PRESENT AND FUTURE

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IT IS HARDLY possible to reflect on the relation between the present and the future without thinking of the problem in terms of the title of Alvin Toffler's well-known study, *Future Shock*.[1] This book is principally concerned, not with predicting our future, but with the problems we have of adapting to it in the present climate of frantic change. For Toffler, future shock is the shattering stress and disorientation which enters the lives of individuals when they are subjected to too much change in too short a time. It grows out of the increasing lag between the speed of environmental change – the places in which we live and move, the people and institutions to which we relate, the information we need – and the limited pace of our human responses to those changes. Individuals, groups or nations fall victim to future shock when they cannot adapt to the future which they are creating for themselves. Since in our lifetime there has been more change than in the previous history of mankind, future shock is a disease, which afflicts not only a few particularly exposed individuals but the whole human culture.

It hardly needs stressing that the Church is as deeply affected by this situation as the rest of our culture, from which in any case religion can never be isolated; and that a number of questions which other ages found it convenient to shelve acquire in these circumstances a new urgency. For instance there is the problem of identifying and interpreting the permanent elements in christianity in its personal and institutional dimensions, its doctrines and wor-

[1] Toffler, Alvin: *Future Shock* (London, 1972). Toffler, of course, is only one of several contemporary futurologists, each with his own slant; Herman Kahn is the high priest of the movement. See Kahn and Wiener, *The Year 2000* (New York/London, 1967); Kahn and Briggs, *Things to Come* (New York, 1972). From Europe we have *Mankind 2000*, ed Robert Jungle and Johan Galtung (London, 1969). Religious considerations do not enter into these works; the focus of theological enterprise is decidedly in the past. Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (London, 1967) and Metz's *Theology of the World* (London, 1969) represent efforts to introduce a present and future focus into theology. We may mention here *A Theology of Liberation* (New York, 1973), by Gustavo Gutierrez, which deals, not with Toffler's problem of western future shock, but with the present problems of underdevelopment in Latin America from a theological viewpoint. In general, the gap between theological enterprise and contemporary social reality is wide indeed.

ship. In its own way Toffler's book provides a modern though specific context in which to consider the problems of the development of doctrine. Again, in a situation where man is confronted by the paradoxical presence of the future within his present, the believer can hardly be unaware of the future-directedness of christianity in an ultimate sense; our absolute future is latent in a mysterious manner within our present, our temporal life is caught up in the eternal life of Christ. In view of this, how precisely do we apprehend the relation of our present to the future we hope for in this life and finally to the absolute future which is the goal of christian life?

These are questions which I want to come to in the second part of this article. As a preliminary, however, it will be helpful to consider at some length the more general features of the problem as it concerns contemporary culture in its entirety.

Many social prophets – to say nothing of the fathers of the Vatican Council II – are at one with Toffler in agreeing that the human race is currently entering upon a new age.[2] Basic to Toffler's diagnosis of the disease which accompanies this transition is the claim that *permanence* in human affairs has died and is being replaced by a *transience* which extends virtually to every area of contemporary life. There is the transience of things, of places and of relationships. We are 'the use and throw away society'. 'In seventy major United States cities, average residence in one place is less than four years'. Our lives are marked by the continual turnover of the people with whom we work; friendship itself is put under strain by the accelerated pace of life, and 'old friends' are few; the permanence of the marriage relationship is questioned, and in many sub-cultures rejected. Transience is also characteristic of organizations: the groups that fail to adjust to new goals disband; the ones which succeed do so at the price of frequent and major change. (In the latter organizations, whose general approach has been termed 'ad hocracy', 'one major restructuring every two years is probably a conservative estimate of the current rate of organizational change'.) Finally, we may notice the transience of information. School, polytechnic and university courses change their content rapidly. We are

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[2] It is a basic thesis of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World that the human race is passing through a new stage in history: cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 4ff. Karl Jaspers, in his *Origin and Goal of History* (Yale, 1968), outlines an 'axial period' in human history between 800 and 200 B.C. which effectively gave history its direction until the recent scientific and industrial revolutions. In our times history is turning on a new axis and is being given a new direction.

constantly under pressure to keep up our reading in various fields, in order to remain in touch with and contribute to the ongoing processes of collaboration.

