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KATALLAGETE

SINCE 1965

About the Cover:

THOMAS MERTON has been a friend and writer for Katallagete since we began in 1965. The drawing on the cover is from the collection of Merton's calligraphies held at the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky. The Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust agreed that we carry the sketch as our logo.

Explaining the collection Merton wrote:

... Their meaning is not to be sought on the level of convention or of concept ... They could not be assigned a reference by advance agreement because it has been their nature to appear on the paper without previous agreement ... They came to life when they did in the form of reconciliations, as expressions of unique and unconscious harmonies appropriate to their own moment though not confined to it ...

Special Note: On the inside back cover we have a listing of articles by Merton written originally for Katallagete. Readers may purchase reprints of those articles on the card enclosed.

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Notice

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About This Issue ...

Well . . . It's been a long time between . . . Issues . . . An accounting is in order for the intermezzo between Fall 1987 and Spring 1989. We welcomed your gracious response to Julius Lester's *fundraiser* (to be read *Help!*). We have nominated Julius for Sainthood for a second time, though we expect another rejection. So we assume the authority, two-times-only, and consecrate Saint Julius the Fundraiser.

"About This Issue" should be easy; we record dramas survived—professional, personal, financial, automotive, vocational, academic—since Fall 1987. Our sense of humor remains intact. "Survived," not "suffered": you read about "suffering" in theological journals, *The National Inquirer*, *Penthouse*, *People Magazine*, *Parade*, Richard John Neuhaus, and watch the Soaps. Why take up time rehashing this sort of thing when it surrounds us?

Why we survived, we're not sure, except as our vocation, KAT seeks to keep the sense of humor on straight. Is your sense of humor on straight? That may be the only question we ask our readers. (Reinhold Niebuhr touched many of us decades ago with a sermon, "Humor and Faith": No humor, no faith; no faith, no humor. God gives faith and our humor is on straight.) Months ago, a note from a long-time reader:

"It's worth the price of a subscription to read how you explain the delay between issues. Great! It's better than most of the Soaps and the long delays between issues prevent you going commercial. So, KEEP IT UP!"

We shall try: Humor and Faith.

In *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy identifies the main character, Binx Bolling, on the search: "The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair." Working with *The Moviegoer*, one amongst us throws in front of students: "What's the search?" Not a pilgrimage, not an odyssey; maybe a twentieth century rambler, a rover "onto something," knowing somewhere or someone is "out there," but the rambler doesn't know who or where. *Seeker*. Percy will understand (perhaps appreciate) a metaphor of his metaphor: KAT's search for an office.

Friends, a lot of energy (aka *chronos*-time) has been spent in recent months locating real estate for KAT. A couple of years ago we had the best office, but as non-resisters, we graciously gave it up, recognizing "Wider Fields Of Christian Service" when we see them. We then landed good digs. The College Administration and some friends worked with us on a financial crunch brought on by the ambitious one-hundred-and-eighteen page Fall 1987 issue.

We moved into the new quarters. In part. We were *Elluded*—one more hostage to technique. We cannot teach and write and publish KAT in the way we have been doing it for three years with no Apple Macintosh. We had access to one only with no \$'s to buy another. Stalled. The accessible MAC had to remain where it was (and is). Moreover, the air-conditioner liberated for the new (currently unoccupied) KAT office is insufficient to MAC-cool the new area; even if we got another MAC we require more A/C's, BTU's in the 1000's. *Elluded*. Prisoners of technique. Computers and air-conditioners, printouts, spreadsheets, subscription lists, the damndest assortments of discs (floppy and otherwise) and in an "office" (Draper 212) that you might think of as the KAT Bowling Arena, 7' x 20', two to six people working behind three desks and the Apple MAC on the altar.

This issue begins with Robert Suder's homilies on Epiphany texts. Suder, on the KAT Editorial Board and Associate Professor of Religion at Berea College, studies with us primarily, but not exclusively, the Old Testament. A veteran of digs in Tel Dan and Tel Aroer in Israel and Khir bet Iskander and Tel Safut in Jordan, Suder is a Lutheran minister.

What follows Suder's homilies is one part of KAT's participation in the twentieth anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton, an early friend of KAT. (Some of us participated in the conference at Bellarmine College in Louisville [May 25-27], a celebration of Merton, concluding with a mass at the Abbey of Gethsemani Sunday, May 28.) So we run again the first of his many contributions to KAT: "Events and Pseudo Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman." The character of Merton's writings is the character of the writer of integrity: quality matures with age.

The poems following Merton are from Philip J. Lee. "L'Office: a Presbyterian Tribute to the Order of Cistercian of Strict Observance" is just that: reflections of a Calvinist at a Trappist monastery. Phil Lee, new on the Editorial Board, is one of a vanishing species: a *pastor* as The Apostle invoked the office. A native of Tennessee, he has been senior minister of the Church of St. John and St. Stephen in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada for twenty years. He is with us Spring 1989, as Eli Lilly Visiting Professor of Religion at Berea College.

Two articles look at four recent books which offer diverse accounts of Christianity yesterday and today: Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford, 1987); Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1986); Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Eerdmans, 1980); Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (Random House, 1986).

Respondents are Jean Bethke Elsthain, Centennial Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University and Joel Marcus, Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton University on leave at the Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem.

The new logo on the cover is a Merton calligraphy, used with the gracious permission of the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust. The portraits of snake-handling and hogs are by Al Clayton, our second-time-only nominee, Saint Al of the Lens. Clayton has been with KAT since 1966.

We make a special note of appreciation to the Administration of Berea College and President John B. Stephenson for understanding, patience and support these twelve months.

JYH
Ω



An Uncomfortable Season

Robert Suder

Epiphany is an ancient season with a single theme: God appearing, God made manifest. Each week the ancient lectionary appoints a Gospel lesson that focuses on a sign; the visit of the Magi, the Wedding at Cana, the healings and the denunciation of the demons. Yet Epiphany retains the mystery. It is not a simple, clear-cut season. It is a time of glimpses and elusive texts that make us wonder, that lead us to points of departure rather than conclusions. How is God present in this world?

The Old Testament lectionary points us toward the elusive quality of Epiphany even more than the Gospels. Among these texts is one that catches the hidden and revealed aspects of the season. I Samuel 3:1-10 heightens the mystery of the season.

I Samuel 3: 1-10 (Jerusalem Bible)

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to Yahweh in the presence of Eli. It was rare for the Lord to speak in those days; visions were uncommon. One day it happened that Eli was lying down in his room. His eyes were beginning to grow dim; he could no longer see. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying in the sanctuary of Yahweh where the ark of God was when Yahweh called, "Samuel! Samuel!" He answered, "Here I am." Then he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am since you called me." He replied, "I did not call you, my son; go back and lie down."

Samuel had as yet no knowledge of Yahweh and the word of Yahweh had not yet been revealed to him. Once again Yahweh called, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am since you called me." He replied, "I did not call you, my son; go back and lie down." Samuel had as yet no knowledge of Yahweh and the word of Yahweh had not yet been revealed to him. Once again Yahweh called, the third time. He got up and went

ROBERT SUDER is Associate Professor of Religion at Berea College. A graduate of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and the University of Wisconsin, he is a veteran of archeological expeditions in Israel and Jordan. Suder is a member of the *Katallagete* Editorial Board and is a Lutheran pastor.

to Eli and said, "Here I am since you called me." Eli then understood that it was Yahweh who was calling the boy, and he said to Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if someone calls say, 'Speak Yahweh, your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Yahweh then came and stood by, calling as he had done before, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel answered, "Speak, Yahweh your servant is listening."

I Samuel 3:1-10 does not solve the mystery of God's presence in our world. Instead the text leaves us in tension as it points in two directions; toward the silence in which we live and towards the voice which speaks through the silence. Look at the setting for the story. There are only two characters in the scene, Samuel and Eli. They are asleep. There is no activity here, no thought, no conversation; only silence and gathering darkness. One light burns, it has not yet gone out.

Consider the two characters. Eli sleeps. Why shouldn't he sleep? His eyes are weak. Awake or asleep are all the same to Eli. He can no longer see to offer sacrifice. He must give instructions to the lad. Even when Eli fulfills his priestly role, it is accomplished within a darkness. Eli's service may be proper, but it has always been answered with darkness and silence. In all the festivals and sacrifice, in all the long days of service before the Ark of the Lord, the answer has always been silence. Eli's exalted God did not speak to Eli. Israel might raise it's voice in prayer and thanksgiving, and Eli might encourage the people. But for Eli there were no visions and no word from God.

There is scant hope for the future. Eli's two sons have failed their parents' wish. They are priests, but they are priests for their own career, without compassion for Israel or Yahweh. They take bribes and hurry the service to sit at the feast. Eli the parent dwells in darkness and silence. When Eli is gone the priesthood will vanish.

Unlike Eli's sleep of despair, Samuel's sleep is naive. The lad serves Eli. Samuel does not know when to go up to the altar until Eli gives instruction. Samuel does not know how to read the word of Eli's exalted God until Eli teaches him the letters which Eli can no longer see. So, while the old priest sleeps in darkness, the lad has nothing to do. Indeed Samuel can do nothing. He does not know Eli's God.

The shrine is also silent and dark. This is a contradiction. Here is the Ark of the Covenant. It contains the words spoken at Sinai. This is the Ark that led Israel through the wilderness. In ancient times Moses received the Word of God in the presence of this Ark. Israel saw the lightning and thunder and responded, "We have heard the Word of the Lord!" How can there be silence in this shrine? Yet a naive lad sleeps at the foot of the Ark.

The scene seems a prototype for Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's characters speak nonsense while they wait for Godot, who may or may not appear. In the biblical text the characters do not even speak. Yet, like Beckett's characters, Eli and Samuel seem to be waiting. Why should they wait for a God who will not appear? Why not quit the sanctuary? Eli could be a story teller for one of the tribes. Samuel could lead him. Why wait? This part of the story is most perplexing. Do they wait because of a stubborn loyalty to ancient promises? Do they wait because it is our nature to wait between the past and the future? Or is their waiting a sign which points beyond their silent existence.

Waiting for God is integral to the Biblical drama. Abraham and Sarah wait through a lifetime for the child promised to them. Jerusalem waits through its long captivity. Jerusalem still waits. The psalmist declares, "I will wait for the Lord, my soul waits for the Lord." (130) Paul speaks of "...all creation eagerly waiting..." (I Corinthians 8:19).

There is no preparation for the next part of the story. "And the Lord called to Samuel. . . ." There is no accounting for the voice; no hint of its presence in the darkness. Samuel and Eli have offered neither prayer nor sacrifice. They can only wait. Yet the voice is heard. Here is the mystery of the Epiphany. The voice speaks without prompting, without coaxing, without inducements or conditions.

The reaction of Samuel and Eli is a statement of the human comedy. The voice is heard, but they get it wrong. Samuel thinks Eli has called. Eli thinks the lad is dreaming. "Go back into the darkness," Eli says. "Be quiet! Go back to sleep." The voice is heard again. A second time the comedy is repeated. "Be quiet. Go back to sleep!" A third time the voice is heard. Now the priest is awake and wondering "Perhaps?"

In a world of silence and darkness, Eli perceives that the mystery approaches. He instructs Samuel, "Go back, lie down, if someone calls to you, then you must say, 'Speak Lord.'" Eli's words capture the force of the mystery. He says "If *someone* . . ." Eli emphasizes the anonymity of the voice. Who is it that speaks? Is there a name? What does the voice want with the lad? The

mystery speaks and Eli knows that he and Samuel are addressed by that speaking. How do you stand in the presence of the mystery? Quite simply: You say, "Speak Lord, your servant hears."

This is not, however, the substance of Epiphany. The story again points beyond itself, beyond a single occurrence in a darkened sanctuary. The voice is heard in other places at other times in Israel's life. From the very beginning the voice is heard. That first story of the human condition in Genesis has two people in the scene, hiding in a dark part of the forest. And the voice is heard walking about in the cool of the day, searching for the creatures.

Look anywhere in Israel's waiting. Through the long centuries the mystery of the voice of God goes seeking. The prophet Hosea saw how persistently the voice called, how far the Epiphany stretched.

Thus says the Lord,
"When Israel was a child I loved him
and I called my son out of Egypt.
The more I called to them
the further they ran from me.
I myself taught Ephraim to walk.
I took them in my arms.
Yet they have not understood that I was the one
looking after them.
I was like one lifting an infant close against the cheek,
stooping down to him I gave him his food."

(Hosea 11:1-4, Jerusalem Bible)

How far the mystery of the voice of Epiphany extends! How persistent is that voice! A rabbi saw it most clearly. Reading the first chapter in Genesis, the rabbi saw the words "Let there be..." He was caught by those words and he confessed, "Here is the presence of God in our World." Then the good rabbi examined the words in the passage. He examined the morphology, the grammar and the syntax, and he explained: "Notice what these words do *not* say. They do not say, 'I will make an earth and some heavens.' Instead the words are, 'Let there be' There is no end, no completion to these words. Creation is not an accomplished fact; it is God's continual voice 'Let there be. . .'"

