

IN SEARCH OF A CREATIVE CHRISTIANITY

Robert A. McDermott

AN ATTEMPT to adequately handle so broad and problematic a topic as Christianity is a rash, if not an impossible, undertaking. The mere mention of the word Christianity arouses a sundry set of responses. Christianity as *creative* is an impertinent proposition precisely because Christianity is supposedly, by its very nature, creative. Our proposal to search for a creative Christianity, then, clearly assumes that the Christianity of Christendom has failed to make sufficiently manifest its basic characteristic.

That the history of Christianity has dimly shone forth the light of the Christian message is a fact that Christian apologists are slow to admit. Like the interpreters of Plato who would solve the problems of the modern state with the unrealistic axioms of the *Republic*, interpreters of Christianity seem to treat the ideals of Christianity as if they exist apart from the human situation. Critics should judge human activity in the light of possible ideals and possible ideals in the light of human potentiality. In this paper the ideals of Christianity and the possibilities afforded the individual Christian will be evaluated in respect to each other. It is the individual who creates the gap between the ideal and the real Christian society: Karl Adam refers to this gap as "the contrast between the Church's temporal manifestation and her divine idea, between her actual state and the great and holy thing that lives in her." The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the causes, effects and remedies of this contrast.

Christianity has contributed to, and absorbed, epochs and events of diverse cultures of twenty centuries; we will here be able to cite only a few such epochs and events, all of which are limited to our immediate situation. Our assertions, therefore, are more representative than exhaustive, more tenta-

ive than definitive. Indeed, it is our expressed purpose to be less dogmatic and complete than the singleminded dogmatists we oppose. Let us hope that this article is read and received in the spirit in which it was written — in the spirit of a search as creative as the Christianity we seek.

REASON AND REVELATION: TWO TRADITIONS

The Divine Human Dialogue

MARTIN BUBER has written that "the real God is the God who can be spoken to, because He is the one who speaks to men." By referring to God as a Speaking or Responding Being, Buber exemplifies the Judaic or biblical tradition which has always understood God to be a participant in the affairs of man. This understanding of God is so fundamental to Judaism that Buber refers to the "dialogue between the above and below" as the basic doctrine of the Hebrew Bible. It was this Judaic experience of a Providential God which anticipated the Christian belief in a God who "so loved the world as to send His only begotten Son."

Man's belief in God's transcendence and his experience of God's power, both beautifully recorded in the Bible, is collectively termed revelation. "The event of the Word of God, revealing God's plan, that is the immediate means of revelation." Jean Danielou is here asserting that revelation is man's belief that God is within his experiential reach. Insofar as one believes that God speaks to man, he is able to believe that "God has a stake in the life of every man. But," continues Rabbi Heschel, "this idea cannot be imposed from without; it must be discovered by every man; it cannot be preached, it must be experienced."

The God of Judaism is more the object of human faith and personal ex-

perience than of the subtle intellect and abstract reason.

And God moreover said unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel. The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name forever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.

EXODUS 3:15

The Christian understanding of God, however, too often pays only lip service to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; too often Christianity's God is, to use Pascal's words, "the God of philosophers and scholars."

The God of Reason

IN *The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion*, John Herman Randall, Jr. contrasts the Latin (or Roman) tradition with the Eastern (or Greek) tradition of early Christianity. The Latin Church was more concerned with ethical than purely intellectual problems. It was primarily concerned with "the practical conditions of moral life: sin, salvation, grace, and the Church." The Fathers of Eastern Christianity on the other hand, "with real philosophical interests, . . . worked out the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Person of Christ."

Dedicated as it was to practical concerns, and thoroughly influenced by the Roman genius for political organization, the Latin Church developed a juridical structure which necessarily resorted to the same rational bases for its rulings as were developed by the Greek Fathers. The rational or purely philosophical approach to God and the Gospel has periodically overwhelmed the more empirical approach: indeed, since the Thirteenth Century it has dominated Christian thought.

