CREATION AND POVERTY

By ROBERT J. O'CONNELL

Few things are stranger than man's immemorial suspicion of creation. For one thing, it seems to be almost an inevitable moment in any spiritual conversion to pass through a stage where the attractiveness of everything in the world about us suddenly seems to constitute a danger: things weigh upon us like so many baubles slowing down our march, impeding our flight to higher realities; wealth and all created delight seems a stain upon the soul; and poverty – the abandonment of all 'possessions' – commends itself as the road toward 'purity' and salvation.

This fixation on purity tends to focus on certain areas: much has been said about a christianity conceived uniquely in terms of chastity, the form of purity that represents liberation from sexual attachment. It should be observed, though, that man's attitude toward creation has been bound up with his attitude toward woman, from ancient religions of earth-goddesses and earth-mothers, to a vast more recent literature, about nature as the eternal feminine. It is not surprising, then, that the aspiration toward poverty is often analogous to the one toward chastity, and motivated by a similar ideal of detachment: and that, both in males who preach and in the women who heed that preaching. Just as sexual pleasure is conceived as darksome, soiling, so, too often, the thirst for poverty arises from the suspicion that things – particularly things of sense, the kinds of possession normally denominated wealth – are somehow evil, suspect.

Such was the message of the manichees, the gnostics, dualists of all sorts in the ancient world. But those dualisms die hard: they represent historically identifiable forms of perennial temptations which, even today, still nag at the human mind and heart. How often one comes across christians who manifest a vague unrest about their spiritual health, coupled with an attraction toward a life of poverty: and then, once the surface of their expressed attitudes has been broken through, the source of their unrest is found to be a deep-seated distrust of creation.

The goodness of creation, and of woman

And yet, the christian *credo* clamoured to the ancient world that creation was good, indeed, 'very good'; that all was made for man, and man, both male and female, was created 'in the image' of God, to represent his own divine dominion over earth and all things on it. 'Multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it' – associated in the creative design, man and woman stand together in its rupture too: 'Because you followed your wife's suggestions . . . cursed shall the earth be through you'. Only then does man's shame before his own nakedness spread to become a dualistic suspicion of the earth. But the biblical author's point is clear: only through man's sin has the earth been 'cursed', – the trouble lies in man's own heart, and spreads abroad from there. All dualistic suspicion of the earth is peremptorily excluded.

But with it is excluded the validity of grounding christian poverty on such dualistic suspicions as invade the area of chastity as well. Man's proper attitude toward earth is set in parallel with his attitude toward woman, – both their mysteries are set in resonance, their profound attractiveness and rich fecundities answer to one another. So too, St Paul's advice that 'it is an excellent thing for a man to remain unmarried'[1] instantly receives widened application, – 'those who buy anything (should live) as though they did not own it';[2] man's relationship to woman draws as its companion-piece a message on the christian attitude toward creation more generally.

Contemporary rethinking

The biblical renewal of the past thirty years has greatly contributed to a recovery of this Old Testament sense of creation. All too often in the past, it has been pointed out, the immanent values of created reality were looked upon as mere means to the end of saving our souls, – so many temporal realities set over against our 'eternal good'. In these terms, the christian life was conceived as a passage, pilgrimage – or, in stronger terms, an escape, a flight: the christian was exhorted to flee the clutch of visible things and cling to the God who is invisible.

What, then, became of man's mission to 'multiply, and subdue the earth'? The task is surely temporal if ever there was one. It supposes that man's history makes a difference, that what he does here can be truly significant, that temporal activity is not merely

[1] 1 Cor 7, 1. [2] 1 Cor 7, 29–31.

so much 'basket-weaving' to pass the time until the celestial rocket takes off for eternity.

So christians today are being summoned from all quarters to abandon formerly deficient ways of regarding creation, to return to Genesis' robust acceptance of it as 'good'. Coupled with this, predictably, comes the proclamation that sexual union is a good, the act of love between husband and wife a quasi-sacramental encounter: the inclusion of considerations on marriage in Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* is significant. Let manichaeism finally be exorcised, the cry is heard, let gnosticism breathe its last; let christians at last adopt a mature attitude to these perennially related aspects of their incarnate state.

And all this is to the good.

But, especially when it takes the form of pleading with contemporary christianity to assume a frankly 'secular style', some doubts arise as to whether we are not being asked to take a stance unbalanced in the opposite direction.

