

The Protest of Vitalism

The Church and the “Godless World” – 4

By Thomas Merton

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This superstitious reverence for science – another of the myths of our time – has come to fill the place left empty in modern man by the “death of God.” Yet let us realize that all modern men do not share this holy awe. There is a widespread rebellion against the established cult of science, a rebellion sometimes prophetic and sometimes merely petulant which, if it does not attack science directly, nevertheless derides the culture which depends on it. This protest is articulated by artists and writers who have developed an eschatology of their own, sometimes clear-sighted in its analysis, generally negative and anarchic in its view of the future. It is the poetic protest of those who claim to speak for man against a completely mechanical and dehumanized world-view, a fake humanism which is easily judged by its fruits – cold war, political and economic pharisaism, the total irrationality of mass-society, and the threat of nuclear destruction which is so real and so enormous that people do not even think about it most of the time – unless they indulge in the kind of mental exercise we have come to associate with the name of Herman Kahn.

This protest of the artist and the non-scientific intellectual may not always make sense. It may at times be too negative, too ill-informed, too opinionated and too hysterical. Yet it is basically valid and in some cases genuinely prophetic. We may add that these artists, poets and secular philosophers have been ahead of the Church and more active than the Church in their outspoken opposition to total war, to modern dictatorships, and to the misuse of technology.

Since this protest is uttered in the name of life and spirit, it has very positive claims to our sympathy and our attention, even though it may tend at times towards a kind of gnosticism or scientific pantheism. Though it is extremely various in its shades of expression, let us call this philosophic and aesthetic current of protest by the name of “vitalism.” This suggests that one of its sources of inspiration would be Bergson. We might add many others, some godless and others not – Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Scheler, Berdyaev, Freud, Jung, D. H. Lawrence, Rilke, Dostoevsky, Gandhi, Heidegger, Whitehead, Cassirer, and so on – a mixed-up crowd of representative names, some close to orthodox Christianity and some far from it. Among Catholics, Gabriel Marcel and Teilhard de Chardin come close to vitalism. All are concerned with modern man and, we may add, with his “salvation.” They seek this salvation not by science alone but by the inner forces for transformation which can be brought into action within man himself – and doubtless with some help from science. This vitalist current flows between pure scientism and pure negative refusal of modern life. It is a religious-

scientific mystique which accepts, to some degree, scientific materialism but also brings in God as an immanent mystical force manifesting himself in and through the evolutionary process. In this vitalist mystique, God is not the eternal Father and Creator,* but is somehow in “becoming,” in a process of being made and manifested, as some would say, in and by man.

In proportion as man grows, becomes adult, and achieves perfect mastery of the world, it is God himself that becomes conscious of himself in man. Thus God is in some sense man’s creation. God then “needs” man in order to achieve his final epiphany in the world. He will appear as the final result and perfection of man’s creative mastery of the world, and when he appears it will be seen that he is Man. This implies the growing conquest of matter, of nature and of life by “spirit.” Spirit here means something more than intelligence and something less than the Holy Spirit of Christianity: it is that element of the world of matter which finds itself in human consciousness and which develops itself in and through the creativity of man, perfecting itself in man in proportion as man obeys it in order to transcend himself. But this growth and development of “spirit” demands a certain control and even suppression of “life.” Thus there is in the world a dynamic struggle between self-transcending “spirit” (the Apollonian force of light) and immanent, natural, dark and Dionysian “life.” Spirit derives its extraordinary energies from the control and repression of life.

Differences in the world-view of various kinds of vitalism depend on the view each one may take to the relation of “life” and “spirit” and on the clarity or lack of clarity in their conception of God and his transcendence. Against the objectivity of science, vitalism affirms the primacy of the living subject in whom “spirit” is known and manifested by the expansion of consciousness. Against the generality and universality of scientific abstraction, vitalism affirms the particular, the concrete. Against the impersonality of science vitalism affirms the person – or at least the individual with his spontaneity, his uniqueness, and his claim to self-expression and fulfillment.