The tension between this widespread phenomenon of transience and a permanence which seems universally under threat is a situation we must learn to cope with if we are to arrive at a balanced approach to our present and future. This coping will sometimes have extremely practical implications – as when it involves departing from the accumulated skills of a lifetime. But it also makes far-reaching demands on the level of attitude, and above all, the attitudes underlying the word 'permanence'.

Perhaps the problem here is less insoluble than might appear at first sight. I have used the term 'death of permanence', but on closer consideration it would seem that what has died in our time is not so much permanence in human affairs, but the classical western notion of culture, of man and his world.[3] Classical culture tended to be absolutist and conformist rather than pluralist and normative; nor was it historically minded. It distinguished in man and society between what is essential, invariable, permanent, and what is accidental. In its spirituality it distinguished between eternal values and the passing show of human history. In our own time this notion is giving way to an empirically-minded view of man and his culture in which conformity has been replaced by pluralism. The diversity of human groups, for classical culture an accidental, is seen today as of permanent importance. (In catholicism, the transition from an earlier conformist liturgy to diverse forms of worship is indicative of that cultural change.) But the emergence of an empirical notion of culture is both recent and unassimilated. An older religious world-view or attitude has broken down but has not been adequately replaced; and it is here that the fundamental problem of the relation of our present to our future lies.[4] Classical culture had its notions of

[3] See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London, 1972) – index under 'Culture(s)'; Floyd Matson, *The Broken Image*, (New York, 1966).

[4] Arthur Gibson, in his 'Visions of the Future', in *Concilium*, 16, no. 9 (June, 1973), pp 118–26, after considering the thought of various authors in the future, including Toffler, sees the problem in terms of man's relation to technology. He suggests that the answer is for man to submit himself to his technological creations which have become superior to him. I consider that to express the task of bringing modern culture, with all its implications, to perfection, in terms of reaching an adequate understanding of what man is and of human values, merely as a problem of relating to technology is a vast over-simplification. The problem of achieving openness, with which I shall deal later on, is a strictly religious one which cannot be reduced to technology. I find Gibson's attempt to subordinate man to technology bordering on idolatry.

particular permanence; modern culture is developing quite a distinct notion of what is permanent or transient and of the relation of the two.[5] What is permanent in man is not something fixed and static, but intrinsically *open* and dynamic.

We might illustrate this by considering the notions of permanence, transience and change in the context of the marriage relationship. Obviously in a life-long marriage there is the permanent element of commitment of two persons to each other. Such commitment, however, involves their personalities as these emerge and develop throughout the duration of the relationship. The commitment spans past, present and future. As the personalities emerge, develop or decline organically, psychologically or socially, the commitment has to be reconsidered and reaffirmed many times. It follows that the permanent element concerns not the individuals at any particular stage of their changing relationship, but the manner in which two people can remain open to one another throughout the duration of the relationship, always receptive to new developments in themselves and their future.

But as well as the permanent dimension, there is also the transient. The family grows up. Personality, jobs, houses, cars, schools – all these change: yet these changes are not matters to be dismissed as accidental. They are and can be the very expression of a developing relationship; and quite radical alterations in life-style can occur within a marriage.[6] To be human is to change, to grow in mind and heart and body,[7] to be creative and creating. Growth involves becoming what one is not yet; and that can be a painful, even threatening, process. It can even provoke crisis. But in meeting painful crises, personalities grow, present limitations are transcended, and future novelty, the 'hoped for', can emerge. Avoiding crises, on the other hand, can result in lack of growth, in a hardening of the psychic and social arteries, and withdrawal from the gen-

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[5] Most of the work of Bernard Lonergan has been concerned with locating what is permanent in the context of the new notion of culture. Chapter 1 of *Method in Theology* attempts to objectify the permanent open structure in man that generates all the change that Toffler talks about. Chapter 4 is concerned with permanent religious features, chapter 5 with objectifying a set of permanent and open theological tasks and their inter-connectedness.

[6] See Carl Rogers, *Becoming Partners* (London, 1973), pp 166 ff, where he outlines the case history of a marriage that went through three distinct developmental phases with three corresponding life-styles.

[7] See H. A. Williams, *True Resurrection* (London, 1972); Sam Keen, *To A Dancing God* (London, 1971). The stress on the body in both books is striking.

uinely creative movements of one's times. Change provokes and challenges the human mind and heart. Resistance to genuine progress is just as much a sin against God as 'turning away from listening to the truth and wandering into myths'.[8] Both interfere with the proper unfolding of man's capacity for openness.

