

THE WORLDLY CHRISTIAN

By OLIVER ELLIS

To many christians the second Vatican Council has brought only bewilderment: so much change and questioning; so much once loyally defended now unceremoniously jettisoned; the feverish sorting out of essentials from among outmoded accretions; the groping where once was clarity and firm attitudes. Nor is puzzled docility enough. It is not sufficient to say we have faith in the Church: that when 'they' have worked out the new theology we shall accept it as we did the old. Every one of us must share sympathetically the great quest of the Council for renewal and reform, and apply it in that depth within us where the word of God touches the springs of our being and our action.

The key to and justification of the perturbation caused by the Council is captured in the image of the Church holding up a frank mirror to herself and recoiling from the vision, facing the fact of her uncertain role in a society dominated by institutions over which she had no influence because she was not present at their birth, in a new world she had not taken seriously and which had entered into confident maturity without her. The weaknesses and sources of her ineffectualness were manifold. There was much in her physiognomy and character, her organization and structure that militated against her efficacy. She looked old and harsh, her doctrines remote in content and archaic in expression, her institutions quaint. Above all she had lost touch. And so the anguish of the Council and the painful loving efforts to rediscover the splendour of the face of Christ's spotless bride.

We are being offered by the Council, besides specific directions for our conduct in the modern world, something even more important: an attitude, at once durable and adaptable, a spirit of identity with the dynamic of history, a spirit incapable of obsolescence even when the revolutionary doctrine of today has become platitudinous and its legislation obsolete.

This anguish of the Church touches us at a personal level, insofar as we have inherited the character and face of our mother. In the mirror of the Council the Church saw herself 'with a feudal face because most of her institutions developed in a feudal society'.

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Mediaeval spirituality had a non-worldly face because it evolved in a milieu that stood in no need of christianizing. But this face in the modern world had come to resemble a mask of insouciance and detached indifference. Western spirituality, from the dominance of St Augustine to *The Imitation of Christ*, seemed to over-emphasize the inwardness of man and keeping pure from the world. Out of the ignatian mystique of obedience and authority came the indiscriminate cherishing of vital roman unity, of organization and law, with its less lovely obverse: arrant confidence in the sufficiency of formalism and tradition. There was devaluation of initiative, and blindness to the need for adaptation. What was bred in our bones showed in our faces, a strange blend of heartless cocksureness and natural anguish for our torn age, spiritual infantilism and secular sophistication.

It were strange if christianity, which appeared in the world as a fearless radical movement of protest and salvation, parade now a detached serenity in face of the world's confusion. The inactivity of the good, as Burke reminds us, is all that is needed for the triumph of evil. Our trust in God too often goes with damp powder. 'The things that I pray for, Lord, give me the grace to labour for', was a prayer of St Thomas More. To leave the righting of abuses and injustices to the atheist and humanist, to leave protest against barbarism and oppression, genuine labour-grievance, housing and the betterment of social conditions to the championing of the communists is a christian betrayal, and we are tolerating a caricature of the virtues – timidity for righteousness, inaction for patience, sloth for prudence. The tragedy is that the atheist is unable to save the world, to cope with the perverseness of the human heart, to end injustice, or give peace or joy. For bread he offers a stone. His heroism cannot make sense of pain or sorrow, much less eliminate it. He is as helpless to light the darkened spirit (he is not the light of the world) as he is powerless to heal the broken heart.

Have we then falsified the gospel metaphors, the yeast in the mass, the light in the dark, the salt that keeps from corruption? Have we a defective spirituality because we have a defective theology, of employment and personality, of sex and war and all the human condition? We veer towards angelism with every rejection of what is valid in the human patrimony, respect for reason and all human values, social, technological, economic, cultural. To hate and flee the world and call it evil is resurrected jansenism; to think matter evil is to court manicheism. It is the glory of the Church and her

members to incarnate redemptive love in the midst of confusion and anguish.

Have we been betrayed into our unworldly attitude by a too partial exegesis of the New Testament concept of 'the world'? There is the world which is the domain of Satan and whose hatred includes us too. This is the world castigated by St John as a triple concupiscence. This too is the *civitas gentium* of St Augustine's dramatic imagery, relentlessly opposed to the *civitas Dei* of which we become citizens when baptism breaks our thralldom to the prince of this world. The citizens subscribe to opposed sets of values: submission/independence, detachment/possessiveness, humility/hauteur and scramble for position. Here to be slave or free, to be greek or jew, learned or unlearned is nothing, because the world is nothing, its learning straw, its values mere pretention. Terrestrial values have an eschatological touchstone only: *quid ad aeternitatem?* Not for us then to take the world seriously nor its pretensions; our home is elsewhere. We submit to the inconveniences of life and the wretched accommodation as pilgrims to a splendid vision. We share Sir Thomas Browne's moral hybridism. The world is 'but a small parenthesis in Eternity. I count it not as an inn but an hospital, a place not to live in but to die in'. Shall we sing songs in a strange land? What to us genus and species? Faith is greater than reason. We accept with Hooker that the way to be ripe in faith is to be raw in wit and judgment. 'Pride puffeth up'. Earthly values pale beside heavenly. What doth it profit a man? Hope is our consolation, our defence against the harsh reality. Consciousness of the love of God makes trivial all injustice, repression, exploitation. Time is nothing, the world of the temporal city and economic life is anachronistic, surpassed by a future which is already present, against which the gates of hell may rage but will not prevail.

