THE MEANING OF RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN SOCIETY

1. RELIGION, CHURCH AND STATE IN MODERN SOCIETY

The ideal image of medieval society is that of a harmonious Hierarchy, in which various societal functions and powers were well ordered under the guidance of an omnipresent Church. From the ecclesiastical life at the top to the secular, everyday life at the bottom of the scale, all social and cultural levels and roles in society received their specific meaning within and from the religious framework of the whole. The rational justification of this divine Order was given by theology, the queen of the sciences, which subordinated the arts and sciences to the revelation of the Bible and religious tradition and which tried to synthesize all human knowledge with the blinding light of God's truth. Everyday life was full of religious signs and symbols; towns and villages developed around the church; education was in the charge of monasteries or cathedrals; art was so dependent on religion that even portraits and still lifes necessitated a religious setting. The whole culture was constructed and characterized by the religious: clergy or men and women dedicating themselves to a spiritual way of life, in which religion was the central concern.

This image of the middle ages is, of course, an overidealisation of certain tendencies of that time. In actuality the power of the Church was never simply uncontested. We know that from the beginning of the Christian era and throughout all of the middle ages, Church and Empire fought against each other in order to conquer the highest position in the social hierarchy. The continuous struggle between Emperor and Pope for political (but not only political) and spiritual (but not always purely spiritual) power shows that from the beginning, politics tended to be much more than the possession and government of lands and peoples, and that the Church combined its evangelical message with the pretention — in the name of God — to dominate all secular rulers and to command the details of everyone's everyday life.

The struggle between church and state seems to have come to an end in the 20th century states of western Europe, due to the latter's depriving the churches of their secular powers. The Catholic Church did until recently have a rather great influence in some countries, such as Portugal and Spain; this, however, is one of the reasons why we considered those nations — notwithstanding their being contemporaneous with the other European countries — as remnants of the past. In eastern Europe, the political leaders claim the same highest and
total power as the Roman Emperor and the medieval Church did, denying any power to the Church.

The end of the conflict between church and state is not simply due to their separation. A separation would presuppose the possibility of fencing religion and politics off into separate regions which would not interfere with each other, but this is impossible; religion is by definition in a sense all-embracing and the structure of the modern centralized state is such that it could not tolerate any intervention through which religion would become a rival power on the political level. The solution of "the priest into the sacristy" works for a church that restricts itself to liturgical and sacramental functions, but not for a religion which claims to permeate all the moments of life.

In actuality the struggle between the two powers stopped when the Churches found themselves deprived of their political powers and when they thus became private associations. This "retreat" into the private sphere — the reverse of the modern state's monopoly of political, juridical and to some extent also cultural power — put Christianity up against new problems. Formerly, when church and state conflicted, two powerful masters presented themselves to the Christian, two masters whose claims the Christian could not refuse. To escape from the political sphere would condemn him to an a-legal existence which would result in imprisonment or economic misery. Resignation from the church would exclude him from a spiritual family that supports him by its inspiration. In Western Europe the peace between church and state seems nowadays so safely established that such a choice does not seem to impose itself. But, as we will see, there are other, perhaps even greater difficulties for a person who today tries to combine his participation as a citizen of the modern western state with a serious participation in religious life. In order to prepare our reflection on those problems, we have to consider first the distinctive feature of life in modern society.

2. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN SOCIETY

The enormous task of a "diagnosis of our time" cannot be performed within the limits of one article. It is possible that we lack not only the necessary distance from ourselves, but also the creativity to discover or invent a viewpoint from which we can interpret in an illuminating and fruitful way the features that distinguish our present life.

Because I wish to limit my discussion mainly to the meaning of religion in contemporary society, the following description will stress the question of the meaning of the different dimensions of society. One way which may lead to a — be it partial — answer to that question consists in an analysis of the ideology by which modern society tries to legitimize itself: an analysis of the implicit and explicit philosophy in which its self-consciousness unfolds itself. This ideological self-conception is not simply to be accepted, for it could certainly be a false, hypocritical or stupid consciousness. A critical examination is thus
necessary. But one might ask: Where shall the critic find a better stand-
point than that of the common ideology?

Individual thought is not completely determined by the general convinctions of the society and the time in which one lives. Our relative autonomy includes the capacity to discover or to construct new thoughts. But even "untimely" thoughts maintain a relation with the social and cultural determinations of the historical situation in which they are expressed. Although they criticize and transcend the established order, they are always identifiable as thoughts of that situation and time.

