

# THE SOCIETY OF JESUS AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

By JOHN H. WRIGHT

EVERY AGE CONFRONTS a reflective man with its own distinctive features and problems. It is not sufficient to recall the world-view of another period nor to apply the solutions of the past without seriously raising the question of their actual effectiveness today. We then are asking whether the resources of ignatian spirituality can assist us in relating positively and fruitfully to contemporary culture. To put it more particularly and concretely: 'How can we, as members of the Society of Jesus, work for the greater glory of God in today's cultural situation?'

No one person can answer this question adequately. A team of experts, working together closely over an extended period of time, could perhaps draw up a helpful series of precise guide-lines for this kind of creative relationship. The combined proficiency of social theorists, physical scientists, technologists, industrialists, historians, philosophers, and theologians – to mention some – would be required. My own scope is therefore more modest and limited. I will attempt to describe contemporary culture by drawing attention to some of its primary characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Then I will try to show how the basic attitude and method of ignatian spirituality helps us to enter into a living, responsive relationship with this culture, both assimilating from it and contributing to its transformation and development.

The title of this paper speaks in the singular of 'contemporary culture'. The world today actually presents us with great cultural diversity. There are the main divisions of east, west, and the third world. Within each of these are innumerable varieties of national, religious and racial heritages. These cultures seem to complement one another at some points and to conflict strongly at others. Still, some kind of unified world-culture seems to be emerging, not through

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<sup>1</sup> See Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, 4-10, for a description of contemporary culture from a somewhat different point of view.

the suppression of differences but through a process of mutual exchange. Certain developments in western culture seem to be functioning as catalysts in this emergence.

Two basic elements of western culture seem to lie at the root both of its own present development and of its influence on the rest of the world: a) its attitude towards knowing or understanding the world, manifested chiefly, but not exclusively, in the physical sciences; and b) an attitude towards controlling or changing the world, manifested chiefly, but not exclusively, in technology.

The knowing-stance of western culture is basically experiential. This does not refer simply to sense-experience, though this is a great part of it, but rather to whatever is verifiable by a direct and immediate act of knowing. This knowing-stance by no means excludes very elaborate and abstract theories, but these theories must finally be tested by directly observable consequences. This fundamental attitude stands in contrast to that of other periods of history, which adopted a more philosophical or metaphysical view: one which began indeed in immediate experience but drew conclusions that were not experientially verifiable. It also differs markedly from a tradition-oriented attitude towards knowledge, in which the position or opinion of earlier generations is in itself of decisive importance.

This experiential knowing-stance lies at the heart of modern science and is embodied most completely in the scientific method: 1) careful observation, 2) theoretical hypothesis, and 3) experimental verification.

The use of the scientific method has enormously changed our understanding of the physical world through the development of modern science. An educated man of three or four hundred years ago thought of the earth as six or seven thousand years old, as the centre of the universe surrounded by an elaborate system of heavenly spheres, and as produced in more or less the same condition as we find it today. Modern science, however, has made known to us a universe which is billions of years old. And our earth, far from being the centre of this universe, is a medium-sized planet circling around a medium-sized star which is itself one of several million stars in a medium-sized galaxy, which again is one of millions of galaxies scattered throughout billions of light-years of space. And the earth in its present condition, far from directly manifesting its original state, is the result of millions of years of evolutionary development.

This scientific view of the world has also strongly influenced man's view of himself. He knows that he is not just an inhabitant of the

universe or a spectator of the process of evolution. He himself is a part of this process. He is the latest fruit of evolutionary development.

In view of this, man sees that all human activity, all thought, expressions, institutions and achievements are time-conditioned. They inevitably reflect the period of history and the world-view within which they are produced. For many people in the world today, this has induced a profound relativism, wherein all certainties are dissolved in the ambiguity of man's limited perspective.

All this has led to a widespread secularism, the gradual but complete exclusion of the divine from ordinary human concerns. God is not invoked to explain or to understand the world. God is not needed to authenticate human law or moral obligation. Many feel that God is not even required to confer meaning upon life or to give man his ultimate fulfilment.

This knowledge-explosion has also encompassed man himself – man the knower. Modern psychological investigations have revealed new depths and new complexity in human consciousness and activity. This is made clear, for example, in freudian psychoanalysis and in the newer schools of transactional analysis.

This, at least partially, accounts for a profound change going on throughout all of society. To use the language of transactional analysis, there has been a shift from parent-child relations as the essential bond of society to adult-adult relations. This has meant increasingly that traditional roles of authority cannot anywhere be exercised out of a presumption of superior and hidden wisdom and with an inviolable divine authentication of whatever is commanded. Thus, we have seen a growing collegiality in religious and educational organizations, a growing democracy in political and secular societies, and a growing pluralism in the field of value and interpretation.

The arts of contemporary culture also, poetry, music, dance, drama, fiction, painting, sculpture, cinema and whatever else might be included, here reveal in their vigour and symbolism both this primary concern for the experiential and for the depths and complexity of human consciousness and relations between persons. The placid portrayal of nature, the expression of simple harmonies, the straightforward narrative line, the portrayal of obvious and comforting solutions to human anxiety, are not typical of today's art. A deeper appreciation of human subjectivity is being manifested in complex subtleties and nuances, which make great demands on those who try to take in what is going on.

