PROGRESS IN VALUES

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To a greater extent than we realize, our lives are governed by unreflective attitudes. How far our illusions prevail over our intuitions, how far perceptions valid in themselves are falsified as guides to life by what we unconsciously leave out: these are questions we ourselves decline to ask or allow others to ask. Our reluctance is natural, for there is a close relationship between the way in which we think and the demands that life manages to make on us. Thought-patterns are a mesh: they let through and they keep out. To upset the delicate balance of the fairly certain and the highly dubious is to expose ourselves to new claims on our freedom and hence to new threats. It is easiest to let sleeping doubts lie.

All this holds true of a widespread attitude towards the problem of moral and spiritual progress. With the proviso that labels are generally simplistic, one might describe this attitude as an optimistic christian liberalism. Its basic assumption, though seldom spelled out, is that, thanks to increasing knowledge and achievement, the world is growing steadily better. Not only have life-conditions become progressively less nasty, brutish and short, but more people are wiser, more morally perceptive and, above all, more humane than ever before. The liberal optimist is cavalier towards the past, and looks forward to the future as holding in store the prolongation and fulfilment of all that is good in the present. He is confident that the sickness of our society, intractable as it may appear at the moment, will decline as we discover and learn to cope with its causes.

Admittedly, this sort of liberalism has taken some hard knocks in the present century; other approaches to the relationship between moral progress and a changing world are equally characteristic of our age. Liberal optimism, with its vision of history as a gentle evolutionary ascent, differs markedly from the more aggressive and intransigent optimism of the revolutionary. Again, a negative and pessimistic view of the world is extremely widespread: the view which instinctively looks for the catch in what appears like moral progress in an age of declining religious practice. To try to appor-

tion these various attitudes among the christian population is a task for the sociologist; but it needs no analysis in depth to recognize that an easy optimism forms one significant element in a complex picture of fears and hopes, delusions, insights and wishful thinking. An eagerness to jump on to moral bandwagons, and an extreme reluctance to subject contemporary values to scrutiny, may be noticed as two signs, among many others, of its presence.

In this article, without making any claim to depth or originality, I want to consider this liberal and optimistic attitude from the standpoint of three questions. What are the authentic perceptions behind it? What are the main elements it contains of error and distortion? What difference does it make to the quality of christian commitment to have purified its real perceptions by the identification and rejection of error and distortion?

The insights of liberal optimism

The basic insights of the optimistic and liberal attitude concern two inter-related truths, both carrying important implications for christian spirituality. The first is that a progress is discernible in history which may rightly be called moral. (Precisely what this does and does not mean will be considered later.) The second is that this progress has arisen not from the Church alone but from the evolution of society.

Those eager to believe in moral progess are prone, of course, to find signs of it under every historical milestone, and many claims to such discovery can be disposed of fairly easily. It is immensely tempting, for instance, to falsify the contrast between past and present by arbitrarily denigrating the past, as did the eighteenth century enlightenment; or to succumb to moral naiveté, as when valid perceptions, mixed with much censorious incomprehension, concerning the permissive society are studiously ignored. Nevertheless, contemporary man, at least in the majority of civilized societies, recognizes as quite clearly wrong a variety of attitudes and forms of behaviour which the christian world at large – not excluding many of its saints – once regarded as permissible. Slavery, judicial torture, the savaging of heretics, criminals or undisciplined soldiers: all this was once accepted by devout and honest men as part of the order of things. The right to education, to 'appropriate information', to 'choose a state of life freely', did not always loom large in the christian consciousness of the past. Yet to most people today, derivation of these rights from the christian idea of human

dignity is so obvious that, in making the point explicitly, *Gaudium et Spes* only tells us what we already knew. For good measure, one might add the evolving status of women, which bids fair to bring about another situation where attitudes accepted by our forbears will be rejected by common accord. At least with regard to a limited range of attitudes concerning the dignity of the person, it may be claimed that what saints could once accept in good conscience, the ordinary christian today repudiates.

