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CHRISTIAN SECULARITY

ONE of the characteristic features of our time is the polarization process that is producing a complete divorce between religion and the 'world', understanding by 'world' the sum-total of realities which pertain to man in his life here below and which confront him, whether he is a believer or not. The polarity of these relations gives rise to many practical tensions and theoretical dilemmas which are much debated in our day, and which are often resolved by an indifferent or even outright antagonistic attitude towards anything that has to do with religion. It is not simply a matter of decline in religious practices and moral standards, serious as these may be, but of a radical change of mentality in regard to the whole institutional status of religion in society.

Until recently, Christianity enjoyed by and large the presumption of being considered right. States paid at least lip service to Christian ideals and principles, even if they blatantly ignored them in practice. Individuals transgressed the Christian code of conduct, but admitted that they were doing wrong and did not query either the existence of, or the need for the code. All the environmental pressures supported Christianity, and the cultural ethos of the Western world was infused with insights developed in the Christian era and therefore considered specifically Christian.

All this is no longer so. Today Christianity is beginning to lose its protected position. It no longer enjoys the presumption of being right. The religious neutrality of the State is slowly becoming a neutrality not just between the Christian denominations, not even between one religion and another, but between religion and non-religion. Today it is the atheist who is claiming 'religious liberty'.

On the level of the individual the same trend is apparent. The Christian code of conduct is no longer regarded as the unquestioned norm which, though often transgressed, is still valid. Very many people, perhaps the majority, even in so-called Christian countries, no longer really

believe in an objective moral code. A person's behaviour is his own affair. He can deal directly with God if he believes in God, ignore Him if he does not. The Church is considered by such people as having no special competence in dealing with man. It is a sort of optional extra which people can take or leave.¹

Inevitably this rejection of the institutional Church is interpreted by many as a rejection of religion. The man who does not go to Church is often classed as irreligious. And yet many things around us show that mankind is all the time becoming more humane, more just, more concerned about values, and man is becoming more concerned about his fellow-man. The measure of man's progress is not the atom bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, but the desperate struggle since then to create a world in which nuclear warfare becomes impossible. Nor is a measure of man's progress the overnight invasion of peace-loving Czechoslovakia by Russia and her satellites, but the revulsion which it aroused throughout the whole world. Man is, in fact, becoming more and more religious, in that he is responding more generously to the insights of his own nature fashioned in the image of God.

The crisis facing Christianity today is, therefore, very different from previous crises which revolved around individual points of disputed doctrine – was Christ fully divine as well as fully human? how are Christ's two natures united in the same person? The new challenge poses more fundamental questions – what is the function of religion today? what is the role of the Church in society? how should ecclesial institutions change in order to serve man's changing insights and needs?

This explains why the Second Vatican Council had to be different from all the twenty Ecumenical Councils which preceded it. Its main task was to concern itself with the erosion of the whole religious foundation of society, with the growing divorce between the Church and the world. The modern heresy might be said to be the total rejection of the institutional Church. What this means in practice is that the world, in refusing to accept the old idea that the Church has rights over society, has also rejected the whole idea of religion. Modern philosophers in fact are attempting to secularize religion altogether, to prove that 'God is dead'.

Such a movement, which is growing in strength, has panicked the Christian Churches. In an attempt to keep up with the secularizing

¹ D. Fisher, *The Church in Transition* (London: Chapman, 1967), p. 19.

trend, some churchmen have sought an uneasy compromise at all levels, from an overemphasis on the primacy of conscience to going dangerously close to taking God out of religion. Others, on the contrary, have retreated into their ecclesiastical fortresses, dismissing the new thinking as wholly and entirely evil without any attempt to sort out the wheat from the chaff. What is needed is a new understanding of the relationship between religion and society, between the Church and the world. Christianity must find the middle way between the two extremes of a religionless secularism and a religion-governed society. This middle path is called 'Christian Secularity'.

The past few years have witnessed the production of an enormous quantity of literature on this thorny subject. Some really best sellers have been written by authors of different Christian denominations, bearing such titles as *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* by P. van Buren,² *The Secularization of Christianity* by E.L. Mascall,³ *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox,⁴ *Honest to God* by Bishop John A.T. Robinson.⁵ On the Catholic side, serious concern with the same problem is indicated by several recent publications, such as *Secularization Theology* by R. Richard S.J.,⁶ *The Future of Belief* by L. Dewart,⁷ *The Problem of God* by the late John Courtney Murray S.J.,⁸ *The Christian and the World*,⁹ *The Church and the World*,¹⁰ these last two being collections of essays by well-known theologians such as Karl Rahner and Father Chenu. These and other similar works propose nuanced solutions and accept moderate forms of secularization. The same tendency is reflected in a document which, in the opinion of many, is the most original and characteristic document of Vatican II, namely the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), which is my principal source in this paper.