Though a Catholic can hardly accept most of the eccentric theological implications of vitalism, there is certainly every reason for a sympathetic understanding of these humanist and personal aims of this protest against the wrong use of science. On the other hand, there are without doubt dangers of exaggeration and pseudo-prophetism. The Catholic thinker may well help to restore some kind of communication between aesthetic vitalism and scientific objectivity. This vitalism, which is sometimes close to Christianity, sometimes atheistic, sometimes neo-pagan (as in Marxism), sometimes a sex-mystique, sometimes a mystique of power, sometimes a mystique of non-violence, is much more prevalent in the intellectual climate of our time than people give it credit for. Though the Constitution on the Church in the World often refers directly or obliquely to Marxist positivism on the one hand and to atheistic existentialism on the other, it pays scant attention to the vitalist tendencies of contemporary man who needs something akin to religion. In fact, it is in this vitalism that the “God is dead” thinkers and the apostles of religionless Christianity seek the positive and creative elements for their world-view and for their hopes for the future. Their faith is not in the gift of the Spirit to the Church in the fullness of time on the first Pentecost but in the emanation of an immanent spirit in man as he progressively creates himself.**

On the other hand, not all vitalism takes kindly to the part played by “spirit” in sublimating the creative powers of “life” since this elevation and transformation cannot be accomplished without a

* These statements must of course be qualified in the case of the Christians I have named.

**Probably some of the “religionless Christianity” writers would deny that they believe this, and it is true that some are more eschatological in the traditional Christian sense than others.

certain amount of sacrifice. There is a strong anti-intellectualist and anti-humanist trend which tends to glorify the irrational and subconscious forces in man. In a time of lassitude or of conflict it becomes negative and life-denying – a mystique of pessimism and anarchy expressed in a reverse vitalism of resentment and destruction in which, out of revenge for the sacrifices imposed on it by “spirit,” “life” proceeds to take revenge in the destruction of “spirit.” This vitalism in reverse takes a negative, nihilistic attitude towards life in the name of life itself. Here we might quote Ernst Juenger: “The best answer to the betrayal of life by spirit is the betrayal of spirit by spirit. And one of the greatest, most cruel powers of our times is to participate in this work of destruction.”

Thus we have come in a full circle, from the optimistic, creative cult of the self-transcendence of life in and by the “spirit,” to the resentment, the hatred of spirit for itself, that comes when spirit realizes that in dominating and manipulating life it has destroyed life and in so doing has destroyed its own reason for existing. Thus the cult of life and spirit turns into the nausea of the lifeless spirit enclosed within itself, having no more noble project left than to destroy itself out of spite.

So we fall back into an existentialism of despair, of nausea, of hate, of frustrated, impotent individualism and meaningless subjectivity.

Amid all these various myths and philosophies of life the Church proposes her traditional Christian humanism, a theocentric humanism which declares that the dignity of the human person is to be found in an authentic freedom – the ability to obey a call to love which transcends even man’s own nature.

Christian humanism is not based on belief in an immanent natural dynamism working quasi-automatically as man progressively evolves and becomes more aware of his potentialities. It is based on belief in God, as Absolute Being, who has endowed the human person with freedom and summoned him to transcend nature by the creativity of love and the grace of the Holy Spirit. The dynamic power without which there can be no true self-transcendence is the power of the divine Spirit which is not immanent in nature, but received in man’s free response to God’s gift of grace.

If man is supposed to transcend himself, however, creatively, simply by abandoning himself to the dynamism of forces within matter or within his own nature, his project of self-transcendence is bound to be a mere velleity. Such a velleity cannot be taken seriously unless it becomes the object of a faith every bit as absolute and as serious as the religious commitment of the Catholic to his creed, his Church and his Savior. In fact the various mystiques of vitalism have little point to them unless they presuppose that one has made the blind leap of faith into the stream of self-perfecting creative evolution in which even God is “becoming.” Such a faith is simply an opinion, a devout hope in the powers of nature.

Contemporary philosophic anthropology, like that of Scheler for example, demands as its precondition a “courage of truthfulness” that will risk the adventure of new, unforeseen answers to the question of man “without commitment to any tradition, whether theological, philosophical or scientific, that has prevailed up to now” (Scheler). Nevertheless this adventure does not ignore tradition. It must necessarily *use* the accumulated knowledge and insight of religion, philosophy and science even when they are incompatible with each other. The unifying power that holds these incompatible elements together is a faith in creativity and in spirit which seems to justify an eclectic myth of one’s own. Is there a special advantage in creating one’s own synthesis rather than advancing along a line pointed out by a long-standing tradition? Modern man, suspicious of tradition, seems to think so. But is this not another of his “idiosyncrasies”?