Turning to the second perception, that the Church can lay no exclusive claim to have brought this development about, we need to tread more carefully. In concrete terms, the life of the Church means the lives of many millions of people illuminated by grace and guided by the gospel. In the last analysis, it is the life of God's spirit, joined – in Paul's phrase – to man's operating within the world as a principle of regeneration and enlightenment, in and through the spirit of man. That life is not bounded by the distinction between religious and secular. It acts as a leaven in the world, informing and vivifying, in proportion to individual response and capacity, the lives of saints, prophets, and artists, the people who make the world go round: the millions of ordinary men and women working out their charity in the conditions of their time. It cannot be isolated or quantified.

But when we try to estimate the Church's influence as a historical force in the world, we are not trying to lay hold of the life of the Church in its hidden essence. We are concerned with such factors in the Church's history as are amenable to measurement and assessment, and can be identified as belonging to the Church as a distinct body within society. Such are, for example, the Church's formulated teachings, her public stance, her formal and explicit leadership. On this level, it is clear that the Church has not been the sole agent of moral development. Indeed, it is all too easy to uncover instances where the Church's leaders have neglected, viewed askance or actually condemned developments which in the end they have been brought to applaud. 'Brought' perhaps is a crude word, but it has its point. Take, for example, the question of equality of the sexes. Without denying the obvious differences between a pagan and a christian society, we can no longer see the entire story in the simple and edifying version which the untroubled apologists of an earlier generation put forth. Today, the roles of leader and led have shifted; we are witnessing not so much a Church taking the initiative over against society, as a Church rapidly

gaining fresh insights into her own beliefs through certain developments in society at large. Other instances of a similar process would be easy to find.

Looked at from the negative or pessimistic standpoint, this aspect of the Church's relationship to the world appears slightly anomalous: undeniable, certainly, but not to be given too much prominence in christian attitudes. Fully to accept its implications calls for a rather more far-reaching understanding of the Church's human condition than the popular conservative interpretation of the 'perfect society' would be prepared to allow. To illustrate this, it will be helpful to distinguish two broad meanings which the term 'human element' may bear in connection with the Church. It can mean the human failings of the Church, the Church's sinfulness. It can also mean the Church's necessary involvement in a process of change, or of becoming, which happens through the development, in time, of society as a whole. Up to a point, the catholic mentality has always been ready to accept sin in the Church, even in high places. It is true that popular attitudes have over-simplified the distinction between human frailty and divine guidance in the Church: the manifest shortcomings of churchmen having been viewed a little too exclusively as matters of private and personal import, the effects of stubborness, pusillanimity (and worse) on the actual exercise of the Church's official leadership having been rather underplayed. It is also true that for this reason certain catholics find it hard to accept that a moral insight is not less valid for having had to emerge slowly and in the face of ecclesiastical resistance. Nevertheless, the human element in this first sense provides only a very partial explanation of the gradual character of moral progress. Nor does it really account for the crucial contribution made to that progress by the world. Hence the main respect in which the negative and pessimistic view of the world falls short is its failure to appreciate the second aspect of the Church's human character: the fact that the Church exists in a state of process or growth, which cannot be divorced from the totality of her human context.

Man's response to God, and hence the Church's response to God, is always a matter of the here and now. One of the implications of this is that this response always occurs at a particular point of the long drawn-out and highly complex inter-relationship between man and the world he makes: an inter-relationship which has as its matrix a whole society. The mutations which separate our own world from that of, say, medieval society, are not simply

changes in the scenery of life, leaving our experience and responsibilities much the same. What has changed includes a number of the constitutive elements of our experience. We feel differently and think differently from men of another age. We are sensitized to different stimuli. Not only can we do once undreamt of things, we can think what was once unthinkable, and envisage as a feasible exercise of initiative, projects which only a dreamer could have entertained in former times. This has consequences both for the believer and the believing community; for to be changed as a person is to be changed as a hearer of the word of God, and this word is always specific, making definite claims upon us and continually arousing new urgencies. The normative demands of the gospel do not come to us in abstraction from life, but to man within the situation without which he would not be himself.

