THE DEATH OF WONDER

By ERIC MASCALL

THE STORY is told of a remark made by archbishop William Temple when he was about to speak at eastertide on one of the first radio transmissions from Britain to America. An official of the broadcasting organization had suggested to him that he might well begin by saying how wonderful it was that he, standing in London, was now able, as a result of human achievement in science and technology, to speak to listeners on the other side of the Atlantic. 'I am intending', said the archbishop, 'to speak about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Can anything be more wonderful than that?'

It may indeed seem paradoxical to suggest that the major explanation of the loss of the sense of wonder in our time is to be found in the achievements of science and technology. Have not these provided us with a never-ceasing succession of wonderful appliances and techniques such as no previous age had ever dreamt of? Not only can we now speak across the Atlantic but we can observe and listen to human beings walking on the surface of the moon. Not only have we acquired an unparalleled ability to manipulate and transform the natural objects and forces around us, but we are also, thanks to the labours of molecular biologists and geneticists, on the verge of producing quite terrifying changes in the nature of man himself. Whatever may have happened to our sense of wonder, wonders themselves are a matter of daily occurrence. Has the loss of the sense of wonder, so far as it has been lost, been anything more than the temporary inhibition that often succeeds to a period of overstimulation?

To some extent this may be so, and it is perhaps significant that the young, on whom in the past 'the wonders of science' have had an exciting and exhilarating effect that has often provoked the patronizing smiles of their elders, have recently manifested an observable tendency to desert the sciences for the arts, in disregard of the prestige and the material rewards that devotion to the sciences offers. May it be the case that, to satisfy the sense of wonder, something more than 'wonders' is needed? At this point, however, it will be well for us to engage in the philosophically respectable task of clarifying and defining our terms.

When discussing the problems of knowledge, contemporary philosophers are accustomed to distinguish between the activities of *knowing-that* and *knowing-how*. Only the former of these consists in the apprehension of true propositions; the latter is a matter of possessing skills. In a somewhat similar way, we may distinguish between *wondering-why* and *wondering-at*. By 'wondering-why' I intend to denote the whole range of questioning which ceases when a satisfactory answer has been given; and the questions involved may begin with other interrogatives than the word 'why'. '*How many* electrons are there in the outer ring of the silicon atom?' '*When* will the next total eclipse of the sun occur?' '*Who* killed President Kennedy?' '*What* did Mr Gladstone say in 1863?' All these questions are expressions of what I call 'wondering-why', no less than the questions '*Why* did Hitler decide to attack Russia?' and '*Why* is there a world?' In all these cases the wondering comes to an end when an answer has been given which the wonderer judges to be true.

Very different is the activity of 'wondering-at', though it may, and on occasion should, lead to the activity of wondering-why. It consists in sheer open-mouthed contemplation and admiration of an object in an attitude bordering upon incredulity, the joyful recognition of 'things that cannot be and that are', to quote a line from one of G. K. Chesterton's poems. It can have a variety of objects and can vary enormously in intensity. It can accompany the delighted surprise of a mathematician at the discovery that there exists a number, of unknown magnitude, such that every greater number can be expressed as the sum of not more than four primes, or of a geneticist at the discovery of the double-spiral structure of the chromosomes. It can accompany the aesthetic appreciation of a sublime natural landscape or of a noble work of art. It can accompany the lover's sudden awareness of delightful traits in his beloved which neither he nor, in all probability, anyone else had ever discerned before. (The often made remark 'whatever could he see in her?' should, perhaps, be taken as a tribute to the lover's perceptiveness rather than to his capacity for self-delusion.) And, in the form of wonder *at* the sheer existence of anything at all, it leads to that wondering *why* anything exists which is the starting-point of traditional natural theology. And it is this wondering-*at* with which I am primarily concerned in this article.

