The Man Who Skied Down Everest

Steven Alan Samson, Liberty University

May, 1995
Scenes from
R. J. Rushdoony's 80th
Birthday Party Conference in San Jose
see pages 7 - 9
A Letter From the Christian President of Zambia

By Frederick J. T. Chiluba

I am grateful for every single word you wrote in your letter of 3rd July 1995 and the promises of support and active participation in politics by the Christian community especially with regard to the forthcoming Presidential and Parliamentary elections whose campaign has already heated up.

Yes, I am sure that the Lord will grant us our request: we are asking for what He has already provided us — victory in all things through Jesus Christ His only begotten Son who with His own blood has made us righteous before God. We therefore stand forgiven and accepted by Him and can rightfully seek His mercy which we shall receive. It is going to be tough, but that is why our victory will be sweet.

Praise the Lord and bless His Holy Name — Amen.

Frederick J. T. Chiluba
President of Zambia

“The Man Who Skied Down Everest”... And Atonement

By Steven Alan Samson

In Taoist landscapes, jagged mountain crags flow softly toward the interior and fade into the silent mists of eternity. The tiny men in the foreground are wrapped in stillness. An altar inscription noted by Goethe reads: Lingua Fundamentum Sancti Silentii: Genuine speech bursts forth from holy silence.

“The Man Who Skied Down Everest,” filmed twenty years ago and now available on videotape, is the story of a man’s pilgrimage. Its producer, narrator, and star is the Japanese skier Miura, who has come first to climb and then to ski down the side of the greatest mountain of all, whose treacherous slopes have claimed the lives of so many previous challengers.

The film draws us beyond the surface tranquility of a snowy landscape to confront the awesome immensity of powerful natural forces, whose peril we would more fully realize if we were left bereft of language and exposed even for a moment. Here it is a small human voice that draws us into the cold silence of the highest mountains in the world, welcoming us into an uncanny interior landscape that few of us would recognize as home. Eternity makes itself heard and felt in the penetrating throbs of a speechless basso continuo that seems to rise from deep within the earth itself. I am reminded of Michel Bernanos’s surrealistic depiction of the earth’s heartbeat in his novel, The Other Side of the Mountain. On the far side of that mountain lay an absurd damnation through petrification.

Beyond this other, Everest, we may assume the narrator will move on to new challenges rather than succumb to the petrified memory of capricious defeat.

Max Picard, a Roman Catholic mystic, once wrote that “man does not put silence to the test; silence puts man to the test.” “The Man Who Skied Down Everest” is a story about tests and endurance. We may say that mountains endure, but they are not challenged to do so. Victories and defeats belong only to those who may claim or proclaim them, who have the language to register them. Even if it is only a ragged skid in the snow of a windswept mountain slope, we are intent on leaving our mark. A man is made through challenge and the risk of failure. Having the most to lose, he has all there is to gain, as well. Life is a continual transaction with an inanimate world of passionless tenacity and that thief, time.

Home is where we choose to make it, where a man finds himself. “Finding oneself” may be a curious expression but the words merely conceal the mystery of human purpose in much the way that the set of words and memories we know as our personality conceals our spirit. The skier Miura challenges the inhospitable mountains in a pilgrimage of self-discovery. The ultimate challenge brings personality and spirit into the contest, peeling away the artful words so that a man may know that instant of exposure called insight. However imperfect the means or the results, we demand this confrontation with ourselves. It is this moment of initiation that validates the pilgrimage itself, complete with its harsh setbacks and cruel heartaches.

After a fatal accident kills several of his companions, Miura realizes that his adventure will not have a happy ending. Despite the assistance of hundreds of porters and a staff of expert support personnel — even with the resources of an advanced technological society at his command — Miura is conscious of being alone and exposed when he worries about failing and realizes that death would be an easy way out. “The downhill of the spirit,” he comments, “is more painful than the uphill of the body.” The initiation itself is completed by the sacrifice, when an offering is made of one’s very life.

I was particularly struck by the repeat of the final run down the mountain, first in cold silence, then full of the drama of human words as the skier’s journal erupts into exclamations of dismay and submission. A curious acceptance and even expectancy fills a person who faces this “moment of truth” with the instant realization that death will not be bribed, that even life itself is not too dear to be yielded up. Such moments are marked by the absence or
inadequacy of words. Yet passing through them does not thereby exercise all our fear or possessiveness. The intensity of the experience, though it purges us for the moment, lacks staying power. This sense of relief and release eventually passes. Habits are renewed. The initiate discovers that the slate has not been wiped clean after all.

