

The Revolution That Is Christendom

It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled. —2 Corinthians 5:18–19

JUNE 3, 1781, was a Sunday, the first Sunday of the month when the "Holy Sacrament" was customarily distributed. James Boswell recounted his going with Samuel Johnson to Southill Church near Mr. Dilly's. When Boswell noticed that Johnson did not receive Communion, he inquired why. "I had not thought of it," was Johnson's curt reply. But Boswell felt that there were other and more spiritual reasons, that Johnson "did not choose to approach the altar without a previous preparation. . . ." Boswell next discussed the three views about the types of preparation for the Sacrament that were then controverted within the Church.

Boswell went on to record the further conversations of this day. The opinion of a learned bishop whom both Boswell and Johnson knew—his view about there being "merit in religious faith"—was brought up. Johnson averred that there was indeed some merit in the good bishop's position: "Why, yes, Sir," Johnson went on, "the most licentious man, were hell open before him, would not take the most beautiful strumpet in his arms. We must, as the Apostle says, live by faith, not by sight." St. Paul, no doubt, has never been quoted in a more quaint context.

This vivid conversation led Boswell and Johnson to the topic of "original sin" and "the atonement made by our Saviour." Further conversation ensued, which Johnson wanted Boswell to record. "With respect to original sin, the inquiry is

not necessary," Johnson held, "for whatever is the cause of human corruption, men are evidently and confessedly so corrupt, that all the laws of heaven and earth are insufficient to restrain them from crimes." Johnson's final comment on such theological topics was succinct: "The peculiar doctrine of Christianity is, that of an universal sacrifice, and perpetual propitiation. Other prophets only proclaimed the will and the threatenings of God. Christ satisfied his justice."

On the occasion of the Jefferson Lecture, which he gave in 1989, the novelist Walker Percy was asked about using in public words such as God, religion, sin, soul, and Jesus Christ. He remarked that the novelist has to learn to speak of such subjects most circumspectly before an educated audience since today's intelligentsia can no longer even hear such words with comprehension or sympathy. "The Catholic novelist has to be very careful," Percy cautiously maintained. "He has to be underhanded, deceitful, and damn careful how he uses the words of religion, which have fallen into disuse and almost become obscenities."² Similar to Plato or to Leo Strauss, one must use "myth" or "secret writing" even to hint at the truth.

At the end of the eighteenth century two learned men could talk knowingly and believably of original sin, atonement, and communion without the slightest hesitation. By the end of the twentieth century, however, such topics must be spoken

of guardedly. It almost makes one doubt any theory of progress. Obscenities are blared almost everywhere in the modern world with the protection of the law and the promotion of the culture, while faith must be obscured. In the eighteenth century, a strumpet could bring up questions of eternal punishment in the mind of a licentious man, whereas in the twentieth century she is hardly recognizable as anything other than a bearer of human rights in an ancient and honorable profession. The licentious man, on the other hand, supports some of the most widely read and powerful publications in our society. It might be concluded from this record of two hundred years that Christianity is indeed in the process of disappearing, at least in the souls of the more literate (and licentious) members of our society. Whether this phenomenon is more of a problem for society's literate members or for Christians—they are not always the same people—remains to be seen.

Christianity does not claim to be either a parochial or a time-bound faith, even though it began at an identifiable time and in a specific place, in the reign of Augustus Caesar, when the whole world was at peace. Indeed, Christianity does not hold that it ultimately began in "time" at all but that it came to be in time through the birth of a child, an event prepared by other events described in the Old Testament. In Christianity's understanding of itself, the elements of time and eternity are essential, as well as proper and necessary. Christianity began as an event, not as an idea or as a doctrine. And when one event happens, others follow from it to the end, even to the end of the world. Christianity necessarily involves ideas and doctrines because men must explain what the events are about and what they mean. An event without a human word will never appear within the human horizon. The results of events are words. Words in turn lead to events: "In the Beginning was the Word. . . ."

