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A NEW CHRISTIAN  
CONSCIOUSNESS?

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*In the movies  
and daily*

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## A NEW CHRISTIAN CONSCIOUSNESS?

It was assumed until quite recently that the experience of the first Christians was still accessible to fervent Christians of our day in all its purity, provided certain conditions were faithfully fulfilled. The consciousness of the modern Christian was essentially the same as that of the Christian of the Apostolic age, and differed only in certain accidentals of culture due to the expansion of the Church in time and space.

Modern scholarship has thoroughly questioned this assumption. It has raised the problem of a radical discontinuity between the experience of the first Christians and that of later generations. The first Christians experienced themselves as men "of the last days", newly created in Christ as members of his New Kingdom, expecting His imminent return: they were men entirely delivered from the "old aeon" and from all its concerns. They experienced a new life of liberation "in the Spirit" and the perfect freedom of men who received all from God as pure gift in Christ with no further responsibility to "this world" than to announce the glad tidings of the imminent "reestablishment of all things in Christ". They were, in a word, prepared for entry into the Kingdom and the New Creation in their own lifetime.

Of course these elements remained stable and consistent in Christian theology.

But the development of a new historical dimension of Christianity radically altered the perspective and consequently also the experience in which these truths of faith were apprehended by Christians as individuals and as a community. With the help of concepts from Hellenic philosophy, these eschatological ideas were given a metaphysical dimension. These truths of Christian belief were now experienced "statically" instead of "dynamically" and furthermore, from being intuited metaphysically they also developed into

mystical experiences.

When it was discovered that the Parousia (coming of Christ) was put off into the future, then martyrdom was regarded as the way to enter directly into his kingdom. The experience of martyrdom was in fact, for many of the martyrs, also a mystical experience of union with Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection. After the age of the martyrs the ascetics and monks sought union with God in their lives of solitude and self-denial, which they also justified philosophically and theologically by recourse to Hellenic and Oriental ideas. Thus, it is argued, the existential sense of Christian encounter with God in Christ and in the Church as a "happening" (marked by divine freedom and pure gift) became more and more an experience of stabilized being; the acquisition of a new ontological status and a "new nature". Grace came to be experienced not as God's act but as God's nature shared by "divine sonship" and ultimately in "divinisation". This developed eventually into the idea of mystical nuptials with Christ or, in the terms of ontological mysticism (Wesensmystik) into absorption in the Godhead through the Word, by the action of the Spirit.

There is no space here to develop this critical historical analysis or to evaluate it. What matters is the question it raises: the question of a radical shift in the Christian consciousness, and hence in the Christian's experience of himself in relation to Christ and to the Church. This question is being discussed from many viewpoints in Catholic circles after Vatican II. It is implicit in new explorations of the nature of faith, in new studies of ecclesiology and of Christology, in the new liturgy and everywhere. Conservative Catholics find this questioning of the accepted categories disturbing.

The metaphysical stability of this view which, over the centuries, became

traditional, was comforting and secure. Moreover it was inseparable from a stable and authoritarian concept of hierarchical Church structure. A return to a more dynamic and charismatic Christianity - claimed to be that of the first Christians, - characterized the Protestant attack on these ancient structures, which depended on a static and metaphysical outlook. More radical Catholics realize this today and perhaps take a certain pleasure in using a fluid, elusive terminology calculated to produce a maximum of anxiety and confusion in less adventurous minds. This dynamism questions all that is static and accepted, and it all makes for good newspaper copy, but the results are not always to be taken very seriously. However that may be, the whole question of Christian, especially Catholic, mysticism is affected by it. If mysticism is summarily identified with the "Hellenic" and "Medieval" Christian experience it is more and more rejected as non-Christian. The new, radical Catholicism tends to do this. The Christian is invited to repudiate all aspiration to personal contemplative union with God and to deep mystical experience because this is an infidelity to the true Christian revelation, a human substitution for God's saving word, a pagan evasion, an individualistic escape from community. By this token also the Christian dialogue with Oriental religions, with Hinduism and especially with Zen, is considered rather suspect, though of course since dialogue is "progressive" one must not attack it openly as such.

It may however be pertinent to remark here that the term "ecumenism" is not held to be applicable to dialogue with non-Christians. There is an essential difference, say these progressive Catholics, between the dialogue of Catholics with other Christians and the dialogue of Catholics with Hindus or Buddhists. While it is assumed that Catholics and Protestants can learn from each other, and that they can progress together toward a new Christian self-understanding, many progressive Catholics would not concede this to dialogue with non-

Christians. Once again, the assumption is that since Hinduism and Buddhism are "metaphysical" and "static" or even "mystical" they have ceased to have any relevance in our time. Only the Catholics who are still convinced of the importance of Christian mysticism are also aware that much is to be learned from a study of the techniques and experience of Oriental religions. But these Catholics are regarded by men with suspicion, if not derision, both by progressives and conservatives alike.