It is true that God's commission that man subdue the earth implies and exacts of man a maturity, a responsibility that is rare in religious literature. It might be said that judaeo-christianity is alone in assigning to man a task whose execution makes him partner, and at times quasi-independent partner of the creative God: the frightening part of it is that man can say, no. Or, he can take his dominion over the earth as though it were uniquely his own achievement; advance on the project of subduing the earth with that God-denying triumphalism so heralded in recent centuries.

Traditional thought has envisaged the earth and its affairs as part and parcel of God's own providence: 'God's work on earth truly is our own'. But certain contemporary voices would seem to have it that all talk of divine providence reduces man to an infant again, refuses to admit the maturity of the human race, once more tries to bend man into the grovelling attitude of the pre-scientific age. Man's providence seems nearly to replace God's. Science, we are assured, has allowed man to grow up, to take his responsibilities for earth in serious, adult fashion. He can, and must, handle his own problems, wrest from the earth and sea and atom what it can yield to his know-how and power.

'Secular' christianity

The earth is there for men to explore, to master for the purposes of building the city of man; in executing his task man's attitude

must be both profane and pragmatic. Feverish efforts of christian preachers to inject a religious note into this concern will only distract and enfeeble the legitimately profane attitude post-scientific man has at last managed to assume; drumming out messages about man's ultimate concern will imply that his short-range goals are not worthwhile in themselves, that his attention must at certain moments be drawn away from them to focus upon something else entirely.

What is needed, then, is a 'secular' attitude toward creation, a secular way of speaking about God, a christian acceptance of the 'secular city' as legitimate and adequate scope for his concern.

Corollary of all this would be, clearly, a secular notion of all the traditional christian virtues, including the one so intimately associated with man's attitude toward creation, poverty. And in fairness it must be admitted that a noble, even austere notion of poverty could be evolved from such a secular stance: activity upon created realities when regarded as ordered toward the building of human community allows little room for concern with miserly having, exacts a sense of dedication to one's fellow-men that carries in its train a severe detachment from possessions.

But there are gnawing difficulties in this position: one of them, surely being, its rather questionable assumption – far commoner before the second World War – that scientific triumphs herald a new, mature humanity. The scientists who mastered the atom have themselves come to speculate on a humanity still morally too infant to control responsibly the power placed into its hands. The issues here are ones which science is slowly coming to realize are hardly amenable to scientific treatment and solution.

Mankind is still faced, accordingly, with all the perennial problems, among them man's enduring inhumanity to man. On the level where these problems must be met, we are confronted ever again with the 'pathetic grandeur of human existence' as that splendid pragmatist, Dag Hammarskjöld, was brought to see it, 'bound up with the eternal disproportion in this world . . . between the honesty of the striving and the nullity of the result'.[1] This inexorably brings us to face the haunting spectre of death, whose step, heard even in the best-engineered secular city, still gives us pause when measuring the meaning of all human endeavours. 'Is man alone in the universe or not?' – Unamuno's rephrasing of that ancient question Harvey Cox must at last introduce in the

[1] Hammarskjöld, Dag, *Markings* (New York, 1964), p 13.

final chapter of his book;[1] but the answer one gives to that quite traditional question may well decide whether the secular stance, presented in preceding chapters, can even provisionally be conceived as adequate to the purposes it holds up as valid and sets out to implement.

For any pragmatic goal we choose to honour implies that some goals are ultimately worth striving for, despite all possible disproportion between the 'honesty of the striving and the nullity of the result'. Nor will it do to answer that the tasks involved in building the secular city are justified as ordered to the fulness of what human life should be: one may legitimately ponder why and even whether these creatures of so brief an hour between birth and death are ultimately worth the dedication to which, in the interests of their precarious well-being, the gospel of the secular city summons us.

Creation, reverence and religion

The call to assume the profane and pragmatic attitude inevitably brings to mind Hemingway's hero in *The Old Man and the Sea.* He reflects bitterly on those machine-propelled craft, controlled by hard-eyed men who refer to the sea no longer by the feminine *la mar.* To them it is a neutral terrain of exploitation, – a coldly masculine *el mar* – and not, as for the Old Man, an adversary worthy of respect and wonder. Such reverence for creation, we are now assured, is a relic of the pre-scientific age, a residue of man's religious infancy. To re-awaken it in the contemporary christian mind would only invite man once again to toss himself like a child into the arms of God, give up the human task and supplicate God to do it for him, wait in quiet resignation through the time passed in life's anteroom, until departure for another world.