The second characteristic of western culture that lies at the root of its development and influence is the practical stance, the increased ability and desire to control and to change the world, especially through technology. Man is no longer concerned to effect a simple accomodation to natural processes and rhythms and to work out a harmonious mutual adaptation. Rather, he is promoting an ever-increasing dominion over the world and even over life-processes themselves.

Technology, of course, is the most evident example of this, and the spread of technology throughout the world is most responsible for the expansion and influence of western culture. Technology grows out of western experimental science and embodies in a special way the aphorism 'knowledge is power'. By knowing how the world works, how matter is put together and operates, man has been enabled to control matter for his own purposes in the major areas of communication, transportation, production, and the regulation of human vital processes themselves.

Advances in communication have shrunk the world in space and time. The successive appearance of the telegraph, the telephone, the radio and television have made any event, any happening, in principle a world-wide event, known everywhere at once. Likewise, the development of printing, library organization, phonographs, tape recorders, photography, motion pictures and electronic data retrieval-systems have made the past available almost instantaneously. This revolution in communication obviously has also enormously affected education in the breadth and number of experiences that a person may have as he is growing up.

Technology has successively developed more effective means for transporting people and things: steamships, railways, airplanes, and space rockets. Not only has this made the whole world a potential market for goods produced anywhere, but it has also made it possible for people from all over the world to gather together with relative ease, and for anyone to see and to talk with anyone else in a matter of hours.

Technology has improved the production of natural goods through pesticide, fertilizers and experimental breeding, giving us new and better fruits, grains and natural fibres. It has produced healthier and larger cattle, sheep, fowl and fish for eating. It has likewise produced innumerable synthetic products for use and consumption in every area of human life and activity. It has even generated 'needs' never before known, at least as they are now experienced: for example, the

need to have a new automobile, a new wardrobe, frozen foods and spectacular entertainment.

But most profoundly, technology is gradually transforming the quality of human life itself. It tends, for example, inevitably to reduce the time needed for actual working, and thus to develop leisure time for all. In a more direct fashion it can effect the life-processes themselves through developments in medicine, surgery and genetic engineering. Experiments with different kinds of drugs and with electrical stimulation show how even the psychic activity of animals and men can be modified and controlled.

The technological revolution has incredibly broadened and accelerated the entire process of social inter-action and development. Group decisions which might have required years some time ago can be made and implemented in weeks or even in hours. For example, a telephone call between America and Europe can accomplish a result that not too long ago required sending and receiving a letter by sailing ship.

These, then, in briefest outline are some of the characteristics of western culture influencing the world today. It is not suggested that the west will eventually simply replace other cultures. But these developments in the west stimulate and make possible mutual exchange and enrichment. The west surely has as much to learn from the rest of the world as it can teach, but it is largely the west that has made both the learning and the teaching possible.

This description of contemporary culture has tended to dwell on the good and the at least potentially beneficent aspects of contemporary culture. But of course, this is not the whole story. Modern developments have also brought forth the increased horror of war and oppression. Lives are destroyed through drugs, violence, and abortions of mere convenience. There is increased crime in our cities. There is a depersonalization of human beings in their dealings with one another. There is often a loss of the sense of mystery and wonder at the world, and a growth of loneliness, despair and suicide. In reaction to all of this, counter-cultures of various kinds have appeared: drop-outs and protesters, who nevertheless are often reaffirming values of simplicity and peace and love that the scientific and technological culture fails to cherish sufficiently.

What, then, are the resources of ignatian spirituality for relating to the contemporary world? How are we enabled to work for the greater glory of God in today's cultural situation?

The basic and most fundamental assistance offered by ignatian

spirituality corresponds in a remarkable way to a basic attitude of contemporary culture, to the experiential knowing-stance. For ignatian spirituality offers first of all a series of experiences, the Spiritual Exercises.<sup>2</sup> It does not seek primarily to provide a list of truths to be learned, repeated, and applied, or an abstract explanation of the meaning and purpose of life, but rather a successively deeper introduction into the encompassing mystery of God's creative, redeeming and consummating love. One makes the Spiritual Exercises only by experiencing and responding to this mystery. Ignatian principles are therefore not primarily general propositions from which particular truths and courses of action may be deduced, but concrete revelatory experiences which orient a man towards God and towards the world and towards other men in attitudes of freedom, discernment and loving response. The scientific view of the world, of its immense age and size and evolutionary development along with man's place in all of this, becomes then an enlarged insight into the effort of God's creative love. The Spiritual Exercises provide an experiential confirmation of an evaluation of relativism given by H. Richard Niebuhr: 'Relativism does not imply subjectivism and scepticism. It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees'.<sup>3</sup> The Exercises, especially through the discernment of spirits, offer a remedy for a mistaken and facile secularism by alerting us to 'dimensions of ultimacy' in our experience, to the action of God in our lives.<sup>4</sup> They similarly enable us to recognize the continuing and pervasive influence of 'the mystery of iniquity' operative also in contemporary culture.<sup>5</sup> The experiences of the Spiritual Exercises also enable us to appreciate the fact that the men and women of this age and culture have also been redeemed by Christ and that their lives too can be vivified by the power of his holy Spirit.