The problem of the world and its value in the sight of God has deep biblical roots. The Old Testament, as we know, begins with the bold

²New York: Macmillan, 1963.

³London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1965.

⁴London: SCM Press, 1965.

⁵London: SCM Press, 1963.

⁶New York: Herder & Herder, 1967.

⁷New York: Herder & Herder, 1966.

⁸Yale: Yale Univ. Press, 1964.

⁹New York: Kenedy, 1965.

¹⁰*Concilium* 6 (Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1965).

affirmation that God created the world and that it was good. From then on we see the Old Testament writings firmly asserting that God's lordship extends not simply to a narrow sphere of religious events, but to the whole government of nature and history. It is only in the later Old Testament books that the two spheres tend to become more clearly distinct, as religious devotion becomes more centred about the Torah and the Temple and religious hope focuses on an apocalyptic action by which God will bring history to a close.¹¹

In the New Testament we come across a more ambivalent attitude towards the world. Although God so loved the world as to send His only-begotten Son for its redemption, on one particular occasion Christ said that He refused to pray for the world;¹² and then we know that He struggled unceasingly against the Prince of this world. In questions of morality and worship, however, Christ appears to us almost as a secularist. He predicted the destruction of the Temple and proclaimed the hour when men everywhere would worship in spirit and in truth,¹³ thus supplanting the ceremonies and the priesthood of the Old Law. The heart of religion for Jesus Christ consisted in a love of God and neighbour which could be exercised in worldly situations. But at the same time He refused to involve Himself in political questions, being wholly preoccupied with His Father's business.

Almost from the beginning of Christianity, however, we notice a sharp distinction affirming itself between the sacred and the secular, the city of God and the city of man, the things of God and the things of Caesar, the Church and the world. Such a distinction was even looked upon as a characteristic of Christianity. The Middle Ages, then, witnessed a luxurious growth of the sacred as a sign and symbol of God's presence in the world. Medieval thinking looked upon the sacred as superior to the secular by reason of its greater proximity to the divine. At least in theory, the Church had the last word in practically every question and kept a watchful eye over the arts and sciences, over the affairs of state, and even over wars and commerce. The sacred ministrations of religion were considered essential for obtaining health of body, success in military operations, good harvest, and the like. Revealed religion was supposed to offer the surest guide for philosophy and to provide the

¹¹ Cf. A. Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1967), p. 67.

¹² John 17.9.

¹³ John 4.23.

surest foundation for all sciences. Theology as queen looked upon the other sciences as her handmaids.

The Renaissance marks the initial stage in the decline of 'sacral' civilization. The rediscovery of Aristotle and the re-appreciation of the classical treasures of pagan Greece and Rome brought about a situation in which the arts and the sciences gradually declared themselves independent of religious control, while at the same time the powers of the West began to cast off their allegiance to Pope and Emperor. The Protestant Reformation was not unconnected with this movement towards secularity. Luther's views concerning Indulgences, the invocation of Saints and the ecclesiastical hierarchy may all be interpreted as reactions against the exorbitant sacramentalism of the late Middle Ages.

In our own generation, finally, the secular tide has risen to a new height. More and more functions which used to be considered properly religious are taken over by government agencies and private organizations without any definite religious affiliation. And although the Churches continue to run hospitals, schools and charitable institutions of their own, they are now faced with a stiff secular competition in this field.¹⁴ If the Church has been guilty of one extreme in insisting on its jurisdiction over the secular domain, the secular city is guilty of the other extreme in insisting on the absolute autonomy of the secular. In demanding such freedom, modern man has thrown out the baby of religion with the bathwater of ecclesiastical interference, rejecting the whole sacred order along with the Church's claims in the secular order.