But here a further point needs to be made. Permanence, transience and change are all ambiguous with respect to true human growth, in whatever area of life. There is a permanence that is essential to growth: a developing capacity for openness to the changes in one's life-situation, to the demands to acquire new skills in office, laboratory, factory, school or home. There is a permanence that kills: one that requires *everything* to remain the same. It might start out as an attachment to an ideal present, to a person as he or she is now, to a present experience of a religious conversion; but in time it becomes a fixation with a mode of life that has become obsolete. The world moves on, leaving such a person to become fossilized in a past that will never be repeated. Equally, there is a transience essential to human growth, and one that can kill human relationships, fragmenting human lives into a series of unconnected events, so that the people involved in them lose their self-identity. And there is the dying transience of the committed drifter, of the one who runs away when confronted with the demands for real human commitment. Because change is ambiguous, the permanent and transient elements in our lives all have to be subjected to continuous *discernment*, if we are to grasp whether we are developing or declining.

It has been necessary to set out at some length the general position of our culture as a whole, before coming to the specifically christian question, which concerns the relation between present, immediate future and absolute future. For the wider situation and the attitudes it demands provide a framework within which the believer can more clearly appreciate his own problems, assess where he is at, and take stock of his present and future task. We have seen that the main attitudes demanded by a situation of profound change may be classified under three broad divisions: a sense of permanence that contains a capacity for openness; an acceptance of transience in such a manner as to promote genuine growth; the recognition of the need for discernment.

As there is the openness of husband to wife, of a man to his life-situation, to the people with whom he works and to whom he

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[8] 2 Tim 4, 4.

relates, so also there is the openness of man to God. The two are not unrelated; for we are dealing with the same human quality in its engagement with different 'objects'. Whilst it may be true that in its more refined form this openness may lead to a markedly other-worldly orientation,[9] ordinarily, openness to God and openness to human history and culture, to one's past, present and future, are inseparable. Just as the capacity for openness is a permanent element in marriage relationships, so also the capacity for openness to God and creation, to past, present and future, is a permanent element in human religious experience. It is a permanent feature of every generation, of every marriage; but the manner and extent of the achievement of openness will vary from generation to generation and from individual to individual. We are characterized by an unrestricted capacity for openness: we are, each of us, an unrestricted incarnate loneliness. It is the gift of God's love experienced throughout our lifetime – past, present and future – that operates on our capacity for openness and results in achievement. It reveals to us, through our past, present and future, the loneliness that we are. It indicates that absolute human happiness lies beyond human time and history.

But again, the permanent is offset by the transient. The achievement of openness to God, the growth of our love of God, does not take place apart from concrete involvement in the world of places, things, people, organizations and information. The gift of God's love develops and enlarges our openness to people and situations, as the need for it arises, and in proportion to our response.

So far, then, I have been trying to locate a specifically religious aspect of the general contemporary problem of our attitudes and orientation to past, present and future. Every individual is comprized of a capacity for openness to God and human history, whether he recognizes his religiousness or not. At the same time, we are all faced with the task of achieving openness; and, as the many political and religious conflicts in our past and present indicate, we need all the help that others may have to offer. To some extent it is and must be the responsibility of organized religious groups to draw attention to and elaborate on this specifically religious aspect of man's growth.

Here we encounter a problem. This responsibility supposes that the religious man is involved, precisely as religious, in the expe-

[9] See Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (London, 1964), pp 131ff.

rience of the society to which he belongs, including the disturbing elements in that experience. Yet it will be obvious that a large number of catholic and christian communities are not experiencing 'future shock' in the sense in which Toffler has defined it. Up to and even after Vatican II, these communities have been characterized, theologically, liturgically and institutionally, by a stubborn resistance to change of any and every kind: a resistance to the future. Theology has not been in contact with recent scientific and academic enterprise. Worship has tended to be divorced from modern music, art and life-styles. Despite collegiality, a hierarchical structure remains which is not sympathetic to democracy. Whereas the life-styles of modern society have been shaped by a totally secular mentality, the christian community has not yet reached the stage of being able to interpret and express itself, religiously, in its new context. Religious changes have followed rather than preceded general cultural changes. It follows, then, that much current religious malaise is to be diagnosed, not in terms of 'future shock' but in terms of 'cultural lag'. And the question arises, how can we preach about man's need for God's assistance in the cultivation of his openness, when we are not seen to be open ourselves to the present or the future that contemporary man has made and is making for himself? The christian community is thus faced with the difficult task of assimilating its present religiousness with the wider reach of contemporary experience. Since we share in the general life-style of our times, we share, in so far as our lives are 'secular', in the problem of future shock. As far as our religion is concerned, our situation is one of 'culture lag'.[10]