Secretly implied in all such exhortations is a certain notion of religion – one that might better go under the name of religiosity. The sense that seems regularly accorded to the term is very redolent of the gnostic-manichaean attitude toward the visible creation as a place of exile, alienation; or at best, the augustinian warning that such things are for our use until we take flight to the eternal object of enjoyment. Enough has been said of both these orientations to make it questionable whether either of them can adequately ground a fully christian attitude toward creation, toward man's task of

[1] *The Secular City* (New York, 1965), p 242.

subduing the earth. But another question calls for attention: is this the only legitimate sense in which the term religion may be used?

Again, creation and woman

A possible path toward answering that question may start from Hemingway's 'old man': the sea, for him, represents the created world against which man is pitted in a contest very like the love-encounter between man and woman. The sea is the eternally feminine element that is constantly associated with the invitation, the challenge of creation. Her treasure is there to be wrested from her, her riches there to be unearthed, her mysterious secrecies to be explored.

But the implication is that the sea, and creation generally, cannot be regarded merely as an 'it', pragmatically to be exploited for egoistic purposes; our business with creation is looked on as a dialogue where reverence, wonder is never banished. To remain a treasure, what we wrest from her she must graciously accord; her riches once unearthed will turn to dross between our plundering hands unless we receive them as her gift; her caverns we can light with the clinical glare of our electric appliances, but their secrecies are thereby instantly banished and reduced to bare, comfortless banalities. Sex, to be meaningful, must symbolize the dialogue of love; our dealings with creation must exhibit something of that same respectful tact. 'Getting and spending', the poet once reminded us, we shall merely 'lay waste our powers' and find after the conquest that 'little there is in nature that is ours'.

Merely on the phenomonological level, then, the exclusively profane and pragmatic attitude toward creation threatens eventually to drain it of all interest, and thereby undercut the very project secular christianity finds so worthwhile. Banishing the sense of reverence may not be the answer: the answer may lie in properly understanding the sense of reverence and its import.

The import of religious awe

The secularizer has seen that reverence is always part of the religious attitude. God is experienced not only as the *fascinosum* that solicits man to the delights of union with himself; that feeling is always accompanied and balanced by the perception of God as *tremendum* – one from whose contact we incline to flee; so Peter senses the Other in Christ and begs, 'Depart from me, O Lord, for

I am a sinful man'.[1] He has also seen that the biblical revelation comes in part to challenge and banish certain religious attitudes, certain forms of 'sacralization' of creation. Precisely at this point he takes a leap: banishing certain specific, regnant forms of sacralization suddenly becomes tantamount to desacralizing creation entirely.

But the leap seems to have taken off from a basic misconstruction: the sense of reverence is interpreted as drawing man away from the human task, soliciting the irresponsible movement of escape. Yet just the opposite is true: untempered by the sense of God as *fascinosum*, the feeling of awe would crush man under the weight of his own unworthiness, discouraging him entirely from hoping for the union with God which gives meaning to the movement of 'escape'.

Infantile awe

And here it should be plain that we are not speaking of the religious sense of awe as Freud, for instance, treats of it in his writings on religion. The only form of religious awe his theory permits him to recognize is really a sense of 'guilt' – the infantile dread of some fearfully menacing father-projection, a neurotically compulsive anxiety which persuades man to snuggle, like an infant, against the breast of that terrible avenger, in the hope that, like a human father, he may be cajoled out of his angry mood. Such childish snuggling has very little to do with the fully human, adult sense of awe which can be experienced only if its pseudo-forms have been discarded; it is certainly not the reverence enjoined by christianity – but if it were, one could easily understand that it keeps the devotee busy enough to distract him from the tasks of being human, to say nothing of subduing the earth.

Now there is every indication that the 'sacralization' attitude which the biblical revelation came to banish had much in common with this infantile type: something like it perennially accompanies the forms of nature-religion which Freud's ineradicable dualism equipped him admirably to understand, – and repeatedly to confuse with all forms of religion. All of which leads one to wonder how much of the freudian critique of religion has uncritically been accepted by the proponents of secular christianity.

Reverence and the need for God

How much, then, does the adult sense of religious awe have to do

[1] Lk 5, 8.

with man's fleeing his task of subduing the earth? First of all, it should be underlined that this sense of awe does not directly relate to man's desire for union with God, man's need for God in that sense of the term. The sense of God as *fascinosum* has far more to do with those features of religion; unmodified by a sense of reverence, the experience of God as supremely attractive would draw man away from the creation which he suddenly finds 'weary, stale, unprofitable', when set against the splendour of the divine.

But an attitude which regarded God uniquely under the rubric of the *fascinosum*, thereby reducing him to someone – (or something?) – up there or out in the transcendent somewhere, affably guaranteeing all the satisfactions which elude our grasp during our life down here, would be not only a truncated religious attitude, it would be fundamentally irreligious, – and it is patently unfair to limn the religious attitude, as has too often been done, in these unilateral terms.