The Christian humanism outlined in the Constitution on the Church in the World will seek to understand the new scientific data on man in the light of the traditional doctrine that man is made in the image of God, that is to say free. The true focus of Christian humanism is not human *nature* but the human *person*. In fact, it is because he is a person that man has the freedom to transcend his nature and to master its demands, using the natural powers he has received, not simply in order to fulfil the purposes of nature itself (the good of the species or of the collectivity) but personal and spiritual emancipation for himself and others. The person is more than the ego (the individual nature). It is not man's ego that makes him capable of "likeness to God," but his personal freedom to respond to life and to love beyond the limited requirements of the ego. This is especially true in relations with the other person. Interpersonal relationships involve more than a peaceful coexistence of egos. The demands of true openness, availability, and mutual understanding, help the ego to transcend itself and become "person."

The human ego, or the individual center of man's natural being, is not (in Christian thought) the center of personal freedom. Christian anthropology is not yet fully clear about the person, since what belongs to the whole Christian person has traditionally been ascribed to the *soul* (part of the person only) and to grace. The Christian theology of grace needs to be reviewed in the light of a new and deeper metaphysic of the person and of love.

The individual ego is the center of awareness and decision whose responses are entirely those of nature. The ego of course possesses consciousness and freedom of choice, yet the exercise of freedom by the ego is always in the service of nature, whether in one's own self or in others considered simply as the members of the same biological species. The love of the ego, while often attaining great heights of purity and sublimation, is rooted in sexuality. This does not mean that it is not noble and even spiritual. But *personal* love and freedom imply another dimension beyond and above sexuality (physiological attraction). Personal love needs this dimension of a spiritual consent and mutual gift of self in an interpersonal relationship of profound and mysterious oneness. In authentic married love, two persons become not merely well-adjusted sexual partners, but they complete one another spiritually, they bring meaning and fulfillment to one another's lives by a unity which cannot be accounted for by the human and biological needs of the natural species.

Here again, as in the question of God's existence, a certain metaphysical intuition of human partnership and fidelity is required. This metaphysical sense is dormant or dead in a society which considers only the adaptation of two egos in a well-functioning sex partnership. The Constitution, speaking of marriage, says:

The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by his laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, the existence of this sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For, God himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole. By their very

nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown. Thus a man and a woman, who by their compact of conjugal love “are no longer two, but one flesh” (Matt. 19.6), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions. Through this union they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain to it with growing perfection day by day. As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them.

Further on it says:

Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and may aid and strengthen them in the sublime office of being a father or a mother. For this reason Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfil their conjugal and family obligation, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God (n. 48).

This love is an eminently human one since it is directed from one person to another through an affection of the will; it involves the good of the whole person, and therefore can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage. This love God has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and of charity. Such love, merging the human with the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift proving itself by gentle affection and by deed; such love pervades the whole of their lives: indeed by its busy generosity it grows better and grows greater. Therefore it far excels mere erotic inclination, which is selfishly pursued and hence soon enough fades worthlessly away (n. 49).

The life of the ego is always dominated by instinctive rhythms, and even though it is extremely various and versatile in its responses, it still responds chiefly to typically recurring situations, in which the well-being of the individual and of the species is in question.

The person is however able to transcend these fixed patterns. The individual matures and blossoms out in full personality only when the gift of spirit and of grace endows our natural capacities with unique and creative powers to *make our own gift* to our world and to other men. The person is the individual not only as member of the species but as “image of God,” that is to say as the *free and creative source of a gift of love and meaning* which, if it is not made and given, is irreplaceable and cannot be given by another.

By this free and joyous capacity to find himself in giving himself, man affirms himself as person. By conscious and deliberate ability to sacrifice his ego projects and interests for the good of another precisely *as person* (not just as another member of the same natural species) man becomes fully

human, beyond the requirements of nature and instinct. Personality in fact recognizes itself in the other person in a higher way than the individual recognizes himself in another member of the biological species. The person is illumined by loving awareness of the unique freedom of *the other*. The person has a mysterious insight into the unique creativity and autonomy of the other as manifestations of God. The person shows his awareness of his own creative and free powers by respecting the creativity of the other. This means to say that he reveres and in a sense is “awed” (religiously) by the mystery of personal freedom. He is able to “fear God” in the freedom of the other, because he knows freedom in himself. All this is necessary if we are to understand what is meant by the traditional Christian idea of “man made in the image of God.”