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, the most prolific exponent of Scholastic philosophy, entrusted to Christian theologians and philosophers an entire system of explanation which aimed to verify the existence of God and describe His attributes. St. Thomas, in the Thirteenth Century, was a radical

thinker: he accepted the "pagan" philosophy of Aristotle and used it to solve such enigmatic problems of revelation as the immortality of the soul and the processions of the Trinity. What he proposed as five possible ways of verifying one's belief in God have since become the five unquestionable proofs of God's existence absolutized and dogmatized by Thomists, apologists and catechists.

The Thomistic system of philosophy (if not that of St. Thomas), is, in its passion to explain the whole of reality, both comprehensive and neat; it leans heavily upon abstractions and a deductive process that tends to conceptualize out of existence the genuinely human and experiential elements of our world. A rationally ordered view of the universe, as posited by Thomists, seems to systematically build from rocks and trees to the Trinity and redemption.

A God which is the sum total of principles or a collection of concepts cannot enlist from man the radical transformation described by prophets, mystics and saints. A God which is managed by man's mind is an object of human thought expressed in analogical terms and extended to its absolute end. But if God is a Participating, Personal Being, then He is *in* the world and is accessible to man through action as well as through abstract thought. As Buber says, "God dwells wherever man lets Him in."

It is possible, says St. Paul, for man to gain a knowledge of God through the created things of God. Karl Adam maintains that "human reason can of itself recognize the spirituality of the human soul and the existence of God." But the gap between God as Absolute Being and God as a Providential and Responding Being is a span which can only be bridged by experience. Experience is not opposed to reason: indeed, for John Dewey, "it is experience that is directive, it is experience that teaches." *A priori* knowledge, that is, knowledge gained without consulting experience, is incapable of leading man to a Personal God. As Jean Danielou explains, "ancient philosophers never reached any but im-

perfect and conflicting notions about God, and reason has not been able to gain right knowledge of them except with the help of revelation." Revelation is not a storehouse of truths: it is a description of the divine-human encounter.

Reason cannot convincingly speak about God because man's knowledge of God is the result of an individual experience. This personal experience, taken in the context of man's previous religious experience and knowledge, should subsequently be scrutinized by reason's critical sense in the light of faith and philosophy. Danielou wisely recommends that an individual's religious experience should be handled by reason and "placed within the scheme of things."

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Existentialist and Empiricist Philosophy of Religion

COUNTERING Sartrean or so-called atheistic existentialism are the existentialist philosophers who emphasize man's ability to confront the divine. Three such thinkers, the Jewish scholar, Martin Buber, the Protestant theologian and philosopher, Paul Tillich, and the Roman Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, all affirm an open universe and offer man the opportunity to recreate his world in relation with other persons and realities beyond the supposed barriers of human experience.

Buber says that man can become whole "only in virtue of relation to another self." Buber calls the Ultimate to which man responds "Thou" and calls man's response to the Ultimate an "I-Thou" relationship. Tillich insists that man must have "the courage to be" as well as the "courage to be as a part." Courage is the means of overcoming anxiety and affirming the value of the self and society. Through this affirmation man is capable of ultimate concern: i.e., a religious experience whereby man responds to the Beyond. For Marcel, God is an experiential entity whom

man can confront, but about whom man cannot speak: "When I speak about God, it is not God about whom I speak."

FOR WILLIAM JAMES, as much as for Buber, Tillich and Marcel, religious experience is a total response to the Ultimate. James defines experience as the transformation of an entity as a result of its interaction with another entity. This transformation of the individual, and subsequently of society, is the result of a religious experience, i.e., an individual's realization of the Supreme end. The success of a religious experience is the higher morality it demands from the transformed individual and from the rest of society. James' meaning is in perfect accord with Christ's words when he praises those who carry to our world the blessings of the divine: "By their fruits shall you know them."