Moreover, Christianity is intended to be, as Samuel Johnson recognized, a universal faith. Christianity is expected to

reach, through the human and divine agency of its members, each human being at the core reality in his soul, at the reality of the choice where each person makes himself to be what he chooses to be within the initial givenness of his being. Christianity is designed precisely for one in whatever kingdom or regime someone may be found in, in the best and in the worst, and in those in between wherein most men have lived their days whether happily or sadly.

If we estimate that some ninety billion people have already existed on this planet, and that only some five billion of these are still alive, the fact remains that existing man on earth, in the Christian view, is to explain and direct himself to the transcendent being, to God, from which each person came and to which he is to return. This drama of choice is what we observe in the lives of each of the members of the human race. Nothing else really matters; everything else is the background and worldly context of this choiceful "*commedia*," as Dante significantly called it. The this-worldly mission of Christianity is wholly secondary to this essential task which, on its doctrinal and ritual side, is nothing less than its seeking to explain to each man his purpose and his destiny.

There are not, then, two classes of human beings, one intended to reach God and one not. All are indeed made for the same purpose and destiny. But because of human freedom, some may in fact choose not to reach God. This central fact of choice was described already in the fifth century by St. Augustine in the "City of God." Two cities in fact existed, not one, because the power of choice so radically defines what human beings ultimately are. Whether any individual human beings do not reach God, we do not know. The veil of death ever leaves mankind in doubt, and in hope, and, in some theologies, even in despair.

To believe that some, if not many, are eternally lost, however, is not required by the orthodox tradition. It is only necessary to believe that if any are lost, it is by their own choice. Essentially we must believe

that the possibility of man's radical separation from the reality intended for him by God does exist. In a negative sense, here lies the ultimate foundation of human dignity, the guarantee that man's own actions are not finally meaningless. Classic optimism maintains on its own premises—they are not Christian premises—that a God may *not* even threaten the most dire of consequences to free man because of his own actions in the world. But this "optimistic" view is precisely the most anti-human of philosophies for it removes any seriousness for the human experience. Doctrinally speaking, the denial of the teaching on hell is the other side of the elimination of any real significance for human action, for its ultimate seriousness before being itself.³

The first, second, and now the impending third millennium of Christianity underscore in retrospect the improbable fact not of Christianity's demise but of its strength, its curious lastingness in this world. Whatever else might be said about Christianity, what is most obvious is that it should not still be here at all. Christianity is too old still to exist. By any secular norm—scientific, historiographical, or sociological—this organized faith needs something other than itself to remain what it is. Christian faith itself recognizes in the symbolic keys of Peter a guarantee that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The immediate thing to be explained about Christianity is not whether it will continue to survive, but why has it lasted so long, longer than any other organized institution in human history. There may be scattered tribes and faiths perhaps older than Christianity, to be sure, though their organization is mostly blood and family, not the product of a rational and willed system. But all the institutionalized nations themselves have come and most have gone or have been so radically transformed that they really are not continuous with what went before them. Scientifically, Christianity should not still exist.

The interesting thing about Christianity is not how much it has changed, but

how much it has not changed. Indeed, this is the most interesting and important thing about it. For if Christianity actually "changed," it would cease to be what it is, which is what makes it worth knowing about in the first place. And whatever we might think of doctrinal development, doctrine does not, strictly speaking, "change." Unless Christianity is in some fundamental sense the same as it was from the beginning, then its universal claim is simply non-existing. The claim of Christianity is also a claim of truth, of a truth that is the same yesterday and the same forever, as St. Paul would have it. If Christianity does not make this claim to truth, then it simply has no real reason to exist.

In one sense we can consider Christianity's longevity to be caused by its adaptability. Continuation of principle and rite do not militate necessarily against variety of symbol or wording. But the more profound problem has to do rather with Christianity's constancy within time. The Nicene Creed is still recited. Communion is still distributed as in the time of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, or of Samuel Johnson, or of Walker Percy. The Gospel of John is still read. Sins are still confessed. The Ten Commandments and the two Great Commandments are still there to be observed or broken by those who affirm their validity.