The point may be illustrated from one aspect of social change. Before the spurt of technological culture, social change and the related acceleration of knowledge that characterizes our own time, society and the world were conceived in considerably more static terms. The relational patterns of society, the recurring sources of pain and suffering, man's inability significantly to alter many of the more irksome facts of existence, tended to be seen as part of the order of things. They belonged to the 'given' of life, they were part of the system within which man loved his neighbour. What has happened between that world and our own is the working out of a long and complex interplay between society and the changes which it initiates. It has needed the slow accumulation of knowledge, the realization of emerging physical possibilities, mistakes, exploration, a rhythm of consolidation and change. The Church, both in her life and her leadership, has been part of the change. But the whole process is the history not of the Church alone but of the world: the work of society not just in its spiritual seeking after truth (primordial though this is) but in its secular aspect of the progressive realization of every sort of human potential. The result is a world in which the area of 'given' has receded enormously, the area subject to our power has proportionately grown. With the opening of new possibilities, the range of the thinkable has widened. New sensibilities, new urgencies have arisen. In the past, for example, authentic evangelical charity has to be content to work within the structures and procedures of society; today it must work to change them. Accordingly, a degree of acceptance of the *status quo*, which would once have been consistent with holiness, would today amount to a

betrayal of one's fellow-man. Of course, it is for the Church to make this clear, and when she fails to do so she fails in her task of reading the signs of the times. But if it would be absurd to criticize the Church of the past for not seeing things through twentieth-century eyes, it is equally absurd to stand lightly to new claims on the christian conscience, on the grounds that it is the 'world' which is responsible for them.

Lastly, an assessment of the positive elements, in what I have called the liberal optimist attitude, needs to take cognizance of its implications for christian living. Once the changing and unfolding character of God's call to man and the Church is grasped, certain claims made on the christian by the world and people become harder to shrug off. The liberal optimistic view of the world possesses, then, an inherent openness to the truth that God is (as Anthony Bloom has put it) 'always contemporary'. This means neither disdain for the past nor subservience towards the present. What it does mean is that there is one option that is *not* open to the christian: he cannot choose to govern his life exclusively by those standards which he finds in other ages than his own, by seemingly timeless values as opposed to those which have arisen from the course of history. (The view that this is a perfectly allowable philosophy of life is probably extremely common, and may account in part for the different status commonly accorded to christian sexual morality – supposed to possess this timeless quality – and to christian social, economic and political morality.)

This sense of the contemporary character of God's call provides, in turn, the indispensable prerequisite for recognizing and accepting those demands which the gospel makes on us today through the changed possibilities of man's situation and the related changes of vision and sensibility. While it has always been true that holiness includes some reference to making a better world, the statement has wider implications for contemporary man than was the case in the past, simply because the good we *can* now do for our fellow men, we *must* do.

The distortions of liberal optimism

So much for the virtues of the liberal optimist view. In its unreflective form, however, it has more to its make-up than the perceptions outlined above. In a number of ways, it nullifies its own insights by claiming too much. It deduces from premisses valid and important in themselves inferences that call for much qualification,

to say the least.

We may begin by taking a closer look at the basic datum: contemporary man acknowledges and actually lives out certain imperatives which the past ignored. This much, as we have seen, seems certain. But what precisely follows in terms of moral and spiritual quality? We must be careful to avoid discussing human goodness as though it were entirely accountable in terms of situation. It is true, of course, that there is a quality we call character, a wholeness of personal integrity which presupposes a certain milieu, a certain quality of relationships, a freedom from inhibiting ignorance about the world or oneself. But character leads on to a more fundamental concept. For in so far as we mean by 'character' a genuine and persistent human goodness, this cannot be divorced from holiness. (Leave out holiness, and implicitly you make grace an extra, a top layer.) And holiness means openness to the grace offered to every man, enabling him to die and be reborn. It is a matter of response. When we talk about progress, then, we are talking not just about people as products of society, education, history or whatever, but about people in so far as they respond freely to the demands, however perceived, of truth and goodness.[1]

There is a further qualification. While progress, the advance of one generation on another, has to do with holiness, it is not an advance in the quality of holiness as such. Holiness is surrender to God's self-communication. In the manifestly holy men and women whom we call the saints, this surrender possesses a quality of complete unreserve. In the saints, Christ takes possession of his own, reigning in human hearts with a supremacy he will not possess elsewhere until the eschatological kingdom. Because of this quality, sanctity, at whatever stage of history it occurs, is always a point above and beyond the ordinary christian of whatever age: always a witness to the power and liberty of the Spirit, a witness which we ignore at our peril. Nor can we measure the holiness of one saint against another, still less make comparisons between the saints of different periods of history. We have no tools for such a job.

