do not want to hear. To their credit, most contributors included here, in one way or another, tried to make life more difficult for the reader.

The *Nation*, during its various evolutions, has acquired different layers and armatures of reputation, either to be lived up to or to be lived down. Take only the most frequently made accusation, that between 1930 and 1956 (and perhaps after) the magazine was a communist fellow-traveler's journal. This commonplace both sharpens and dissolves under scrutiny. The political radical Emma Goldman, for example, composed an essay for the magazine in 1934 in which she said that Stalin's persecution of the politically inconvenient was more ferocious than the tsar's had ever been. The editor, Freda Kirchwey, ran the article but complained to Goldman: "While I do not quarrel with your right to say what you believe, I feel that at a time when fascist dictatorship is the dominant instrument of oppression in Europe . . ."

You can complete the sentence for yourself. Kirchwey at least defended Goldman's right to say it. The 1930s debate

over whether to criticize Stalin was, in a manner, resurrected in the 1980s in the debate over the Sandinistas, and indeed has raged throughout the *Nation's* history.

In the crucial years of the Cold War, the *Nation* kept an uneasy Kirchweyite truce between the obligations of truth and the emotional need not to "give ammunition to the enemy." In the *Nation*, Alger Hiss had to be innocent because otherwise Richard Nixon would be vindicated. It's no excuse, here, to note that many of the more prosperous journals put the same principle the other way about. And so a political fundamentalism of the Right and Left is created, which in turn creates a predictability in journalism. How bold a journal would have been to print then a version of what an observer now sees in retrospect: Alger Hiss may be guilty and Richard Nixon is lying.

An honestly expressed prejudice, well-written and heedless of consequence, usually supplies the most memorable journalism. Those who fear to be thought "offensive" or "elitist" are as indentured as those who tremble at the proprietor or the advertiser or—often the worst enemy—the circulation department. Thus my colleague Alexander Cockburn is worth more, by the muscular defiance of his prose, when he is wrong than is my valued editor Victor Navasky (who contributes to this collection a something-for-everyone essay) when he is right. Too much of today's dissenting journalism forgets that consensus is the enemy to begin with.

By this standard, the later sections of this anthology are rather too cautious and well-mannered for my taste. They have too much the flavor of the "correct" and the "sensitive." Currently the main leftist orthodoxy—and therefore one of the main orthodoxies for the Left to confront—is this culture of "sensitivity." The solidarity between radical groups, which characterized an earlier day in left-wing journalism, has been displaced by a plethora of competing mentalities and universes, each holding proprietary rights to special consideration, many believing that nobody but members of their group can truly under-

stand their "situation." The idea that "the personal is political"—an idea that emerged in an era of post-1960s depoliticization—has come to mean that personal identity or preference is a sufficient political commitment. Other magazines may satirize this attitude by publishing lampoons about lesbian one-parent families of color, but these lampoons are often vulgar or ill-natured. It ought to be the *Nation* that opens and extends the cultural and political debate, even on topics sacred to the Left, and keeps those debates going with some heat.

I took delight in the inclusion here of H. L. Mencken's self-portrait, published in 1923, in which appear the words:

When I encounter a new idea, whether aesthetic, political, theological, or epistemological, I ask myself, instantly and automatically, what would happen to its proponent if he should state its exact antithesis. If nothing would happen to him, then I am willing and eager to listen to him. But if he would lose anything by a *volte face*—if stating his idea is profitable to him, if the act secures his roof, butters his parsnips, gets him a tip—then I hear him with one ear only.

In an era where "conflict of interest" is a one-dimensional term and consistency is accounted a virtue, Mencken's "principle" is a great stay to morale.

Contrast Mencken's remark with the heavy political prose, several pages in length, with which the magazine endorsed Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign. This editorial is falsely "practical"—it speaks ponderously about an infinity of "coalitions"—and falsely utopian in taking a dubious character at face value. It is neither a real bid for public opinion nor a true exercise in intellectual scruple. But perhaps these are the failings of those who have the nerve to think as missionaries in the first place.

—Christopher Hitchens has contributed his *Minority Report* column to the *Nation* since 1982. His most recent book is *Blood, Class and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies* (1990).