But let us not try here to solve the many questions of hermeneutic methodology. Instead, let us attempt a rather intuitive description of the structures and ways of contemporary social life and of the "spirit" by which it is animated. The description will proceed by an analysis of the different levels of society: successively politics, economy, technology, culture and religion will have our attention.

a) POLITICS

The ideology of the modern states of Western Europe and America is not an official doctrine, taught in its universities and officially protected by its government such as post-tridentine theology, which was taught and protected within the Catholic Church, or the Diamat, which is the official doctrine of communist states. It is rather a set of statements and arguments widely used in courts of law, public discourses, political discussions, newspaper and TV commentaries and so on. Everyday talk is full of commonly accepted assumptions about liberty, human rights, violence, justice and so forth. Their coherence is not always obvious, but it can be reconstructed out of public opinion concerning political affairs. Thus appears a sort of implicit philosophy underlying the official rhetoric of society. It cannot be identified with any of the great political philosophies developed in that society, because great philosophers are never a pure, and simple symptom of expression of their time. They are also critics of what is going on, sometimes transcending their times by almost prophetic views.

Still, the study of the main texts of modern philosophy, like those of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Comte and Marx, is of great help in getting an idea of the conceptions which guide the practice and rhetoric of modern society. For notwithstanding its greater radicality and critical distance, modern philosophy is still rooted in the same spiritual soil as the less reflexive, more spontaneously "felt" convictions of the modern state and its citizens. Modern philosophy may offer us the conceptual tools we need to detect the coherence or incoherence of the assumptions which lead the theory and practice of modern life.

The following typification relies on a global knowledge of modern political history and on a more thorough study of the political theories of the philosophers mentioned above. Here, too, questions of methodology demand greater attention and a great deal of interdisciplinary work by historians, sociologists, political scientists and philosophers
before we can have adequate insight into the meaning and the spirit of past and present time.

Basic for the whole political ideology of the modern western state is the conception of the individual human being as an autonomous person, i.e. as someone who has to choose and live his own life and who is able to do so because he is free. His freedom is essential, or "natural", to his being human. Insofar is every human being the same; every man chooses his own way of life. There are of course great differences in age, sex, physical capacities, intelligence, character and so on, but these are accidental. Humanity is a collection of free persons who live on their own and for their own sakes. There is no fundamental difference between men and women, children, adolescents and aged persons in respect of their humanity, but all individuals are separated from each other by their autonomy. Yet, because it is impossible to live in complete isolation, everybody enters by his own free choice into social relations with other individuals, because and insofar as they seem useful to him.¹

The essential equality of all human beings expresses itself in an equality of fundamental rights. Autonomous freedom, which is the core of human personality, is not a purely factual state of affairs; it also has normative connotations. Just as much as it is the radical possibility to live one's own life, freedom is also a task. Man has to "make" his own life: he himself is responsible for its results. Life is an achievement — a work. Because of its "naturalness" this task cannot be undone by other persons. Every individual person has to realize his life on the basis of his own free choices. Everybody has, thus, an equal right to realize his life in accordance with his own projects. This presupposes a series of concrete possibilities and conditions. A whole series of rights flow from the fundamental right to live one's own life as a free person. Because life includes the satisfaction of several basic needs, such as the acquisition of food, housing, clothing, work and certain social relations, the right to live would be a lie without the right to appropriate and to use everything which is necessary to satisfy these needs in the maintenance and promotion of life.

The atomistic equality that follows from the central place of the individual leads inevitably to a general competition which — when left to its own devices — would certainly degenerate into a universal struggle for life and the victory of the strongest or most shrewd. But this goes against the universal rights and the essential equality which are proclaimed to be the foundations of modern society.

¹ Right at the beginning, we might take note of an important difference between the official ideology of modern society and the actual state of affairs which it realizes. Although it talks about "the rights of man and citizen" without any distinction, for a long time the free subject of human rights was actually considered to be the adult male of a certain fortune and education. This means that women and children, as "second-class citizens", belonged in a certain sense to those men, whereas illiterate and poor people occupied a third-rank position as servants of important people or as beggars.
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The prevention of anarchistic war, which seems to result from the ideals of universal Liberty and Equality, is not found in brotherhood. (Western society did not know very well what to do with “Fraternity”. The attempts to give it a meaning by nationalistic myths or by socialistic world brotherhood failed.) Much more than the idea of fraternity, the idea of a reward for everybody’s individual achievement was fundamental for social life. Competition, by which every individual sought to obtain goods and power for himself, was thought to be regulated by the just rule that everyone earned what he merited. The measure of proportion between achievement and just deserts lies in the achievement itself. The available goods — grounds, materials, tools, money, etc. — were acquired in proportion to the best efforts of the best workers.