I am, of course, aware that the question 'Why does anything at all exist?' is dismissed by the dominant school of anglo-saxon philosophers as nothing but a pseudo-question, and the answer 'It exists

because it is created and conserved by God' is dismissed as a pseudo-answer. The implied notion of causality, we are told, is one which relates events and characteristics of the empirical world to one another, and it cannot be validly extended to relate the whole empirical world or any one of its constituents to an alleged transcendent and non-empirical ground. It is not my business here to put up a defence of traditional theistic argumentation or of the analogical use of the concept of causation. I do, however, wish to stress that unless we cultivate or recover the capacity to wonder *at* the empirical world in its sheer existence, and not merely to wonder *how* its various constituents and activities are related to one another, we are very unlikely to see the question '*Why* does anything exist?' as other than a pseudo-question. There is, I would maintain, a very close connection between that exclusive concern with intra-mundane relationships which is the proper interest of the empirical sciences and the loss of that sense of wonder which is, so to speak, the pre-intellectual and (as the 'transcendental Thomists' would say) unthematic condition of argumentation for the existence of God. For, I would go on to assert, argumentation for the existence of God is only the explicitation, the 'unfolding' in discursive terms, of the object of this primary wondering-at. And wondering-at is essentially a contemplative activity, a restful and penetrating gazing, such as was movingly described by G. K. Chesterton in his poem 'A second childhood':

> When all my days are ending
> And I have no song to sing,
> I think I shall not be too old
> To stare at everything;
> As I stared once at a nursery door
> Or a tall tree and a swing . . .

In saying this I intend in no way to condemn empirical science for its thoroughly intra-mundane outlook; in this it is simply minding its own business. What is lamentable is that this intra-mundane outlook, perfectly proper in its own place, has spilled over from the realm of empirical science into the realm of our experience as a whole, with two consequences: first, that we have largely lost the capacity for contemplative wondering (wondering-at), and, secondly, that all our thinking and the preconscious psychological functioning on which it is based are formed on the implicit assumption that this world is the only world, and this life the only life, of which we need to take any account. The process has been accelerated

and its range vastly extended through the explosive expansion of the media of communication, with their tremendous power to condition the intellectual and volitional reactions of men and women. Scientists themselves are, so far as my observation goes, rather more sympathetic towards religion than is the community as a whole, for they are usually much more conscious of the limitations of science. But the result of living in a culture that is dominated by scientific technology is that people whose knowledge of science may be minimal or non-existent live their lives on unconscious assumptions which could only be justified rationally if the empirical sciences held the key to every aspect of cosmic and human reality.

It may be interesting to note in passing that in his earlier philosophical phase Ludwig Wittgenstein, who has attained a quite olympian status in the estimation of contemporary analytical and linguistic empiricists, saw clearly that, if the world had any ultimate meaning, that meaning must be located beyond the limits of the world itself, though in virtue of that very fact he saw this as one of the things that are to be 'shown' rather than 'said'. In his *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* he wrote, in a passage which his later admirers have dismissed with some embarrassment as a youthful lapse into 'mysticism':

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists – and if it did, it would have no value . . . All that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.
> It must lie outside the world.[1]

Later on, when he had moved into his later linguistic phase, he was to write: 'Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain'.[2] Nevertheless he is recorded as having said 'that he sometimes had a certain experience which could best be described by saying that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world.* And I am then inclined to use such phrases as "How extraordinary that anything should exist!" or, "How extraordinary that the world should exist!"'[3] Evidently years of linguistic

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[1] *Op. cit.*, trans. Pears and McGuinness, §§ 6, 41.
[2] *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 126.
[3] Malcolm, N.: *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London, 1958), p 70.

analysis had not entirely destroyed Wittgenstein's pristine sense of wonder.

