

† Sacramental Humanism

Regaining control of economic, social and political structures is a key task for which we need more than revolutionary techniques and global strategies.

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† CHANGE of the mind, like growth of the body, is generally imperceptible. As the body sloughs off cells and forms new ones, so the mind quietly casts aside thoughts and ideas and replaces them by others. Only occasionally — at pubescence and middle age, for instance — are there more dramatic changes.

Theologically, I seem during this past decade to have passed through pubescence and come into a cantankerous and boisterous adolescence. Not that I like too much to talk theology. My deliverance from childhood — that is, from Western tutelage — has taught me above all the wisdom of silence. That way, one's contribution to the cacophony of nonsense is at least drastically reduced.

I

A father-figure comes in handy for the adolescent's discovery of self-identity — especially if the figure is dominant and powerful enough to make one's revolt look all the more heroic. For me, Augustine of Hippo was such a figure. What a release it was to learn, in 1959-60, that he was the spring and fount of all creative Western theology, and then to make the gratifying discovery that this source was poisoned! I had already discovered that, as an Eastern Christian, I did not even need to call Augustine a saint. His name appears neither on our liturgical calendar nor in our manuals of theology. The Eastern tradition had wisely ignored him and felt none the poorer for it. What if my supervisor at Oxford insisted that only Western thinkers like Augustine could think problems through? It was this well known professor's incapacity to understand Eastern thought, together with his adoption of Augustinianism as a standard by which to measure the doctrines of others, that prompted my revolt. (I refer to J. N. D. Kelly, whose *Early Christian Doctrines* summarizes his theological views.)

Quite seriously, I believe today that Western theology cannot reorient itself until it takes a second look at some of Augustine's basic ideas. This is not the place to enter into a full criticism. Let me merely indicate five areas where re-examination could reveal basic flaws in Augustine's thought.

First, Augustine's low view of matter leads him to

a low view of the incarnation of our Lord. Taking his cue from the early Athanasius, the bishop thought of the incarnate body primarily as a come-on drawing us to contemplation of loftier spiritual realities. The material body of our Lord was but an instrument of revelation.

Second, and probably because of the same vestigial Manicheism which undervalued matter, Augustine had a low view of this world. The polarity in his thinking between the *civitas mundi* and the *civitas Dei* can only be termed alarming. Western theology is still learning to correct this basic error which has had so many consequences.

Third, because his view of the human element in the incarnation is so low, he holds a low view of man. By taking sin as almost constitutive of human nature, Augustine led the Western church astray — toward denial of the freedom and dignity of all men, Christian or non-Christian. He makes man so utterly dependent and slavish in relation to God that God is distorted into an arbitrary dictator like the Caesars — a petty God whose glory has to be vindicated at the expense of the glory of man. But only a God who can be glorified in the glory of man is worth worshiping.

Fourth, Augustine's soteriology went wrong because of his preoccupation with individual and personal sin, original and actual. Salvation is more than deliverance from sin. It is making man like God, bringing him into the fullness of humanity. We today are caught in a negative and individual view of salvation.

Fifth, by his failure to understand the sacramental principle as integral to the human condition and to the incarnation (man is a citizen of two worlds), Augustine contributed to a substantial distortion of the sacraments as accommodations of spiritual realities to suit the grossness of man. His misconception of the ordained ministry is also a result of his misunderstanding of the true relation of word to sacrament.

These five points (I state them in shorthand) are crucial for the understanding of what Christianity is all about, and my change of mind in the past ten years can be said to focus on them. Any dialogue between East and West must begin on these points, and we may find that, Christianity being after all an Eastern religion, the ancient Eastern approach Augustine deviated from still has much to say to us.

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“Augustine will survive your criticism,” another all-knowing professor told me some time ago, without making any attempt to understand what I was saying. Augustine probably will survive, for he deserves to. He was a great genius, a spiritual and intellectual giant. My purpose is not to destroy his reputation but to seek the renewal of theology in a truly ecumenical context, rather than in the shallow atmosphere and narrow confines of a secular urban-technological civilization in an Augustinian framework. It is the survival of the Western interpretation of the Christian faith that I have grave doubts about.

My reaction against Augustinianism did not lead me to a superficial liberal theology (as it did many in the West in the earlier decades of our century). I now subscribe to a sacramental and ecclesiological humanism.

II

A second major change in my mind has been a growing skepticism about the power of words. The printing press seems to have destroyed the power of

How My Mind Has Changed

THIRTEENTH ARTICLE IN A SERIES

the written word, and excesses in speech-making destroyed the power of the spoken word long ago.