Of itself, Christianity says that when these rites and doctrines cease, it will cease. Christianity assumes that all other institutions will pass away. The most dangerous threat to universal culture is that Christianity *will* adapt itself to its surrounding norms rather than remaining itself. The ultimate worth of Christianity is that it maintains a newness and freshness able to transcend each nation or people without denying its respective worth. Christianity does not consider that this capacity which it has demonstrated about itself in history as an existential fact arises from the strength or genius of individual Christians themselves. Christianity's persistence is not considered to be the product of the genius and tenacity of individual

Christians using their own unaided powers. Thus, in the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal could write in his *Pensées*, "The Church is in an excellent state, when it is sustained by God only" (#860).

John Paul II has often in recent years spoken of the coming "Third Millennium" of Christianity. Are we to look on it as apocalypse or hope, or both? If we ask whether Christianity is a "success," again we have to ask whether it is a success in whose terms? Those of that modernity that has defined itself in opposition to Christianity? Those of Christianity itself? What would a "successful" Christianity look like? St. Augustine seems to have suggested that as the world gets older, fewer and fewer believers will be found. And Augustine did not necessarily think that this meant that Christianity was thereby "unsuccessful." Christianity was to be what it was, and only then could it be called successful in its own terms. But even if more and more Christians were to be found, would that mean necessarily that the ultimate purpose of Christianity was being achieved? Faith *and* works—the Reformation struggle was no slight matter.

What is the relation between the nations, cultures, and religions of the world and Christianity? Again, is this the proper question to ask of Christianity? Christianity is not, in its own view, hostile to philosophy, except to a philosophy that presents itself as a humanly closed system, which is in fact the case with not a few. Indeed, Christianity argues that it alone is compatible with a true philosophy of *what is*. In the thirteenth century, Aquinas also remarked that it is impossible to err without embracing some truth in the process. This truth is why all religions and philosophies have something in common, something universal, to talk about, if they will.

Does Christianity have an inner-worldly mission? That is to say, is there a right order of the world and is it the purpose of Christianity to establish it? Are the philosophers not necessary and are the politicians and craftsman without their own insight? So strongly has modern cul-

ture based itself on the condition of man in the world, however, that it often can see no other criterion but its own, presupposed to nothing but itself, by which to judge anything, including religion.

Is there a "Kingdom of God" on earth? And if so, is that what Christianity is primarily about, as so many, even Christians, seem to want to believe? Is Christianity intended to "improve the world?" Or, perhaps better, will it improve the world? And what might the criterion of this "improvement" be? Does faith judge culture or does culture judge faith? Could the immortal souls all be gained and the world lost? And if so, would Christianity then have proved itself to be a failure?

Do Christians consequently still repeat the disturbing words, "What doth it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose the life of his immortal soul?" This was the question that St. Ignatius in the sixteenth century used to repeat to the young Parisian college student Francis Xavier, who, when he decided he did not want the profit of the world, proceeded to go to the Orient because he wanted to see that this religion was known not merely in Europe but all over the world. Is it legitimate to challenge the distant nations with a belief that is not theirs, not their own construction?

Or do the nations, like the Athenians at the trial of Socrates, have the raw power to decide what adherence to their own gods might mean? Was this Xavier a fool? Or was what he brought needed by those to whom he came even if they did not know it? Do the nations ever really know the destiny of the citizens who make up their structures? On the surface, the rise and decline of nations and civilizations seem continuous and without particular significance. If the purpose of man's existence on earth is that he live in some perfect, complete, self-sufficient regime, must we not conclude that the question of happiness and meaning for the vast majority of mankind who have ever lived has simply been in vain? Most people most of the time have lived in terrible regimes or

terrible conditions, and even the best regimes are few and their days are also distressed.

But it was probably not until the nineteenth century, with its vast missionary works, that Christianity reached the far corners of the earth. Did it come there as an alien power, as so many think? Or did it come, as it thinks of itself, to dwell within every culture because there are universal questions that all people ask which are not at all culture-bound? Can nations be "saved?" Has the Enlightenment so influenced us that we can no longer ask any questions but inner-worldly ones? Near the end of the Gospel of Mark, the disciples are told to go forth and preach to all creation what they had seen and heard.