But if we cannot make comparisons on the level of sanctity itself, we can do so in regard to the attitudes and behaviour in which,

[1] It is beyond the scope of this article to ask whether, if at all, there is a consistent development in history of the more desirable character traits. To the question whether 'evolution and progress includes a humanity that will become more moral, kindlier, more cooperative and better natured', Sydney Pollard returns the pessimistic answer that 'in this respect little if any change has been observable in recorded history'. Cf Pollard, Sydney: *The Idea of Progress* (London, 1971), p 12.

over the ages, sanctity has found embodiment. We rightly reject many of the social ideas of the saints, just as we may disapprove of features of their theology. We may recognize that in some ways their sensibilities were blunter than ours. It is here, then, (not on the level of response itself but of the perceptions through which that response is embodied) that the believer may look for a true moving forward from one age to another. As R. M. Baillie puts it: 'What may legitimately be hoped for as the pattern of the years of grace unfolds itself, is not a better race of men, but a wider and fuller understanding of the tasks to which christian men must devote themselves; not a more scrupulous conscientiousness but an enlarged and better instructed conscience'.[2]

At this point, a further proviso needs to be made, for it would be naive and dangerous to imagine that this potential is realized every time we light upon something to commend in the way our contemporaries talk or behave. A feature of unreflective optimism is its tendency to applaud with too little discrimination. Without falling into cynicism, we need to be alive to the possibility that a proclaimed value may be highly commendable as an expression of moral insight while representing a mere velleity on the level of moral or spiritual quality. Take, for instance, the value of racial equality. The wide acceptance of this value among middle-class liberals, students and readers of *The Times* is a hopeful and welcome sign. But there are places in the world where it is likely to demand both a painful inner conversion and the risk of losing one's friends. How far has the value of racial equality taken root *there?*

One last characteristic of unreflective optimism remains to be noticed. It stands too lightly to the power of positive evil, to the possibility that the challenge of the future might find our moral and spiritual resources utterly and tragically wanting. Historically, it seems clear that the only effective psychological protection against this possibility is the *a priori* assumption that some sort of laws are at work in the world, shaping the future for us, even in spite of us. In recent centuries this assumption has taken a variety of forms. It has been based on the alleged link between knowledge and enlightenment, on an extension of the laws of organic evolution to the realm of human freedom, on Hegel, on Marx. Christianity, how-

[2] Baillie. R. M.: *The Belief in Progress* (Oxford University Press), p 228. This view of the matter, as Baillie notes, delivers us from 'many absurdities, including the insufferably arrogant absurdity of supposing that the saints of long-ago yesterdays must have been less saintly than those of today or tomorrow'.

ever, offers no such assurance that a benevolent power is jollying us along towards the golden age. Eschatology commits us to the future by conferring an ultimate and absolute value on all that we achieve in the way of justice and brotherhood, and 'all the good fruits of our nature'. But it does not relieve us of the precariousness of knowing that we are responsible for the future ourselves. It offers no utopia, only the eschatological kingdom. Certainly, it offers no assurance of a permanent cooling off in the warfare between the spirit of God and the principalities and powers.

It is this precariousness, underlined both by the vicissitudes of the past and the unevenness of the present, which a realistic optimism must take into account. The past shows society not only becoming more humane; it shows it relapsing under new pressures into a greater cruelty. In his study of the Reformation, John Todd pertinently observes that the statute *De haeretico comburendo* is a case of man becoming more inhumane than in the preceding centuries.[3] The example of two world wars in our own recent past would be banal were it not for our incredible capacity to forget its lessons. The present contains abundant evidence of the inability of our moral and spiritual resources to cope with the world we have made. The old are probably lonelier today than in most times in the past, more shunned than in a world which knew how to cope with death. The quality of neighbourliness in our modern conurbations contrasts unfavourably with that prevailing in the simpler communities of the past. Torture is on the way back. Regarding the evils of xenophobia, ethnic hatred, war, there is no solid evidence that secure and definitive results have yet emerged from the sense of urgency produced by the escalation of these evils in our own time. Technological breakthrough, for all the possibilities it offers of a new humanism, has also opened new roads to unprecedented forms of inhumanity. The line is a fine one between the truly man-centred society and the achievement-centred society, the society where any suggestion that what one can do is not necessarily what one *may* do becomes increasingly resented. We have reached a stage where the conduct of our everyday lives involves us in options for or against the entire community; where we shall have to learn, perhaps for the first time, to place restraints upon a questing and inventive spirit which, for the first time, has become capable of destroying the world.