Augustine and Christian Experience

IN AN ARTICLE entitled "John Dewey's Empiricism and the Christian Experienced," John Herman Randall, Jr. is quoted as follows:

Augustine was an empiricist who tested all things in the fire of his own burning experience, a rationalist with a Platonic vision of Truth all naked and alone, and an institutionalist who fully realized the human craving for authority.

Clearly establishing Augustine as the progenitor of modern empiricism, Dr. Ralph Sleeper goes on to explain that to Augustine, "Christianity came as the transformation of history." Espousing a view which is basic to empirical and existentialist philosophy, Augustine maintained that man confronts the divine in concrete situations which bind him historically to God, the source of his salvation.

It is to the writings of Augustine that modern thinkers should turn to find a relatively successful synthesis of a revelation and history, tradition and change. Unlike the rationalists, Augustine understands the divine human dialogue in terms of time and

experience. For Augustine, the bible is history — and as history it is fluid, open, multi-dimensional and unpredictable. Augustine's thought must remain in what has been called "a fundamental state of incompleteness." It is the task of every generation, indeed, every individual, to rework the Christian experience and thereby enable the City of Man to more deservedly be called the City of God.

CHRISTIAN CULPABILITY

Isolationism

PERHAPS no teaching of the Gospel has been more emphasized than the demand which forces man "to seek first the kingdom of heaven." This emphasis on "the things of heaven" as opposed to values of our world (the only world we have, by the way) blatantly admits to a split which is fundamentally specious, and frequently dishonorable: in addition, it has rendered Christian ethics almost ineffectual. The problem is crystalized by one of the most quotable of Christian maxims: "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his immortal soul."

Christianity has too often taken this maxim literally: Christians have consistently rejected the world and have attempted to save their souls in spite of it. For example the contemplative is pleased to free himself of worldly cares. Life in religion, as opposed to life "in the world" frequently thrives on an anti-world rationale. As Mounier explains: "There is a constant temptation for the *interior* Christian to withdraw himself from the affairs of the world, at the same time profiting from the efforts of those who do combat there — not a very honorable position." Part of the reason for this retreat from the world is the Medieval view that "earthly existence was hardly more than a prolonged stay in a bad inn."

In his conscientious dedication to the salvation of his soul, the Christian has frequently gathered around him a set of anti-world values which are guaranteed to lead him through the miasmal mist of earthly existence

to the beatific state of heaven. These distinctively Christian virtues such as peace, serenity, docility, humility resignation and self-denial, have each influenced the Christian's retreat from the world.

Christians have confused their responsibility to themselves and to the community. For example it is obviously laudable to be the silent sufferers, bearing one's tribulations with forbearance. But it is certainly not laudable to view others' plight with the same patience: it is manifestly wrong to dismiss a group's suffering with so convenient a platitude as, "It is God's will for you." History will forever condemn German and other Christian clerics who allowed countless thousands to be slaughtered because it was "the will of God."

Christians, as the witnesses to Christ's love for man, have countered inhumanity by reticence; as a moral force, they have opposed social injustice by apathy. "Treat thy neighbor as thyself" is an ideal which has rarely been realized since the First Christian; indeed, "Treat thy neighbor as thy neighbor" is an unrealized ideal. Our treatment of our neighbor too often resembles that cited by Alan Paton in *Cry, the Beloved Country*:

We believe in help for the underdog, but we want him to stay under. And we are therefore compelled, in order to preserve our belief that we are Christians, to ascribe to Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, our own human intention, and to say that because He created white and black, He gives the divine approval to any human action that is designed to keep the black man from advancement.