The foregoing was a very schematic historical background of the present phenomenon of secularization in the Church. But what is the reaction of modern man to such a phenomenon? In a recent book entitled *The Dimensions of the Church*,¹⁵ Avery Dulles distinguishes three such reactions which he calls characteristic of our age. The first one is that of the unbeliever, who holds that the present trend is irreversible and portends the end of the Christian era; reason and science, and not religion or the Church, must be used for the solution of all human problems. Secondly, at the opposite extreme, there is the reaction of the conservative Christian; this man, identifying Christianity with the sacred, deplores the progress of secularization as a great defection, perhaps even as a sign of the Antichrist. And thirdly, there is the contemporary rad-

¹⁴ Cf. Dulles, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Cf. *supra*.



ical Christian, who welcomes secularization and maintains that a certain amount of it is good and fully compatible with the true Christian message¹⁶.

To correct what may have appeared to be a rather pessimistic evaluation of the situation in the Church before Vatican II, I must hasten to add that there was probably a great deal more spirituality in the Church than appeared on the surface, certainly more than at any time since the beginning of the Middle Ages. The Papacy gained in moral stature what it lost in temporal power. There was a growing recognition of the duty of the Church to serve mankind. And there were also other forces at work in the Church besides the institutional ones. For forty years before Pope John announced the Second Vatican Council, a handful of theologians had been engaged on a complete re-examination of the Christian message with a view to making it more appealing and more relevant to the people of our generation, or, as Desmond Fisher puts it in his recent book *The Church in Transition*,¹⁷ 'to see if it contained more than the theologians of the past had got out of it'. Was it possible to present Christian truths in a way that twentieth century people would better understand and listen to?

Their answer was 'yes'. It was for this reason that they developed a theology of ecumenism which electrified the Christian world and gave fresh hopes for the unity of all Christians. They went back to Scripture for new insights and for a deeper understanding of the Liturgy. The 'new theologians' did most of the spade work for the Council, they worked behind the scenes as experts in the Council, to a large extent they 'made' the Council. From Germany came Karl Rahner, Jungmann and Guardini; from France came Congar, Chenu, de Lubac and Danielou; Schillebeeckx was Flemish; John Courtney Murray and Gustav Weigel were Americans. Some of these are now dead. Others, unsung and unheralded, go on to this day with their unassuming but essential work as professional theologians in the Church. It took time before their ideas were eventually proved right. In fact their ideas were, at some time or other, looked down with suspicion from high, and some of them were for a time suspended from their teaching, and their writings were severely censured. And yet what they were trying to say was basically very simple: that the Church exists to serve God by serving man; that, while its fundamental dogmas cannot change, they can be developed and made

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 70f.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

more complete and expressed in a different language; that in developing her truths the Church should listen to the wisdom of the world, to the scientists as well as to the theologians; in other words, that the institutional Church should engage in a dialogue with the world: it should speak to it and with it, but not at it. It should capture and pay heed to the signs of the times.

If ever there was a Council that captured the signs of the times, it certainly was Vatican II, convened by the great Pope John not to condemn heretics or define new dogmas, but to give a new vitality to the Church; not to revise its creed, cult or code, but to open the windows of the Church for some fresh air (as Pope John once remarked), and to create a new spirit, the spirit of love and dialogue with the secular world. All Conciliar documents are imbued with such a spirit; but it is in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* that the main ideas on Christian Secularity are contained.

For a Christian, the kingdom of God is not of this world. But the question is: Is God's kingdom to be realized in this world? In its finished form, the kingdom of God is one 'of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace': this kingdom Christ will hand over to the Father at the end of time.¹⁸ But this same kingdom is already inchoatively present on earth. The central message of Christ's public ministry was that the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. The arrival of the kingdom was revealed in the words of Jesus, in His miracles, and most of all in His very Person. And when He came to the end of His earthly career, He commanded and equipped the Church to continue His mission of proclaiming and establishing the kingdom. The kingdom is now present in mystery, but it *is* present, and it will display itself in full clarity in heaven.¹⁹

But how is the advent and growth of the kingdom related to man's earthly progress? On this most pressing question of our day the Council gave us a few general but very helpful indications. It first of all made it clear that the establishment of God's kingdom is not identical with man's earthly progress. The kingdom comes about through the action of the Spirit in the world, and entrance into the heavenly kingdom involves a passage through death and leads to a new state of being. There is, on the other hand, a positive relationship between earthly realities and the

¹⁸ Cf. Preface in the Mass of Christ the King.

¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 39.

kingdom of God. The new heavens and the new earth will be fashioned out of those which we know. While the Council does not say that human activity is a necessary condition for the advent of the Parousia, its teaching blends admirably with the affirmative view of many modern theologians. Thus Teilhard de Chardin believed that the end of the world and the second appearance of Christ, while resulting from the transcendent action of God, are nonetheless conditioned by the activity of man, who must through love build the earthly city in its highest possible form.²⁰ And Karl Rahner speaks in similar terms when he says: 'The consummation to be brought about by God does not, in the last analysis, expect a dead, but a living humanity which has gone to its very limits and so is burst open by salvation from above by developing its own powers'.²¹

We can therefore say that Vatican II indicates a middle path between supernaturalism, which would press the initiative of God at the expense of the proper activity of man, and a naturalism which would look upon the kingdom as a merely human achievement. It therefore takes a balanced position, in contrast with some extreme representatives of Christian secularity and with the marked trend of the old theology to restrict Christ's redemptive work to the salvation of man's soul.

The Council has much to say to those Christians of our time who feel somewhat distressed by the apparent irrelevance of religion to the goals of man's temporal life. The various benefits which the Church can and should bring to the secular world may be roughly grouped under three headings, always according to Vatican II. In the first place, the Church must recognize, and seem to recognize, the intrinsic goodness of the natural order and of the dignity of man as a person. It should therefore respect the just autonomy of the arts and sciences and defend their integrity against any unjust intrusion.²² Secondly, the Church must exercise a healing office, insofar as it applies the medicine of grace to repair the ravages wrought by sin. Since Christ Himself was perfect man, those who follow Him are restored to the fulness of their humanity.²³ Thirdly, the Church must exert an elevating influence on the whole

²⁰ C. Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 181-188.

²¹ 'Christianity and the New Man', in *The Christian and the World* (cited n. 9 above), p. 224.

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 36, 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, n. 40.

natural order, insofar as it draws man into union with God and thus gives to human dignity its fullest expansion.²⁴ The whole temporal order, by reason of its essential relatedness to man, participates in his call to eternal blessedness.²⁵

Against the background of the foregoing analysis one can better understand the special function of the laity in the Church, which is to sanctify the world from within, in the manner of a leaven. 'The layman is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is therefore his special task to illumine and organize these affairs in such a way that they may always begin, develop and persist according to the mind of Christ, to the praise of the Creator and Redeemer'.²⁶ This function, of sanctifying the world from within, is described as 'consecration of the world' – *consecratio mundi*.²⁷ Just as the eternal Word of God, by His presence among men, may be said to have consecrated the world,²⁸ so the Christian, by leading a life that is fully human and fully Christian, gives the world a certain but real kind of sacredness. Thanks to the sacrament of baptism and confirmation, the laity themselves are consecrated to Christ and they have a consequent obligation to spread and defend the faith as true witnesses of Christ.²⁹

While not minimizing the benefits that the Church can render to the secular world, it is necessary to add that the world too can afford great assistance to the Church. And here too the Second Vatican Council goes far beyond all previous official statements in acknowledging this indebtedness. The Council pays tribute to the progress of the arts and the sciences for opening new roads to truth, clarifying the message of the Gospel and enabling it to be more effectively proclaimed.³⁰ The recent progress of biblical studies affords a striking instance of how sciences such as archaeology can lead to a deeper understanding of the inspired text and in this way help to mature the judgement of the Church.³¹ Sociology, psychology and the science of mass media can have a far reaching import for an effective renewal of the apostolate

²⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 21.

²⁵ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 7.

²⁶ *Lumen Genitium*, n. 31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 34.

²⁸ Cf. *Roman Martyrology*, for Christmas Day.

²⁹ Cf. M.-D. Chenu, 'Consecratio Mundi', in *The Christian and the World*, p. 165.

³⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 44.

³¹ *Dei Verbum*, n. 12.

and of the spiritual life.³²

The Church and the world coexist in polar tension. Neither can get along without the other, but each retains its own nature and principles. Such a dialogue between them is indispensable, even though this may appear somewhat scandalous to those who still think in terms of the medieval hierarchical scheme according to which the Church is only related to the world as ruler and teacher. But in point of fact, as Karl Rahner points out, this scheme never corresponded to the true situation. The actual realization of Christianity is always 'the achieved synthesis of the message of the Gospel and the grace of Christ on the one hand, and of the concrete situation in which the Gospel has to be lived on the other'.³³ Such has been the case with the past, and such also will be the case with the future if the Church is going not only to perdure in existence relying on the infallible guarantee of God's protection, but also to be effective in its mission of witnessing to Christ and bringing salvation to all men.

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³² Dulles, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 85.