

LIFE MORE ABUNDANTLY

By OLIVER ELLIS

THAT MAN is transforming the world is a truism. More significant, though less generally appreciated; is the fact that man himself is being transformed by his own creation and discovery. We live in accelerated history. In achievement, perspective and hope, the last fifty years have seen greater progress than any previous five hundred. We are on the brink of further staggering change with science the dominant force, simultaneously liberating and menacing. For the first time in history, the banishment of hunger, want and disease has become a theoretical possibility; as has the total destruction of life on our planet. Knowledge of the universe is bringing us to mastery of the sources of energy, total communications, the very mystery of life. Above all there is the evolutionary orientation of our thinking, from stability to fluidity; 'to our clearer vision the universe is no longer a state but a process'.¹ As the primeval forces of evolution come within the range of knowledge and to some extent within control, man no longer appears an exception in or extrinsic to the universe, but frankly integrated in it and thus capable of serving as its interpretation and key.

In the mutation of culture, man is being 'acculturized' himself. Progress has brought him to a completely new situation, not only in the face of nature but with regard to his own existence. Urbanization, the mobility of life, the whole of technological civilisation, is primarily a cultural rather than a material reality. The transition imposes a tissue of new social values. A new relationship to nature involves a reorganization of life, penetrating the structure of society and leaving none of its vital institutions untouched. Above all, technical civilisation is of its nature in perpetual transition.² For effective development it requires the flexibility of evolutive institutions. A new stability, a settling down again of life, is mere wishful thinking. Evidently, such a normal condition of mutation must have the

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, S. J., *The Future of Man* (London, 1964), p 261.

² That leadership in society is going to the young is evidence of this. Traditionally it was the prerogative of the old, because they were the guardians of tradition and the assurance of stability.

deepest sociological and religious implications. And this emphasizes the impossibility of a static theology replying pertinently to the issues of changing social reality.

If its service is to be realistic and its witness credible, and if it is not to impose on its members the intolerable strain of detaching them from their universe, the Church must be committed to continual revision of its work and institutions. It will need a reshaping of its structures to enable it to respond appropriately to the action of God within the patterns and purposes of society. But, in turn, such renewal will remain ineffectual until its personalist base is established. Prior to any reappraisal of church institutions or the forms of its witness must come realistic reappraisal of the relation of the sacred to the secular, insofar as their convergence provides the context of the individual christian's being and activity. Solidarity between the Church and the world must await solidarity between the christian and his environment. Faith can be luminous only by relating to societal modes and values. Establishing the modality of the christian's witness and service within the present will indicate the modality of the Church's survival as institution, and provide a criterion of its effectiveness.

To speak of dialogue *between* the Church and the world, or of relating the Church *to* the world, indicates the degree to which we are still trapped in the mediaeval concept of the Church as perfect society, an abstraction independent of history, marked off within a juridicism of rights and duties. Neither is the world an abstraction. It is persons, nations, classes, attitudes and pressures operating on the christian, demanding response: and insofar as these are not under the influence of grace, challenging his action or commenting on his failure.

The missionary frontier of the Church is now cultural rather than geographical. Failure to recognise the religious significance of cultural phenomena outside the formal religious system makes impossible the integration of the temporal order into spirituality, and leaves our thinking and response lagging behind the evolution of social facts. The starting point of valid dialogue is the acceptance of life within the present as the providential environment of the pilgrimage of God's people. This demands a perceptiveness of judgment and a creative searching for appropriate forms of response to the disconcerting action of the Spirit within history and within the transformation of society. For the christian to absent himself from the dynamic centres of questioning and planning, to attempt

to proclaim the gospel and prepare the kingdom without reference to societal context, would be a damning form of infidelity.

The task laid upon us is to produce a spirituality of events and circumstances, close to the preoccupations and demands of the age, a theological interpretation of the universe consonant with our understanding of it. Our theological and ecclesiological thinking must be shaped by the awareness that any new insight into the universe, in physics or cosmology, in psychology or semantics, any technological advance whatever, provokes mutations which penetrate to the intimacies of social and christian living. The substance of man's achievement, precisely as the environment of personality and adulthood, must also be the place of the christian's response to God. New lines of development within the Church, or new forms of ministry, must await the adequate equipping of the individual as a bridge between secularity and religion.

