

The Road Ahead

The Church and the “Godless World” – 6

By Thomas Merton

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This rapid glance at the Constitution on the Church in the World shows us a clearly optimistic, positive and open approach to modern man. Here is a deeply traditional Christian humanism which is willing and able to collaborate with modern science and technology in building a new world for man. In this new world, modern technology will (if it is used in man’s true interests) enable man to live at last in relative peace, with a high degree of temporal comfort, and with an amount of leisure which he can use to great advantage, provided that he knows how. But the Church is not assuming that all this will come about automatically, and the Constitution is not saying that science alone will bring this new utopia as though by magic.

Nor does the optimism of the Constitution anywhere imply a naïve satisfaction with our present social situation. Far from imparting a blessing to any particular social or economic system, the Council clearly understands that our present social institutions are powerless to resolve our crisis and indeed are to some extent responsible for it. Hence the Constitution says clearly that unless we change our present direction, and unless the structure of our technological society is radically developed and improved, we cannot expect the hopes of humanism, Christian or otherwise, to be realized. On the contrary, though avoiding pessimism, the Constitution does recognize that we are in a state of grave crisis and does foresee the possibility of disaster – a possibility which no one in his right mind can ignore.

Now the question arises: what are we to do? The fact that the Constitution has given us certain general principles by which to understand our present position in the world does not mean that we now clearly understand everything and that our problems will now magically solve themselves. The Constitution simply tells us that we have a great deal of work to do, and suggests where we might look for a good beginning. It stresses above all respect for the human person and concern for the unity of the world-wide human family as the two focal points of all serious thought and action in the modern world.

This teaching of the Council must first of all be studied and understood by Catholics themselves, and through the work of Catholics (especially laymen who are experts in their various fields) these humanistic principles may, we hope, find their way into the general thinking of policy makers and exert some influence on the course of events. But let us seriously reflect on the problems involved.

First of all, events move very fast and move according to the powerful and accelerating momentum they have picked up over the past fifty or a hundred years. Secondly, those who make the crucial – usually secret – decisions which determine the direction we all take are seldom Catholic. When they are Catholic, they do not necessarily grasp or accept the full import of the Church's teaching. For example, everyone knows that the Constitution is still trying to get across a message on social justice that was clearly expressed as far back as Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, was even more clearly reiterated in *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Mater et Magistra*, and is still ignored in some quarters. One of the most obvious reasons for the Pope's pilgrimage to the United Nations was to plead for peace in Vietnam, but this reason seems to have escaped the attention of many Catholics in the United States. They recognized this much: that the Pope was saying that peace would be a good thing. After all, what else would a Pope say? But they hardly stopped to consider that he was asking *them* to do something about it since, as everyone knows, it is always the enemy who is guilty of making war.

The question of peace and war is absolutely central to this Constitution. Here is the greatest and most urgent problem of modern man. In fact, the work of building a better world on the pattern of Christian humanism proposed by the Council will be completely impossible if men continue to devote most of their energy, money, attention and resourcefulness to building up and using military power. It is the threat of war – and all threat of war is potentially a threat of global and nuclear war – that remains the greatest obstacle to man's development along the lines foreseen and hoped for by the Council. It is war that constitutes for the human race a "supreme crisis in its advance towards maturity" (n. 77). Therefore the Council says explicitly:

The human family "CANNOT ACCOMPLISH ITS TASK OF CONSTRUCTING FOR ALL MEN EVERYWHERE A WORLD MORE GENUINELY HUMAN UNLESS EACH PERSON DEVOTES HIMSELF TO THE CAUSE OF PEACE WITH RENewed VIGOR" (n. 77).

Note that the Council does not say simply that statesmen, technicians, generals, diplomats should devote themselves to the cause of peace, but *each person*. Each will, in his own way, find himself in a position to affirm the Gospel message of peace, which now more than ever "is in harmony with the loftier strivings and aspirations of the human race" (*ibid.*).

