

TRANSCENDENCE AND SALVATION

In this brief discussion I am going to offer just two points for your consideration: 1) the general problem of transcendence that confronts modern man—and this more from the point of view of cultural rather than the strictly philosophical difficulties—and how this problem is aggravated by the Christian doctrine of salvation; 2) two Christian doctrines, viz., creation and sin, that may help toward an understanding of the problem raised.

It is commonly recognized that since the time of the Renaissance the western mind has undergone a scientific and technological revolution unique in human history. The key factor in this changeover from classical to the present scientific culture, it is generally agreed, is scientific methodology and the effect this has had on all areas of human knowledge and outlook. The empirical character of science, which confines itself rigorously to the data of sense and consciousness and refuses to validate anything beyond what can be empirically verified, has extended itself to all knowledge. Specifically for our problem, it denies any knowledge of the transcendent, since this latter cannot be verified by the methodology of experimental science. Briefly, this is the problem as the philosophers put it, especially those in the empirical tradition.

But there is a more significant change than the explosion of knowledge under scientific methodology: the revolution that has been going on within man himself, namely the changed outlook with which he views his relation to all spheres of his existence, his place in the universe, his relation to the world of nature, his awareness of his autonomy with regard to all else that falls within his purview of existence. Previous to the scientific revolution man was, in relation to the world of nature, *subject*. Now, with his increasing control over his biological and mental existence, and over the universe, he is increasingly conscious of his role as *creator*. This consciousness of human sovereignty over nature is, I say, the most significant feature of the modern revolution. In the past it could be said that

there would always be areas of existence that would be beyond human control, and therefore were the province of the deity. Now, however, this type of rearguard apologetic no longer has any valid intellectual position to which it can retreat. Man stands supreme, not only in the scientific and technological fields, but extends his creatorship to the economic, artistic, cultural and even moral spheres of life. Most of the gods who controlled human destiny have already made their exit from the scene of man's world; they are the concern of archeology, not of religion. May we not ask now whether the logic of this movement will not lead to a total *Gotterdammerung*, where man will stand subject to none, autonomous, the only transcendent with any meaning?

This revolution in human thought poses a problem especially for religion, because in the past religion provided the ideology which explained man in his position as subject by referring man and the cosmos to a transcendent principle outside man and beyond the universe itself. The problem for Christianity is particularly acute, because the essential message of Christianity proclaims that man is not only creature, dependent in his very existence on a transcendent principle, but further that he is in need of *being saved*. Divine graciousness alone (not human endeavor) is capable of saving him; and the only adequate human response is to recognize this human dependence and submit to God revealed in Christ. It seems difficult, if not downright useless, to preach to modern man who stands in the full confidence of his powers that he needs to be saved from anything.

Let us be clear about this fact: the self-sufficiency of man is not a doctrine of the anti-religious against which we must raise an apologetic. It is a fact, and part of the thinking of everyone of us. For the blessings of the fields we appeal to the agronomist; for a safe journey we rely on competent engineers and trained personnel; to ward off the danger from storms we keep the radio tuned to the weather reports. We ourselves, as part of the modern world, do not, like our ancestors, relate our problems and needs to transcendent principles for solutions we ourselves should be capable of creating.

The question remains, then: can transcendence, above all, a

doctrine of transcendence involving the need for salvation, continue in a world where man is aware of and is achieving his autonomy in all spheres of existence?

This, I suggest, is the real problem of transcendence and salvation *for our time*. Other ages may have asked the question how is salvation achieved outside the sacramental system. But we cannot ask it, certainly not in the simple form it was once posed. The context of the question has so radically altered, it is doubtful that this question is able even to be asked meaningfully yet.

Meanwhile, there is the critical problem for our time; and while I am not going to pretend any kind of thorough treatment in so short a space, I suggest that there are two doctrines, the biblical doctrine of creation and sin, which must be interpreted in a way consistent with the modern understanding of man, if the Christian is to avoid the impossible situation of trying to live in a two compartment mental world, that of believer and that of modern man.

Creation. I emphasize the *biblical* (and, therefore, Christian) doctrine of creation, because it is to be distinguished from all other concepts of creation. It is not to be simply equated, for example, with God as first cause of all things, or the coming-to-be of all things *ex nihilo*, or the first making of everything. Biblical faith sees creation as the manifestation of God through the word. Creation is manifestation of transcendence, the word spoken by God in the beginning. Manifestation implies more than an object—a being who is capable of listening and responding to the word. Creation, understood in this way as God's word spoken to man, says three things. First, by stating that everything comes from God alone, it stresses the essential goodness of all creation. The struggle the Fathers of the Church waged against dualism involved much more than maintaining one creative principle versus two. Manichaeism was but one form of that dark pessimism that crouches on the fringes of human consciousness waiting to reduce existence to a final absurdity. In holding to the essential goodness of creation, the early Church proclaims that existence itself had meaning, order and hope. Second, it denies any substantive share by the creature in the transcendent. Man is the expression of the divine will; he comes to be at the spoken word of God. For all man's capacity to transcend space,

time, experience, there remains a radical difference between himself and the transcendent. Third, it associates man with the work of creation: he is to work it and subdue it. This role is not a position he occupies, but an active function he exercises. Man is to move out over creation and be the image of the transcendent creative power that brought it into being.