'The drama of the present religious conflict lies in the apparent irreconcilability of two opposed kinds of faith, christian faith which disdains the primacy of the ultra-human and the earth, and 'natural faith' which is founded upon it.'¹ Man is in history not by accident but of his nature; time is the basic dimension of his being and the measure of his action. Our sincerest instincts are towards participation and solidarity with the world. Yet 'it is difficult to realize both truths at once, steadily to contemplate the world to come and yet to act in this . . . In various ways does the thought of the next world lead men to neglect their duty in this; and whenever it does so we may be sure there is something wrong and unchristian, not in their thinking of the next world but in their manner of thinking of it.'²

Within a single vocation our allegiance and responsibility are dual. God continually calls to cooperation in building the kingdom, our instincts call us to build the earth; both summons come through the social matrix. Without reconciliation we are led to acquiesce in a double life, 'never wholly belonging to God, nor ever wholly to things; incomplete in our own eyes and insincere in the eyes of our fellows'.³

The glory of God, as Irenaeus reminds us, is man fully alive. Yet at the heart of the present religious crisis lies the rejection

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (London, 1964), p 266.

² Newman, J. H., *Parochial and Plain Sermons: Doing Glory to God in Pursuits of the World* (Sermon XI, Vol VIII).

³ Teilhard de Chardin, S. J., *Le Milieu Divin* (London, 1960), p 23.

of religion not only as uncongenial but as lethal, a threat to the newly-attained adulthood of man just when he has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis.¹ Like Camus, he is formed to live without appeal. Hence the dilemma. The very world within which the christian must make his response and which is to be the theatre of his witness is marked – and inevitably so – by an erosion of theocentricity and the pushing of traditional religious attitudes to the periphery of its concern.

Secularity is a cultural fact. The history of modern thought and culture is the story of the exclusion of God from one department of life after another, as more and more of man's experience becomes de-sacralized. Nature is already 'de-fatalized'. From a blind, tyrannising force it has become intelligible; it has thus become man's responsibility and the instrument of his progress. Its inner consistency enables it to be understood and manipulated without appeal to a monitoring deity. Environment does not rule man; rather it is his responsibility, a liberating responsibility, imposing adulthood, challenging him to full personhood.² That the appeal to transcendence is no longer a necessary context for understanding nature, that we do not have to resort to God to fill in the gaps, is not inevitably loss. It is a legitimate consequence of the impact of biblical faith on history. 'The disenchantment of nature begins with the creation, the desacralization of politics with the exodus and the deconsecration of values with the Sinai covenant, especially with its prohibition of idols.'³ To differentiate and yet to see a unity of order between the sacred and the secular is not an exclusion of transcendence but its heightening and purification. 'For religious people to resist this process, to suppose that room can be found for God only by keeping open a space in the circle of explanation or control, is merely to ally faith with ignorance'.⁴ Modernity is implacably inimical to religiosity, myth and magic. Faith must be allied not with man's weakness and ignorance but with his maturity. A faith which is nourished on categories of a pre-scientific state of civilization, or which does not reckon with the contemporary redefinition of man's place in the universe, cannot inform modern living or condition modern culture. 'We must not gloss over the ungodliness of the

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London, 1959), p. 195.

² Gal 4, 4.

³ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (London, 1966), p. 17.

⁴ Robinson, John A. T., *But that I can't Believe* (London, 1967), p 59.

world, but expose it in a new light. Now that it has come of age, the world is more godless, and perhaps it is for that very reason nearer to God than ever before'.¹

'Nietzsche, when he proclaimed God dead, was not flying in the face of the sensible evidence offered by contemporary christians'.² History can be appealed to for dismissing religion as a circumscribing thing, a sublimated egoism whose pursuit diverts from human concern. The liturgy has its prayers about despising and rejecting the goods of the earth – among them, on the face of it, health, housing and education.³ In the name of such otherworldliness, christianity has sanctioned sloth and indifference, justified slavery and serfdom, disapproved of proletariat advance, depressed liberty or quietly tolerated its depression, allowed the perpetuation of wrongs on earth and their righting to heaven.