The pilgrim has no interest in the passing show. Our faces are towards Jerusalem; our ideal is the Thebaid. Where this cannot be realised we give a grudging interest, guarding against involvement and the specious beauty and the siren songs around us. The earth is no more than a theatre where we play out our sordid drama. Our age, our country, our temperament, our gifts, our IQ, are nothings as we approach our angelic ideal: sexless, ageless, passionless. Hobbes' vision of the life of prehistoric man is subconsciously ours, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. Human effort has no religious dimension; work has only the ascetic value of chastisement. We go through the motions of digging cisterns, mocking those who

believe they will hold water. Intention is all, expertise nothing.

Associated with this detached serenity in the face of the world's confusion is the sense of the elect minority, the shrinking into inconspicuousness as besieged minorities do. We are always willing that the others join us. Their consistent blindness to our obvious truth must ultimately be construed as bad faith. We have done our duty if we warn the evildoers and wring our hands over their sorry condition. Simplicity becomes *simplisme*. For a great good lesser human goods can be sacrificed: liberty can be repressed, holy wars can be waged. For the mystique of obedience can be repressed the treasures of freedom and initiative and self-acceptance. To Providence can be attributed what has a simpler and more easily verified explanation: christian sloth and indifference. Retreat from the face of evil can bring us perilously close to fatalism.

'I am not come to destroy'. When God sent his Son into the world it was not to reject the world but that the world might find salvation through him. 'I ask not that you take them out of this world but that you keep them from evil'. The frontiers of the two cities overlap. Each has rights over the same citizens. The christian cannot renounce his dual citizenship nor the corresponding duality of loyalty demanded. It is to misunderstand our vocation to see ourselves forced into the role of aliens, of traitors to our land and age, disinterested in its aspirations, ideals, achievements. The efforts of the Council to build a bridge to the contemporary world is to affirm that there is no essential gulf between the two cities, that we are not committed to a moral hybridism, that faith and wit can coexist, and a man may gain part of a better world and not suffer the loss of his soul.

Positive threat and enmity towards the Church has given way to indifference, to an assumption of irrelevance. The city of God stands faced with a tranquilly irreligious society, a pernicious language barrier between them: instead of contact, an incommunicative isolation. And wrapped in our napkins are the urgent remedies, the power to cherish and guide a developing sense of world-wide fraternity and staggering control over nature; and balm for the concomitant evils of the day, the depersonalization and standardization of man, the swallowing of the individual in the state.

Ironically, the idea of a Church of *cathari*, insulated from the woes and above the toil of human living, has been the delight of her enemies. Mussolini was happy to tolerate a clergy pottering around their sacristies. Theology will have no enemies while it seems as innocuous a hobby as Hittite pottery, nor religion while it presents

itself as spectacle, like mexican rain-dancing, and just as effectual. Religion is neither escape nor flight, though unfortunately this is the description of the christian life we appear to endorse when we tolerate the concept of the Church as a haven whither converts flee after the buffeting of the open sea, 'where flies no sharp and sided hail'.

Like the donkey, we have had our hour of glory. God so loved the world that he spared not his own Son for it. The incarnation took place on our soil. The Word was made flesh and was in the midst of us as one who serves. It is within this world that man has his meaning, his activity has entered the economy of grace. Matter can never lose its dignity since its assumption into divinity, nor human nature since its divinization in the person of the Word. Life or happiness or progress are not unimportant. If we seek first the kingdom of God all these will be added to us. A fascinating vista opens up, a theology and spirituality of history, of the human situation, a sense of purpose forward-looking and dynamic enough to outdazzle marxian messianism: christian enthusiasm for the conquering of pain and hunger and distance and the fatigue of work, and the limitless possibilities for the evolution of humanity. The world is sick for the Church, said Hadrian the Seventh, but the world will not confess it as long as the Church poses as her rival.

Our theological tradition has committed us to abstractions. It is not souls the Church is trying to bring to salvation but persons. Faith engages not an anonymous stereotype but real men who are saved and sanctified in their own age, in the world that moulds them. The catholicity of the Church is historical as well as geographical; spiritual growth is not meant to be achieved in isolation from the secular climate.