This is the Epiphany! There is silence, darkness all around. Yet the voice calls.

This is Epiphany? The text leaves us with the uncomfortable conclusion that Epiphany is beyond us. How can we invite Epiphany? How coerce it? Impossible! And even if this season of Epiphany should catch us, there is, in our own self-appraisal, a possibility that we, like Samuel and Eli might get it wrong, go back into the darkness, fall asleep. Would that voice continue to call, a second or a third time? Ω

Events and Pseudo-Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman

Thomas Merton

I have publicly stated that I would no longer comment on current events. People ask why. There are many reasons, and I might as well say at once that they are reasons which may possibly be valid for me only, not for others. In any case I did not make this decision for anyone but myself.

First of all, I mistrust an obsession with declarations and pronouncements. While silence can constitute guilt and complicity, once one has taken a stand he is not necessarily obliged to come out with a new answer and a new solution to insoluble problems every third day.

After all, was it not Bonhoeffer himself who said it was an "Anglo-Saxon failing" to imagine that the Church was supposed to have a ready answer for every social problem?

When one has too many answers, and when one joins a chorus of others chanting the same slogans, there is, it seems to me, a danger that one is trying to evade the loneliness of a conscience that realizes itself to be in an inescapably evil situation. We are all under judgment. None of us is free from contamination. Our choice is not that of being pure and whole at the mere cost of formulating a just and honest opinion. Mere commitment to a decent program of action does not lift the curse. Our real choice is between being like Job, who *knew* he was stricken, and Job's friends who did not know that they were stricken too — though less obviously than he. (So they had answers!)

If we *know* that we are all under judgment, we will cease to make the obvious wickedness of "the others" a fulcrum for our supposed righteousness to exert itself upon the world. On the contrary, we will be willing to admit that we are "right-

wised" not by condemning others according to our law or ethical ideal, but by seeing that the real sinner whom we find abominable and frightening (because he frightens our very life) still has in himself the ground for God's love, the same ground that is in our own sinful and deluded hearts.

To justify ourselves is to justify our sin and to call God a liar.

Second, there is the nature of my own vocation to the monastic, solitary, contemplative life — the vocation of Job! Of course this monastic life does not necessarily imply a total refusal to have anything to do with the world. Such a refusal would, in any case, be illusory. It would deceive no one but the monk himself. It is not possible for anyone, however isolated from the world, to say "I will no longer concern myself with the affairs of the world." We cannot help being implicated. We can be guilty even by default. But the monastic and contemplative life does certainly imply a very special perspective, a viewpoint which others do not share, the viewpoint of one who is not directly engaged in the struggles and controversies of the world. Now it seems to me that if a monk is permitted to be detached from these struggles over particular interests, it is only in order that he may give more thought to the interests of all, to the whole question of the reconciliation of all men with one another in Christ. One is permitted, it seems to me, to stand back from parochial and partisan concerns, if one can thereby hope to get a better view of the whole problem and mystery of man.

A contemplative will, then, concern himself with the same problems as other people, but he will try to get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems — not by analysis but by simplicity. This of course is no easy task, and I cannot claim that I have discovered anything worth saying. Yet since I have been asked to say something, I will at least hazard a few conjectures. Take them for what they may be worth: they are subjective, they are provisional, they are mere intuitions, they will certainly need to be completed by the thinking of others. If they suggest a few useful perspectives to others, then I am satisfied.

I am more and more impressed by the fact that it is largely futile to get up and make statements about current problems. At the same time, I know that silent acquiescence in evil is also out of the question. I know too that there are times

when protest is inescapable, even when it seems as useless as beating your head up against a brick wall. At the same time, when protest simply becomes an act of desperation, it loses its power to communicate anything to anyone who does not share the same feelings of despair.

There is of course no need to comment on the uselessness of false optimism, or to waste any attentions on the sunlit absurdities of those who consistently refuse to face reality. One cannot be a Christian today without having a deeply afflicted conscience. I say it again: — we all are under judgement. And it seems to me that our gestures of repentance, though they may be individually sincere, are collectively hollow and even meaningless. Why?

This is the question that plagues me.

The reason seems to be, to some extent, a deep failure of communication.

There is a great deal of talk today about the Church and the world, about secular Christianity, religionless religion and so on. It seems to me that religionless religion is certainly a result of this failure of communication. (Here I am distinguishing Bonhoeffer's disciples from Bonhoeffer himself.) Seeing that traditional and biblical language simply does not ring any bells in the minds of modern men, the apostles of religionless religion have discarded that language and decided thereby to avoid the problem of communication altogether. Having done so, however, they seem also to have got rid of any recognizable Christian message. To reconcile man with man and not with God is to reconcile no one at all. It is the old problem of the social gospel over again. When the life expectancy of the average secular ideology today is about five years (barring a few notable exceptions that have become orthodoxies, like Marxism and Freudianism) it seems rather irresponsible to identify the Gospel with one or the other of them.

Assuming then that the Church has something to communicate to the world that the world does not already know, what does this imply? First of all, we must try to clarify the relation of the Church to the world. It seems to me false simply to say that the Church and the world should be considered as perfectly identified, as indistinguishable, and leave it at that. After all, there is still I John 2:15-16 to be considered.

This judgment of the world as by definition *closed in upon itself* and therefore *closed to any revelation that demands to break through its defensive shell* is surely one of the key ideas of the New Testament. By the Incarnation and Cross Christ does in fact *break through* the defensive shell not only of sin and passionate attachment, but of all ethical and religious systems that strive to make man self-sufficient in his own worldly realm.

The Church and the world are related in a dialectic of identity and non-identity, yes and no, nearness and distance. The Church is Christ present in the world to reconcile the world to Himself. The world is therefore not purely and simply Christ. There is a question of acceptance or refusal. If we are dealing with the self-revelation of a cosmic Christ who is gradually becoming visible in man, simply *as man*, the decision for this Christ becomes a kind of poetic commitment to pantheistic vitalism or something of the sort, not an acceptance of the Gospel in the obedience of faith. In other words "Christ" is then only a symbol for the world as a closed-system. Further, if Christ is simply manifesting himself in man's history, whether we do anything about it or not, then there is no need either of dialogue or of dialectic between the Church and the world. By this dialectic of challenge, faith and love, word and response, we break out of the closed system. If we forsake this forward movement toward eschatological fulfilment, then we plunge into the interminable circling of the world upon itself. No amount of religious clichés can make this encapsulation a true "freedom."

It seems to me that one of the great obligations of the Christian is to keep the eyes of his faith clear of such confusions. And the monk above all has to keep free from this circling-in-desperation, this closed system, which is essentially pagan and which implies a hidden servitude to the elements and the powers of the air in St. Paul's sense (Galatians 4:3, 9). (I readily admit, with Luther, that in practice the monk who makes monasticism a "law" automatically fails in his primal obligation.)

Though there are certainly more ways than one of preserving the freedom of the sons of God, the way to which I was called and which I have chosen is that of the monastic life.

Paul's view of the "elements" and the "powers of the air" was couched in the language of the cosmology of his day. Translated into the language of our own time, I would say these mysterious realities are to be sought where we least expect them, not in what is most remote and mysterious, but in what is most familiar, what is near at hand, what is at our elbow all day long — what speaks or sings in our ear, and practically does our thinking for us. The "powers" and "elements" are precisely what stand between the world and Christ. It is they who stand in the way of reconciliation. It is they who, by influencing all our thinking and behavior in so many unsuspected ways, dispose us to decide *for* the world as *against* Christ, thus making reconciliation impossible.

Clearly, the "powers" and "elements" which in Paul's day dominated men's minds through pagan religion or through religious legalism, today dominate us in the confusion and the ambiguity of the Babel of tongues that we call mass-society. Certainly I do not condemn everything in the mass-media. But how does one stop to separate the truth from half-truth, the event

THOMAS MERTON studied at Cambridge and Columbia Universities, and taught English at Columbia. In 1941, he entered the Trappist Order at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky. In addition to his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his more than thirty books of theology, poetry, devotion, and literary and social essays include *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *The Waters of Siloe*, *Disputed Questions*, *Seeds of Destruction*, and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. (Credit line from *Katallagete*, Summer, 1966.)

from the pseudo-event, reality from the manufactured image? It is in this confusion of images and myths, superstitions and ideologies that the "powers of the air" govern our thinking — even our thinking about religion! Where there is no critical perspective, no detached observation, no time, to ask the pertinent questions, how can one avoid being deluded and confused?

Someone has to try to keep his head clear of static and preserve the interior solitude and silence that are essential for independent thought.

A monk loses his reason for existing if he simply submits to all the routines that govern the thinking of everybody else. He loses his reason for existing if he simply substitutes other routines of his own! He is obliged by his vocation to have his *own mind* if not to speak it. He has got to be a free man.

What did the radio say this evening? I don't know.

What was on TV? I have watched TV twice in my life. I am frankly not terribly interested in TV anyway. Certainly I do not pretend that by simply refusing to keep up with the latest news I am therefore unaffected by what goes on, or *free* of it all. Certainly events happen and they affect me as they do other people. It is important for me to know about them too: but I refrain from trying to know them in their fresh condition as "news." When they reach me they have become slightly stale. I eat the same tragedies as others, but in the form of tasteless crusts. The news reaches me in the long run through books and magazines, and no longer as a stimulant. Living without news is like living without cigarettes (another peculiarity of the monastic life). The need for this habitual indulgence quickly disappears. So, when you hear the news without the "need" to hear it, it treats you differently. And you treat it differently too.

In this perspective you are perhaps able to distinguish the real happening from the pseudo-event. Nine-tenths of the news, as printed in the papers, is pseudo-news, manufactured event. Some days ten-tenths. The ritual morning trance, in which one scans columns of the newsprint, creates a peculiar form of generalized pseudo-attention to a pseudo-reality. This experience is taken *seriously*. It is one's daily immersion in "reality." One's orientation to the rest of the world. One's way of reassuring himself that he has not fallen behind. That he is still there. That he still counts!

My own experience has been that renunciation of this self-hypnosis, of this participation in the unquiet universal trance, is no sacrifice of reality at all. To "fall behind" in this sense is to get out of the big cloud of dust that everybody is kicking up, to breathe, and to see a little more clearly.

When you get a clearer picture you can understand why so many want to stand in the dust cloud, where there is comfort in confusion.

The things that actually happen are sometimes incredibly horrible.

The fog of semi-rational verbiage with which the events are surrounded is also terrible, but in a different way.

And then, beside the few real horrors, there are the countless pseudo-events, the come-on's, the releases, the statements, the surmises, the slanders, the quarrels, the insults and the interminable self-advertising of the image-makers.

We believe that the "news" has a strange metaphysical status outside us: it "happens" by itself. Actually, it is something we fabricate. Those who are poor artisans make only pseudo-events. These are the tired politicians and businessmen, the educators, writers, intellectuals and tireddest of all, the Churchmen.

Others are better at it: they know how to make real bad news!

Read the *Vulgate* I run across the Latin word *simulacrum* which had implications of a mass-like deceptiveness, of intellectual cheating, of an ideological shell-game. The word *simulacrum*, it seems to me, presents itself as a very suggestive one to describe an advertisement, or an overinflated political presence, or that face on the TV screen. The word shimmers, grins, cajoles. It is a fine word for something monumentally phony. It occurs for instance in the last line of the First Epistle of John. But there it is usually translated as "idols"... "Little children, watch out for the *simulacra*!"—watch out for the national, the regional, the institutional images!

Does it not occur to us that if, in fact, we live in a society which is par excellence that of the *simulacrum*, we are the champion idolators of all history? No, it does not occur to us, because for us an idol is nothing more than a harmless Greek statue, complete with a figleaf, in the corner of the museum. We have given up worrying about idols — as well as devils. And we are living in the age of science. How could we, the most emancipated of men, be guilty of superstition? Could science itself be our number one superstition?

You see where my rambling has brought me. To this: we are under judgment. And what for? For the primal sin. We are idolators. We make *simulacra* and we hypnotize ourselves with our skill in creating these mental movies that do not appear

to be idols because they are so alive! Because we are idolators, because we have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the semblance of the likeness of mortal man, of birds, of quadrupeds, of reptiles..." we fulfil all the other requirements of those who are under God's wrath, as catalogued by Paul in Romans 1:24-32.

Our idols are by no means dumb and powerless. The sardonic diatribes of the prophets against images of wood and stone do not apply to our images that live, and speak, and smile, and dance, and allure us, and lead us off to kill. Not only are we idolators, but we are likely to carry out point by point the harlotries of the Apocalypse. And if we do, we will do so innocently, decently, with clean hands, for the blood is always shed somewhere else! The smoke of the victim is always justified by some clean sociological explanation, and of course it is not superstition, because we are by definition the most enlightened people that ever happened.