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[3] Todd, J.: *Reformation* (London, 1972), p 23.

How far can we trust ourselves? It is noticeable that the trend of science fiction is far from utopian. John Wyndham's vision of future primitives living on the edge of a burnt-out waste is plausible.[4] So is the possibility of a world where science will have placed itself at the service of hedonism. Twenty years after writing *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley showed, in *Brave New World Revisited*, how many of his prophecies had already come true. And it is not a writer of science fiction but a sociologist, Alvin Toffler, who, in *Future Shock*, anticipates the future as follows: 'We will soon no doubt be able to put super-L.S.D. or anti-aggression additive or some Huxleyan soma into our breakfast foods. We will soon be able to settle colonists on the planets, and plant pleasure-probes in the skulls of newborn infants'.[5]

Conclusion

We have seen the grounds for an optimistic christian secularism. The unfolding of history has in fact brought genuine spiritual and moral growth; and through this growth and in consequence of it, man works towards an ever more human, though always imperfect world. But equally, there are no reasons for complacency. Not only is moral progress not to be taken for granted; there are grounds for profound misgivings at the thought of a future committed to our own responsibility. To say this is not to suggest that in the end there is a normative christian attitude in the matter, a perfect conjunction of optimism and misgiving to which all should aspire. Both reflection and experience lead some to be more serene, others to be more fearful.[6] But differences of emphasis within an openness to a many-faceted reality is one thing, the disregard of uncomfortable data is another. And the unreflective attitude considered above, the cozy sense of all being well, is not just a matter of emphasis but of evasion. Built into it is a defence against the truth that there is no power beyond ourselves which is going to override our freedom and that the future lies in our own hands.

The insight of a genuine optimism is this: we have come to see

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[4] Wyndham, John: *The Chrysalids* (London, 1955).

[5] Toffler, Alvin: *Future Shock* (New York, 1971).

[6] The more fearful tend to be critical of the overall tone of *The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Criticisms of the document, on the grounds that it was rather *too* optimistic in its view of the world, were not slow to appear. Cf the observation of a protestant commentator, that 'the on-going power of evil is a theme to which more attention could have been given'. (R. McAfee Brown, in *The Documents of Vatican II* (London/New York, 1966), p 316.

that christian spirituality must consist in an ever more comprehensive grasp of whatever is positive in the present, in order to build a future according to the mind of Christ. Hence, optimism is not in any sense assent to the way things will work out. It is a purposeful striving towards an object of hope, in the face of risk and in a situation of precariousness. The optimism which is hedged around by false suppositions about holiness, and an unfounded serenity with regard to the future, means accepting the way things are and will be on the grounds that all is indeed working out for the best, that the nightmares will turn out in the end to have been passing fantasies, and that the good dreams will come true.

The conversion which the optimist needs is, quite simply, a conversion from simple acceptance to hope. It is also (and this comes to the same thing) a conversion to a fuller realism and to a fuller christianity; to a fuller realism because unreflective optimism today has much in common with the liberalism that found the world unprepared for Hitler; to a fuller christianity because, with its diminished sense of sin, crisis or urgency, unreflective liberalism pressed to the ultimate would preclude the specifically christian contribution to saving the world from itself. This contribution may be summed up as discernment and holiness. The christian brings to the many and confused voices of the world the light of the gospel, a wisdom which the world needs but whose source is the Spirit. He brings to the needs of people an ardent and self-renouncing love, and an integrity which comes from knowing the mystery of Christ's death and life. The brand of optimism which simply ignores the fact that the world's voices are indeed many and confused, that death and re-birth are indeed the price of salvation, may well be easy on the nerves. It will contribute little to furthering the world's salvation.