In order to make sure that this just rule of recompense should prevail, however, a situation of order and peace must exist, in which no indolent persons could oppress the others. To this end an institution is needed which maintains the ideal of free and just competition. This is a primary reason why a state is necessary: to be a guardian guaranteeing just recompense for competitive achievement.

This task received a more positive content when socialism made clear that the protection of free competition advocated by liberalism would not abolish but rather would confirm the unjust distribution of goods, due to the fact that most people simply are not fit, intelligent, rich or educated enough to get the goods, the honours and the power they would receive if society paid attention to their efforts or needs. The socialist claims of an authoritative redistribution of property, such that everybody could receive enough education and share in the general well-being, were justified by the same basic principles as those of liberalism: the inalienable rights implied by every individual’s liberty. The task of “making” one’s own life implies the right to do so. If this right is more than an abstract idea or a good-sounding slogan, it demands a social situation in which everyone actually can acquire and enjoy the things to which he has a right. This supposes an authority strong enough to submit all citizens to its just decisions concerning the welfare of all. The anarchic competition has to be controlled and amended by a powerful administration or state.

As soon as the state’s function is thus formulated, different questions arise: 1) First: What authority guarantees that the state, which must do justice to the fundamental rights of all citizens, does not become partial or corrupt? This is a modern version of Plato’s question: “Who will guard the guardians?” 2) A second question is: Does the idea of an authoritarian, powerful state not contradict the idea of freedom on which its ideology rests?

The first question was insisted upon by Marxists and other socialists, who showed that the state was, in fact, dominated by one class of citizens. Their accusations against the bourgeois state, however, were inspired by the ideals of liberty and equality claimed by that state. Perhaps the question concerning the guarantee of a just state assumes too easily that there has to be a sort of mechanism, an objective, structural system preventing unjust orientations and look for the
cultural, and especially the moral presuppositions of it, but it is impossible to eliminate every possibility of injustice.

As for the second question, the idea of a “social contract”, which in one form or another returns in all great political philosophies of modern times, is the attempt to understand an authoritarian and powerful state as the necessary result of two realities: 1) individual freedom and its inherent rights, and 2) the fact that individuals are not willing by their own initiative to restrain their personal desire to dominate the world in function of their own private interests. Since freedom and fundamental rights are at the same time both strictly individual and universal (they are essential for every individual) and since the world of goods is a finite reality, a limitation of everyone’s demands is necessary. Thus the right to use one’s fundamental rights is limited by the equal right of all others to do the same. But individual freedom does not necessarily restrain its individualistic inclinations; it tends to exceed the bounds which an impartial consideration would set in the name of the universality of freedom and human rights. The irrationality of pleonexia has to be repressed by reasonable limitation. Pure reason could accomplish this, but society cannot be left in the hands of morality. Reason has to be imposed by a power that threatens, forces and punishes those who, immorally, do not want to submit their particular interests to the judgment of the voice of reason. The state is animated by the will of all its members in a union. The will of the state should thus be a reasonable one, expressing and realizing what all of its members would collectively will if they willed reasonably. The volonté générale is the true soul of the society. Therefore, insofar as they are reasonable, the citizens agree with its power and authority (on the not often expressly formulated, mostly forgotten condition that the state use them reasonably).

The idea of a basic social contract is to construct a collective unity out of the atomic dispersion of autonomous individuals. Because of its individualistic point of departure, this political ideology must explain the unity of a people as something which is composed out of a) individual persons and b) social relations, of which it has to prove the necessity. Since the individuals forming the “material” of this union are free, the composition of this unity should be their own work. The social contract solves this problem by showing how human individuals form of their own free will their own union under an authority which governs them without taking their freedom away. The consensus on which the state rests and the self-consciousness of the state are the work of its members, who therein express their own will.

The result is democracy. All the doings of the state have to follow out of the free choices of those constructing a large machine which they simultaneously compose and run. Governing themselves, they save their autonomy on a collective scale.