The things that we do, the things that make our news, the things that are contemporary, are abominations of superstition, of idolatry, preceeding from minds that are full of myths, distortions, half-truths, prejudices, evasions, illusions, lies: in a word — *simulacra*. Ideas and conceptions that look good but aren't. Ideals that claim to be humane improve themselves, in their effects, to be callous, cruel, cynical, sometimes even criminal.

We have no trouble at all detecting all this in the ideologies of *other* nations, *other* social groups. That is at least something! But it is not enough. We cannot begin to face our real problems until we admit that these evils are universal. We see them in others because they are in ourselves. Until we admit that we are subject to the same risks and the same follies, the same evils and the same fanaticisms, only in different forms, under different appearances (*simulacra*) we will continue to propose solutions that make our problems insoluble. We will continue to be deadlocked with adversaries that happen to be our own mirror image.

My thesis is now clear: in my opinion the root of our trouble is that our habits of thought and the drives that proceed from them are basically idolatrous and mythical. We are all the more inclined to idolatry because we imagine that we are of all generations the most enlightened, the most objective, the most scientific, the most progressive and the most humane. This, in fact, is an "image" of ourselves — an image which is false and is also the object of a cult. We worship ourselves in this image. The nature of our acts is determined in large measure by the demands of our worship. Because we have an image (*simulacrum*) of ourselves as fair, objective, practical and humane, we actually make it more difficult for ourselves to be what we think we are. Since our "objectivity" for instance is in

fact an image of ourselves as "objective," we soon take our objectivity for granted, and instead of checking the facts, we simply manipulate the facts to fit one pious conviction. In other words, instead of taking care to examine the realities of our political or social problems, we simply bring out the idols in solemn procession. "We are the ones who are right, *they* are the ones who are wrong. We are the good guys, *they* are the bad guys. We are honest, *they* are crooks." In this confrontation of images, "objectivity" ceases to be a consistent attention to fact and becomes a devout and blind fidelity to myth. If the adversary is by definition wicked, then objectivity consists simply in refusing to believe that he can possibly be honest in any circumstances whatever. If facts seem to conflict with images, then we feel that we are being tempted by the devil, and we determine that we will be all the more blindly loyal to our images. To debate with the devil would be to yield. Thus in support of realism and objectivity we simply determine beforehand that we will be swayed by no fact whatever that does not accord perfectly with our own preconceived judgment. Objectivity becomes simple dogmatism.

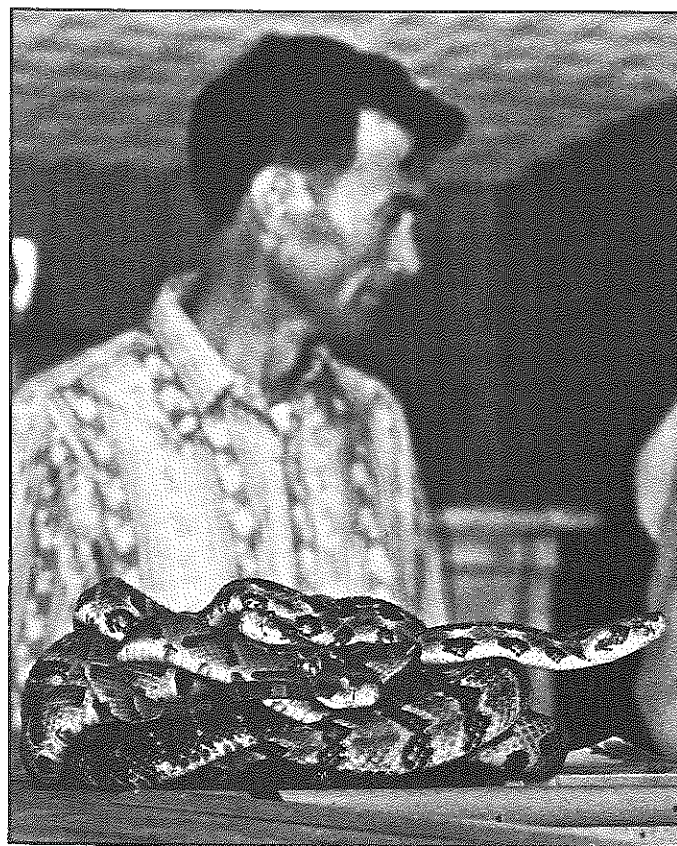
As I say, we can see this mechanism at work in the Communist. We cannot see it in ourselves. True, of course, our dogmatism is not as blatant, as rigid, as bureaucratically dense, as monolithic. It is none the less real. That is to say, it is based on *refusals* that are just as categorical and just as absolute.

These refusals are made necessary by a primary commitment to a false image which is the object of superstitious worship. The fact that the image is not made of stone or metal, but of ideas, slogans, and pseudo-events only makes it all the more dangerous.

A more complex syndrome is our mythical thinking. I shall call it "justification by snake handling."

Let me say at once that I am not trying to ridicule the good, simple people in the Tennessee mountains or in North Carolina who every once in a while gather in their little churches, work themselves up into a state of exaltation and then pass around a live rattlesnake from hand to hand. There is a kind of rugged starkness about this primitive fundamentalism that calls for a certain respect, and I am reminded that in the novels of Flannery O'Connor due honor was not denied to primitives. The people Flannery O'Connor despised were those whose mental snake-handling was more polite and less risky, more sophisticated and adroit, more complacent and much less honest, based on the invocation not of Mark 16: 18, but of something at once more sinister, more modern and more obscure.

I take the mountain people as my starting point because in them the cycle is stark and clinically clear. And they are aware of what they are doing.



The rest of us do it without recognizing the analogy.

I do not say we do it everyday. Snake handling is reserved for moments of crises, when we feel ourselves and our ideals called into question. It is our reaction to deep stirrings of guilt about ourselves and our image. We handle snakes in order to restore the image to a place of perfect security.

In Christian terms, the mental-snake-handling is an attempt to evade judgement when our conscience obscurely tells us that we are under judgement. It represents recourse to a daring and ritual act, a magic gesture that is visible and recognized by others, which proves to us that we are right, that the image is right, that our rightness cannot be contested, and whoever contests it is a minion of the devil.

Here is the scenario.

First, a drab, uninteresting or over-organized, bored existence. Or at least an obscure feeling that your life is not quite as meaningful as it ought to be. That there is not only something lacking, but probably *everything* is lacking. The more obscure and diffuse the feeling, the better. If you are hardly aware of it at all, fine. Most Americans on any day of the week can, if they reflect a little on it, see that they easily meet these qualifications. Even if one has all he needs in material goods, he can still feel as if he lacked *everything*!

Second, you have to connive with a group of other people who feel the same way, at least implicitly. You may perhaps come to an agreement with them in actual discussion together, or you may simply (more often than not) find that you and a lot of other people have all seen the same thing on TV or somewhere and are all reacting to it in the same way. I will not go into bizarre details about snake handling in small fanatical groups of adepts and snake handling on the national level. Let's keep it simple. First, you are bored and dissatisfied. Second, you find yourself in collusion with others who react as you do to some event.

Implicitly or explicitly you agree on some course of action which is at the same time *symbolic, arbitrary, and dangerous*. These three characteristics are essential. There may be others. But at least the act has to be symbolic. If the symbolism is unconscious, so much the better. The act or event has to be arbitrary, irrational, and in a sense provocative. It must not only be more or less unreasonable, it should, if possible, even openly *defy* reason. Indeed it may be totally irrelevant. If at the same time, it is an act which defies morality, public or private, this may enhance its value. But that is not essential. It must at least be basically irrational. If it is completely useless and irrelevant, so much the better. And it must be dangerous, if not physically that at least socially or morally. The event brings one face to face with destruction or grave harm, if not danger to life and limb, then a danger to reputation, to one's social acceptability, one's future.

However, while the event may implicitly defy ostracism or hatred on the part of an out-group, it strengthens the bonds of the in-group, those who have agreed to engage in the symbolic and arbitrary activity together. At this point, we recognize characteristic adolescent behavior, but teenagers have no monopoly on it, except in so far as we are in fact a teen-age society -- a society that likes to play "chicken" not with fast cars, but with ballistic missiles.

The symbolic, irrational and perilous event must prove something, at least to those who perform it. The thing it attempts to prove must be some basic value in themselves: that they are *alive*, that they are *real*, that they *count*, or (as in the case of the authentic snake handlers) that they are *the Chosen*. In fact, it is a *substitute for divine judgment*. Instead of waiting around in uncertainty, one forces the issue. One does something drastic and "conclusive."

Naturally, not all who enact such events are necessarily believers. One does not have to believe in God — one merely needs to have an "image"! This mental ritual is a component in our contemporary idolatries.

Finally, and this is the point, these who have come together, who have agreed, who have performed the irrational, quasi-initiatory act, who have "proved themselves" thereby, who have stabilized their common image, *are now in a position to*

judge others. By creating this situation of challenge, by constructing this "event," they have proved themselves to be "the ones who are right." They have not done this by thinking or reasoning, nor by discussion, dialogue, investigation: they have done it by ritual and initiatory action in which they enjoyed the sense of self-transcendent, of escape from the monotony and the affront of a meaningless existence. And not that it is a cycle that is all the more easily set in motion when existence is in fact more really drab, when the mentality of the participants is more genuinely desperate, when the inner contradictions they seek to escape are all the more inexorable.

Though by its nature this event is arbitrary, unnecessary, and in some sense fabricated, if it is sufficiently drastic it can become far more than a pseudo-event. It can become an act of genuine horror. It can lead to incalculably tragic consequences. If, in handling the rattlesnake around, somebody gets bitten, it is no longer a pseudo-event. Yet nevertheless, in its origin, the event was artificial, fabricated and indeed uncalled for.

Some examples: on the international level, a paradigm of snake-handling and pseudo-event was the Berlin crisis, turned on and off periodically, for the sake of effect. It reached its paroxysm in Cuba, and shortly after that Khrushchev's snake-handling days were over.

The big fuss about fallout shelters in the country was another episode of the same kind, and it was our reaction to the Berlin crisis. A purely symbolic and irrational exercise.

The philosophy of escalation, with its mystical degrees and esoteric meanings, is a form of intellectual snake handling. To "think of the unthinkable" is to display one's prowess in handling a cosmic copperhead without dismay. Since the copperhead is only abstract at the time the feat is not uncomfortable. But in this area, myths can suddenly and without warning turn into unpleasant realities. In point of fact, our snake handling in Southeast Asia is not abstract — but as I said before, I am not commenting on events.

On another level, we all participate in one way or another in this national or international snake-handling when we get into the act in some more or less dramatic way. A lot of protests and demonstrations, even when they are perfectly valid and reasonable in themselves, take the form of political snake-handling. This, I submit, robs them of their real value, because it isolates our actions of protest in a closed realm of images and idols which means one thing to us and another to our adversaries. *We no longer communicate. We abandon communication in order to celebrate our own favorite group-myths in a ritual pseudo-event.* "News" is largely made up of this liturgy of pseudo-events and irrelevant witnesses. Let us realize that "ideals" and "purity of heart" may easily cover a

snake handling approach to political reality.

Everywhere, from extreme right to extreme left, we find people in our society who become "sanctified," set apart, chosen, sealed off in a ritual game of some sort by reason of events enacted in honor of images. They move step by step, taking the nation with them into realms of commitment and absurdity, areas where, by virtue of the fact that one has agreed to face some very select irrationality *one is quarantined from the ordinary world of right and wrong*.

The man who has agreed with his peers in the enactment of a symbolic, dangerous and arbitrary event has thereby put himself and them beyond good and evil. They have all entered together into the realm of the gods, and in that realm they find that their action has had amazing consequences: it changes the whole meaning of truth and falsity, it imposes on life an entirely new logic: one must follow on from one irrationality to the next in a demonic consistency dictated by machines.

But here of course, I am speaking of mental snake-handling only at the highest and most mystical echelons of the technological elite. Down on our pedestrian level there is no such mystical security, no such permanent election. We are not initiated into a whole new kingdom of sacred irresponsibilities. We have to repeat some crude fanatical stunt again and again because it never quite takes. However, we have the privilege of remotely participating in the snake-handling exploits of policy and strategy.

On this liturgy of pseudo-events the survival of the human race — or at least its sanity and dignity — are now made to depend.

Our salvation, on the contrary, cannot be sought in this realm of images and idols, of fabricated events and unclear meanings.

After all this rambling and conjecturing, it is time to draw a few conclusions. Should the Church turn to the world of modern man and identify with him completely? In all his legitimate aspirations, in all his authentic human hopes and aspirations, obviously it must. If not it betrays him and betrays the Gospel. "In so far as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). But the Church betrays herself and modern man if she simply identifies with his superstitions, his image-making, his political snake-handling and his idolatries of nation, party, class and race.

The Church has an obligation *not* to join in the incantation of political slogans and in the concoction of pseudo-events, *but to cut clear through the deviousness and ambiguity of both slogans and events by her simplicity and her love.*

"To be simple," says Bonhoeffer, "is to fix one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted and turned upside-down. It is to be single-hearted and not a man of two souls . . . *Not fettered by principles but bound by love for God.* The (simple man) has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision."