The question arises which outlook comes closer to the primitive Christian experience? Is the supposedly "static" and metaphysical outlook really a rupture and a contradiction, violating the purity of the original Christian awareness? Is the "dynamic" and "existential" approach a return to the primitive view? Must we choose between them?

Is the long tradition of Christian mysticism, from the Post-Apostolic age, the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers down to Eckhart, Tauler, the Spanish mystics and the modern mystics simply a deviation? When people who cannot entrust themselves to the Church as she now is, nevertheless look with interest and sympathy into the writings of the mystics: are they to be reproved by Christians and admonished to seek rather a more limited and more communal experience of fellowship with progressive believers on the latter terms? Is this the only true way to understand Christian experience? Is there really a problem, and if there is, what precisely is it? Supposing that the only authentic Christian experience is that of the first Christians: can this be recovered and reconstructed in any way whatever? And if so, is it to be "mystical" or "prophetic"? And in any case, what is it? The present notes cannot hope to answer such questions. Their only purpose is to consider the conflict in Christian consciousness today and to make a guess or two that might point toward

avenues of further exploration.

First of all, the "Christian consciousness" of modern man can never purely and simply be the consciousness of a first century inhabitant of the Roman Empire. It is bound to be a modern consciousness.

In our evaluation of the modern consciousness, we have to take into account the still overwhelming importance of the Cartesian Cogito. Modern man, in so far as he is still Cartesian ( he is of course going far beyond Descartes in many respects ) is a subject for whom his own self-awareness as a thinking, observing, measuring and estimating "self" is absolutely primary. It is for him the one indubitable "reality " and all truth starts here. The more he is able to develop his consciousness as a subject over against objects, the more he can understand things in their relations to him and one another, and the more he can manipulate these objects for his own interests. But also, at the same time, the more he tends to isolate himself in his own subjective prison, to become a detached observer cut off from everything else in a kind of impenetrable alienated and transparent bubble which contains all reality in the form of purely subjective experience. Modern consciousness then tends to create this isolated bubble of awareness: an ego self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other such selves in so far as they are all "things" rather than persons. It is this kind of consciousness, exacerbated to an extreme, which has made inevitable the so called "death of God". Cartesian thought began with an attempt to reach God as object by starting from the thinking self. But when God becomes object, he sooner or later "dies" because God as object is ultimately unthinkable. God as object is not only a mere abstract concept, but one which contains so many internal contradictions that it becomes entirely non-negotiable except when it is hardened into an idol that is maintained in existence by a

sheer act of will. For a long time man continued to be capable of this willfulness: but now the effort has become exhausting and many Christians have realized it to be futile. Relaxing the effort, they have let go the "God-object" which their fathers and grandfathers still hoped to manipulate for their own ends. Their weariness has accounted for the element of resentment which made this a conscious "murder" of the deity. Liberated from the strain of wilfully maintaining an object-God in existence, the Cartesian consciousness remains none the less imprisoned in itself. Hence the need to break out of itself and to meet "the other" in "encounter", "openness", "fellowship", "communion".

Yet the great problem is that for the Cartesian consciousness the "other" too is object. There is no need here to retail the all-important modern effort to restore man's awareness of his fellow man to an "I-Thou" status. Is a genuine I-Thou relationship possible at all to a purely Cartesian subject?

Meanwhile, let us remind ourselves that another, metaphysical, consciousness is still available to modern man. It starts not from the thinking and self-aware subject but from Being, ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the subject-object division. Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being. This is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness.

It is completely non-objective. It has in it none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject becomes aware of itself as a quasi-object. The consciousness of Being ( whether considered positively or negatively and apophatically as in Buddhism ) is an immediate experience that transcends experience. It is not consciousness of but pure consciousness, in which the subject as such disappears. Posterior to this immediate experience is a ground which transcends experience, emerges the subject with its self-awareness. But, as the Oriental religions and Christian mysticism have stressed, this self-aware

subject is not final or absolute: it is a provisional self-construction which exists for practical purposes only In a sphere of relativity. Its existence has meaning in so far as it does not become fixated or centered upon itself as ultimate, learns to function not as its own center, but "from God" and "for others". The Christian term "from God" implies what the non-theistic religious philosophies conceive as a hypothetical Single Center of all beings, what T. S. Eliot called "the still point of the turning world," but which Buddhism for example visualizes not as "point" but as "Void".