Yet let us remember that when this was being promulgated, the American general was demanding that North Vietnam be bombed back into the stone age, while no doubt very large numbers of American Christians, Catholic and Protestant, not only did not see any reason to disagree substantially with the general's advice, but even felt that it was right and practical, if perhaps somewhat brutally expressed. The Council declared – and this too is news to no one – that "every kind of weapon produced by modern science is used in war, (and) *the fierce character of warfare threatens to lead the combatants to a savagery far surpassing that of the past.*" This was no rash statement, considering that daily acts of unparalleled savagery, with or without modern weapons, were being committed by both sides in Vietnam. War crimes such as torture, the execution of hostages and the indiscriminate slaughter of non-combatants are not only committed without hesitation but are accepted as normal, while at the same time many apparently prudent and responsible persons are suggesting that China, which is by any standard of international law neutral, should now be attacked and crippled with atomic weapons before it can build up its own nuclear arsenal.

This being the case, we must soberly ask ourselves what are the real chances of this Constitution being accepted and understood where it most needs to be understood. And we must at the same time ask ourselves a more fundamental and more urgent question: what chance has this Christian human-

ism of being accepted and applied in a predominantly scientific and technological culture?

One of the most optimistic features of the Constitution is the assumption that the modern world of science to which it addresses itself is essentially humanistic in the same sense as the Council itself. And certainly there is no reason to question the basically humanistic orientation of the scientific *ideal*, or the scientific and technological world-view considered *in the abstract*. Certainly science and technology seek to make the world better for man, and they understood their task two and three hundred years ago with a more or less explicit consciousness that it was their mission to bring to man benefits which the older religious culture had so far been unable to obtain for him.

On the other hand, when we look at our scientific world in the concrete, in massively organized managerial societies, whether totalist or capitalist, we realize at once that science in the service of government quite easily forgets its concrete humanistic aspirations. The humanistic clichés are still pronounced with conviction, but they are not substantiated by results.

For example, we know that scientific research is now overwhelmingly government subsidized. But in the United States, with the federal budget for research and development at 15,000 million dollars or more – after a climb of 445 per cent in ten years – 87 per cent of this is devoted to defense, space and atomic energy. In other words 87 per cent is chiefly for military interests and 13 per cent for *all other* research. Only 7 per cent of this goes to health, education and welfare. Consideration of such figures as these will enable us to judge the humanism in government-sponsored technology, and this in a nation which, not unreasonably, considers itself one of the most humane on earth – as compared with some of the others.

Thus at a time when modern war is the greatest single threat to man – a threat to his very survival as a species – man is putting everything he has into war. Singular humanism!

Let us consider, moreover, what modern war means. This will give us more insight into the strong terms in which the Council condemned the arms race and the drift towards total war. It is of no use to appeal to “limited and non-nuclear war” as offering possibilities for just and “humane” warfare. Consider the proportion of civilian to military casualties in modern wars. Max Born, a Nobel Prize winner, stated that in the First World War 5 per cent of all fatal casualties were civilian, 95 per cent military. In such a case one might still resort to traditional moral arguments concerning the rightness of “permitting” some civilian casualties on the principle of double effect. In the Second World War, 48 per cent of the dead were civilians, 52 per cent military. Could one argue here that these civilians died “incidentally”? Did those who perished in Hamburg, Dresden, Coventry, Tokyo, die merely on the *margin* of limited and pinpointed military destruction? If we look further, to the Korean war, a “limited war” in which atomic weapons were not used, one finds that 84 per cent of the deaths were civilians, 16 per cent military. As someone remarked, we are now killing civilians directly and intentionally, while permitting the incidental death of soldiers. If we had figures for Vietnam, where entire areas are ruthlessly bombed on the mere suspicion that a few guerrillas might be hiding there, the proportion of civilian deaths would be even higher.

Everyone knows about women and children being burned to death in Vietnam by the frightful effects of napalm. Everyone is aware how often and how casually entire communities are wiped out on the mere suspicion that one or two guerrillas are hiding there – and even friendly villages are exterminated “by mistake.” All this is accepted with the most extraordinary stoicism on the part of comfortable and prosperous people who act as if this were simply the way things had to be. Is this the “humanism” of scientific and technological man? Then we can look forward to the world of Orwell’s

1984 and forget about the Council Constitution, unless we are willing to make some drastic changes. When our modern strategists speak of “megadeaths” they are obviously thinking of non-combatants, and nuclear war has made the distinction between combatant and non-combatant purely meaningless: except perhaps that in a nuclear war the men in the armed forces might conceivably be better protected and better provided for than the non-combatants. How solemn, in this context, is the affirmation of the Council: “Contemplating this melancholy state of humanity, the Council wishes *above all things else* to recall the permanent binding force of universal natural law and its all-embracing principles. Man’s conscience itself gives ever more emphatic voice to these principles. Therefore *actions which deliberately conflict with these same principles as well as orders commanding such actions are criminal, and blind obedience cannot excuse those who yield to them*” (n. 79).