It is unfortunately true that the Church has to repent of remaining enclosed in parochial concerns, and turn to the outside world. To turn to the world is to recognize our mission and service to man and man's world. We are not in the world for ourselves, for our own spiritual advantage, but for Christ and for the world. We have a mission to reconcile the world with Christ. How can we do this if we do not "turn to the world"? At the same time, in turning to his fellow man and loving him, we will ourselves be reconciled with Christ. What other point has there ever been in preaching the Gospel? Unfortunately the simple business of "making converts" has sometimes obscured all deep understanding of what this turning to the world really means as *event*.

The Church is indeed concerned with news: the Good News. The Church is concerned with real events: saving events, the encounter of man and Christ in the reconciliation of man with man. In a sense, there is no other kind of event that matters and there is no other news that matters. To abandon this news, and become implicated in the manufacturing of pseudo-events in order to create an "image" that will then attract converts . . . This is an affront to the world and to Christ. Can it be entirely avoided? I do not know, but one thing must be said about it now: *it has ceased to have any meaning whatever to modern man.*

If *image* means *idol* — and it does — then the Church too can unfortunately make an idol of itself, or identify itself too closely with other idols: nation, region, race and political theory.

Obviously the Church is present in history and is responsible to man in his historical predicament. But let us not take too superficial and too distorted a view of history. Our over-sensitive awareness of ourselves as responsible for "making history" is a grotesque illusion, and it leads us into the morass of pseudo-events. Those who are obsessed with "making history" are responsible for the banality of the bad news which comes more and more to constitute our "history." The Church that takes all this too literally and too seriously needs to go back and read the New Testament, not omitting the book of *Revelation*.

The genuine saving event, the encounter of man with Christ in his encounter of love and reconciliation with his fellow

man, is generally *not newsworthy*. Not because there is an ingrained malice in journalists but because such events are not sufficiently visible. In trying to make them newsworthy, or visible, in trying to put them on TV, we often make them altogether incredible — or else reduce them to the common level of banality at which they can no longer be distinguished from pseudo-events.

Finally, no matter how you doctor it, the pseudo-event cannot be turned into a saving and reconciling event. Whether it is a display of political snake-handling, or some other demonstration of man's intent to justify his existence by seeing himself in the morning paper, no matter how noble and how Christian the intention may be, no man is ever going to come to the truth through pseudo-events, or be reconciled with his fellow-man as a result of pseudo-events. On the contrary, by its very nature the pseudo-event arouses anxiety, suspicion, fear of deception, and a full awareness of the inherent weakness of the position which it is supposed to justify.

The great question then is how do we communicate with the modern world? If in fact communication has been reduced to pseudo-communication, to the celebration of pseudo-events and of incompatible myth-systems, how are we to avoid falling into this predicament? How are we to avoid the common obsession with pseudo-events in order to construct what seems to us to be a credible idol?

It is a nasty question, but it needs to be considered, for in it is contained the mystery of the evil of our time.

I do not have an answer to the question, but I suspect the root of it is this: if we love our own ideology and our own opinion instead of loving our brother, we will seek only to glorify our ideas and our institution and by that fact we will make real communication impossible.

I think Bonhoeffer was absolutely right when he said our real task is to bear in ourselves the fury of the world against Christ in order to reconcile the world with Christ — (a statement that does not accord with the superficial worldliness of some of Bonhoeffer's disciples). But let us take care that the fury of the world is not merely directed against our own ethical or political ideals, worse still our *image* of ourselves incarnated in our particular mode of symbolic protest.

When I began this letter I did not promise an answer, I only promised a question. Our own life-time will not suffice to bring us close to the answer. But the root of the answer is the love of Christ and the ground is the sinful heart of sinful man as he really is — as we really are, you, and I, and our disconcerting neighbor. Ω

L'OFFICE

A Presbyterian tribute to the Order of Cistercian of Strict Observance
La Trappe Oka, Québec

Philip J. Lee

COMPLINE

Grown men trundled off to bed like small boys.
Self-inflicted this bed-going, but the
walk is small boy walk—resignation
with a bounce of hope.
What can Pravda and Time Mag make
of this? (Time Mag will make it obscene
—like it makes birth and death.)
No, what earthly good can come of this,
Up the night stairs at ten til nine?
What great deeds could be done
between nine and midnight,
for the poor,
for the cause,
for this uptight, with it, concerned,
future-shocked, turned on, sexed out, greened over
ever bourgeois generation.
Wait America, La Trappe has a practical
reason for the early rule:
The brothers need their sleep—in order
to be awake and waiting at four o'clock
when Christ might come again.
Did you hear that, Time Mag—Time Mag?

VIGILS

For the vigil they yawn their way down the
night stairs,
Penguin-like each finds his stall where he left it.
By rote (par coeur for them) they chant the
Psalms, hear the lesson, offer the prayers,
feel the silence, make the low bow and leave.
When the last night stair is ascended after the
last vigil,
One by one is whisked away to the heavenly
chorus to lead the many who do not yet know
L'office.
Or, if not, if Stalin and Nixon are correct,
and there is no judgement,
then they rest in holy ground,
close to the Presence, surrounded by their
brothers, and trained in the art of silence.

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TIERCE, SEXT, NONES

Contemplate what?
Praying by the bells, 7 times a day,
One cloistered year follows another,
70 times 7 becomes 70 times 70.

Comtemplate what under the sun
shielded by the great dome?
His sister's family, of course.
The favorite and closest sister.
Growing older the children are.
Whatever will happen to the middle boy,
The one who drinks?
Is the husband still womanizing?
Precious lot one can do about it
Stuck in an abbey.
Precious lot one can do about it
outside *La Trappe*.
Contemplate what?
Man—put in his place under the great dome.

Contemplate what under the sun
shielded by the great dome?
Some last words from the Cross, of course.
I thirst.
I thirst for the life I could have claimed.
(Claiming it, I would thirst for this life.)
I thirst for a life of not thirsting,
Of joy fulfilled, of reasons given,
Of justice and peace not imagined but real.
Instead, here we are together *Seigneur*.
The two of us and—we thirst.
Contemplate what?
Man—put in his place under the great dome.

Contemplate what under the sun
Shielded by the great dome?
The Holy Presence, of course.
Why here of all places?
All the churches, all the people in Montréal.
But those Emmaus ones now,
where were they? And not but two.
And who were they?
Those he found, and
gave them seats at the fete, he did.
More than two brothers here and the Oka road's
As famous as that one, I think.
Thank you, *Jesu*, for the visit.
Contemplate what?
Man—put in his place under the great dome.

MATINS AND VESPERS

All in white, now.
Something special up!
The sun of God coming up—
or going down.
The times of change.
Anticipation of bright noonday sun,
or of utter darkness,
anticipation of both with breathless joy!
The 12th Century heart loves extremes.
An alleluia is added to the opening antiphone,
The choir gives it an added lilt;
almost it is like what cloistered voices
do with a song to the virgin:
Pouring out all their male hormones,
their tenderness, their warm yearning for family,
their love of woman, as at no other time.
Vive la difference! Vive the dawn and the
dusk, birth and death, hate and love, the cross
and the Resurrection, the Holy God and the
Holy Church the Virgin represents.
The 12th Century heart loves extremes.



The World of Narké

Christ, Christianity and Politics

Jean Bethke Elshtain

These are parlous times. Often we do not know whether, as my mother is fond of saying, we are "coming or going." Philip Lee, in *Against the Protestant Gnostics*; Jacques Ellul, in *The Subversion of Christianity*; Thomas Sheehan, in *The First Coming*; and the always curmudgeonly Malcom Muggeridge, in *The End of Christendom*, aim to help us sort things out. They seem to think we are "going," down and out, if not doomed, unless we restore some purity that has been lost along the way (Ellul); come to understand "the message of the Kingdom of God without Christ and without Jesus" (Sheehan); give ourselves over entirely to a faith that only the imagination rather than knowledge can grasp (Muggeridge); or challenge the gnostic heresies which have come to dominate North American Protestantism (Lee).

As a political theorist concerned with war and peace, men and women, I found these four volumes provocative and troubling and they spurred me on to organize my own reflections about the history of early Christianity. Before I turn to my version of the great Christian narrative, a few words on each text. Muggeridge drives such a sharp wedge between Christianity (good) and Christendom (bad); between faith (good) and knowledge (dubious), that his analysis segues into the gnosticism that Lee so relentlessly unpacks. Muggeridge traffics in absolutes: Absolute Power versus Absolute Love. If that is the way one couches it, Love is bound to lose — at least on this earth. Christians must dirty their hands in the world. Muggeridge celebrates Solzhenitsyn's stated realization that if we are free in our souls "a man in prison camp who has learned to be free inside himself is freer than the freest man, whether in the so-called free world of the West or in the ideological Marxist world of the East." This is disquieting, uncomfortably close to Sartrean proclamations of freedom as ontologically solipsistic, and it offers precious little help to people struggling with how to be decent to, and with, others in a very indecent world.

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Similarly, Ellul's claim that the history of Christianity is a story of "perversion or subversion" and the emergence of practices the "total opposite" of "what we read in the Bible," is an unacceptably blanket indictment. He, too, insists that the Spirit liberates us, putting us "in a situation of freedom, choice, and open possibilities." But surely Ellul, a brilliant observer of human life, recognizes that possibilities for human beings on this earth are never utterly untrammelled — that we must struggle to make do. He enjoins us to be heroic, impossibly heroic, thereby making the everyday things we do to create peace in small ways and to be caring and generous seem trivial. Mostly Ellul goes after theologians — they were the ones who made and continue to make "mistakes." But many of the transformations he decries emerged from the grass roots, were the outgrowth of popular piety, not the impositions of "Greekified" philosophers who penetrated Christian ranks, including, for example, the cult of the saints.

Ellul is quick to indict. He finds errors, lots of them, all over the place. The Church got paganized. Theologians "abandoned the true way." Faith entails an elite as Christian freedom "presupposes perfect self-control, wisdom, communion with God, and love. It is an absolutely superhuman risk" as it makes us radically free. When I read such words I feel discouragement. These are injunctions beyond the reach of ordinary human beings such as myself and the vast majority. Ellul propounds as unquestioned fact a position of original purity from which Christianity has strayed. From this contestable proposition he establishes a privileged epistemological vantage point from which he can hurl one judgement after another.

The Church, he insists, should not conform to the present age. Fine. But what is "the Church"? Do we rely solely

on individuals rebelling or converting in isolation? Pope John Paul II sees the Church as "counter-cultural," a "sign of contradiction." This doesn't satisfy Ellul because the Church is an institution and the Pope is the "leader of a state." (The latter is rather a silly claim. To be sure, the Vatican has a flag and sells postage stamps but it is scarcely a state.) Ellul cites as a present day example of a good awakening, one raised up by the Spirit, "Lech Walesa's Solidarity in Poland." But Solidarity is unimaginable without the institutional Church which preserved, protected, and defended it and Walesa, as everyone knows, is a devout traditional Catholic. Ellul even regrets the action the institutional Church took to end slavery and infanticide and to improve the status of the women in the fourth and fifth centuries because these "legal improvements cost the church when it ceased to be a messenger of God's Word in order to organize a less satisfactory society." Defending the weak is good, Ellul claims, but the Church cannot do this "without being in relation with those in power." Ellul here places Christians in an impossible double-bind.

Sheehan's project has a bit of a nineteenth century "search for the historical Jesus" ring to it. And he does hearken back to the old Protestant demystifiers who have been joined in our time by Roman Catholic exegetes. The Gospels are not "accurate 'histories' of Jesus but religious testimonies," he tells us, and most of us long ago accepted that. The question is what

one makes of it. This recognition drives Sheehan down a path that is not, finally, that fruitful — a path that would cobble together elements of nineteenth century historiography of the positive sort, sans its naivete, with modern hermeneutics. But he slides, from time to time, into the naive proposition that one can distinguish the facts of history from the claims of faith. Such a tidy severance is not possible and to rely, as Sheehan claims he does, on "the scientifically controllable results of contemporary Christian exegesis of the New Testament texts that bear upon resurrection," is stuffy at best. He offers up some interesting material on the slow forging of the Christ of faith, including a growing insistence on the ontological divinity of Jesus. But I got the sinking feeling that much of this is rather beside the point. Sheehan seems to be searching for his own version of the "Church Without Christ, the Church peaceful and satisfied!" in the words of Hazel Motes. We are to cease to attribute any power to Jesus beyond the natural and to situate Jesus as a "culturally determined, historically relative interpreter" just as we all are. There is a whole lot that cannot be explained if one goes this route.