( And of course the Void is not visualised as all. ) In brief, this form of consciousness assumes a totally different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking self which is its own justification and its own center. Here the individual is aware of himself as a self-to-be-dissolved in self-giving, in love, in "letting-go"<sup>11</sup>, in ecstasy, in God, – there are many ways of phrasing it. The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself: it is centered on God, the one center of all, which is "everywhere and nowhere" in whom all are encountered, from whom all proceed. Thus from the very start this consciousness is disposed to encounter "the other" with whom it is already united anyway "in God". The intuition of Being is an intuition of a ground of openness, Indeed of a kind of ontological openness and an infinite generosity which communicates itself to everything that is. "The good is diffusive of itself" or "God is love". Openness is not something to be acquired, but a radical gift that has been lost and must be recovered ( though it is still in principle "there" in the roots of our created being). This is more or less metaphysical language but there is also a non-metaphysical way of stating this. It does not consider God either as Immanent or as Transcendent but as grace and presence, hence not as a "Center" imagined somewhere "out there" or "within ourselves". It encounters him not as Being but as Freedom and Love. I would say

from the outset that the important thing is not to oppose this gracious and prophetic concept of the divine encounter to the metaphysical and mystical, but to show where they really seek to express the same kind of consciousness or at least to approach it, in varying ways.

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The French Marxist Roger Garaudy has said that the religious experience of a St Theresa is something that he finds interesting and worth studying in Christianity.

This has perhaps embarrassed some of those Christians most concerned with dialogue with Marxists. There is no question that the Christian mystics, though repudiated by some Christians, remain mysterious signs and challenges to those who, though they remain outside the Church and are confirmed "unbelievers", nevertheless still seek a deeper dimension of consciousness than that of a horizontal movement across the surface of life - what Max Picard called "the flight" (from God ) . They are attracted by the mystical consciousness but repelled equally by the triumphalist institution of the Church and by the activist and aggressive noisiness of some progressives.

St Theresa is a classic example of Christian experience. Though a mystic with her own special charisma, it has long been taken for granted at least by traditional Catholics, that her mystical consciousness made her actually aware of realities which are common to but hidden from all Christians. What others believed, she experienced in herself. The mystical consciousness of St Theresa implies a certain basic attitude toward the self. The thinking and feeling and willing self is not the starting point of all verifiable reality and of all experience. The primal truth, the ground of all being and truth, is in God the Creator of all that is. The starting point of all Christian belief and

experience (in this context) is the primal reality of God as Pure Actuality. The "existence of God" is not something seen as deducible from our conscious awareness of our own existence. On the contrary, the experience of the classic Christian mystics is rooted in a metaphysic of being, in which God is intuited as "He Who is", as the supreme reality, pure Being. The self-centered awareness of the ego is of course a pragmatic psychological reality, but once there has been an inner illumination of pure reality, an awareness of the Divine, the empirical self is seen by comparison to be "nothing", that is to say contingent, evanescent, relatively unreal, real only in relation to its source and end in God, considered not as object but as free ontological source of one's own existence and subjectivity. To understand this attitude, we have to remember that in this view of things Being is not an abstract objective idea but a fundamental concrete intuition directly apprehended in a personal experience that is incontrovertible and inexpressible.

The new Christian consciousness, which tends to reject the Being of God as irrelevant ( or even to accept as perfectly obvious the "death of God" ) must be seen to be an entirely different matter. Here there is no metaphysical intuition of Being, and hence "being" is reduced to an abstract concept, a cipher to figure with, a purely logical entity, surely nothing to be concretely experienced. What is experienced as primary is not "being" or "isness" but individual consciousness, reflexive ego-awareness. This distinction is very important indeed, because if the primary datum of experience and the ultimate test of all truth is simply the self-awareness of the conscious subject, verifying what is obvious to its own consciousness, then that self awareness would seem to block off and forbid any real intuition of being. By the nature of the case, being, in this new situation presents itself not as an immediate datum of intuitive consciousness but as an object of empirical observations which, as

a matter of fact, it cannot possibly be. This has many important consequences. For such a consciousness, a non-objective metaphysical or mystical intuition becomes, in practice, incomprehensible.

For example; when the mystic ( of the classic type ) claims to rest absorbed in a simple intuition of God's presence and love without "seeing" or "understanding" any object, the consciousness which I am for the sake of convenience calling Cartesian interprets this in a peculiar way; either as a stubborn fixation on an imaginary object, on "something out there", or as narcissistic repose of the consciousness in itself. It is true that false mysticism can take on some such appearance as this. The only solution to this problem is to admit that quite probably there is no way for this "Cartesian" type of consciousness to really grasp what the mystics of the classic type are talking about. (Hence the astonishing jumble of the authentic and inauthentic in a book like James' Varieties of Religious Experience). The same is probably true of the phenomenological consciousness. For either of these, an altogether different road to personal and Christian fulfilment must be found.