The theologian sometimes thinks that the problem of the church today is the lack of the right words — in short, of a relevant theology. But the world is not waiting for new words; it is waiting for Godot — a pattern of life, a type of personality, a way of living, being, doing, thinking. It is our professional bias that makes us think a new theology will solve our problems. Only God is going to solve our problems. Perhaps, however, a new pattern of living the Christian life may open the way.

This faulty reliance on words and forms of words is found not only in the West. Here in India too many people talk and talk and talk about an “indigenous” theology as the cure-all — but never produce one. For a fresh theology has to come out of a new way of living the Christian life in Indian conditions. Such a new way of life is both the matrix and the authentication of a new theology anywhere. Young people especially are looking for a person or a type that is authentic, not for new words.

What a misunderstanding it is to think that communication takes place mainly by words! Voice and ear and even the conscious mind form but part of the communication system between human beings. Psychologists have been long at work on the role of “kinesic and paralinguistic information” in communication. Our actions, our gestures, the very lines on our faces, all communicate.

Thus I have come to believe that being and doing are more important than speaking in communication. And anyone can see how that belief in itself devalues theology considerably.

III

A third area in which my mind has changed in the past ten years is in regard to the dialectic between structural relations and personal relations. I had never quite seen how the larger framework of society substantially affected personality. But by observing the faces of people of various nationalities and religious groups, I began to see that structural values and national ethos can change a person's face and also that a facial change is always the result of a change in personality. This conclusion was reinforced as I watched those of my own countrymen who had spent five or six years studying abroad. I discovered that each country sojourned in produced a different type of personality. Even the particular institution attended made a difference.

But more important for me was the “middle level” — that between large structural relationships, as in the nation, and intimate personal relationship, as in the family. The small group, in which intimacy and a degree of independence are combined and structural relations are consciously accepted — such now seems to me the milieu in which the new humanity can be most effectively shaped, both as a social structure and as “individual” persons. Such a group must be a school for its members, a place where work, worship, study, play, property rela-

tions, recreation and repose are all suitably balanced in order to shape a new type of personality which will work actively for the transformation of society. More than any new theology, we need many such pioneering, committed, socially alert groups.

IV

A fourth area in which my mind has changed is closely related to the third. I have come to a new — or rather, a very old — understanding of freedom. Freedom in the positive sense means creativity that is spontaneous, not caused by external pressures; it is the capacity to conceive the good in new forms and then to create that good. To be free also means not to be directed by one's passions and ambitions or deterred from action by false inhibitions and complexes. Freedom is something given to man so that, while being part of creation, he can himself become a creator and alter the shape, the direction and the meaning of creation.

The fresh insight for me lay in understanding freedom in a structural context. Not that I had chosen sides in the argument between Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean-Paul Sartre, between structuralism and existentialism. On the contrary, I saw that individual freedom is inseparable from the freedom of the collective (the community) to choose its own goals as a society and to work to achieve them. Ultimately it is humanity that must be free. The measure of freedom that a Gandhi, a Sartre, a Jean Genet, a St. Francis is able to acquire is but an incentive to society to seek its own freedom as part of the human community. Sartre and Genet go wrong simply because they have insisted on their individual freedom without in the same act choosing also the freedom of mankind. The individual quest for freedom takes place in an alienated framework. It can bring only misery so long as my intention is to establish my identity over against "the masses." No matter if I become one of the masses provided that thereby the masses would become free; for in their freedom — i.e., in their capacity to conceive, choose and attain the good — I shall find my own fulfillment. My fairly total abandonment of the two extremes of existentialist and structuralist philosophy and theology may be understood in this context.

V

A fifth area of significant change is in my understanding of mission and missions. For a long time I had suspected that modern Catholic and Protestant missions were expressions of the cultural and economic aggressiveness of the West — though probably a certain aggressiveness has always characterized Christian mission. However, during the past ten years I have had occasion to "watch the show" from inside, and my negative reaction to the mission of the Western church has developed to a high pitch.



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The basic mistake of Western mission is not so much cultural aggression as missionary colonialism. Never before in church history has mission been as completely institutionalized as in the years since 1500 which saw the expansion of the West. In the previous centuries when a missionary went to another country to evangelize he preached the gospel, established the church and probably died there. There was no need for a second generation of missionaries, though occasionally a teacher or a bishop might visit the mission field.