Philip Lee, by contrast, accepts "Jesus Christ crucified" but frets about what the incursions of gnosticism into the Christian message have done to deflect from full recognition of incarnational truths. Much of what Ellul sees as the cure for a deformed Christianity, Lee indicts as the disease, namely, too

* per publisher 10/10/89



powerful a tilt towards celebration of "pure, free and unencumbered spirit" on the part of Christians, particularly North American Protestants, inviting a concentration upon "the radical individuality of the self" and a diminution of commitment to communion with others who are not members of an elect but poor sinners like oneself. He indicts gnostics, then and now, for their "disdain for the faith of ordinary persons" and their radical immateriality and hatred of the tangible — whether bodies, bread, or wine. In our own culture, gnostic tendencies bolster a narcissistic over-evaluation of the self, drawing individuals away from the communal and the covenanted and forging, at the same time, an overly tight assimilation of Christianity to "Whig history," the march of progress as a good in itself. Lee sees the need for discipline and authority as part of the ties that bind up to one another and to a moral order that is not up for grabs. No doubt his thesis is overdrawn. No doubt he lays too many ills at the doorstep of gnosticism. But there is an important truth here, as he puts it, a desire to escape from "time, history and politics." Lee is right that there is no escape. But there are ways back in, interpretations that help us to make contact with our forefathers and foremothers.

As I indicated above, my reading of these texts prompted me to reflect on Christianity and the social and historical context in which it took root. Here are the bare bones of that story, one that distances me from the overly purist aspirations of Muggeridge and Ellul as well as the robust historicism of Sheehan. The anti-gnosticism I share with Lee will also be clear.

If one goes back to the Greeks, and that is what political theorists invariably do, one sees that war from the beginning was construed as the natural state of mankind. The Greek city state was a community of warriors whose political rights were determined by the fundamental privilege of the soldier to decide his own fate. There was a direct line of descent from the Homeric warrior assemblies to Athenian naval democracy. The franchise was restricted to those who bore arms — hence the exclusion of women. The formal definition of justice, repeated by Thrasymachus in his sparring with Socrates in the first book of Plato's Republic, was "the interest of the stronger." The Greek citizen army was an expression of the Greek polis, its creation one of the chief concerns and chief consequences of the formation of the city-state. In Sparta, the army organized into mess groups, was substituted for the family as the basic element of the state. Another custom of the male group, homosexuality, was developed and institutionalized, most systematically at Thebes in the fourth century, to create a Sacred Band of lovers fighting side by side. Such institutions served to ensure that sense of fellowship deemed a prerequisite of disciplined courage in war, of the willingness to risk death together.

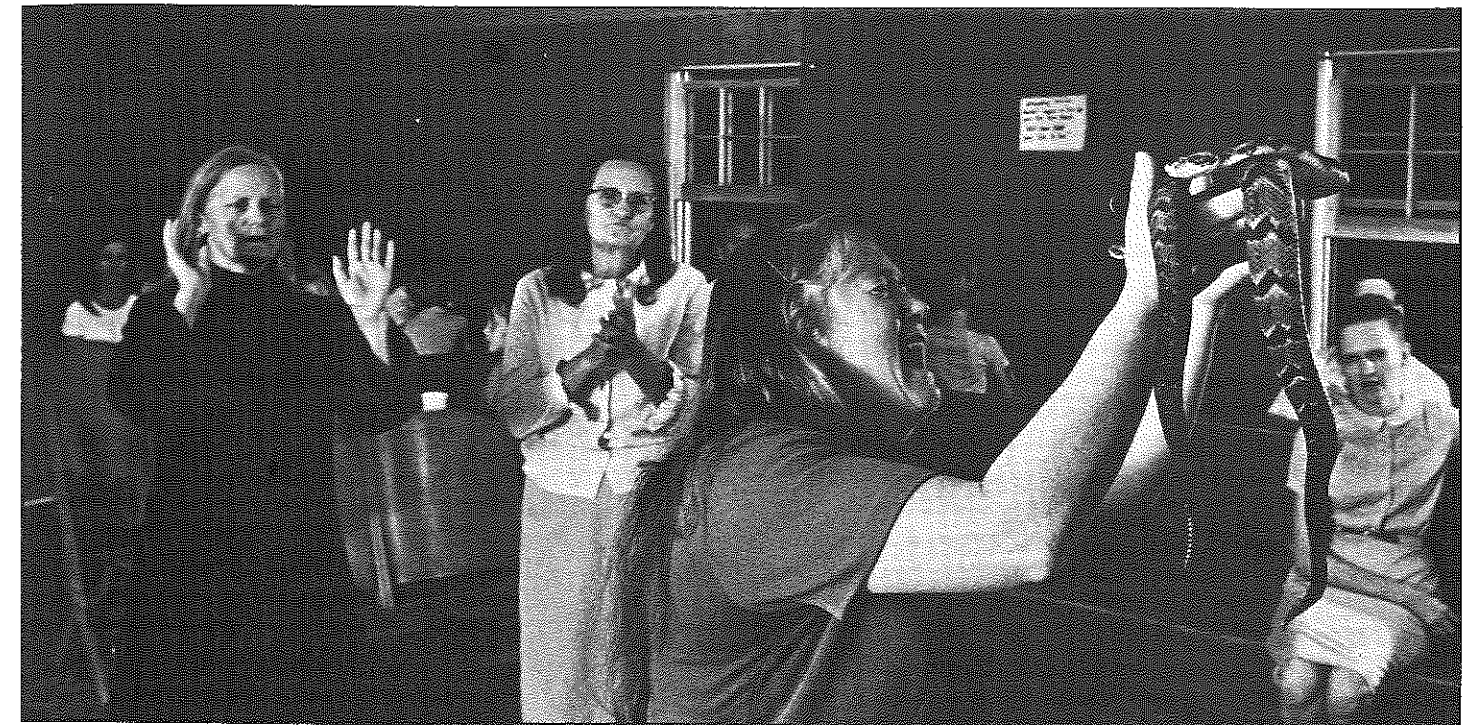
Not having the bodies of protectors, of men constituted as warriors, women were those who had to be defended, whose role in the household, the *oikos*, was a necessary precondition for but not an integral part of the structure of the dominant political warrioring world. These presumptions were geared towards preserving sex segregation even as they required sex collaboration to hold the overall system intact.

The human body in Greek, then Roman, antiquity was wholly conscripted into society, an insight I owe to the great historian of late antiquity, Peter Brown. His is an important point. Brown's argument, in many books, including *The Cult of the Saints*, goes like this. The pre-Christianized individual was not free to withhold his or her body from conscription into the extant social order. One could with Socrates endorse withdrawal of the soul from the body but one could not take oneself out of the group — one could not constitute one's body as a protest against its conscription into the social body in the form of warrior, slave, or female householder. The classical view is that the city-state should have complete control of human bodies for the purposes of labor, procreation and war.

The body, hence the self, existed at the behest of the wider social order. St. Augustine argues that Rome perfected the regime of *cupiditas* run rampant, the triumph of a lust to dominate. The distinctive mark of Roman life as a *civitas terrene*, a city of man, was greed and lust for possession which presumed a right of exploitation. This became a foundation for human relationships, warping and perverting personality, marriage, family, all things. Augustine writes: "For he who desires the glory of possession would feel that his power were diminished, if he were obliged to share it with any living associate . . . he cherishes his own manhood."

I will return to Augustine from time to time but first a quick look at Christianity's emergence in this world of the triumphant *Pax Romana*. Securing the historic context as a preliminary to making judgements as to whether the history of Christianity is one long story of deformation, *a la* Ellul, is essential. Christ's mission began and ended in a dreary outpost of a corrupt, bloated, power-drunk empire already headed down a path from state worship to emperor deification and all the sordid evils of Caesarism. The Roman empire had through guile, bloodthirstiness, and even genocide extended its sway over the then-known world. The only politics of the Empire was the passivity of subjects quashed by fear and hopelessness or the power-machinations of the ambitious spurred by greed and ambition. Those few voices who rose to condemn Caesarism and to lament the loss of the *res publica* passed or were forced from the scene.

In my book, *Public Man, Private Woman*, I issued a salvo and I shall repeat it here: Christianity ushered a moral



revolution into the world which dramatically, and for the better, transformed the prevailing images of the human person, male and female, and the relations between various human activities and the creation of shared social life. Christianity redeemed and sanctioned both *each* life as well as *everyday* life, especially the lives of society's victims, and granted each a new found dignity reserved previously only to the highborn, the rich, or the powerful. The warrioring politics of the ancient world found itself put on trial, and convicted, for its violence and its perverted celebration of domination and acquisition.

The heady drama of this moral revolution, with its politically jarring implications, is a story that has lost none of its excitement. The public world now had to justify itself. The legitimacy once accorded automatically to the claims of the city-state and the empire upon the human body of each and everyone now had to make its case and could not be assumed unproblematically. The human body could withdraw from the demands placed upon it by society. The sexual-social contract could be broken. One was free to withhold or to surrender to the body. Freedom of the will could be brought to bear on the body itself as a tangible locus, a sign, of a newfound relation of the self to the social world. One need not become a social body in the old warrioring or household ways. An elemental freedom was endorsed. Liberated individuals formed communities to validate their new-found *individualities* and to shore up the transformed, symbolically charged good represented by the new social body: the body is one but has many members.

Women were implicated in this scene from the start. The life of Jesus is peopled with men and women at many of its crucial stages and both are involved in the spread of His message after His death and resurrection. Jesus convinces people of His divine origin by signs and healing. He heals both men and women. People of both sexes are baptized. The dedication of men and women to Christ's work is evident throughout the New Testament. There is, of course, the oft-quoted passage in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, but all are one. Indeed, some scholars have argued that in early Christianity "the initial burst of human liberation extended to women as well as men in a very high degree." I think this judgement is essentially correct but that does not make of Jesus or the early Christians forerunners in some direct sense of our modern, secular notions of what equality between the sexes is or requires — a point underscored by Ellul as well.

What does emerge is a new image of the human body and the body social; a radical notion of loving thy neighbor; a break-down of old strictures of taboo and uncleanness; violations of the Law in order to reaffirm its spirit at a deeper level; a sense of the hiddenness-mystery-surprise-discovery and joy of life. Jesus meant to put the security of the socially secure in jeopardy. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, is not a pleasant tale about a traveller who does a good deed but an indictment of social, radical and religious superiority. In that parable, if Jesus had simply wanted to inculcate love of one's enemies it would have been ^{social} enough to have a Jew stop and assist the wounded Samaritan. But, as told by Jesus, a Jew, to a Jewish audience, it signified much more. Jews had no

dealings with Samaritans. So the story challenges the hearer to put together two impossible and contradictory words for the same person: Samaritan and neighbor: good Samaritan. When good (clerics) and bad (Samaritans) become bad and good, a world is in upheaval.

The New Testament is filled with many such reversals. The insistence is: the law is not enough. The aim of the Gospels is to liberate human beings from the need to have victims and to sacralize the victims that they have. The false transcendence of violence, in Rene Girard's terms, of constituting enemies and slaying them, or of setting up scapegoats, is repudiated. Jesus in this sense threatens the system as a whole through a mission and a Gospel that seeks to expose the violent origin and maintenance of social order, to make visible the ugly passions that hold intact destructive systems of power, and to break them down.

Jesus, then is a Prince of Peace, not a god who loves violence and sanctions a lust to annihilate. He rejects utterly the notion that one must rule others tyrannically or submit and be tyrannized. Early Christians extirpated the barbarism of the Roman Arena; ended infanticide and the abandonment of infants (disproportionately female); dictated that children should not be maimed; and devirilized the warrior. The Council of Nicea declared that the Christian who abandoned warlike and returned to it "as dogs to their vomit" had to become penitent. The priest foreswore use of his sexual instrument. It is impossible to overemphasize the drama and importance of these matters. They laid the basis, as Christopher Dawson insists, for the idea of human society based on the sacredness of the individual and the ideal of inviolate human personality.

The best we can do is to provide imitations of Christ's extraordinary appeal in a world in which force and violence has debased politics and there was simply no such thing as active participation in public life. How could one possibly speak of a common good in a world composed of victors and victims? The early Christians did endorse rendering unto Caesar that which was Caesar's but that turned out to be minimal: obedience to laws aimed at public peace, payment of taxes, at first a refusal to serve in armies. What was not Caesar's was control of life's ultimate purpose and meaning and the human being's vocation and calling on this earth. Christian doctrine drained the empire of its claims to divinity and omnipotence and to being the only ordering principal in the world. Possessing free will, the bearers of responsible moral agency, Christians could do no less. But they could and might be called upon to do more: to act against the state, to resist its claims and impositions upon individuals, their bodies, their minds. This was something new under the sun: principled resistance to public power. The notion of moral revolt against public power opened up a range of options, duties,

responsibilities, dilemmas and reassessments not possible in pre-Christian epochs, implications — for women were citizens of Christian communities — for males and females alike.

Welcomed into the new community, the *res publica Christiana*, the woman shared in the norms, activities and ideals that were its living tissue. She found — try to suspend time and place yourself as a woman of the first century after Christ hearing this message! — that qualities most often associated with her activities as mother — giving birth to and sustaining human life, an ethic of responsibility toward the helpless, the vulnerable, the weak; gentleness, mercy, and compassion — were celebrated. The realm of necessity generated its own sanctity. Women, like men, might be called upon to die for a cause, not as Homeric warriors wielding great swords, but as witnesses to the strength of their inner convictions and living sacrifices to the evil that absolute power trails in its wake.