Religion must be rescued from its position of a narcissist superstructure on the fringe of living. The constitution on the Church in the modern world generously discerns behind the rapid mutations and effervescence of modern life the aspirations of humanity towards greater dignity, unity and intelligent mastery of its own destiny.⁴ It recognises man himself as the source of these mutations, led through exploration of the universe and of his own history to growth in self-understanding.

Many still mistake the effort towards theological interpretation of modernity for a failure of nerve, stampeding us into capitulation or compromise: as an embarrassed flight from the supernatural, a betrayal of the charism of pessimism and protest, which should rank high among the claims the world has upon our charity. Any idea of accommodation to the spirit of the age is anathema, what Maritain, quoting Chesterton with approval, 'the Church is the one thing which saves man from the degrading servitude of being a child of his own time', now calls *chronolatrie*.⁵ Accommodation appears as the abandonment of the call to self-denial, to endurance and courage before temptation, the relinquishment of the primacy of the spiritual in the midst of materialism, unbelief and demonic forces incapable of synthesis or recapitulation into Christ: in brief, a shirking of the

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Prisoner for God* (New York, 1959), p 167.

² *Herder Correspondence*, vol 4, no 5, p 1.

³ Cf the dilution of the spirit of St Francis of Assisi in the prayer of his feast.

⁴ 'It is clear that men are not deterred by the christian message from building up the world or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows, but they are rather the more stringently bound to do these very things'. *Gaudium et Spes*, 34.

⁵ Maritain, J., *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (Paris, 1967).

cross, the covenant stamped with sacrifice and sealed with blood. The gospel is necessary scandal, a judgment of the world and its enduring power for evil. The world is transitory and awaits its apocalyptic purification, a testing ground where intention and inner disposition count above technique and result.

There is consistency in this attitude and apparent scriptural foundation. Religion is keeping oneself unspotted from the world¹ and unconformed to it.² The disciple does not belong to the world,³ nor is he to wonder if the world hates him for his attachment to Christ.⁴ But more than the scene of our testing, the world is also a protagonist in the drama of our soul-making. Satan is its prince⁵ and its wisdom; strength and nobility are folly, weakness and lies.⁶ Drawn into mankind's fall, it is alienated from God and in its hostility to him lies under judgment.⁷ Anti-humanism, then, is logical; it is a spirituality haunted by the littleness of man, a wariness about seeking fulfilment in work, an opting out of social or political involvement, a complacency once our own salvation is assured. If God is all, man nothing, religion easily develops an otherworldly mould, condescendingly serene and detached, its truth definitively evolved and formulated, a place of security and answers.

The strength of this viewpoint is the strength of half-truth. It is at variance with right understanding of both creation and redemption. Not that awareness of the force of evil is avoidable. There is little evidence, as Belloc remarked, for the immaculate conception of man. But the disorder is residual. The prince of this world has already been judged; he roams the earth powerless against the strength of our faith.⁸ For we have been drawn – and the world drawn with us – into the paschal movement from death to life.

To see redemption in penal and substitutional terms reduces the resurrection to an epilogue to the death of Christ. The apostolic teaching centres on Christ risen by the power of God, and so victor over flesh and sin.⁹ Flesh meant separation from God and dependence on what is essentially weakness, and so a sign of death. Overwhelmingly the victory of the risen Lord dominates the world, resolving its discords and its fundamental disorder of sin and death.

Christianity is neither code nor ideology. It is living out an event, a response in faith to a person who is the summary of all that is in heaven and on earth, and in whom all history is resumed.¹⁰

¹ Jas 1, 27.

² Rom 12, 20.

³ Jn 15, 19.

⁴ Jas 4, 4.

⁵ 1 Cor 11, 13.

⁶ 1 Cor 1, 20; 2, 6; 3, 19.

⁷ Rom 3, 6–19.

⁸ 1 Pet 5, 8.

⁹ Acts 2, 22–36; 3, 13–7; 5, 31.

¹⁰ Eph 1, 9.