This seems to be the formal structure of the modern western state. It solves in one particular way the tensions between reason and violence, liberty and necessity, individuality and collectivity, but it does not answer the question: What are the ends of political life? Different answers to this question have been given, but all seem unsatisfactory. The answer which consists in well-being will be discussed further on
in this paper. Here, I will give my attention only to the question of whether nationality, national patrimony and traditions can give a content to the formal frame of the modern state.

The western state was and is a national state. Most of the time, the nation involves a unity of language and culture, of people having a common historical background and the same or similar traditions. But is nationality a modern principle? Does it fit into the political ideology of modern times as exposed above? It seems an unfree, simply given, irrational element, which cannot be related to the basic principle of autonomy. Is the spirit of modernity not the exact contrary of acceptance and receptivity? Is it not a desire to transform everything which is simply given into a work of man's own achievement, by his own calculations, planning and production?

Actual aversion from nationalistic myths and distrust of idealizing slogans, a spreading movement of conscientious objection to military service, a certain shame for what "my country" did to its colonies and similar symptoms show perhaps that the force of national ideals is exhausted. Even on the cultural level, few persons care for national language, art and history. Everyday life in Western Europe is full of American words and symbols, and most people are very pleased to sing or hear the new ξώνη of our world.

Does the shrinking importance of national myths and ideals mean that we are becoming worldly or cosmopolitan? The question has to be asked also on the economic and cultural level. As for the political level, we may state that our generation is much more concerned with world problems than former generations were. Mass media offer us daily journeys to politically tense regions; travelling and commercial relations bring us close to what happens in Cambodia, South Africa or Guatemala. But do we meet the common man of other countries? And: do we behave like citizens of one world?

The real meaning of Liberty and Equality has come to our consciousness. Until the end of colonialism it was hard not to consider the third world and other "underdeveloped" people as "lower". We are astonished now by the hypocrisy of bourgeois slogans and practices. But the worldliness of our conscience still waits for an effective realization. And — to come back to the question of the ends of political structures and activities — even if we would have actually extended the pattern of our free well-faring world to all regions of the earth, we would not have found an answer to the question of what it is all good for. Of course, we have to do what we can in order to deliver South America from its oppressors, every poor country from its misery, so many prisoners in "civilized" countries from torture, but after we have established a just world on the basis of freedom and human rights, the question remains: What is the end of human life?

Insofar as the new cosmopolitan consciousness is the radicalization of the ideals of liberty and equality, it springs from the same source as the movements of protest that came up almost everywhere in the "free world" after the second world war. If we abstract the egoistic interests and rebellion against modern culture which were also part of them, we may say they demanded true loyalty to and actual execution of the ideals of the French Revolution. The fact that a great part
of contemporary western youth has recourse to Marxist theories (which are difficult to understand and more difficult to prove) or even to a (much easier to understand) communist doctrine does not change the fact that the underlying principles of their inspiration and the implicit "philosophy" of their enthusiasm are the same as those from which 19th-century liberalism lived.

The heroes of western youth are no longer the dictators of the thirties who incarnated a nostalgia for the irrational roots of nation and race, but the founders of more just and equal societies: Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Fidel Castro and — the most romantic of all — Che. They do not pretend to be consecrated by the grace of God, like Franco and Salazar, who were unfortunately considered by a premodern, nostalgic Church to be crusaders and "heroes of Christ". If the new political heroes appear somehow consecrated, it is by History, the modern version of Greek Fate and Christian Providence, which disposes of life and death, and of the well-being and misery of societies and cultures.

b) ECONOMY

Since man is a walking bundle of needs, economy has always played a fundamental role in human society. Life will always be under the domination of those technical and economical processes which rule the relations between needs, and production, consumption and production.

Typical features of modern economy are 1) the technological character of its production and distribution and 2) the worldliness of its market, in which money — the great equalizer — is king. Both of these features express the spirit of a special project, which we will approach principally from its technological aspects.