God's grace was available to all. God's love, Christian *agape*, very different from classical *eros*, could infuse each and every human life. We must love one another. We are, argued St. Augustine, well advised to judge ourselves and others not by our acquisitions or our power to compel, but by what it is we and they love. The new Christian community was available to any who had a hunger and a thirst for righteousness. The Christian City of God on pilgrimage on this earth is "set apart by a holy yearning," in Augustine's lovely phrase. And that yearning includes hope: hope lodged in the capacity of human beings to long for something different, to examine the nature of the relationship with their immediate environment, and above all, to establish their identities by refusing to be engulfed in the unthinking habits of their fellows.

The Christian life is not primarily a solitary life but a communal one. Early Christians recognized their intimate dependence on the life around them and were aware of the tenacity of the links that bind us to the world. What is "our business within this common moral life," Augustine queried. We must honor these early forebears: How different the Christian band of men, women, children, the infirm, the possessed, the crippled from the warrior-citizens of the city state. That Christianity failed to live up to the promise of its early mission should surprise none of us. We know the world is a most intractable place. But that Christianity secured a moral revolution and established a set of claims which must be faced and answered today is remarkable.

All mass, charismatic movements, once they begin to take institutional form (and they would not survive if they did not, there would be nothing for Ellul to lament, in other words)

lose the edge of their early radicalism. This has been the story of history. Human beings are beings open to change and surprise but desirous as well, especially in a world of such heightened human vulnerability as late classical antiquity, for safety and security. There were institutions in place, at least ostensibly, to guarantee that safety and security, including armies and city-states, through the Empire. Christians were still searching for their own forms of institutional organization, and beginning to consider how they might survive once the eschatological moment got postponed, when the catastrophic event, the fall of Rome, sent tremors of shock through humanity. As horrible as its rule had been, Rome had provided order.

It is difficult for us to understand late antiquity's obsession with order and living, as we Americans do, in a society which has been spared much of the traumatic disorder of the twentieth century. Confronted with social and economic dislocation, barbarian invasions, corruption and debauchery in high places, it is small wonder indeed that Christians looked to and for order and authority. The early bands of believers awaiting Christ's second coming gave way to settled, rule-governed forms of social life. People brought to this enterprise both the old and the new. None of us can ever leap out of his or her historic skin. Order got re-created, an uneven amalgam of old and new. Men, not surprisingly, had the advantage in terms of traditional orderings of authority. Women, however, had found new strength and purpose. The educated of both sexes had efficacy which the non-literate lacked. Those who knew Roman law could shape Christian life legalistically in ways that both safeguarded and veered away from the heady promise of Jesus' transvaluation of all values.

It would be foolish to look for a 'key' here — either some clear-cut evidence of male intent to re-enslave women, or a dramatic rupture, a moment when Christianity made its peace with the inherited hierarchicalism of antiquity. The process was fitful and uneven, filled with anomalies. Fateful decisions had to be made. Could Christians remain wholly pacifist in a world in which others were committed to collective violence? Would that not guarantee the destruction of the Christian community? The solution: a partial compromise, the notion of the just war as adumbrated by Augustine. Yes, violence is evil. Yes, the Christian must put violence on trial. Yes, it must be eschewed whenever possible. But, no, it is not possible to evade violence altogether for one's responsibility to protect a way of life. To spare the innocent from certain harm may commit the Christian, in the city of man, to a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater one.

Our Christian forebears could find no institutional forms to hold intact and guarantee the continuance of a stance of pure, collective non-violence — no more than we can. The

warrior got resurrected as a just warrior, not the lustfully destructive warrior of old: a strange warrior, one bidden to be killed rather than to kill should such action on his part require the destruction of a non-combatant. Similar compromises were made in other areas of social life, including the family, where the old sex-segregated system of antiquity is not restored but neither are the full implications of ontological sex equality institutionally established. That would have been much too much to expect of persons struggling with, and against, the old and the new in circumstances of disorder and fear, scarcity and vulnerability which we can scarcely imagine.

This is not a story of loss of purity. It is a story of struggling to live in an imperfect world. Augustine is right: the earthly city is never free from the dangers of bloodshed, sedition and civil war. Human beings are estranged — from one another, from completeness of unity, from the attainment of permanent peace or justice or control over themselves, others, or human events. A human being cannot even be certain of "his own conduct on the morrow," let alone specify and adjudicate that of others in ways he or she foreordains. In this world of discontinuities and profound yearnings, of sometimes terrible necessities even "in his own actions," the best a human being can do is to maintain an order that approximates justice, strives to prevent the worst from happening, resists the seductive lure of imperial grandiosity. Augustine believed he had uncovered the lowest common denominators of human existence in the *saeculum*: a need for social life, hence for peace and order; a divided will easily traduced by a lust to dominate and to possess; a world of insoluble estrangements, perils, and shortcomings. That is the world we inhabit, reflects Augustine; and it is a world he evokes in densely textured description, through scathing indictments of folly and false pride, in passages that soar with the joys of friendship and resonate to the hope that estrangements will be healed and human incompleteness made full in the City of God.

I must break off these reflections for now. But my extended foray into the past aims to challenge the excessive purism of Muggeridge and Ellul as well as the overly dry ruminations of Sheehan. With Lee I fear the inward turningness of North American Christianity. The story of early Christian struggles to forge community and order and institutions is a strong antidote. With St. Augustine I accept that human beings are imperfect and that attempts to perfect this life either wind up in withdrawal or terror. We do what we can hoping that in the words of an old master of medieval history cited by Peter Brown, "Above all, by slow degrees the thoughts of our forefathers (and foremothers!), their common thoughts about common things, will have become thinkable once more. There are discoveries to be made; but also there are habits to be formed." Ω

In the World but Not of It

Joel Marcus

In a recent issue of this journal, J. Louis Martyn has written with characteristic incisiveness of the generative question of all Christian theology: how can the church, confronted with an apparently unredeemed world, affirm nevertheless that the world has been redeemed through Jesus Christ? In Martyn's words, "What does it mean to have inherited both the triumphant *Hallelujah Chorus* and the suffering world?" Martyn outlines three possible answers to this question, all of which take their point of departure from biblical texts: the answer of *otherworldliness*, the answer of *thisworldliness*, and the answer of what might be called *bothworldliness*.

This schematization can be fruitfully applied to the four works under consideration here. Each presents a contrast, which can be expressed in terms of thisworldliness and otherworldliness, between what Christianity started out to be and what it has become. Each describes this development as a degeneration, and each attempts to diagnose the sickness that has brought the patient from its original health to its present unhealthy state.

Malcolm Muggeridge's diagnosis of the problem, to judge from *The End Of Christendom*, is that an otherworldly Jesus has been made worldly by modern clerics and theologians. Muggeridge develops his analysis with his usual acerbic wit. (Is it just coincidence, or part of the divine irony Muggeridge relishes, that his name bears a phonetic resemblance to the word "curmudgeon"?) Muggeridge's humor is not the only strength of the book. It contains some sharp observations, especially about the shallowness of modern life without faith, and the end of each chapter rises to heights of eloquence.

But Muggeridge's otherworldly vision of Christianity is not entirely satisfactory. The version of Christianity advanced in the book owes a good deal to Plato. In Platonic fashion, Muggeridge views this world as one of shadows, in contrast to the true world of God's reality; at one point he explicitly cites with approval Plato's allegory of the cave. Coupled with this belief in the shadowiness of the present life is an underlying

contrast between time and eternity. Most people, according to Muggeridge, live in the world of time, where the clocks tick inexorably on; but God dwells in eternity, and Christian faith permits people to escape from the world of time into that eternal world. Although Plato himself constantly emphasized that knowledge of the eternal cannot be divorced from responsible action in the earthly sphere, Muggeridge's version of Platonism often loses sight of this link and denigrates earthly existence in general.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Muggeridge usually describes earthly history with the detachment of one who already lives most of the time not on earth but in the halls of eternity. How calmly, even cheerfully, he contemplates the rise and fall of empires, and predicts the dissolution of Western civilization ("Christendom"), to be followed by another Dark Age! He is supremely indifferent to history: it is not even for him, as for Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, a nightmare from which one tries to awaken, but just an "interminable soap opera going on from century to century, from era to era, whose old discarded sets and props litter the earth." Is this soap opera what life is about? Surely not, Muggeridge replies. One of the pleasures of old age, he informs us, is realizing that history is largely nonsensical, and "knowing that you need not bother in any way about history." No wonder, then, that his *bête noire* is a Marxist-influenced Christianity that in his view takes thisworldly history too seriously. No wonder, too, that his interpretation of Christianity is almost completely individualistic, having little sense of the corporate aspect of Christian life.

Muggeridge is true to the Biblical vision of things when he skewers the pretensions of leaders who claim to set up thousand-year kingdoms upon the earth. He is on target when he attacks theological enterprises in which Christology is swallowed up in political ideology. But the extremity of the otherworldliness expressed in *The End of Christendom* flies in the face of the biblical witness. Are Christians really to rejoice, as Muggeridge calls them to do, when they see governments, economies, and societies in general falling into decay and thus precipitating their own downfall? What about the human cost of such chaos — for example the Holocaust, the other frightful sufferings of World War II, the genocide in Cambodia, and the specter of full-scale civil war in South Africa? Are these things merely to be shrugged off as part of the soap opera? How different is the attitude of Old Testament prophets who howl in

pain because of the judgments they see coming on the earth:

My anguish, my anguish! I write in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly;
I cannot keep silent. . .
For the wound of my beloved people is my heart wounded,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.
(Jeremiah 4:19-20; 8:21)

Even Augustine, whose reaction to the sack of Rome Muggeridge takes as exemplary, seems to have been more profoundly disturbed by the event than Muggeridge allows himself to be by the collapse he sees coming.

Muggeridge's assertion of the nonsensical realities of history flies in the face of the Bible's depiction of a God who is Lord of history, who has the whole world — *this* world — in his hands. One thinks especially of the book of Daniel, with its detailed, coded description of the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms; surely the author of that book did not think that "you need not bother in any way about history." Muggeridge himself seems to approach the Danielic vision at one point when he says that history consists of parables whereby God communicates with people. Further, he devotes a number of pages to the resurgence of interest in Christianity in the Soviet Union. This is certainly a thisworldly phenomenon, though Muggeridge would doubtless insist on its otherworldly origin. These hints of a different attitude toward history, however, remain undeveloped in the present work.

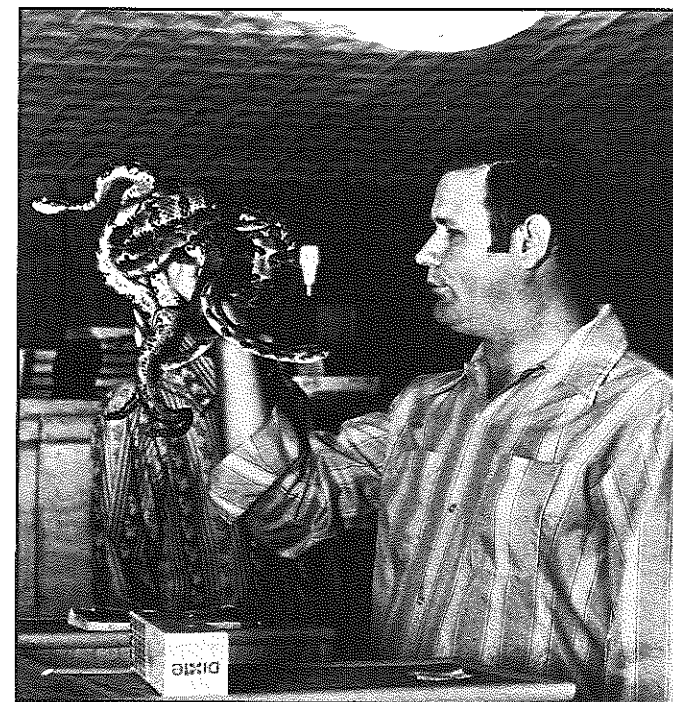
A key text for Muggeridge's otherworldly vision is Jesus' statement in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world." The otherworldly interpretation of this frequently-abused text, however, rests on a misunderstanding of two words. Contrary to Muggeridge, the "kingdom" is not a place, and "of" is not a possessive preposition. As is usually the case in the New Testament, the Greek word *basileia* here is better translated "kingly power" than "kingdom." "Of," moreover, does not have the possessive nuance Muggeridge gives it, as though Jesus were saying, "My kingdom is not one belonging to this world." Rather, "of" translates the Greek word *ek*, which means "out of" and indicates *origin*: "My kingly power is not *out of* this world." The Johannine Jesus is talking about the *source of his power*, not about the *place* where he rules. Jesus' power does not take its cues from the structures of the fallen cosmos, but from another source. It does not come out of this world; but there is no doubt that, in John as in the New Testament in general, it does come *to* this world. Like the disciples in chapter 17, it is in the world though not of it (John 17:11,16).