God who created all things in Christ¹ has recreated them in him.² The world, made subject to frustration by man, has been set free from its bondage to decay to enjoy the glorious liberty of the sons of God.³ The redemption of the universe is a corollary of the redemption of man.⁴ *Resurrexit in eo mundus, resurrexit in eo coelum, resurrexit in eo terra. Erunt enim coelum novum et terra nova.*⁵

Much misunderstanding about the oppressiveness of God is avoidable by a more biblical orientation of the relationship of man to the universe.⁶ 'An authentically biblical doctrine of God not only survives the view that man himself is the source of cultural meanings, but actually supports and encourages such a view'.⁷ The world does not come to man already finished and ordered. Genesis shows God enlisting man in his creative activity. It comes in part confused and formless and receives its significance from man. 'Since man names the animals, the meaning they have comes from the fact that they are incorporated into his life. Their significance arises from their being a part of his projects and purposes'.⁸ Creation is presented more as a structuring of chaos than a mechanical, once for all enterprise of causation. Man is not inserted into a world where relationships and meaning patterns are already established. He must fashion them himself. 'He simply does not discover meaning, he originates it'.⁹ As creation is never complete, man's role persists and his co-responsibility for the world with God. Faith, then, is congruous with creative freedom.

Secular christianity is not a tampering with the integrity of faith but a rescuing of its cosmological and anthropological bearings from deformation, from a platonic concept of time and history, and from the unwarranted shift of scriptural opposition to the world from the purely moral and religious level to the ontological.

Within the unity of creation and redemption there are repercus-

¹ Jn 1, 3. ² Col 1, 15-20; Gal 6, 15.

³ Rom 8, 19-22; Eph 1, 10; Col 1, 20; 2 Pet 3, 10-13; Apoc 21, 1. On the cosmic dimension of redemption, cf *Lumen Gentium*, 9 and 48; *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

⁴ 2 Cor 5, 17-19.

⁵ 'In him the world is risen, in him heaven is risen, in him the earth is risen. For there will be a new heaven and a new earth'. St Ambrose, *De fide resurrectionis*, cited by Lyonnet, S.: *Exegesis epistolae ad Romanos* (Romae, 1966), p 240. Cf St Thomas, *Contra Gentiles*, 4, 97: 'Et quia tunc homines incorruptibiles erunt, a tota creatura tolletur generationis et corruptionis status'.

⁶ Gen 8, 21-22; Jer 33, 20-25; Ps 88, 36-38. Cf Lyonnet, S., *op. cit.*, p 236.

⁷ Harvey Cox, *op. cit.*, p 73.

⁸ Von Rad, Gerhard, *Genesis: a Commentary* (London, 1961), p 81.

⁹ Harvey Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

sions for the cosmos. Far from being a symbol of sadness or limitation, the cross is the tree of life, signifying the release of the world from the conflict and contradiction of its striving for autonomy. The Spirit has renewed the face of the world, and it is already on its way to final transformation. Involved with man as the matter and place of his relationship with God, natural and cultural values are redeemed. Through them, in turn, man integrates the purpose of his life – the humanizing of himself through the humanizing and evolution of the world – into his communion in grace with God.

The other half-truth, God is all, man nothing, has a neatness to attract the facile preacher, but is patently at variance with the achievement and potential of man, and with the biblical version of his origin and place in the cosmos. It is a wrong-headed effort to exalt the creator by denigrating the creative order established and restored in Christ. To evaluate fragile human achievement merely against the divine absolute is to miss the sense of creation and man's lordship within it. Based on a concept of man as originally spiritual through and through, essentially unrelated to matter, dedicated to pure contemplation, it is a deformation rooted in the religious-philosophical current of the early centuries, gnostic and neoplatonic, and fostered by the monastic mould in which spirituality evolved.