On the other hand, it would assuredly be difficult to fault the case against religion so understood. Creation, in this perspective, would become a gigantic toy-shop, offering as we explore its riches an array of more and more attractive, more and more fascinating play-experiences; the attitude of poverty, then, would intervene only when the child was led wearily, and disappointedly, to realize that the ultimate plaything was in another room: heaven, or what have you. Creation would then be a frustrating trick to get us to experience our need for, awaken in us the insuperable desire for, God. And we are back to another variant on the escape notion of poverty. But now one of its dominant features stands out plainer than before: its incurable egoism, its childish self-centredness. For God becomes the object we all are meant to enjoy, the thing we all most profoundly desire, – and poverty gives up (as we used to say when children) everything else in order to possess this 'uniquely necessary' reality.

Reverence and Epiphany

It is precisely to this self-centredness that the religious sense of awe applies a remedy. It does so, first of all, by reminding us that God is not merely remote in some ineffable transcendence, but near us, here and now, dwelling and – as St Ignatius puts it in a daring phrase – 'labouring' in all the things and events and persons of our experience. 'An awesome place is this', cries Jacob awakening at Bethel, 'the house of God and the gate of heaven' – a place where

heaven meets with, deals with earth, and doing so, makes earth a sacred place. What we greet with the movement of reverence, is indeed, God's ineffable transcendent holiness, – but that transcendence precisely manifested as immanent.

We find him, in Hopkins' phrase, each time we rediscover that the 'world is charged with the grandeur of God' as source of that 'dearest freshness deep down things', forever bursting forth into presence and epiphany.

Reverence and the value of creation

In the light of this experience all the treasures of creation guard their preciousness, none of her riches lose their gloss, her secrecies explored retain their wonder and their mystery. For exploration now is dialogue not only with creation but the creative splendour flaming forth 'like shining from shook foil'. Far from diminishing interest and fascination in created things, the experience of reverent wonder lays bare the ground of that interest, the depth to which that fascination beckons, the personal Heart from whom creation, as a gesture of love, has proceeded, still at each passing moment proceeds.

To the question, now, of why any goals at all are worth our dedication, the experience of reverence answers that all values derive their worth from this Presence that suffuses them. People are 'worth it' now precisely because each 'thou' affords us contact with the transcendent 'Thou' both within and beyond them. The human community God has chosen to make his family. Hence no city is purely secular, no reality, 'for those who know how to see', is purely profane.

Reverence and the temporal task

This is why that sense of awe does not distract from but inspires and deepens earthly concern. Jacob sets up a stone to commemorate his meeting the Godhead, and forthwith continues his pilgrimage; Peter turns away – not from human affairs, but – from this other sphere which has momentarily invaded his experience; hearing the Word however, he leaves nets and boats, but only to set out behind him on the dusty roads of Palestine. Paul's cry comes down to us as exemplary: the radiance strikes him from his horse, blinds him to all about him, yet the wish he expresses is typical: 'What will you have me do, Lord?' Only when this has been made plain to him does his sight for earthly realities return, a sight that he will need to

cross the seas, roam the towns, deal with the people he must deal with.

Poverty and charity

And deal with them he does, with unstinting solicitude, but with that soaring liberty that springs from the source and centre of all christian attitudes, poverty included. In his new-found relation to the Heart of all, he 'has nothing', and yet 'possesses all things'. His quest is to comprehend him by whom, he has discovered, he is already comprehended, but comprehended as a vessel of election to his brethren.

Peter's development takes a somewhat different course: it appears to have taken him a certain time to shake off old attitudes and valuations: complexes always take time to resolve themselves, even in the blaze of such personal encounter. But after the vision at Joppa[1] he is finally enabled to read aright; nothing, he sees, is unclean any more; to those who are pure, all things are pure.

But the purity in question is conceived, now, in interpersonal terms; the purity of total responsiveness. The dialogue with creation has become a dialogue creation mediates with its personal Source.