Thus, though Jesus says at the beginning of John 14 that he is going away to prepare a place for the disciples, he later adds, in what can only be viewed as qualification, that he and the Father will come and make their home with the disciples in this world: "I will come to you" (John 14:3, 18, 23). Or, to put

it in the imagery of the book of Revelation, human beings do not go away to the heavenly city; the heavenly city comes down to earth (Revelation 21:2, 10). The biblical hope, then, is not primarily for a space trip to another world, but for a transformation of *this* world: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ!" (Revelation 11:15).

Still, the power to transform this world does not come from within this world. This is the central biblical claim that is either missed or disputed (it is hard to tell which) in Thomas Sheehan's book *The First Coming*. At first glance, Sheehan seems to be at the opposite pole from Muggeridge. Muggeridge sees the enemy as thisworldliness; Sheehan sees it as otherworldliness. His book has a revealing subtitle: *How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity*. In the terms that we have been using, this subtitle might be paraphrased: how the radically thisworldly message of Jesus was corrupted into the otherworldly narcotic of Christianity, so that we have been left, as Sheehan puts it, with a church with its head in the clouds.

Sheehan, a professor of philosophy at Loyola in Chicago, has done a great deal of homework in preparing this book. It is valuable for its presentation, in terms comprehensible to laypeople, of the last century or so of critical scholarship on the historical Jesus, though Sheehan at times falls prey to exaggeration and a somewhat breathless tone in describing the results of that scholarship. A further value of his book is that it causes one to rethink some of the basic elements of the Christian faith by the thoroughgoing nature of its challenge to Christian orthodoxy.



The centerpiece is Sheehan's explanation of what Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God." In some ways this explanation is a throwback to the interpretation of the kingdom by nineteenth and early twentieth century liberal theologians Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack. Sheehan is close to Harnack, for example, when he defines the kingdom as "the immediate presence of God as a loving Father." But he goes beyond Harnack when, taking God's immanence to an extreme, he turns it in a frankly atheistic direction. The kingdom, for Sheehan, means that God has identified himself *without remainder* with his people. Since Jesus' ministry, there is no longer any God-up-above; God is present only in and as one's neighbor. God is not transcendent but is entirely identified with the cause of men and women; God has "disappeared into mankind" and can be found nowhere else but there. Sheehan is only driving his idea to its logical conclusion when, near the end of the book, he embraces the theology of the death of God.

What is the basis of this startling interpretation of the "kingdom of God" as it appeared on Jesus' lips? Unfortunately, under close scrutiny the exegetical grounding of Sheehan's theory melts into thin air almost as completely as the transcendent God does if that theory is accepted. The evidence boils down to: a) statements by Jesus which emphasize God's loving care for His chosen ones; b) his calling God "Abba," i.e. "Papa;" and c) his statement in Luke 17:21 that "the kingdom of God is among you."

There are certainly parallels, however, in the Judaism of Jesus' time, for Jesus' statements about God's tender concern for His people, as well as for the image of God as a loving father, if not for the address "Abba." The idea of God's fatherly concern for his people, then, cannot be what is radically new in Jesus' teaching. (One of the shortcomings of Sheehan's book is that he has not rid himself of the outmoded picture of the God of Judaism as a distant, impersonal sovereign who has to be bought off by the legalistic works of self-righteous prigs.) Further, one must ask: Did Jesus' proclamation of the fatherly kindness of God mean that he thought that God had disappeared *without remainder* into his people? The metaphor "father" itself seems to be against this. A father is a helper, a supporter, a stronger presence at the child's side; but he is not *identical* with the child, and the child is never identical with him. (This *complete and invariable physical distinction* from the child, by the way, differentiates a father from a mother, and is a large part of the reason that God is a father, not a mother, in the Bible.) As for Luke 17:21, this saying proclaims that "the kingdom is *among* you," or "in the midst of you," not that "the kingdom has *become* you." There is visible here, too, the distinction between the kingly power of God and the world it invades.

Denying this distinction, Sheehan consistently applies an anthropological starting point to what can only paradoxically be termed his theology. Jesus, according to Sheehan, dissolved

eschatology into ethics; he did not speak of an otherworldly reality about to invade this world, but rather he taught that God's future was already present where people enacted justice and mercy. He proclaimed neither himself nor even God but "the endless, unresolvable mystery inscribed at the heart of being human." And having made his point, Jesus had the good sense to die and get out of the way. The anthropological starting point also determines the interpretation of Jesus' resurrection, which is not construed as having "happened" in an objective sense. The resurrection "appearances" to Peter and the other disciples, rather, were merely their arrival at the realization of what Jesus' ministry had meant. (Sheehan argues they later betrayed this realization, however, when they began to concentrate on Jesus rather than on the kingdom. To the extent Sheehan believes in the church, then, his vision of it is similar to that of Flannery O'Connor's character Hazel Motes, who, in *Wise Blood*, founds "The Church of Christ Without Christ." By the end of the novel, however, Hazel Motes comes to a very different vision. Perhaps there is hope for Mr. Sheehan.) Indeed, the Gospel message is not about a *happening* at all; Jesus proclaimed, not a new coming of God, but only what had always been the case:

To receive God's eschatological forgiveness was to realize that everything was already in God's graceful presence and that everyone was already saved — precisely because they did not need salvation: They had already been saved from the beginning.

In the concluding words of the book: "Grace is and always has been everywhere. The task is to make it so."

The First Coming impresses the reader by the rigor with which its anthropological starting point has been applied. Sheehan does not try to play both sides of the fence, as the great Rudolf Bultmann sometimes seemed to do, insisting on an anthropological focus in his interpretation of the New Testament, yet maintaining that something from outside the self addresses human beings in the Gospel. Sheehan is consistent, even relentless: the Gospel is anthropology. On the other hand, it is difficult to know how to engage in meaningful dialogue with an interpretation of Jesus that runs so counter to the vivifying spirit of the whole New Testament. If Sheehan is right, then every Christian from Peter on has been wrong, including the Christians who transmitted to us our only real sources for reconstructing Jesus, the Gospels. That is a possibility that must be faced; but, as someone once said, "By their fruits you shall know them." Sheehan's interpretation of Jesus ends up in nihilism: "There is no Jesus to be found anywhere anymore. . . There is nothing to be found and therefore nothing to be searched for." Such nihilistic wisdom can be found on the broad paths of our culture; why detour down the side street marked "Jesus"? Indeed, it is finally curious that Sheehan has written a book about Jesus — complete with Georges Roualt's painting, "Behold the Man," on its cover — if the ultimate meaning of Jesus is that Jesus does not matter.

Sheehan's most significant challenge to biblical faith is his assertion that nothing new happened in Jesus' proclamation, ministry, death, and resurrection, but that he came merely to show what had always been the case. The denial of time in this interpretation draws Sheehan curiously close to Muggeridge, in spite of their surface differences. It also separates both of them from the earliest church. If there is a central conviction that leaps out from every page of the New Testament, it is, to borrow the title of Joseph Heller's novel, that "*something happened*." In an announcement that Sheehan apparently considers authentic Jesus proclaims in his inaugural sermon at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, "The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near!" (Mark 1:15). Nothing can come near, however, that was not previously far away; a movement forward, an *event* has taken place.

It is clear that laudable motives are responsible for Sheehan's frontal assault on the otherworldliness of Christianity. He is rightly disturbed about a "pie-in-the-sky" spirituality that would abandon the earth to tyranny and injustice while it looks to the sky for salvation; he is rightly concerned about what he terms "the praxis of human liberation." But he does not seem to realize that an otherworldly starting point does not necessarily lead to quietism, and that a thisworldly starting point is not necessarily a bulwark against injustice. Karl Barth's refusal to take a loyalty oath to Adolf Hitler in 1934 is a case in point. It was precisely because of an otherworldly starting point — that only God is God — that Barth believed himself called to challenge a thisworldly ruler who, in effect, set himself up as a god by extracting promises of unconditional obedience from his subjects. Sheehan's theology, on the other hand, contains no clear check against this sort of deification. Indeed, if God has disappeared without remainder into His people, might not the apotheosis of a leader or a *Volk* be a logical conclusion? No.

The distinction between God and human beings must be maintained, both to be true to the Bible and to be true to the reality of our world. It is God's kingly power, not a human possibility, that is designated by *basileia tou theou* in Jesus' teaching; Sheehan effectively loses sight of the possessive phrase in the term "kingdom of God." An otherworldly starting point is necessary for, not an enemy to, thisworldly liberation. For grace is *not* everywhere, as Sheehan maintains; the invading power of God's grace confronts a strong enemy that holds human beings in thrall and sickens our world, an enemy that must be defeated for God to be all in all (Mark 3:27; I Corinthians 15:26-28). We have seen in our time what human beings, who in Sheehan's view "do not need salvation," make of their world when left to their own devices. The distinction between God and humanity, then, is not a dispensable part of the Gospel; it is rather humanity's hope, because it means that there is hope when human possibilities fail.

A more carefully thought-out, more theologically orthodox attack on otherworldliness, especially the otherworldliness of the North American evangelical church, is provided by the third book under discussion, Philip J. Lee's *Against the Protestant Gnostics*. Unlike Sheehan, Lee does not react against otherworldliness by swinging wildly to the opposite pole; he has harsh words not only for otherworldly, conservative evangelicals but also for thisworldly theological liberals. Both groups, according to Lee, represent a recrudescence of the ancient heresy of gnosticism anathematized by Church Fathers in the second century and afterwards. Lee does a good job of describing the chief emphases of the ancient gnostic groups: secret knowledge (hence the name "gnostic"), alienation from the world, escape from the world and into the self, an elitist concentration on the enlightened few, and syncretism (the jumbling together of different religious systems in the belief that they all mean the same thing). More important are the parallels he draws between these ancient gnostic emphases and contemporary forms of North American Protestantism.

Lee asserts that the history of evangelicalism on this continent has seen a retreat from communal, thisworldly emphases to individualistic, otherworldly ones. The Pilgrims' biblical and Calvinistic concentration on the covenant *community* and a faith lived out in this world has been replaced by the individualized covenant, "receiving Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour." On the lips of the television evangelists, the word "Jesus" has been emptied of its incarnational, social, thisworldly reality and has become a buzzword for the individual's escape to heavenly realms. Accompanying this turn to the heaven lies a spiritual elitism and a deep sense of alienation from the earth, paradigmatically expressed in Dwight L. Moody's statement, "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'" Though Lee's analysis tends to gloss over the recent emergence of politically motivated evangelicals, it does suggest some intriguing parallels between certain strains of evangelicalism and the gnostics' concentration on the individual, the elite group, and the other world.

Equally fascinating are the parallels Lee draws between gnostic self-actualization and syncretism, on the one hand, and some contemporary North American forms of theological liberalism on the other. A prominent theologian's account of auto-erotic bathing in his theology of "human experience as Word of God," a feminist's statement that "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely," and the pervasive influence of the Human Potential Movement on North American Protestantism in general, are shown to be strikingly reminiscent of the quest of the ancient gnostic to discover and liberate the

divine seed within himself or herself. As Lee acutely observes, moreover, some contemporary forms of theological liberalism are marked by a syncretism that regards the history of Israel and the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as mere illustrations of deeper, timeless truths about human nature and God, illustrations perhaps necessary for the mass of simple, unenlightened churchgoers but superfluous for the elite. This attitude has many points of contact with the gnostics' distinction of themselves from ordinary believers who take the doctrines of the faith more or less literally.

This summary of Lee's thesis, however, already hints at its major weakness. At times the strokes with which the picture is painted are so broad that one wonders whether they have been applied with a brush, a roller, or a spray gun. Ancient gnosticism combined a sharp sense of world-foreignness with supreme confidence in the autonomous divine self. Lee's thesis requires that the ancient system of thought be divided into two portions, with half of its heritage (world-foreignness) being allotted to modern evangelicalism and half of it (self-actualization) to modern liberalism. Such vivisection, however, does not preserve the integrity of the organism, as the mother in 1 Kings 3 realized. No significant Protestant group described by Lee combines these two essential facets of gnosticism; evangelicals do not as a rule advocate self-actualization, and liberals do not express world-foreignness. It is questionable whether, lacking the combination of both, either can rightly be called gnostic.

As a matter of fact, there are better analogies for both modern liberals and modern evangelicals. The ancient Stoics, for example, are closer to modern liberals than the gnostics are. Lee is right to point to the theme of "the divine sufficiency of the individual" in the writings of those prototypical liberals, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other Transcendentalists, and to say that this conviction was shared by the ancient gnostics. Divine sufficiency alone, however, doth not a gnostic make, and Emerson and his cohorts, in their sense of harmony with the beautiful universe, are closer to the Stoics, who stressed both the self-sufficiency of the wise person and his conformity with nature, than they are to the gnostics, who were revolted by the cosmos and revolted against it in turn. On the other hand, the world-foreignness of the modern evangelical has its most direct prototype not in the ancient gnostic's alienation from material reality but in the sentiment expressed by the ancient apocalypticist: "Woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Revelation 12:12).