The way of modern production is domination and exploitation. It is guided by an attitude towards nature in which nature is no longer either a careful though sometimes frightening mother, or a harmonious cosmos in which everything has its natural and divinely ordered place and function. Modern man does not experience himself as a moment of an organic totality animated by a world soul or as governed by an inscrutable, yet providential God. Nature is no longer a home, but rather a sum of energetic material, the structure and the laws of which man describes by means of mathematical terms. The system of nature can be calculated and to a very great extent reconstructed in function of the goals of its human master, who has replaced the ends of nature by plans of his own. Modern engineering wants to have the whole of nature at its disposal, and to transform it according to man's wishes. The breaking down of the universe into the smallest homogeneous particles and energies reveals endless possibilities for creating an infinity of new and useful products, structures and processes. Usefulness is the criterion for the modern remaking of the world. The old nature disappears behind a technological world which is a reflection of the human brain.
Man, thus, puts an end to his dependence on the benevolence or wrath of nature's gods. Matter and energy are brought into conformity with his needs. The God who "filled the holes" has been eliminated. Science and technology replace prayer and hope.

Mastery over nature does not, however, automatically include order, peace and welfare. After his successes in physics, chemistry and biology, man tried the same approach with relation to social and individual behaviour. Modern psychology and sociology were born as exact, calculating sciences. Their ideal is the same as that of the natural sciences: to control the life of society and its participants by planning, manipulation and prediction. Man becomes, thus, the creator and providence of his own human history. The God who gave victory and saved from oppression, the "God of the armies" and of eschatological world peace, is a relic of pre-scientific times. Secularisation and atheism (or deism, which comes down to the same thing) are the logical consequences of modern autonomy.

It would, however, be inexact to explain technology by the image of a tool or instrument handled by modern man in the role of a new demiurge. The technological world is a complicated system of circuits and cybernetic regulations, of which man himself is a link. Although it is he who sets the programs and supervises their execution, he experiences his role not so much as that of a labourer who handles instruments, but rather as an organizer of the work that is done by an automatic "second nature". The automats are produced by other automats. We even talk about "generations" of machines and do not remember very well the date of the origin of their species.

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The ways of modern consumption are marked by the same characteristics as the processes of production. At the supermarket we find ourselves in face of a humanly produced universe, in which the fruits of nature are hardly recognizable. Some invisible organization offers us all the useful goods of the world, assorted in accordance with our varied needs. The whole world is at our disposal; in function of our preferences we choose what we want, like kings. A signature — not even money — at the exit is sufficient to take it home, while we only vaguely notice that our buying is a link within a big network set up for production and moneymaking.

Who is the planner of the technical and economical systems and processes in which we are caught? We feel inserted into an enormous "business" which makes us function as workers and consumers by its hidden decisions and rules. Sometimes an elevator does not open, a computer fails or the light of a town blacks out. Then we feel trapped and helpless, overpowered and very dependent. Yet a specialist will deliver us from this "hole".

More serious is the pollution we produce as a by-product of our increasing sovereignty. By augmenting comfort and speed, we also diminish it. One begins to wonder if there is a secret enemy trying to obstruct our project of universal exploitation.
The recent experience of being at the mercy of the automatic world which was produced by men has important consequences for our conception of history.

The vision which prevailed from the beginning of modern history and culminated in the 19th century was faith in Progress. It was based principally on scientific and technical achievements, which man believed would uniformly develop and progress. Man believed that he would deliver himself from his dependence on nature, satisfy his needs, produce universal well-being, see through the secrets of nature and society, and replace magic and mystical beliefs by skill and mastery. Humanity would finally be free, and would obey its own will and reason.

Different events and experiences have attacked this optimism. The cultural crisis which started in the last century will have our attention in the next section. On the political level, the terrible experiences of two world wars and innumerable local wars for invalid reasons, the barbarisms of nazi camps, stalinistic trials, capitalistic discrimination, torture and total destruction shocked contemporary conscience. The secular eschatology of the 18th and 19th century revealed itself to be ridiculous and naive, notwithstanding certain successes on the level of international co-operation and the theoretical proclamations of human rights.

On the economic level we are perhaps beginning to lose our confidence in our knowledge of economic causes and processes. Inflation and unemployment, but especially the increasing gap between the affluence of a happy few and the poverty, hunger and misery of the greatest part of humanity causes us not only shame, but also a certain disgust.