Ignatian spirituality, in the contemplations of the Kingdom, the Incarnation and the Two Standards, shows that what we have to give to the world, the communication we can make to contemporary culture, is not another culture, or a competing goal for civilization,

<sup>2</sup> The central importance of the experiential in the Spiritual Exercises is shown not only in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, but especially in the annotations that deal with consolation and desolation, with interior relish, with tears and temptations, and with the special graces and inspirations granted by God during the time of the Exercises.

<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr, Richard H.: *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York, 1970), p 13.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Gilkey, Langdon: *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (New York, 1969), part II, chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>5</sup> Cf 2 Thess 2, 7.

or even a detailed new code of ethics, but news about a person and an event. Everything else is subordinated to the central message about a happening: that Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again and that in this event we have been set free. Now, because of this happening, we are free to love and to live and to hope and to dream. This good news at once changes everything and leaves everything the same.<sup>6</sup> It changes everything by opening new horizons, new possibilities, new areas for human experience and action. On the other hand, it leaves everything the same because it opposes no positive human insight, contradicts no established truths, forbids no adventure into the future that respects the personal worth of other human beings. For Jesus Christ does not come to rule as Lord through coercion or suppression or constraint, but in freedom, in the renewing power of the holy Spirit, and in the assurance that human effort and struggle are finally worth-while because of what he has done and achieved for us.

The experiences of the Spiritual Exercises, and the kind of influence we seek to exert in contemporary culture, as well as the values that we assimilate from this culture, all point to the kind of life individuals and communities should live today. The individual should manifest the interior liberty and dedication that is born of love. He is not attached to any particular place or occupation or way of doing things merely because a tradition calls for this; he is willing to leave everything behind in his search for the best way to proclaim Christ to the world.<sup>7</sup> A single-minded intention of serving God and spreading Christ's gift of life makes him willing to try everything and to hold fast to what is good.<sup>8</sup>

The life of the community far more than that of the individual attests the experiences of the Exercises and authenticates their message. It is the life of many together in mutual love, respect, forgiveness and understanding that witnesses to a power of unity stronger than the combined energies of all these persons together. This witness is given in two ways in particular from within the life of the community: in the manner of its government and in the training or education of its younger members. Both reflect the adult-adult relationships of contemporary culture and are essentially spiritual: that is, keyed to the guidance of the holy Spirit. Any form of government must finally arrive at decisions about what the group

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<sup>6</sup> See Fransen, Piet, S.J.: *The New Life of Grace* (Tournai, 1969), part II, pp 327-350.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Phil 3, 7-14.

<sup>8</sup> Cf 1 Thess 5, 21.

is to do, and the group must follow those decisions. Ignatian spirituality today, reinforced by contemporary insights, would require that in arriving at decisions there be genuine respect for the guidance and illumination of the holy Spirit in each individual. Likewise, in the matter of formation, attention must be given to individual needs, to the development of individual gifts, to providing the possibility of unique experiences suited to the unfolding of the personality of each one. This will mean that the community of the Society of Jesus is not made up of persons cut as nearly as possible to the same measurements and mould, but of men with highly diverse talents and abilities, united in a common love of God and the desire to serve one another and all mankind through the unique contribution that each can make.

Jesuits endowed with ignatian spirituality will share the modern concern of building the earth in co-operation with all men of good will, and will acquaint themselves with the resources provided by modern art and technology for their work, and will make full use of them. But ignatian spirituality as it affects the ministry of jesuits will manifest itself most in the kinds of persons they endeavour to serve. Following the spirit of the third mode of humility, they seek to identify with Christ in his lowly and suffering condition, and thus to help where there is genuine need. The need of course is various and widespread. They are concerned for the young, who need so much if they are to grow up today strong in the faith and love of Christ and able to live fully human lives. They are concerned for those who fail to see and do not even realize their blindness: that is, for the learned and the scientific who have failed to judge critically the presuppositions that exclude God from the world. This kind of help can come only from one who is within their own circle and shares their profoundest concerns and knowledge. They seek also to serve the peoples of the third world, those areas where the penetration of science and technology are stirring the desire for a more human way of life. They seek to serve the poor and the oppressed everywhere, those who are the victims of discrimination, prejudice, injustice and oppressive social structures. They wish to work with them to create and use opportunities for living in dignity; they wish to mediate God's loving concern for them as persons. And finally, they seek to serve all the lonely, depressed, deprived persons of the world, those who are in some sense outcasts of contemporary culture; they wish to draw them as fully as possible into the life and joy and peace that God has given us in Christ our Lord.



At the beginning of this paper I observed that no single person can adequately deal with the question of the Society of Jesus and contemporary culture. These remarks, by their very nature, cannot be more than some suggestions. The actual response to this question must be a matter of life. The person and community formed through the living experiences of the Spiritual Exercises must enter with sympathy, discrimination, and understanding into the culture that is forming around us.