Much unfavorable comment attends our modern rites of passage, not least because of a general loss of context. The blood sacrifice, an apparently universal atavism, is only dimly recalled in the initiation ceremonies that have taken its place. It is easy to deplore the hazards to life and limb that characterize our more dangerous sports. Certainly, it must be acknowledged that foolish risks are too often taken in pursuit of even more foolish marks, whether it is a place in the Guinness Book of World Records or a face etched by the acids of experience. But the criticism too often misses the point. We may as well ask: what is the attraction of hang-gliding? It is through risk and endurance that we cultivate our personalities. Yet here the mystery deepens: at the crucial moment, the moment of truth, we will even sacrifice this self that at all other moments we hold so dear. Why?

Years ago a friend told me that the greatest evidence in favor of the truth of Christianity is the universal institution of the blood sacrifice. Its persistence as a cultural memory seems to testify, as it must have done to C.S. Lewis, to the inescapability of sacrifice. Those who condemn it as an anachronism, as a relic of a savage past, probably do so from one or another of two viewpoints. Either they fail to reckon that sacrifice is actually demanded of us. Or else they recognize that the price has already been paid. In the desacralized world of modern man, our rites of passage are too often designed to implicate the initiate in some vile act, binding him to the group by cultivating a guilty conscience. Originally, in ancient times, such rituals seem to have been ceremonies of purification, transition, or atonement. The sins and compromises of daily living have always demanded some kind of redress, whether personal or vicarious. The pilgrim seeks nothing less than renewed clarity and purity of experience and knowledge.

Disagreements concerning the necessity of this quest also suggest that there must be at least two beliefs about the journey’s end. The Christian pilgrim responds to a summons from Christ: “Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it.” His life comes to fruition only when the truth of God’s self-sacrifice is acknowledged, when the Christian accepts on faith, vicariously, a share in the crucifixion, repents, and dies to sin. In a fallen world of radical insufficiency — of uncontrollable consequences flowing from our deeds and misdeeds — what kind of atonement other than a complete and permanent cleansing can offer us hope, and break the endless cycle of guilt and self-reproach?

But others regard the search as their destiny. Life’s end is the pilgrimage itself. At the close of the film, Miura says: “The end of one thing is the beginning of another. I am still a pilgrim.” This is the “journey to the east” that fills so much of our literature and art, beckoning the tiny men of the foreground deep into the interior landscape of their longing for absolution, unmindful that this, too, is art.

Steven Alan Sawson holds a Ph.D. in political science and is a college professor in Texas.

Armenia Revisited:
Prospects For Reformation?
A. R. Kayayan

“What are the prospects for Reformation in Armenia?” asks my friend J.T.

The question is as legitimate as the answer may be complex. I will avoid an easy one, with some highly triumphalistic overtones. The temptation is great for any minister, a fortiori for the broadcast minister, to offer a flamboyant description of his ministry, exempt from any problem and at a safe distance. Such have been the tactics of many I have known around me since my involvement with the broadcast ministry. They almost seem to be “forced” to produce evidences, albeit fictitious, of the efficacy of their ministry, in order to secure a decent budget and be able to run it safely. They will not hesitate, nor do they, to describe some situations with great optimism, even if some of the stories are ultimately of failure. Arithmetical missiology (they now call it missionology), fruit of mathematical theology, seconded by a geometrical ecclesiology, serves only their own inflated statistical figures. However, the eyes of a careful observer will easily detect that which is a bluff and catch the fake nature of such evaluations of some modern missions.

My aim in this article on Armenia is to attempt a more objective evaluation of the “religious” situation of Armenia than draw conclusion for our missionary activities in this country.

Several presences are acting on the religious scene of Armenia, the main three being the cults, Evangelicals and the Armenian “Apostolic” Church. Two other groups may also be mentioned in passing, the Roman Catholics and a curious group of Armenian Muslims. This latter is not prominent as the former ones.

Cults and Sects

The variety of cults and sects operating in Armenia is not different from those we see in the West. The recently