To resolve this double problem will not be an easy matter. But a prerequisite for its solution is to be alive to some of the commoner ways in which people are tempted to evade it completely. First, there are those who, when faced with the demands of unremitting change, will cultivate an attitude of nostalgic yearning for an idealized and golden past, where, in the distortion of memory, everything is represented as perfect and peaceful – a perfection which is being destroyed by upstart innovators. The result is an alienation from one's present and future. Religiously, such attitudes intensify the 'culture lag'. In the short term, there is a total evasion

[10] The document *The Church 2000* does not in any way present a great vision of the future. Yet it does deal with very real and practical questions of renewal. As such I believe it is concerned with the removal of culture lag.

of future shock, which inevitably leads to its long-term intensification. Secondly, there are those, and they will be a majority, who want to live simply in the present. Here the outcome is a romanticism of the present moment, one which shuts out memory and hope, and occasions an alienation from past and future. Religiously it poses the acute problem of how to integrate, seriously and thoroughly, religious attitudes with modern life-styles. Thirdly, there are those who are totally alienated from both past and present, who simply hope for a utopian future abounding in milk and honey. For these, the political or religious sins of the past and present are too heavy a burden to bear. Yet before utopia can be attained, the sins of the past and present have to be redeemed.

These different dispositions, with their corresponding life-styles, can occur in individuals, groups or nations; and it should be obvious that each is, in one way or another, 'diseased'.[11] Each is seriously lacking in openness. What is needed is not alienation from either past, present or future, but consent to all three. The present should be 'vibrant' rather than diseased; a present in which, despite the banality or routine of the daily round, one never loses sight of the fact that the daily drama is inescapably and mysteriously caught up in the life of God. And to live vibrantly in the present involves cultivating the openness of both memory and hope. (Needless to say, this cannot be achieved except in union with the ultimate source of human openness.) Yet the question must be put, do we really cultivate hope, are we 'future-orientated', or are we content to 'get bogged down in the present',[12] and, as with the british weather, simply refuse to calculate about the future? Do we really hope for new and novel forms of political and social organization which will eliminate current social evils? Do we hope for developments in liturgical expression which will touch the heart of modern man and, more specifically, meet the criticisms which the youth of today make of worship? Do we hope for new forms of church organization and new religious life-styles? As I have stressed, not all change is progress; changes have to be submitted to the process of discernment. At the same time, not to change is to promote decline, and not to hope is to mutilate one's humanity.

It is presently acknowledged that to be without an understanding of human history, of our past, is to have a deficient world-view. But

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[11] On diseased time, see *To a Dancing God*, pp 23ff.

[12] Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

in addition a further expansion of vision is called for: to our developing historical consciousness we have to add 'future consciousness'. Do we really admit that humanity may well have at least another eight hundred lifetimes of progress ahead? To do so is to put oneself and one's times firmly in their place. Such an awareness invites, for instance, serious consideration of the moral responsibility of the present generation for the future of mankind. As future consciousness penetrates the social mind, it is to be hoped that educational and other organizations will dedicate themselves to the task of adapting to the future.

'Future consciousness' is, to a large extent, non-existent in present society. That holds true equally of the religious communities. Christianity, by and large, has tended to focus its eyes on the first advent of Christ. It has not been over-concerned with the *human* future in this world or its consummation in the second coming. The cultivation of genuine openness to the human future in this world could lead to an important enlargement of religious horizons. The major characteristic of the future is newness, and the basic attitude to the human future should be one of hope. Perhaps through developing an openness to the future novelty that is the product of human creativity, by cultivating an attitude of hope towards that newness, we can begin to heighten our appreciation of the religious hope that God alone can implant in our hearts: hope for the fulfilment of human history, for the consummation of the kingdom, the arrival of 'the new heaven *and* the new earth',[13] the product of God's unlimited creativity. It is a contradiction in terms for a religious community not to hope. Nor is hope in our absolute future totally unrelated to hope in our human future. To hope is to be confident that God, who is the author of human history, past, present and future, and who guides it to its fulfilment, will enable us to achieve the openness that is necessary in responding to our situation of culture lag and future shock.

[13] Apoc 21, 1ff.