Dogmatism

IN COMPLIANCE with Christ's command, the Church has attempted to "teach all nations." Centuries before mass media the Church was dedicated to mass communication; if its message was to be understood, it had to be clear and concise. Questions had to be answered definitively and controversies had to be settled authoritatively. As a result, commonly

held traditions and theological developments gradually evolved into dogma. Biblical scholarship, since the early centuries of Christianity until very recently, has steadily factualized truths which were originally presented in mythic terms. Myth is not less true than fact; it is a different kind of truth. John Courtney Murray has wisely suggested that myth is that which never was, but is always true. The roots of the Judaeo-Christian revelation are fundamentally mythological: unfortunately, the Christian need for dogma and absolute truth has fossilized the richest and most profound realities of revelation. Dogmatic theology and catechetics have destroyed the Judaic sense of myth as well as the Christian sense of doctrine as process or development. Contemporary exegesis, however, has tended to question the historical and factual validity of many Christian beliefs; the meaningfulness of revelation to our age may be inestimably enhanced by the findings of linguists and the revisions of biblicalists.

Defensivism

THE CHURCH has been constantly vigilant in its desire to defend the fundamental (and sometimes less than fundamental) doctrines of faith against individual apostates and heretical movements. The so-called "defender of the faith" resembles the super-patriot in that he knows just enough to know that he is absolutely right. The mentality and methods of an ambassador of a political theory and an apostle of a religious doctrine are embarrassingly similar; but the apostle or missionary is even more prone to singlemindedness since he is convinced that he preaches what is true for all men — and his conviction is backed by revelation.

Every Christian, as a result of his commitment to the cause of truth, is impelled to spread the faith which is for him the only way to salvation. The dark spots in Church history are largely the result of an enthusiastic attempt to spread an overly simple interpretation of the "good news."

Missionaries, cleric and lay, might do well to consider the statement of the French Dominican M. D. Chenu: "Religion cannot be an ideology without degrading itself. A religion is something other than a system of ideas." Christian history, unfortunately, has often limited itself to an ideology, and in order to preserve this ideology it has to debate and analyze, defend and anathematize. At the root of intolerance is the irreverent mentality summed up by this fallacious slogan, "error has no rights."

Fanaticism

CHRISTIANITY has always countered the Greek "Golden Mean" by taking seriously Christ's admonition that man is either with Him or against Him. In an attempt to meet the Gospel's demand for an extreme dedication, the Christian, says Thomas Merton, "tends to become another fanatic who allows himself the worst excesses, and excuses them easily on the ground that he is 'defending the faith' or 'fighting for the Church.'"

Like other excesses, Christian fanaticism is the result of an unreasonable emphasis on reasonable values. In an excellent article entitled "Christianity and Mass Movements," Merton has analyzed the causes and effects of fanaticism. His statements deserve to be quoted:

Christianity is love. Love and fanaticism are incompatible. Fanaticism thrives on aggression.

Fanaticism refuses to look at another as a person. Only a person can say 'volo,' 'I will.' The Christian is not saved as a member of a mob, by joining in mass acclamations and allowing himself to be lost and submerged in the vast anonymous exultation of a totality.

Clericalism

THE NATURE of lay-cleric relations is obviously a touchy problem. The temptation to resort to a negative attitude is a strong one, but is one which must be resisted if a harmony worthy of the church is to be effected between the respective functions of the clergy and laymen.

Nietzsche's choice of a sheep as a symbol of docility and obedience is so painfully appropriate that reference to the parable of the "Good Shepherd" or to the traditional figure of the "Flock" does more to embarrass than to exalt Christians. We are past the day when lay-cleric relations should be thought of in terms of shepherd and flock. In America, many laymen are becoming responsible. Competent and sensitive laymen are now aware that clericalism results in the "dissolution of the laity as a people." But the number of responsible laymen is still relatively small and voiceless, and the number of incisive and respectful clerics who are aware of the changing needs of the Church is just enough to keep the lay-cleric split from dividing the thinking church into two self-neutralizing camps. As Charles Taylor notes, the whole of Christianity must view "the church as a single community made up of men both priest and lay."