From passivity we are called to action. The new life of the christian is not merely constitutive; it has a progressive dimension. It is becoming as well as being. Work has not only significance but direction, man's self-realization within his two great earthly projects, the construction of the earth and the promotion of community. Teilhard concurred with Bergson's description of the world as a machine to make gods: 'The adventure of my life has been to reach heaven by bringing the earth to perfection . . . By virtue of the creation and still more of the incarnation nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see . . . Right from the hands that knead the dough to those that consecrate it, the great universal host should be prepared and handled in a spirit of adoration'. Work is not a mere spiritual discipline, a punishment laid individually upon us, burdensome and frustrating, as uncomfortable in one age as another, a punitive means of subsistence while we get on with the real work of saving our souls. It is both the matter of our dialogue with God and the concrete expression of our service to the hope and expectation of mankind.¹ Ordinary living is the matrix of christian

¹ Cf 1 Pet 3, 15.

development, assumed into the gratuitous presence of God, though it remains under menace from the ambiguity of injured creaturehood.

The life of the christian is to be the light of the world. He has to make his faith a dynamic principle of action, to mediate the purifying and integrating force of grace within the complex of social realities and activities. But this task cannot be assumed with creativity or imagination without enthusiasm for the new order, without recognizing the present cultural revolution and its concomitant secularity as a providential phase in God's unfolding plan for his kingdom. Little support is offered by religious attitudes appropriate to a pre-scientific world view. An obsolete theological perspective can only induce confusion or paralysis. We must start from the conviction that no synthesis ever achieved between culture and faith can be definitive. Each generation is confronted with a novel situation, with new dangers to face, a new dialogue to establish, new insights to interpret and integrate. Christianity has an assimilative power, 'sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing and asking them questions, claiming to herself what they said rightly, correcting their errors, supplying their defects, completing their beginnings, expanding their surmises, and thus gradually, by means of them, enlarging the range and refining the sense of her own teaching'.¹ To search for indications of God's grace at work in the world, and for signs of his will in the demands and aspirations of each epoch, is a perennial challenge to the vigour of the christian's faith and a part of his prophetic office. He must investigate, and then focus his zeal and charity on, the convergence of these values and the spirit of the gospel, and link these values to their source. Above all, he must humanize these events and situations: which is to rescue them from disorder. He must be an exorcist where the ambivalence of progress leaves untouched the pride and barbarity and selfishness of the heart of man. He must oppose whatever works against man's development and debars him from access to God.

Paradoxically, insofar as modern secularity purifies transcendence and imposes a personalizing of faith, it facilitates the relating of faith, hope and charity to the grace latent in the world and operative outside any empirical ecclesiastical framework. It re-defines for him his role of instrument of the world's salvation.

The world is not neutral vis-a-vis the creator or his salvific design.

¹ Newman, J. H., *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.

It is scored with the marks of divine wisdom and the place of his incessant activity. We are invited to discern his action and join in his work. In the construction of the world we bring stones to the edifice without knowing the totality of the plan; but we know and trust the architect. Faith will reconcile man to his new role as superman, orientate him towards appropriate witness, progressively integrate him in humanity, serve his liberty and lordship within the cosmos where the transforming mystery of God is working with divine power.

Religious and human life converge towards a single reality. The basis of all action, sacred and profane, is encounter with God in Christ. Christian life is paradox. Already it is life with Christ,¹ but it is still subject to the advance and check of historic progress, temporal in character, imperfect and provisional.² Essentially it is pilgrim life in the harsh liberty and challenge of the desert. It is being called forever out of security and the easy slavery of the past to discovery and growth, to persistent search: to search without precedent for a new incarnation of the event, a new correlation of the unique message in Christ Jesus with the present to which it is spoken. 'That everything that is good and wholesome, meaningful and upright, luminous and beautiful and complete and splendid on this earth, is given to know, through the healing which routs the powers of darkness, that the kingdom of God is come'.³ It is not a call to comfort, for to be amenable and submissive to the living presence of the Spirit as the guide to evolution, to have a sensibility refined and vivified by the Spirit, will lead us to the obscurity of unmapped ways. The Lord of history goes before his people to the earth's end, chronological and geographical. He in whom the light of God appears is also the light of the world, the norm of time and progress, the criterion of relationships. He is our place to be, for 'the world, life, death, the present, the future – all of it belongs to you. But you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God'.⁴

¹ Col 3, 3.

² Phil 3, 12.

³ Rahner, Karl, *Biblical Homilies*, (London, 1966), p 46.

⁴ 1 Cor 22, 23.