Christendom is itself invaded by the older religions—by Islam, by the Chinese, by the Hindus. Science and democracy, what are these? What are their origins? If Christianity is not universal, surely these latter are? Can science and democracy exist outside of Christendom? Are certain fundamental doctrines and practices implicitly or explicitly necessary in every civilization? Did science and democracy arise in the West by accident, as a kind of historic chance? Or did they arise there because of the peculiar nature of Christianity itself? Is faith necessary for science? And is there a natural law which even the Christians did not invent?

The most radical thing that one can say today—radical in the sense of opposed in principle to the commonly accepted norms of contemporary discourse—is that, in the end, it does not make any ultimate difference where one lives, in what regime or society. True, some polities are better than others, that is, if there are right and wrong ways of being human. If there is no right way to be a human, then the principal question of political philosophy, of the way men organize themselves, namely, what is the best regime, will not be asked, because all regimes will be equal in principle. In such a case, we could not compare or judge regimes, only describe them, celebrate their structures, whatever it is they do. We could not go to all the nations with anything, the worst regime is as

legitimate as the best because there is no way to tell them apart.

Yet, it is true. The connection between souls and regimes is not such that regimes, though they too are of the soul, answer the deepest questions of souls. The Kingdom of God will also be populated by men from the worst existing regimes. Grace abounds. And we must likewise assume that the realm of hell will find within its unhappy confines many of those from the best earthly regimes. What does this mean with regard to Christianity in the third millennium? It means that Christianity must continue to speak to souls over the heads of (or with the cooperation of) existing regimes. Would it not be best, then, as so many late twentieth-century Christians seem to maintain in their easy accommodation with the aftereffects of the Enlightenment, to work to establish the best regimes? Religion ought to be politics.

The effort to establish the best regime in this world has invariably been the locus of the most dangerous opponents to what is human in the modern era. Christianity maintains that it has at its disposal tools that are not available to or for the polity, even though, since creation and redemption are a single whole, right order with the divinity will entail right order with the polity. Faith and reason do not contradict each other. The fact is that good citizenship does not entail good belief, and without good belief one will not be saved. Christianity takes the human intellect seriously, and the function of the intellect is to know the truth. One can have good belief and bad practice, so that one must believe and act. In other words, everyone has both intellect and will and these faculties constitute our unique selves and relationships, the ones that are really ours.

Josef Pieper has made the following remark about Christianity, about its complexity and its simplicity, about what it essentially is, if it be itself:

According to the theologians, the essence of the Christian faith can be summed up in two words. Those two words are Trinity and Incarnation. The "universal teacher" [St. Thomas] of Christendom has said that the

whole content of the truth of Christianity can be reduced to the dogma of the Trinitarian God and the dogma that man participates in the life of God through Christ.⁴

There is a modern reluctance to admit that the purpose of man is, in part, to clarify what it is that he is, what God is, so that his intellect becomes more of itself by seeking to know, even to know the divinity.

Behind the reluctance to acknowledge the purpose of the human intellect one finds both a skepticism and a kind of purity that would have us give up the effort. However, it is true that we will not be able ever to define what God is in exhaustive human terms. Spiritual beings have this in common, that their capacity to know is that faculty that they share in some fashion with each other, so that not to seek to know and not to define the doctrines would be to fail to exercise one of the given faculties. And since it would be precisely the highest faculty that is doubted, it would mean that man fails in a dignity that most constitutes his being. The failure of intellect thus is also a failure to follow man's natural way to God.

God transcends our formulas. We want not just a definition of God, but God Himself. An existentialist theory of knowledge is not one that ignores this need. In fact, it is one that rests on it in its very operation. The same reality may indeed be explained in different languages and from different aspects rooted in the reality of its being. But contradictory explanations are not possible. The human mind is not the infinite mind, but it is a mind, and in this sense it must confront what it knows of the Godhead. The argument among religions and philosophies about what is true even in logic must recognize that not all positions are equally true. A small error in the beginning leads to a large error in the end, as Aristotle had already observed. It makes a difference both to civilization and to each person which understanding of God is true. This means that the Hobbesian effort in modernity to remove from the public order a discussion of the highest things in the

name of civil peace is itself a betrayal of human dignity.