THE CHRISTIAN SOLUTION

The Split Universe

CHристианITY has always admitted to a divided or warring universe. The Christian has rarely been at peace with his world: good and evil, spiritual and material, temporal and eternal, are all commonplace terms which refer to the contrasting factions which vie for his allegiance. Christianity has, unfortunately, perpetrated this impossible dilemma. It is the task of contemporary Christianity to unify this ruinous dichotomy which has permeated the Christian worldview.

Inheriting from the Greeks a prejudice against matter, Christianity has traditionally regarded the spiritual dimension of nature as ideal or non-profane.

One manifestation of the Christian de-emphasis of the natural or physical world is the tendency to view the human body as a stumbling block to salvation. Man's immortal soul is looked upon as the prisoner of man's mortal body. Christian moralists have

never tired of warring against "sins of the flesh."

Because Christians have often failed to sanctify their existence, they develop an other-worldly consciousness. This failure would be less common if the Christian would consciously cooperate in God's work of creation. Part of this task is "the art of sanctifying time," which Rabbi Heschel explains "is the way to nobility of the soul." Christians can and must sanctify time through Christ who bridged the temporal and eternal.

Christ the Unifier

THE CHRISTIAN believes that Christ embodies all divine and human qualities; he is mediator between God and man; he unites physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal.

By His Incarnation ("coming into flesh"), Christ sanctified man's body. By entering history at a specific point in time, Christ sanctified the temporal. George Santayana, contrasting Christianity with the religion of the Greeks, explains that "the great characteristic of Christianity, inherited from Judaism, was that its scheme was historical."

Christ is the center of Christian experience and the pivot of Christian history. He is the source of Christian truth and love. The rationalistic strain in Christianity has emphasized Christ's role of teacher. But the emphasis on Christ as a sanctifier is backed by His words: "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly." Man's task is to co-create with Christ: he must carry on the work of divinizing the physical and temporal order, thereby participating more fully in the world. This participation includes the task of suffering, and enables a confrontation with the divine.

Despite its disturbing emphasis on censorship and restriction, the basic ideals of the Christian message are supremely positive. Notice, for example, the possibilities afforded to man by the Christian belief in man's power over creation: "We do not have to carry the spiritual to the temporal; it is there already. Our task is to discover it there and give it life, indeed

to sacramentalize it." This task is similar to William James' idea of religious experience as the interaction between man and the divine. John Herman Randall is surely speaking for the best of the Christian tradition when he explains that "religious symbols not only reveal the powers and possibilities latent in the nature of things... but at the same time (are) instruments of unification."

Christ, the God-Man, messiah and mediator, has unified all of creation. As the "second Adam," Christ restored what man had lost. (Although the Judaeo-Christian tradition factualizes these concepts, they obviously include figurative and symbolic elements.) No matter how one manages to handle the mythic dimension of the fall and redemption, man's unity — actual or potential — is made possible through the fact that Christ came for all men. As Karl Adam explains, it must be the mission of Christ "to reunite to God mankind as a unity."

THE NEED FOR ACTION

Creation as a Value

THE TASK of the Christian is to finish, with God's help, the work of love. When man recognizes the possibility of transforming his world, he assumes responsibility for its destiny. The process of transformation, Augustine would agree, is dependent upon communication with God and the provision by God of a vision to men who somehow transcended the ordinary limits of human experience. The activity whereby man acquires God's design is called, by Henry Bergson, "dynamic religion." William James refers to this communication between God and man as "experience of the Ultimate" — and the results of this experience "are the best things that history has to show."

PIERRE TEILHARD de Chardin has written of the union of all men and the cosmos: "In each one of us, through matter, the whole history of the world is in part reflected." He states further that the human soul

"is inseparable, in its birth and in its growth, from the universe into which it is born. In each soul, God loves and partly saves the whole world which that soul sums up in an incommunicable way." Teilhard believes that man can *not only* save himself through the cosmos, but that he must save himself through his action upon his world in communion with all men. Summarily, Teilhard explains that the fundamental truths of our faith and experience should lead us to the following observation: "God is inexhaustibly attainable in the *totality* of our action."