While the secularization of modern man's mentality cannot be denied, its extent must not be exaggerated. Even in our urbanized and technologized western culture there are many people who are immune to its infection. Some of these no doubt are escapist, conventional or insensitive, though conventionality is likely to manifest itself today in capitulation to secularism rather than in resistance to it. Many of them, however, are adult, mature and reflective men and women, who know quite well what secularism is and have seen its inadequacy. Furthermore, there still survive great human cultures on which secularism has made as yet little impact. To many africans the existence of an unseen world and of God is so obvious that the elaborate argumentation devised by christian apologists for the defence of theism seems superfluous and faintly ridiculous. Nor do the religions of Asia seem to have lost their appeal, though we may doubt whether they will survive the never-ceasing expansion of science-based technology. We must not, however, forget that something like one-third of the human race lives under ruthlessly indoctrinated marxist ideology, with its seductive promise of a paradise on this earth and its firm conviction that any concern with religion is at best sheer waste of time and is at worst active sedition.

In such a situation as the present it is perhaps not surprising, though it is highly regrettable, that christians themselves have not always been able to resist either the wiles or the pressure of secularism. This is not the place for a discussion of the atheistic christianity of Dr Paul van Buren or the christian atheism of Dr Thomas Altizer and the very heterogeneous apostles of the 'death-of-God' school. (Dr J. C. Cooper has listed no fewer than ten distinct senses in which the death of God is understood by different writers who agree in announcing it.[4]) It is, however, very relevant to comment on a type of argument which has been widely used to justify the position that a consistent christian must be totally secularist in his attitudes and beliefs. A very characteristic instance of this is to be found in Dr Harvey Cox's book, *The Secular City*. Dr Cox began by pointing to the fact that human religion in general has viewed the world and all its constituents as being themselves divine; all things are full of Gods and it is therefore both right and prudent to offer them divine worship. He then claimed, and rightly, that it was the great achieve-

[4] *The Roots of the Radical Theology* (Philadelphia, 1967), pp 31 ff.

ment of the judaeo-christian revelation to disenchant and de-divinize nature; nature-worship is idolatry, and the only true and legitimate object of divine worship is the transcendent Lord Jehovah, the maker of heaven and earth. However, Dr Cox went on to interpret the transcendence of God as implying that he is altogether out of contact with the world and that therefore, paradoxical as it may seem, the world is absolutely and not merely relatively autonomous. Everything in it happens as if God did not exist and, although man has been set in and over the world to mould it and transform it, he is to mould and transform it as if God did not exist. God is not only transcendent to the world, he is altogether absent from it. And here, as it seems to me, Dr Cox goes sadly astray.[5] For a de-divinized world is not a world from which God is absent; it is a world which is totally dependent upon him and in which, therefore, he is most intimately and universally present. Where nature-worship was wrong was not in seeing deity everywhere but in identifying this universal deity with creatures instead of with their creator. For Dr Cox, nature-worship is a universal and inexplicable phenomenon, only to be accounted for by sheer human perversity, and the only cure for it is to treat it as purely irrelevant. But, as I see it, nature-worship only just misses the mark, though, like many other near-misses, it has ramifications and by-products some of which are deplorable. As I have said above, its mistake is not in discerning deity in the world but in ascribing that deity to the world and not to its creator. And this mistake is not difficult to explain. Its possibility is precisely due to the fact that God is so generous to his creatures that he makes them not as insubstantial phantoms or gossamer garments, so transparent that his presence within them could not be ignored, but as genuine subjects of existential energy and activity, possessing a real, though derived and dependent, substantiality and spontaneity. It is thus only too easy for man, when he sees them in all their manifold and scintillating beauty, to attribute their perfection to them alone, and to let his admiration of them terminate in them instead of penetrating through them to the eternal and uncreated beauty of the transcendent Lord from whom it is derived.

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[5] Fr Johannes Metz, though he has been criticized, as by Fr Karl Rahner, for underemphasis on the divine transcendence, is more discriminating than Dr Cox. 'We cannot and must not simply *identify* the actual modern process of secularization with the secularity of the world that Christ made possible and intended'. *Theology of the World* (New York, 1969), pp 40 ff.