The fact that God is personal is accessible to us by analogy with the mystery of the free human person. *God is not an individual ego*. When atheists object to the term “personal God” as if it meant an “ego-god” they are partly right. God is not an individual member of some wider species including all human and superhuman natures (which is what popular religion makes him seem to be at times). To speak of personality in God is to speak of relationship in giving and loving, *in respect for personal identity*. To speak therefore of a “personal God” is to speak not of an ego-god (with all the limitations and failings of the ego, such as anger, jealousy, pique, spite, suspicion, emotion, etc.) but of a freedom which respects all other autonomies which proceed from himself by way of pure gift.

It is true, of course, that in speaking of “person” in God we speak by analogy with what is personal in ourselves: that which is deepest, most intimate, most exclusively our own and yet most communicable. In fact, we can do this because the mystery of personality in man is a revelation of God in man. Man as person is not only capable of love (for he has this capacity by nature) but he is also capable of *grace*, that is to say of the absolutely free and creative relationship with God himself and with others who have God dwelling in them. Our response to personal love is itself creative. The mystery of human personality is situated in an absolutely unique freedom ordered directly and immediately to the freedom of God in such a way that, to use the language of the Church Fathers, man can actually “*become God*,” not in the order of nature but as a person. Man, in other words, can enter into the inner life of the Trinity of Persons, and be to God the Father as the Son is. Man can never become divine by nature but he can become as it were a “divine person” by adoption, in the sense that he enters by grace and love into the intimate relationship which unites the Divine Persons among themselves. He can be, in Christ and the Spirit, a son of God. It is there that he attains to the summit of personality.

Here we discover that there is a basis of truth in the vitalist imagery of man bringing God into being in the world by his own creativity. If this language is understood not as theology but as poetic mythology concerned with man’s own creative self-fulfillment beyond and above the demands of his nature, we see that in fact it does remotely suggest something of the truth. Man, by his creative response to grace and by his gift of himself, does come to realize and actualize the divine life in himself. And this he does not only as an isolated person but in communion with other persons, so that by his creative fidelity to love man does in fact manifest God in the world (John 13.35; 17.21-23). However, this does not mean that God’s only being is that which is brought about in man by love, as the result of immanent creative powers in man’s nature. Such a notion reduces the whole idea of personal freedom to meaningless and arbitrary projects of individual affirmation, and plunges us once again into the anarchy and despair of a chaotic existence. The root of all freedom and creativity in man is the transcendent freedom and creativity which is the infinite, necessary, absolute Being of

God. He is outside of all contingency and all becoming, and above all natures and all being. It is by his very transcendence that God is immanent in all that he has made, without becoming a part of it except through the mystery of freedom, creativity and grace, centered on his mysterious Incarnation in Christ.

This is the core of that God-centered humanism which is traditionally Christian – a humanism built not on human nature but on personal freedom. Once the basic relationship of the human person to God is disrupted, then no amount of natural creativity and dynamism can restore it. On the contrary, once our personal freedom deviates from this orientation to God, its most exalted projects for renewing and glorifying the world of matter are nothing but absurd dreams which come, in the end, to tragic self-negation and perhaps physical destruction. Hence the inner split in man which makes man an “unsolved puzzle to himself” (Constitution on the Church and the World, n. 21) and of which he is himself “at once the cause and the victim” (n. 8).

This personal dignity of man, the image of God, and this mystery of human freedom and intelligence oriented to the invisible truth and freedom of God, is what the Council is talking about when it says:

Now, man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man. For by his interior qualities he outstrips the whole sum of mere things. He plunges into the depths of reality whenever he enters into his own heart; God, who probes the heart, awaits him there; there he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God. Thus, when he recognizes in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but is rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter.

Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind. By relentlessly employing his talents through the ages he has indeed made progress in the practical sciences and in technology and the liberal arts. In our times he has won superlative victories, especially in his probing of the material world and in subjecting it to himself. Still he has always searched for more penetrating truths, and finds them. For his intelligence is not confined to observable data alone, but can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partly obscured and weakened (nn. 14-15).

Notice here that the Council shows a distinctly contemplative orientation. The person of man is an intelligence open to the divine light, not merely to the study of objects – “observable data.” The full dimension of personal fulfillment is to be sought not simply in knowledge and technical control of matter, but in contemplative wisdom which unites knowledge and love above and beyond the subject-object relationship which is characteristic of ordinary empirical observation.

To say that man is a person is to say, ultimately, that he has a vocation to contemplate God and to share that contemplation with his fellow man. However the Council places great stress on the active love of other human persons. But this active love cannot have its true character and fruitfulness without a contemplative sense of the mystery of the other person as person. Contemplation enters even into active charity, and into the transformation of the world by the humanistic use of science.