The city is not the location of the discussion of the highest things which we know of the divinity. But the city can make such discussions impossible or difficult. This is why the problem of the relation of poetry to philosophy and also to politics is and remains the theoretical beginning of all human effort to relate divinity to man. Since man does transcend the city, then the city cannot and must not substitute itself for what transcends it. Indeed, the main alternative to God in the modern world is the state itself, particularly the state that identifies itself as the instrument or the completion of what is known by man and of what is good for man. It is true that the wars of religion have not resolved the problems that exist between religions, each of which claim the truth. This is why we have and ought to have differing regimes in which at least some possibility of genuine philosophical or religious truth is possible. The way of persuasion, as Plato argued, remains for all polities.

In the twenty-first century, no doubt, the question of the relation of man to the cosmos and to the other beings of this earth will arise in an acute form because of the problem of the transfer of at least some human and animal life outside of this planet for a more or less permanent residence. The problem of the twenty-first century, moreover, will not be one in which the main condition of mankind will be scarcity but abundance. Computers, fusion, further advances of knowledge and technique will free more and more men and women for the leisured life to which Aristotle referred as the true end of human earthly existence. Whether man is more dangerous to himself in scarcity or abundance remains to be seen, though Aristotle himself had already warned that the most probable answer would be abundance—would be, in fact, in philosophy.

The question then remains: What sort of existence is this which mankind has been offered in this world? What is to be done with it? If we distinguish an individ-

ual existence which will itself transcend the destiny of any earthly city or culture from the purpose of the world itself, we can see that the two questions are not the same. Man is higher than the state, even though man is by nature a political animal. We must assume in Christian terms that the Incarnation will remain a permanent reality of the Godhead. Hence, St. Paul's remark that creation itself is groaning for redemption suggests that the destiny of the world is related to the destiny of man. Man is not an afterthought of the world, but the world, in spite of its immensity, is an afterthought to the existence of the rational being, the image of God. The ultimate configurations of the world will depend on man, on his choice and technique. But the world does not constitute man's principal choice, which is that of the city he chooses ultimately to join, the City of God or the city of man.

Each human being has a soul which transcends the world. The nature and the condition of this soul are such that mankind will always be disturbed by man's being insofar as he is not devoted to the openness to which this soul is directed. The twentieth century has seen the alternatives to God elaborated in their most perfect forms. Eric Voegelin has put it well:

At the extreme of the revolt in consciousness, "reality" and the "Beyond" become two separate entities, two "things," to be magically manipulated by suffering man for the purpose of either abolishing "reality" altogether and escaping into the "Beyond," or of forcing the order of the "Beyond" into "reality." The first of the magic alternatives is preferred by the gnostics of antiquity, the second one by the modern gnostic thinkers.⁵

Christianity is not gnostic. It does not want the reality of what is less than God to disappear into God or into nothingness. This is why it can assimilate the classic doctrine of the immortality of the soul into its own doctrine of Resurrection. On the other hand, Christianity cannot accept the view that the purpose of human and cos-

mic existence is merely itself or its own making. That spiritual core of man, which includes his connection to all of the cosmos through his own body, longs for that which will fulfill it. The civilizational purpose of Christianity in the twenty-first century is that this longing should not be forgotten or unattended to, even though what man is transcends the world.

Jean-Marie Lustiger, the Polish-born Cardinal of Paris, has written:

All the world's problems are basically spiritual problems and they stem from the temptations of Christianity. From this comes the inevitable conclusion that if the world's problems are spiritual problems, then there are Christian answers to the world crisis. I do not derive a sort of spiritual imperialism from this but I point to the evidence for a paradox: the main problems which constitute our world crisis (starvation, underdevelopment, wars, etc.) are capable of a technical solution. We could, *if we really wanted*, feed the whole of humanity, develop all the Third World countries, and stop the arms race. But in fact, if we do not have the technical means for this at hand, it is because we do not really want these ultimately desirable objectives. So what is making them impossible to reach now is something in our own hearts and wills.⁶

However correct in its essential point, this position is perhaps too one-sided. The problem is not just in the hearts of Christians. It is also in the hearts of those who resist—individually, politically, or academically—listening to its reality or living the spiritual means that it proposes.