C. S. Lewis was, I think, quite right in seeing pantheism as the normal religion of fallen man:

> So far from being the final religious refinement, pantheism is in fact the permanent natural bent of the human mind: the permanent ordinary level below which man sometimes sinks, under the influence of priestcraft and superstition, but above which his own unaided efforts can never raise him for very long. Platonism and judaism, and christianity (which has incorporated both), have proved the only things capable of resisting it. It is the attitude into which the human mind automatically falls when left to itself.[6]

This may seem to have been a digression, but it is in fact very pertinent to our theme. For to a culture which, under the domination of empirical science and technology, has, in its concern with intra-mundane relationships and transactions, almost entirely lost its sense of wonder and its belief in the transcendent, the Church's duty, in its evangelistic and prophetic office, is not to acquiesce in the situation, in the comfortable reflection that, atheistic as it has become, it is at any rate not idolatrous, but to help it to recover its lost dimension. For a world that is upheld and energized by the God in whom christians believe is not less but more lovely and rewarding than was the world as pagan antiquity conceived it. This would be true even if God had not conferred upon the world and upon man the crowning glory of grace and the Incarnation. The error of nature-worship is not that its conception of nature is too high but that it is too low. It is more glorious to know oneself to be a creature, made, sustained and enriched by God, than to congratulate oneself on a spurious self-sufficiency. 'I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God', wrote the psalmist, 'than to dwell in the courts of ungodliness'. But when in addition we consider the Incarnation and all that flows from it, our sense of wonder (wondering-*at*) is immeasurably enhanced. Two brief passages from the angelic doctor will serve to sum up the surpassing marvel of God's assumption of human nature in Christ and man's assumption into Christ by grace:

> Of all the works of God, the Incarnation most greatly surpasses our reason; for nothing more wonderful could be thought of that God could do than that very God, the Son of God, should become very man.[7]
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> The Incarnation holds up to man an ideal of that blessed union

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[6] *Miracles* (London, 1947), p 101.

[7] *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, xxvii.

> whereby the created intellect is joined, in an act of understanding, to the uncreated Spirit. It is no longer incredible that a creature's intellect should be capable of union with God by beholding the divine essence, since the time when God became united to man by taking a human nature to himself.[8]

All this would have little relevance if the mind of contemporary man had become so incurably secularized that it was simply impossible to awaken in him the sense of wonder and the transcendent. There are, however, notable signs that, even among those whose outlook would seem to be most thoroughly secularized, it is not so much destroyed as suppressed and overlaid, though its expression can take bizarre and even perverted forms. The contemporary cults of psychedelic art, hypnogenic music, hallucinatory drugs and promiscuous sexual activity all witness to a desire to achieve some kind of experience of an object that transcends the purely empirical, though, for lack of knowledge of the only true transcendent Being, they attempt to find a transcendent object within the finite realm and not through and beyond it. Neither art, music, drugs nor sex is to be condemned as evil in itself – even the hallucinatory drugs have a legitimate therapeutic use – but the attribution to any of an absolute character perverts even its proper function and leads in the long run to frustration and disillusionment. Thirty years ago Dr V. A. Demant wrote some very illuminating words about the attribution of an absolute character to relative and temporal realities:

> The whole modern world in those aspects of it which really affect the lives of men, is a field of conflict between various forms of demonism, as we may call the attempts to give some element in the temporal order the absolute value which only belongs to the transcendent. Demonism is the effort to include being in becoming.[9]

Dr Demant was writing with politics and economics primarily in mind, and the demonisms which he perceived were those of contemporary liberalism and totalitarianism; but his point is no less relevant to the personal inner life of men. Elsewhere he gives it a wider reference:

> The doctrine of the creation of the world by God implies that the world has the source of its meaning outside itself. Creation is the denial

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[8] *Comp. Theol.*, I, cci. The primary reference here is to the beatific vision which the redeemed will enjoy in heaven. Nevertheless, as St Thomas says elsewhere, grace is the beginning of glory in us (*Summa Theologiae*, II–II, xxiv, 3).