This kind of consciousness naturally turns outward to history, to event, to movement, to progress, and seeks its own identity and fulfilment in action toward historic political or critical goods. In proportion as it is also Biblical and eschatological it approaches the primitive Christian consciousness. But we can see already that "Biblical" and "eschatological" thinking do not comfortably accord with this particular kind of consciousness and there are already signs that it will soon have to declare itself completely post-Biblical, if not also post-Christian.

Meanwhile drugs have appeared as a Deus ex machina to enable the self-axfare Cartesian consciousness to extend its awareness of itself while seemingly getting out of itself. In other words, drugs have provided the self-conscious

self with a substitute for metaphysical and mystical self-transcendence. Perhaps also with a substitute for love? I don't know.

At any rate, the new Christian consciousness would seem to be the product of a kind of phenomenology which more and more questions and repudiates anything that seems to it to be "metaphysical" "Hellenic" and above "mystical". It concerns itself less and less with God as present in being ( in his creation ) and more and more with God's word as summons to action. God is present not as the experienced transcendent presence which is "wholly other " and reduces everything else to insignificance, but in an inscrutable word summoning to community with other men. But what community, and what other men? The Church in its traditional authoritarian structures is severely criticized - which is not necessarily a bad thing! But the rather more fluid idea of community which "happens" when people are brought together by God's word may perhaps remain very vague and subjective itself. It may conceivably degenerate into mere conviviality or the temporary agreement of political partisans.

Obviously this is not the place to examine a new and completely fluid conception xjhich has not yet taken definite shape. But this much can be said:

the new

Christian

consciousness is one which is activistic, anti-mystical, anti-metaphysical, which eschews well defined and concrete forms and which tends to identify itself with active, progressive movements which are on the way but which have not yet reached any kind of clear definition. In this context, then, the concept of the self as a very present, very concrete center of decision has considerable importance. It matters very much what you are thinking, saying, doing, deciding;

here and now. It matters very much what your current commitments are, whom you are with, whom you are against, where you claim to be going. This is obviously proper to men of action who feel that there are old structures to be torn down and new ones to be build. But from such men we must not yet expect either patience with or understanding of mysticism. They will be foredoomed, by their very type of consciousness, to reject it as irrelevant and even unChristian.

On the other hand, there must be a better reply to them than the mere reaffirmation of the ancient static and classic positions. It is quite possible that the

language and metaphysical assumptions of the classic view are out of reach of many modern men. It is quite plausible to assert that the old Hellenic categories are indeed worn out, and that Platonising thought, even revived with shots in the arm from Yoga and Zen, will not quite serve in the modern world. What then? Is there some neitf possibility, some other opening for the Christian consciousness today?

If there is, it will doubtless have to meet the following great needs of man. First his need for community, for a genuine relationship of authentic love with his fellow man. This will also imply a deep, in fact completely radical seriousness in approaching those critical problems which threaten man's very survival as a species on earth - war, racial conflict, hunger, economic and political injustice etc. It is true that the ancient and classic positions - with their counterparts in the East - have too often favored a kind of quietist indifference to these problems. Second, man's need for an adequate understanding of his every day self in his ordinary life.

There is no longer any place for the kind of idealistic philosophy that removes all reality into the celestial realms and makes temporal existence meaningless.

The old metaphysical outlook did not in fact do this - but in proportion as it was idealistic it did tend to misconstrue and depreciate the concrete.

Man needs to find ultimate sense here and now in the ordinary humble tasks and human problems of every day. Third: Man's need for a whole and integral experience of his own self on all its levels, bodily as well as imaginative, emotional, intellectual, spiritual. There is no place for the cultivation of one part of human consciousness, one aspect of human experience, at the expense of the others, even on the pretext that what is cultivated is sacred and all the rest profane. A false and divisive "sacredness" or "supernaturalism" can only cripple man.

Finally, let us remember that the modern consciousness deals more and more with signs rather than with things, let alone persons. The reason for this is that signs are necessary to simplify the overcrowding of the consciousness with objects. The plain facts of modern life make this unavoidable. But it is also very crippling and divisive.

But it is wrong to assume that these great needs demand the hypertrophy of self-consciousness and the elephantiasis of self-will without which modern man tends to doubt his own reality. On the contrary, I might suggest a fourth need of modern man which is precisely liberation from his inordinate self-consciousness, his monumental self-awareness, his obsession with self-affirmation so that he may enjoy the freedom from concern that goes with being simply what he is and accepting things as they are in order to work with them as he can.

For all these needs, but especially the Christian will do well to return to the simple lessons of the Gospel and understand them, if he can, not in terms of an imminent second coming, but certainly in terms of a new and liberated

creation "in the Spirit". Then he can be delivered from the obsessions of a culture that thrives on the stimulation and exploitation of ego-centric desire.