Because of our own preoccupation with the creation accounts of Genesis, there is a tendency to throw out of focus the Old Testament's total doctrine on creation. We must, therefore, recall that in the Wisdom literature, the creation psalms and the prophetic literature, especially Second Isaiah, the theology of creation is deepened and expanded. Here creation is not an isolated event at the initial point of time, but clearly the beginning of salvation history, the first manifestation of God's mighty word. As Israel expanded its history, so it developed its concept of creation. The theology of the past, including the first bringing of things into being, is seen now as a preparation for the election and salvation of God's people. Second Isaiah grasps best of all the full sweep of the divine plan which looks to the future for completion and final meaning.

There has been a great deal of discussion, much of it fruitless, whether creation happened once or whether it continues throughout time. The Old Testament certainly in isolated passages speaks of creation in the beginning. But the total context of Old Testament doctrine places all history under the lordship of Jahweh who directs (*not* directly intervenes in) all history. Along with this conviction of faith two others are implied: (1) man plays his role as ruler, and (2) creation looks forward toward completion and fulfillment.

We must be careful not to make biblical doctrine say what was in fact realized explicitly centuries later. But, it is certainly less in accord with the mind of Scripture to make creation a static scene on which each man plays his role for a little while and God periodically intervenes, and more consonant with it to see creation as heading toward its fulfillment with man as ruler, working it, exploring it, developing it and bringing it under his control. The conclusion to such an understanding seems clear. If we today confront a world where the secular is becoming rapidly desacralized, where man's science, arts, politics and expanding control are achieving their

rightful autonomy, we ought to welcome this development—not because the facts force us to do so, but because a sound understanding of our biblical faith demands it.

A few words about sin and salvation. In one respect, creation and salvation are inextricably linked biblically. To say one is to say the other, since salvation is the ongoing process and its completion initiated by creation. However, Scripture does not speak of man ontologically but in his ethical conditions, his situation before God which it calls sin. Under the symbol of covenant, God has remained firm, Scripture says, but man has cut himself off, alienated himself from God. Reconciliation is made possible by the second first man, Christ, and each man can through faith in him cancel the estrangement, join God's own people, rededicate himself so that the saving process can proceed. Is there a basic incompatibility between this Christian view of man and the current view of modern scientific man who feels no need of renewal, but who starts where he is and goes ahead toward his own fulfillment? Is modern thought on man open to a synthesis with the Christian doctrines on sin and salvation? Certainly not, if man's life before God is preached solely in terms of a tally of actions that mean either performance or violation—a kind of nine inning summary of moral hits and errors. Sin must be seen as an alienation from God, a shutting God off from one's central concern of life, a pattern of life that a man tries to live cut off from the roots of his being that gives existence and value to what he is. And salvation must be seen as a rejoining of self to that which gives meaning and purpose to existence. Not just by emotion for that is not where the self is; not just by intellectual assent, which can be detached and impersonal; not just by the will, which could be delusion and slavery—but by all of these, by the whole self.

But, if the doctrines of sin and salvation need purification, so, too, the assumed absolutes and the confidence of the scientific mind need reassessment. I think that we are beginning to see a renewed awareness of the contingency of human existence in the frustration so many feel, the drop-outs, the protesters, the alienated. Never has man brought so many structures under his control, yet at this very moment he seems to be losing the meaning of

his own existence. No doubt some of today's uncertainty is accounted for by cultural transition. But in any age man will inevitably reflect on his own contingency, find himself suspended between being and non-being and ask why he is rather than is not, inquire into the meaning of his own personal existence, wonder whether the values of life that he has seen on a horizontal plan do not also have a vertical dimension that give their final meaning and perspective.

Such a man is open to the question of faith and salvation. He will never have to deny the autonomy of his secular activities, but simply not to make particular values or their totality into an absolute, and to relate all values to the perspective of the transcendent. Conversely, Christian faith will not speak to him and will not save him if it conceives its function to fill in the gaps in the universe as was once done, or to compete with the professional in secular activities, or to substitute secular values, e.g., social justice for its own radical message—belief in a unifying transcendent principle, another dimension that gives meaning and purpose to all existence.

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