[9] *The Religious Prospect* (London, 1939), p 68.

> that the world is God. Because the source of the world's meaning is not in the world itself, each part has its meaning from the source and not ultimately from its relation to the whole . . . .
> Creation is not the fall; becoming is a real element in existence. But the actual world is fallen, for it is a world in which becoming is erected by the sinful spirit to the absolute, unconditioned value of the eternal.[10]

The sense of a need that only transcendence can satisfy is by no means absent in our culture, but it is significant that its satisfaction is sought within the finite realm of becoming, in spurious absolutes which cannot give ultimate or lasting fulfilment. It is also significant that, within the finite realm, it is not sought within the established institutions of society but outside them in various in-groups of which the hippy culture is the most notable. It is therefore lamentable when the Church, to which belong the means of access to the true transcendence which alone can give lasting satisfaction, appears so often to be identified with the establishment. This is too big a matter to discuss at the end of an article, but I will raise one question which seems to me to be vital.

How far has the renewal of the Church, which was set in action by Vatican II and has had repercussions far outside the roman catholic communion, taken account of man's need of a transcendent object which can engage his wonder? I am not pleading for artificial means of evoking feelings of awe and mystery – storied windows richly dight, casting a dim religious light, soporific chants and the like – but for a clear recognition of the transcendent God as the object of liturgical and non-liturgical prayer alike. As I see it, modern man has been starved by his social and cultural environment of the objects of two of his most fundamental needs, the need of community and the need of transcendence. In the past few centuries the Church tended to satisfy the latter need at the expense of neglecting the former; now the wheel has come full circle. With the recovered consciousness of the essential corporate nature of the liturgy and of the Church as the Body of Christ one must enthusiastically agree, but the question may be asked whether there has not gone together with this a loss of the consciousness that the whole temporal order of man's existence is rooted in the loving will of a transcendent God, in whom alone man can find ultimate satisfaction and who alone is the adequate object of his devotion and wonder. Unless we can recover the sense of transcendence in our worship, our concern with

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[10] *Ibid.*, pp 47, 81.

the pressing needs of our human contemporaries is itself doomed to frustration. Neither in the roman nor in the anglican communion is the danger absent of an attitude which is so involved with human welfare that the basic justification for this involvement falls out of view. Certainly in anglicanism one has seen cases of priests who have thrown themselves into social activities to the complete neglect, and even with the repudiation, of any concern with the sources of grace, and whose religion (and sometimes their psychological balance) has simply proved unequal to the strain. It was not so with the great leaders of the christian social movement in the past, whose thought was based on their belief in God as Creator and Redeemer and whose life was fortified by prayer and the sacraments. It will be nothing less than tragic if, when men and women are seeking, however fumblingly, for an adequate object of their wondering devotion, the Church has lost its own concern with the transcendent. Writing as an anglican, I cannot do better in concluding this article than quote the following words of Fr Michael Richards in *The Times* of May 16, 1970:

> Unless we can rapidly discover and communicate to one another the point of the new patterns of worship which the churches are bringing in, we shall lose a whole generation or more of christians; and that means finally losing England for christianity itself. Myth and magic will take over. When the rational worship of christianity fades, man will not be left in a clean, antiseptic, secularized world; a primitive, subhuman, savage, 'sacred' way of life is already returning and there is no visible sign at present that the process will stop.
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> Explanations of details, historical information about when this or that ceremony or prayer came in and why it should now go out, even theological commentary, are all pretty well powerless to help. People do not want bits of information; they want to see the unity of it all; they want to find God . . . .
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> Nothing short of the ritual of the courts of heaven will ever succeed in taking over from the rites of the jungle.