To overstress the incompatibility of the two cities is to create unnecessary tension. Pope John poured scorn on 'those prophets of doom who see in these modern times nothing but prevarication and ruin'. The glory of the christian mission includes the completion of Christ's prophetic office, to bear witness to the truth, a task we jeopardize without engagement in the world's preoccupations, without speaking its language, without familiarizing ourselves with its topography, without commitment to it in loyalty and respect. The people of God, dedicated to completing the redemption of earthly reality, is inescapably inserted in history and can only suffer deformation by attempting to live outside the evolutionary process of history.

We can delimit the supernatural too easily, hovering over human-

ity instead of being incarnate in its flesh and blood. Liberty, peace, fraternity, reverence for the individual, are all christian values. It is bad theology that imposes a schizophrenic disassociation between an instinctive solidarity with the general eagerness for a more harmonious world and the intellectual block of rejection of the natural. The question of daily bread for oneself, said Nicolas Berdyaev, is a natural question; the question of daily bread for one's neighbour is a spiritual one.

We have to free ourselves of the haunting fear that enthusiasm for the ideals of the world is a betrayal of our own. Religion is not a refuge, an evasion of life become too complex, too challenging. *Candide* is no patron of christian simplicity. Resignation is not synonymous with quietism; it is a captious partiality of view that only the eschatological aspect of toil is of value or merits our attention. As love of God is inseparable from love of our neighbour, so is our vocation earthly as well as heavenly. 'The greatest fault of christians of the twentieth century', said Cardinal Suhard, 'would be to leave the world to develop and unify itself without them'. It is our privilege to insert christianity into the dynamic of the new age, where man is groping towards a solution of his problems as a species instead of as a collection of competing units, and is coming for the first time to have at his disposal the means for real control over his destiny. But all effective dialogue with the world will be impossible without openness to the inevitable pressure and formation of the present, without enthusiasm for the evolution of the technological society, without sympathetic tuning to our particular age, without the living affirmation of 'all that rings true, all that commands reverence, all that makes for right, all that is pure, all that is lovely'.¹ The world has a meaning beyond that of a testing ground. The circumstances of living are not inconsequential to human destiny. Brutality and illiteracy, the depression of rights and toleration of malnutrition, are more than trivialities of the passing show.

But it is not enough that we care for the world: we must appear to care, no more shrinking than Francis from the leper. Charity urges us to look into its eyes and see in its values and hopes and aspirations a groping – often ill-directed – after the truth and love and justice of the gospel. The missionary task demands not only that one speaks the language of the tribe but that one cultivates its thought-processes.

We work not that the supernatural order replace the temporal

¹ Phil 4, 8.

but that it consecrate it. This was the vision of Teilhard de Chardin, 'the synthesised act of adoration, in which a passionate desire to conquer the world and a passionate desire to unite ourselves with God will join hands and raise one another to the heights'. Cardinal Suhard took the confusion of the times to be neither disease nor decadence but a crisis of growth. The modern world he envisaged 'not the result of a catastrophe but the herald of a new birth'. To its aspirations we must contribute not a few tired slogans nor pre-fabricated solutions but awareness and identification and love.

That in our era the road to holiness passes through the world of action, was an aphorism of Dag Hammarskjöld. We have not received a spirit of fear. Through the Church the incarnation continues, and in the midst of the soaring achievement and moral squalor that are the strange bed-fellows of our accelerated history. The lepers approached Christ and sinners were called his friends. We fail the world if we do not attempt to integrate its dominant scientific and technological attitudes into the life of faith.

The imagery of the two cities is too facile. Overlapping is inevitable, dual loyalty is a betrayal of neither. Christ accepted the autonomy of the earthly city: 'render to Caesar'. Yet it is a charge as old as christianity that preoccupation with the spiritual leads to neglect of the practical, in the way hindu insistence on the illusionary nature of life obstructs economic reform and leads to cheerful forfeiting of the phenomenal world. Pope John encouraged cooperation with the unbeliever on the basis of the natural. He saw the world as full of christian possibilities. In a world that is the theatre of God's salvific plan, his will reaches to the perfection of man on earth and his dominance over the material world and its energies. The inevitable socialization of life and work is an unconscious approach to the supreme fraternity of the mystical body.

Science is neither to be mocked for its limitations nor perverted to propaganda; in his Dublin days, Newman had to fight for its autonomy. His 'philosophy of severance' shocked many. Nothing seemed falsier to him than that the secular did not count, or had no right to respect or claim to glory. Labour, which predates the fall, becomes the actuality of charity insofar as it is informed by it, rendered sacred by the grace within the worker and his vocation. So the making of a sonnet or a computer becomes a sacred task, and it can be as holy a thing to attend a conference on soil conservation as a eucharistic congress, and equally christian to be a pilgrim at Florence as at Fatima.