Indeed, the importance of apocalyptic thought for an understanding of Christianity in both its first century and its twentieth century varieties is something that Lee seems to miss. On the few occasions that he uses the term "apocalyptic," he invariably employs it in a pejorative sense, usually to refer to a belief in the manifest eschatological destiny of the United States.

An important aspect of apocalyptic thought, the view of evil as an external, personified force, is disparaged as an invitation to passivity. Most pertinently to our study, Lee seems to imply that "this world" and "the other world" are eternal opposites, an understanding that is unapocalyptic — and even gnostic!

Lee's failure to grasp the importance of the dynamic relation between the two worlds in apocalyptic thought is illustrated by a revealing passage on the black church. This church, according to Lee, is an exception to the prevailing otherworldliness of North American evangelical churches. (It is a rather large and significant "exception"! "The black church," Lee writes, "though usually clinging to an otherworldly theology, has provided overall a clear witness to the transforming power of Christ in politics and human affairs." Seen from the apocalyptic perspective shared by the New Testament and many black churches, the word "though" in this sentence strikes an oddly discordant note. From that perspective, the clause should be causal rather than concessive: "because it clings to an otherworldly theology . . ." This is because of the realization, which plays such a living role in the churches under discussion, that

our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

The enemy described in this passage is not just human malice but an invisible, oppressive, all-embracing power that catches this world up in a web of hatred, indifference, and hopelessness. In such a situation, the only hope — a hope known in black churches as well as in other places where the principalities and powers are recognized — arises because God has gone on the offensive against evil, and therefore its days are numbered. Note the reference in the New Testament passage to the rulers of "this present darkness;" in Romans 13:12, similarly, we are told that the night of the old age is passing away and the daylight of the new age is dawning. The hope expressed here is thoroughly apocalyptic confidence that our world is not at the mercy of its past or its present, but rather is already in the act of being redefined by its future, that is, by the other world.

It is therefore *because* of, not in spite of, their otherworldly theology that black churches can offer a clear witness to the transforming power of Christ in politics and other human affairs. Their otherworldliness is not the sort that counsels passivity or escape from the world, but the sort that recognizes the necessity of being armed with otherworldly weapons, weapons that draw their power from God's new age, in order to fight the battle that is going on *right here* in this world: "put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having accomplished all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13).

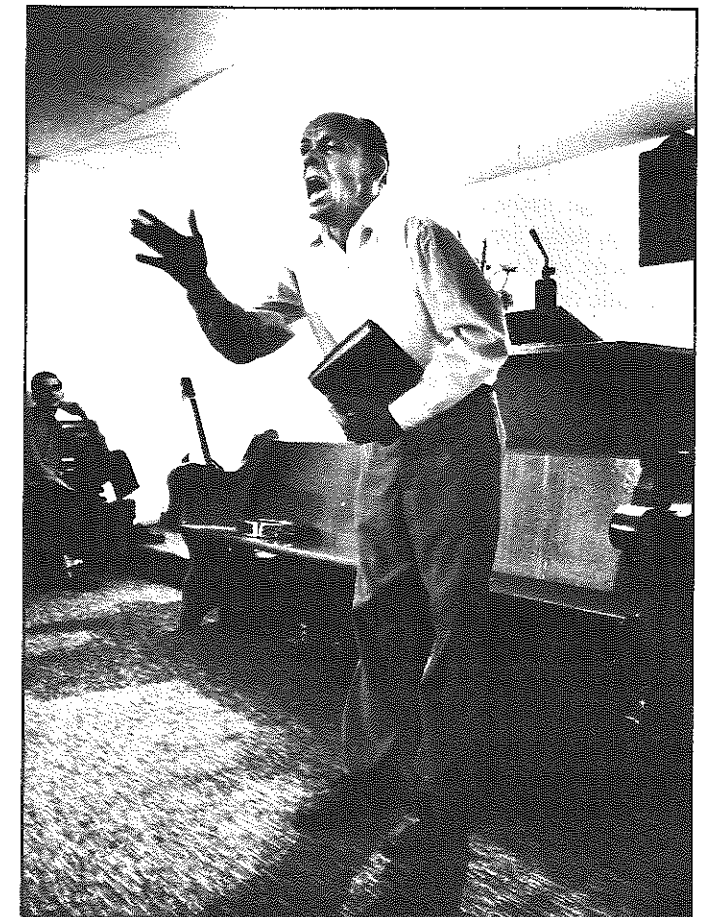
In the article referred to at the beginning of this essay, J. Louis Martyn speaks of the "bi-focal vision" of Paul's apocalyptic theology. By this he means that the reality of this world can only be seen by those who look *both* at the thisworldly stage *and* at the otherworldly backstage of the drama of God's dealings with humanity. In the fourth book, Jacques Ellul's *The Subversion of Christianity*, a similar prescription is made. The central question of every age, Ellul tells us, is one that is *both* "spiritual" (in our terms, otherworldly) *and* "political" (in our terms, thisworldly). The relationship between these two realms is not a static tableau, but a revelatory drama with *movement*; thus for example Ellul describes nihilism as "a retrograde movement whose time has passed" in view of Jesus' conquest of death and nothingness.

The bi-focal vision of Ellul enables him to address the concerns of Muggeridge, Sheehan, and Lee. Like Muggeridge, Ellul has an otherworldly starting point, and he affirms that God is not to be *identified* with any part of his creation, including human actions such as revolutions. One the other hand, like Sheehan and Lee, Ellul is vociferous in his insistence that belief in God is not just a hope of heaven but also a hope for this world. He affirms the "full realism" and "full materialism" of the Bible, adding that the Holy Spirit is not just "spiritual" and attacking inward-looking revival only in relation to the world," a point borne out in Ellul's mind by the Solidarity movement in Poland. The two worlds are neither artificially separated, as they are by Muggeridge, nor collapsed into each other, as they are by Sheehan; and the relationship between them is clearer than it is in Lee's thought. The two worlds are held together in the apocalyptic tension of Ellul's bifocal vision. When that tension is dissipated, "the subversion of Christianity" takes place; either Christianity becomes a religion of complete integration into the social order ("Constantinianism"), or it becomes a flight from concrete reality into mysticism.

But "the subversion of Christianity" seems to have for Ellul another sense as well: the subversion *which is* Christianity. This is true in two ways. First, Christianity, as an "ism" (the French word is *christianisme*), is a subversion of the revelation of God. Second, Christianity in a good sense is subversive of the structures of this world: "The God of Israel and of Jesus Christ is an absolute without compromise, and this shatters the order of the world, the cosmic equilibrium, and the order and the equilibrium of society." Thus the God who justifies not godly people but ungodly ones (Romans 4:5) assaults the moralism upon which all society is based. A God who acts in such a way is terribly unsettling; Christians themselves turn away in horror from the freedom he demonstrates and calls them to in Jesus Christ, a freedom Ellul beautifully describes as "a joyful and perilous acrobatic feat with no net."

It should be clear already from my critiques of Muggeridge, Sheehan, and Lee how completely I agree with the main lines of Ellul's analysis of the relation between worldliness and otherworldliness in the Christian faith. Ellul points a way out of the one-sided either/or served up by Muggeridge and Sheehan, and he does so with more force and clarity than Lee does. The reader carries away from his book an impression of his clear-eyed, unblinking, sometimes furious perception; he demonstrates a courageous willingness to look reality in the face and yet to keep the faith.

Moreover, Ellul has performed a valuable service by conveying to us anew what a shock the Gospel represents. This is an insight that goes to the heart of the preaching of the prophets, of Jesus and Paul, and the Bible. A radical *disequilibrium* is foretold in the Old Testament prophets and introduced into the universe by Jesus Christ according to the New Testament witnesses. As Flannery O'Connor's character "the Misfit" complains, "Jesus thrown everything off balance." The Old Testament prophet Amos describes God's righteousness not with images of order and balance but with the image of a mighty flood sweeping away all obstacles (Amos 5:24). In Jesus' preaching, the kingdom of heaven triumphs by violence (Matthew 11:12). Paul tells us that, in his powerful



invasion of the world through Christ, God chooses the things that are not, in order that he *might destroy* the things that are (1 Corinthians 1:28).

At the same time, one sometimes wonders whether Ellul has not concentrated on the destructive side of the divine invasion to the detriment of its creative side. His is a prophetic voice, and prophets are often pessimistic; but they are also sustained by a vision of hope. Jeremiah, for example, is called not only to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, but also to build and to plant (Jeremiah 1:10). Ellul, on the other hand, sometimes conveys the impression that all hope for this world must be reserved for the Second Coming and that nothing of importance can or will be accomplished here short of that event:

Christ says: "My kingdom is not of this world, so act in every way possible to make this world liveable and to share with all people the joy of salvation, but with no illusions as to what you will accomplish. *This is very little* [italics mine] . . . You will not achieve liberty, peace, justice, equality, goodness, or truth. Each time you think you have achieved them, you will have set up only an illusion or lie."

Now, on the one hand, passages such as this are useful as an astringent against the inveterate tendency of modern Christians to fall in with the latest schemes for the improvement of the social order, to coat them with a thin veneer of Christian jargon, and to announce that they themselves are building the kingdom of God upon earth. Such accommodation is indeed, as Ellul says, the setting up of an illusion and a lie. On the other hand, the passage quoted, as much by its tone as by its explicit message, seems inconsistent with certain aspects of the biblical witness as well as with practical experience. From a purely pragmatic point of view, for example, would anybody "act in every way possible to make this world liveable and to share with all people the joy of salvation" if he thought he would "accomplish very little?"

One suspects that behind Ellul's pessimism there may lurk what Lee, in a discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr, describes as a remnant of "an evangelical separation of spirit and matter." From the standpoint of New Testament theology, Ellul seems derailed. We have already seen that John 18:36 ("my kingdom is not of this world") cannot appropriately be used in the way that Ellul employs it here. Moreover, some New Testament writers seem to be animated by a different spirit than that which says, "You will accomplish very little in this world." Paul, for example, rejoices that by God's grace he has fully preached the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, bringing about the obedience of faith among all the nations (Romans 1:5; 15:18-19). It is true that this extension of the Gospel has taken place under the sign of the cross, in the midst of scenes of human

weakness and defeat, but this only proves that it is God's power not human power that has been at work (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul's boasting in what God has done through him (Romans 15:17) is part and parcel of his conviction that Christ is presently reigning and bringing his enemies into subjection to himself (1 Corinthians 15:25; Philippians 3:21). Can such cosmic victories fail to have their counterpart in the earthly sphere?

Let me express one other reservation about Ellul's excellent book. He tends to gloss over the richly textured quality of the Bible and to ignore discrepancies in the biblical witness which point to the Bible itself being a thisworldly book. For example, he describes the earliest years of the church as a time of pristine purity: "Originally the teaching was almost completely in conformity with the truth of God in Jesus Christ. . ." This picture can be supported perhaps from Acts, but not from Paul's letters, which show us an embattled apostle whose views were often in the minority and whose ministry was constantly in question.

The same flattening out of discrepancies in the biblical witness is visible in Ellul's treatment of Pauline texts to support misogyny in the church. There is no doubt that, as Ellul claims, Paul generally "tries. . . to relate every problem to the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ," and that this attempt is the foundation of such radically egalitarian statements as the one found in Galatians 3:28 ("in Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female"). There is also no doubt, however, at least to my mind, that Paul is not consistently successful in this effort, and that he sometimes falls back into support for patterns of domination found in his society, taking his cues not from the new reality in Christ but from the old age. Ellul's attempt to save Paul from this charge in his discussion of 1 Corinthians 11 disintegrates under the weight of his own rather tortured exegesis. Contrary to Ellul, the statement in 11:7, "woman is the glory of man," *does* imply male hierarchy, as the following verses show. Further, the issue in 1 Corinthians 11 is *not* just whether or not women as well as men should speak in tongues, but whether or not women should speak at all in church. What Ellul does not seem to realize is that upon occasion the far-reaching and revolutionary insights of Paul can, indeed *must*, be used against Paul himself.

The Bible, in other words, is a thisworldly book as well as a voice from the other world. In it speaks the word of God; but that word comes in a context that is as variegated, as shaded, as questionable as life itself. Some hermeneutical template is necessary for measuring even biblical texts. In searching for that template, we can probably do no better than Martin Luther, who taught that everything must be gauged not simply by the Bible but by the one who is revealed in the Bible, the one who, like Jacob's ladder, links the heavenly with the earthly world by the apocalyptic power of his cross (John 1:51). Ω

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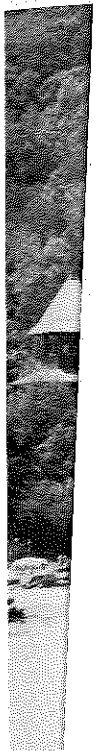
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