Risk as a Value

ACTION, then, is man's task. Action is creative; it is also precarious. Dewey explains that Western man has a prejudice against action because it threatens his security and certainty. Our age is in dire need of the creative risk which Christianity has for so long avoided. That Christian thought should ally itself with a conservative mentality is a phenomenon as sad as it is incongruous. The simple fact is that Christianity itself is a risk. Christian rebels and reformers are more in the tradition of the First Christian than the guardians of the status quo who block the way of creation.

The protectors of the past seem to ignore the fact that Christian doctrine could not have developed were it not for Christian heresies. The risk taken by thinkers, subsequently branded heretics, has been rewarded by excommunication. It has been too commonly held that when original speculation affirms traditional verities, it is virtuous and laudable; but when a thinker ventures an opinion which runs a course counter to the stream of existing ideas, it is scandalous and punishable. This mentality is largely responsible for the paucity of Christian leaders at the beginning of broad intellectual developments.

The obstacles confronting radical thinkers, however, have always been rampant, and authentic minds will continue to break through the barriers

of blind belief that masquerade as faith. But the break-throughs would be more frequent and less painful if

we would recover the sense of innovation which is so much a part of the authentic Christian spirit.

VALUE AND USE OF THE LITURGY

Patrick J. Hill

The liturgical revival in the Catholic Church has occasioned among thoughtful observers many questions that bear harsh witness to the confused ignorance that necessitated the movement. The queries that arise do not concern such minor problems as translation or interpretation, but the far more fundamental questions of meaning and relevance. Why such elaborate ceremony, they ask, such detailed rubrics, such repeated "hosannas", when outside social injustice abounds? Should not such medieval pomp be confined to monasteries to allow the modern layman more time for activity in the apostolate?

Two recent publications of Helicon Press combine remarkably well to answer these questions and impel the uninitiated into a rapidly growing literature, richly rewarding to one's religious life. The first is *Liturgy and Personality* by the Catholic phenomenologist, Dietrich von Hildebrand. As the title implies, the liturgy of the Church is compared to a full, classic personality, one touched and formed by the objects of central significance into a reverent man, a man open to all the nuances in the hierarchy of Being, responding in proportion to their value. But great as is this power of transformation, the author repeatedly emphasizes that this

is not the *raison d'être* of the liturgy. Rather the liturgy exists to praise God. It is the prayer of Christ and of the Church, rendering to God what is His *due*. As the Preface of the Mass says, *Dignum et iustum est*, "It is meet and just" that God should receive this praise simply because He is God.

The second book, written by Father H. A. Reinhold, exhibits classic pastoral concern for those for whom the Sabbath was made. Tired of waiting for people to understand the Mass as it is, the author joined an *avant garde* of priests and laymen intent on *Bringing the Mass to the People*. First, they carefully distinguished the divine from the human elements. Then, keeping one eye on tradition and the other on pastoral aptness, they chiseled away the accretions of past ages and produced a dynamic structural reform which coerces the attention to focus upon the essentials of the Mass: the approach to God through the Son, the renewal of the Sacrifice of Calvary and the intense union of all Christians in the reception of one Body. If the suggestions of Father Reinhold are adopted, the Mass might once again become the bold, startling confrontation with Divinity which teaches, nourishes and transforms.

THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC DILEMMA

Robert A. McDermott

Subtitled "Religious-Secular Encounters in the Modern World, *American Catholic Crossroads* (Macmillan) is an attempt to explicate the terms of the City of God, City of Man dichotomy. The author, Walter J. Ong, discusses the various ways in which each age has played out the drama of the "two cities"; this is for him, as it was for Augustine, an historical process. This

point is made in the first paragraph of the book: "There is no revelation outside history, — and no Church either." Wisely citing the importance of John Henry Newman's great work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Father Ong states that "Man's history is tied up with that of the cosmos which bore him." The Church's history is likewise bound up