Ultimately the real issue is found in the reluctance to admit that the way to accomplish the technical means for achieving these laudable ends requires a denial, in whole or in part, of the validity and worth of certain historic ideologies and religions. This latter spiritual confrontation is the real nature of the struggle of Christianity in the twenty-first century. Ironically, this struggle over the inner-worldly purpose of Christianity is found also within the heart of Christianity about its own essence, about the Transcendent to which it first must be committed. "Seek

ye first the Kingdom of God." The third millennium of Christianity will, as in the first and second, have this purpose as the main criterion of what it is about.

Nietzsche wrote in *The Twilight of the Idols*:

The Christian and the anarchist are both decadents. When the Christian condemns, slanders, and besmirches "the world," his instinct is the same as that which prompts the socialist worker to condemn, slander, and besmirch *society*. The "last judgment" is the sweet comfort of revenge—the revelation, which the socialist-worker also wants, but conceived as a little farther off. The "beyond"—why a beyond, if not as a means for besmirching *this* world (#34).

Christianity in the twenty-first century, as in the first and in the thirteenth, ought not "besmirch" this world—but it should recall that "this world" is not our destiny, nor our final purpose. "The peculiar doctrine

of Christianity," to repeat the words of Samuel Johnson, "is that of an universal sacrifice, and perpetual propitiation." This truth, this "dogma," is Christianity's purpose in any century. As Chesterton said, "Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave."

—James V. Schall, S.J.

¹*Boswell's Life of Johnson* (London, 1931), II, 422-25. ²Interview, *Crisis* (July 1989). ³See James V. Schall, "On the Neglect of Hell in Political Theory," *The Politics of Heaven and Hell: Christian Themes from Classical, Medieval, and Modern Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Md., 1984), pp. 83-106. ⁴Josef Pieper, "Communication of Reality," *Josef Pieper—An Anthology* (San Francisco, 1989), p. 18. ⁵*In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge, 1987), p. 37. ⁶"The World's Problems Are Spiritual Problems," *Dare to Live*, trans. M. N. L. Couvre de Murville (New York, 1988), p. 30.

Christianity and the Second Religiosity

"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the prime source of all God's creation: I know all your ways; you are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were either hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'How rich I am! And how well I have done! I have everything I want in the world!' In fact, though you do not know it, you are the most pitiful wretch, poor, blind, and naked. . . ." —Revelation 3:14–18

CHRONOLOGICAL DIVISIONS, abstract and unrelated as they are to the personalities and events of history, are apt, especially when they are millennial, to provoke the most extravagant hopes and fears. Chiliasm exerts such extraordinary persuasive power over Western thought not because of its numerological neatness but because the thousand-year period derives its power from an ancient and pervasive myth which in its origins and consequences is antithetical to Hebrew-Christian conceptions of history. Indeed, one might argue that when millenarianism becomes a powerful force in Christian thought, it does so either in a heterodox system or one which skirts or ignores the adequacy of Christian revelation and tradition. Scripture, to the great disappointment of many, has not been much concerned with the exact computation of time. It would be interesting, at least, to have a historical road map of time nicely divided into thousand-year periods, each with a distinctive character, and each realizing a sacred and providential purpose. Alas, such a hope represents the fallacy of misplaced concreteness as applied to theology and history.

Nonetheless, millenarian numerology

from Virgil through the early Middle Ages, to conceptions of a thousand-year universal monarchy, to Joachim of Flora and finally the dates Archbishop Ussher provided for the King James Bible all underline the importance of these notions for Christian thought.¹

However, historical time and the meaning it possesses are rarely chronological in character. Change in time is rather biological, psychological, and intellectual. Thus the great turning points in Christian history have little or nothing to do with the year 2000 and everything to do with intellectual and cultural changes which have characterized the last two centuries and particularly the first half of the twentieth century.

Lord Acton could confidently assert in his Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, June 11, 1895, that Christ is risen in the world,² by which he meant that the triumph of the principles of Christian ethics was everywhere producing the providential and progressive realization of what nineteenth-century Whigs called "civilization." Only a Whig could have been so hopeful about the prospects of either Christianity or "civilization." Two decades