Along with great humanistic possibilities, our world displays in fact the most frightful inhumanity, accepted without protest by the vast majority of men simply because they believe that this is the way things have to be. This inhumanity is not usually due to the scientists themselves who, we remember, have been very articulate in issuing warnings and protests ever since the atomic bomb was developed and even before it was used in war. It is due to a certain moral ignorance and callousness which has entered into the very fabric of technological society. For technology what matters is efficiency first. What to the moralist is a crime against humanity is to the strategist simply the most efficient solution to a technical problem. If “morality” is considered at all, it is merely in terms of public relations. The same general who advocated bombing North Vietnam back into the stone age has also advocated – and put into effect – such ideas before in Japan and Korea. He is on record as saying that in the end his solutions would be “less immoral” because “fewer people would be killed in the long run.” That is to say massive annihilation is simply the most practical way of winning immediately and stopping the war in its very beginning.

What is more practical is therefore “best” and what is “best” is more moral. Such argumentation implies a complete indifference to objective justice, to moral rights, and a total unconcern for the human person. The thousands – or millions – whose extermination solves this problem in strategy are simply not considered as human beings with rights, hopes, and aspirations for a better life. A logic that builds peace on cold war and deterrence is a logic of callous indifference to man and is therefore essentially an anti-humanism. In fact, we know that Hitler argued on these terms and that in the end history left its pronouncement on the efficacy of his reasoning.

Hence one of the great problems confronted by the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is this: the ideally scientific humanism of modern civilization tends to become a gross and destructive anti-humanism when science is taken over by men of power. (We need only refer here to the pseudo-scientific theories behind Hitler’s determination to wipe out the Jews.)

In the apocalyptic and destructive anti-humanism which we see to be so prevalent in our society, we recognize the “dark” aspect of the world condemned without ambiguity in the New Testament – the second of the three senses of the world which we considered at the beginning of this study. This is *not* the “Modern World” to which the Council speaks with encouragement and approval. It is the world which is the enemy of Christ and of man, a dark world of cruelty, cynicism and hate to which the Council has said “No” and said it unmistakably, while at the same time saying “Yes” to all the legitimate hopes of modern man.

Therefore we conclude that the task of the Christian in the modern world is by no means simply a naïve and wholesale acceptance of what claims to be a “scientific and technological culture” on its

face value and on its own terms. We must first of all distinguish between the true scientific humanism of science itself and the anti-humanism of science in the service of totalism, plutocracy and *realpolitik*.

Then, too, in considering science itself, we must also recognize that true scientific humanism is somewhat different from that on which the Council has insisted so strongly. Science, after all, is concerned with man in general, with the species, and with the individual human being in so far as he is another example of the general run of men. Science is quantitative and objective: in this lies its power and also its limitation, from a humanistic point of view. If true humanism, in the deepest sense of the word, centers not on human nature but on the human person, then there is a humanistic dimension which is out of reach of empirical and objective science. The person, in fact, cannot be empirically and objectively studied. It is true that scientific knowledge can prepare us to approach the person in a more valid, less deluded fashion but in the end the knowledge and understanding of the person is non-objective. That is to say that the human person cannot be known outside the empathy and identification which are provided only by love. We cannot truly know another person unless we can to some extent "become" that person, experience the subjectivity of the other person as our own. Science provides no way of doing this and offers precious little help in formulating any conclusion we might come to after having done it. It is here that the Church, with her perennial wisdom rooted in the Gospel of divine reconciliation and love, brings an absolutely essential element into the climate of modern scientific humanism. To attempt to build a world of peace, justice, order, plenty, stability and relative happiness on quantitative and technical methods alone is to court disaster, because in the process people will inevitably be treated as subjects and not as persons. The shortcomings of this are only too clear in urban civilization today.

The Church therefore must not only enter into conversation with modern science, and learn to co-operate with the scientist and technician in building a better world, but she must also enable the scientist and technician to retain a certain spiritual freedom and independence from the power structures which offer them such tempting rewards.

In a word, the Church must try to save modern man from his Faustian tendencies, and not become a sorcerer's apprentice herself while doing so. Such is the message of the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.