But this idea that missionaries must go in every generation, that they should be organized, their finances looked after, life and medical insurance provided, cars, bungalows and compounds furnished — all that seems to me to kill mission. Today it is economic imperialism or neocolonialism that is the pattern in missions. Relief agencies and mission boards control the younger churches through the purse-strings. Foreign finances, ideas and personnel still dominate the younger churches and stifle their spontaneous growth.

My disgust with this pattern has made me suspect even the ecumenical movement. Catholic and Protestant seem to be collaborators in this neocolonialist domination and Western cultural imperialism in the ecclesiastical sphere. So now I say, "The mission of the church is the greatest enemy of the gospel." I began to say it 15 years ago, rather softly. Very rarely did I find any creative response. Therefore I have decided to be rude and rough about this matter. I still do not have much hope that the Western churches (or even the dependent non-Western churches) will see the point, because to see

it is to be pushed to most drastic changes in church life both in the West and in the rest.

VI

A sixth area in which my mind has changed in the past ten years is that of the relation between sacrament and society. Today I can accept only a sacramental-ecclesiological social ethics. The stuff that comes out of ecumenical conferences claiming to be Christian social ethics bores me no end. I can understand human society only on the analogy of the church. My notions of social justice come from my understanding of the communion of saints. And I can understand the ministry of the church in the world only in terms of a fresh understanding of the sacramental principle and the sacramental ministry. But how can I even indicate here the scope of my book-length thoughts in these areas?

Finally, my mind has changed in relation to the nature and destiny of man. I now firmly believe that the destiny of man is to be like God in every respect except that of being a noncreature; i.e., God is the source of his own being, but man's being will always be derived from God. Yet in love, wisdom and power, as well as in holiness — which is after all something more than the combination of these three — man must become like God. That alone gives me a new perspective for understanding the human vocation on earth and beyond. Again, a book-length idea.

Without being pedantic and academic, one could say that what God has done in Christ has consequences for all men. To use Roman Catholic terminology, all men, Christians and non-Christians, are

in the realm of "supernatural grace" stemming from the incarnation. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ make a difference for the history of the world and the destiny of mankind. All the secular ideas and forces smacking of salvation that are in vogue today come from the Christ event and the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Man's attempt to build a tower of Babel was reprimanded and frustrated by God. Today, God allows man to build many towers of Babel — to go to extremes of *hubris* and blasphemy, to defy the divine and erect a secular city. That is, man always goes to the edge of catastrophe — "brinkism" is his delight. Yet God has lengthened man's rope, so that even in the misuse of freedom he can travel far. Will God finally let go? He well may. Catastrophe is quite conceivable, and even the resurrection of Christ (*pace* Moltmann and Pannenberg) does not provide insurance against it. For the same Lord predicted both his own resurrection and the apocalyptic denouement of creation. Nor does the fact of hope (*à la* Bloch) provide a sufficient basis for the notion that things will work out for mankind in history.

VII

In other words, there is no basis for the liberal hope of building the urban technological paradise. There was a time when I thought that the movement toward the Kingdom of God and the movement toward the urban technological society would merge somewhere. I now have second thoughts. Certainly neither the affluent society with its pressure for consumption and the resultant bloated egos, nor the regimented society with its repression of so much that is creative in man, shows us the way to paradise. Alienation and nuclear destruction are twin giants threatening mankind.

These days I think of disarmament and reconciliation as the proximate goals which would lead us in the direction of the Kingdom. Science and technology now have their own momentum and can go on without assistance from the church.

Disarmament and reconciliation are integrally related in my mind. Alienation should be tackled at all its four levels: the chasm that separates urban-technical man from God should be bridged; man must regain control of the structures — economic, social and political — that now hold him prisoner; nations, groups and individuals must learn again to trust and have compassion for each other; man must find himself, not in a whirl of activity but in the depths of silence. These four elements together I call "disalienation."

A concrete place to begin is the third area — the disalienation of nations and groups. Here disarmament is to be seen as a positive program. Centralized and widely controlled power should eliminate group conflicts, and resources now wasted in build-

ing up arms reserves should be diverted to science, education, the elimination of poverty and the enhancement of human creativity. Only in trying to build a united and unified humanity can we rediscover the way to God as well as our own being. Regaining control of economic, social and political structures is a key task for which we need more than revolutionary techniques and global strategies. Only a corps of men and women, distributed all over the

world, ready to labor and die for the cause, can pioneer the movement for disalienation. And the spiritual dynamism for such a pioneering movement (such as the communist movement once was) can come today only out of a more profound understanding of Semitic Christianity.

I have made no attempt here to be systematic, thorough or detailed. The mind keeps changing, and changing still.