What Peter and Paul and Francis and the other saints eventually come to embody is that poverty enjoined on the christian in the sermon on the mount, and lived by Christ at every moment of his existence – from the poverty of Bethlehem to the dispossession signified in his final 'Into Thy hands I commend My Spirit'. The world as Christ envisaged it was constant gift – lilies, sparrows, falling rain and growing wheat, and especially ourselves, however little our faith, all untiringly upheld by the Father's creative care. Why, then, be anxious about what we shall eat, or what we shall put on? Constant revelation of the Father's love for us, creation calls forth the banishing of self-centred solicitude, evokes the freedom that unlocks our egoistic reluctance to 'do good and lend', giving with measure full and overflowing the responsive love of trustful children – childlike, but far from infantile, playing with delight like the Wisdom of old among his works, because in all of them we constantly rediscover the immensity of his paternal love. The centre of our life becomes the wish that his paternal love succeed: creation has been placed in our hands as invitation to collaborate in the labour of that love. All things are ours, we are Christ's, and Christ

[1] Acts 10.

is God's: we no longer live for ourselves, but for him who lived and died for us, whose Spirit of love still moves like a mighty wind down the centuries.

Like the complex attitude toward sex, the dualistic dread of creation slowly dissolves when polarized by such a focus. No longer is it question of a dark desire, suspect and all-devouring, so alien to some angelistic self-image that we must repress it utterly, or else camouflage it under sublimation-surrogates. Nor is it merly a drive, so natural to man (like the appetite for food) that he can do no more than accept, consent to it resignedly as part of his lower nature and leave it at that. The personal focus can penetrate downward to this lower nature, this lower nature be in time assumed, transformed in the assumption, into the personal sphere, – just as creation itself and all its lower forms has been assumed and recapitulated in that personal being, man.

Then, just as tact and reverence transform the act of love between man and woman who recognize each other now, not merely as naked, but as each an irreplaceable 'some-one', the mission of subduing the earth begins to shed its egoistic, exploiting character. There enters into it a detachment born of respect, reverence, wonder. He who went off in the 'rash lustihead of his young powers' to conquer creation returns in time conquered by it. What once appeared merely an arena of struggle for mastery slowly reveals itself as an awesome place. What seemed to be a host of things yielding themselves to any who would take hold, plunder, and enjoy them, reveal themselves, in time, as disclosers of a Presence before whom we fall back, in the detaching movement of reverence, to return and follow him in loving labour for those he loves.

But all of this takes time: poverty, freedom, are not assimilated in a day. The task of subduing the earth summons man to months and years, a lifetime of dedicated action in and on the world; in the course of such a lifetime each task assumed scours out some vestige of our egoism; the experience of wonder comes to one thus readied for it: 'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God'.[1] Occasionally, then more frequently and powerfully renewed, it comes in time to be the implicit atmosphere of our lives, hollowing out at the heart of our action a centre of detachment, freedom, responsiveness, – the heart of christian poverty.

Rooted, then, in a personal relationship progressively uncovered

[1] Mt 5, 6.

in his active dealings with creation, the christian's poverty flows out of love, and flows out into love for his brethren. He knows now why creation must not be permitted to lie fallow; man must accept his divine commission to continue and advance the creative process which has been delivered into his hands; but all of this finds its central meaning when channelled into the building of human community.

For here the secularizer is on solid ground. The task of subduing the earth is indeed directed toward the building, not of some city of God aloft and unconnected with the temporal, earthly city of Man, – but a city of God at the heart of, enshrining the city of Man itself. The kingdom of God is in our midst: we actualize it each time we direct our efforts on creation towards building the city wherein love and mutual understanding find home and native air; each time our work, in advancing the creative process, demands of us and evokes from us the purity of heart required by the task itself.

In short, each time the community virtues of unselfishness, reverence, and tactful love penetrate into our dealings with creation, we grow in the poverty of spirit to which the kingdom of God was promised: promised by one whose care alone can close the gap between the 'honesty of striving and the nullity of the result', assured that no cup of water given in his name will fail to contribute to building the eternal New Jerusalem.

Poverty, then, like charity, is a growing thing. The christian's liberty of attitude toward created things increases as love progressively invades the springs of his action. As creation becomes for him gift bestowed and responsibility conferred, his activity more and more becomes responsibility freely undertaken, gift responsively given. He looks on creation less and less as something to have, more and more as something to bring to its divinely willed fruition: a fruition, is to be found in the mutual self-gift which is human community come to its fulness in Christ, because divinely grounded in that paradoxical coincidence whereby 'You do it unto Me'.

But again, that process of growth is purifying: year by year the pennants of egoism are stripped away, until the moment comes when poverty reaches its climax. Then it is exacted of us that we loose our hold on all created things, make of all creation – and of ourselves – the ultimate and irreversible gift that we call death. 'Into Thy hands': the dispossession must be total now, the poverty unreserved. Then the wonder glimpsed as we tramped the hills and valleys of our lives will become for us what we shall (hopefully) have learned to be for him and his – response, eternal and undying.