Another reason for disgust is affluence itself. We possess all we need and more. The whole economic system is focused on an endless increase of consumption or, rather, on selling and buying. The world of advertisement has invaded all domains of life and culture. The endless satisfaction of every possible need and want, however, creates a profound dissatisfaction, a sort of "nausea": ultimately it is not this that I want. The level of satisfaction by consumption seems too superficial. Man has other desires, which cannot be contented by more of the same goods. If this is the whole of life, if this is happiness, it does not seem worth all the labour and energy, all the suffering and pain. Solitude, violence, injustice and hate cannot be compensated for by all the supermarkets in the world, nor by the greatest luxury of eating, dwelling, or travelling.

A certain resentment against modern economy has come up. It blames "the structures", accuses Capitalism or Communism, and places its hope or despair in History, but it has no clear answer to the question of how we should conceive of these "subjects". If they are to be thought of as modern gods, they are strange gods, because they are — at least partly — produced by man himself. How could they have a will and plans of their own?

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The attitude of modern economy and technology towards religion has the same characteristics as that of political man. It follows from the
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special form and place which liberty and needs took in the technolo-
gical era. The God of needs has died. We help ourselves and no longer
need the magic or miraculous interventions of a Providence who feeds
the hungry and protects the weak. The poor have to look for someone
who will give them a share on the world market or who will lend them
a capital. The God who filled the holes (the Lückenhüßer of whom
Bonhoeffer wrote) has been unmasked as an idol. His figure is too eco-
omic; the heaven from which he saves is just another, second world
with a hundredfold of the same satisfactions as those which are offered
in our human world. If God exists, he does not help the poor and op-
pressed, but makes them suffer like Job. If there is hope for them,
they have to wait for human saviours.

Modern atheism is not only motivated by the desire for autonomy,
but also by our feeling able and obliged to provide ourselves with
everything we need. If religion is still to have a sense, it should bear
testimony to another God and another desire than that for consumption
without end.

c) CULTURE

Contemporary culture, too, can be described as a Supermarket. Its
rules and processes are very similar to those which govern the world
of economics. Also on the cultural level a central question is: How can
we produce and offer enough in quantity and variety to meet consump-
tional demands, and how can we sell our overproduction of scientific
and artistic goods? Concerts, expositions and cultural journeys are sold;
even churches try to attract their customers by modern techniques of
advertisement. Religion itself, principally in its bourgeois form, is do-
minated by concepts and conceptions of modern economy. Instead of
love, hope, admiration and adoration, highly praised in other times,
the prevailing “values” today are liberty, justice, achievement, compe-
tition, merit, recompense and payment. They give a commercial turn
to the relation between God and man.

The widespread use of the word “values” is itself a symptom of the
“marketing” of culture. Probably, the sociologists who use it so easily
found it in the writings of Max Weber, who took it over from neo-Kan-
tian philosophy. The way the word “values” is used shows that every-
thing which is valuable (artistic objects, moral virtues, religious sym-
bols, love relations, prayer etc.) can be seen as separate things on a
market which puts a price on them. Continental philosophy fortunately
no longer talks about “values”, but it is difficult to avoid the term
altogether, because our mind has adapted schemes and attitudes belon-
ging to the market or exhibition hall.

In fact, another image that can give us some idea of the spirit and
style of contemporary culture is that of the Museum. Modern western
man is not only a maker and planner, but also a discoverer and collec-
tor. His travelling around the world, together with a new, all-encom-
passing curiosity, opened his eyes to the enormous differences between
his own civilization and that of the other peoples of the Americas,
Asia, and Africa. Repeated encounters, the development of commercial
relations, geographical expeditions and an enormous progress in historical knowledge placed the western world in face of the alternative either to consider one civilization as superior and the others as primitive or degenerated, or to conceive of a plurality of equally valuable cultures, which should tolerate each other and, possibly, enter into dialogue. The latter conception finally prevailed. Modern pluralism places all civilization, beliefs, styles, ideals, doctrines, attitudes and opinions side by side on the same level, presenting them as alternative ways of human life. The “collections” of the British Museum or the Musée de l’Homme give a good idea of the spirit which guided western man’s observation of other civilizations. The only remaining ambiguity is the place of Europe within those collections: Is our culture one of the many or has it still a special place, be it as the standpoint of the neutral observer?

During the 18th century, European thinkers tried to understand the plurality of cultures as variations on one theme, which was detected in human nature by liberating it from the super-structures due to western religious, moral, juridical and political habits and traditions. Different theories of “natural morality”, “natural law”, “natural religion” were developed from Grotius until Kant. Reason was celebrated as the natural and universal force that united races, spirits and manners. But the concept of “Nature” succumbed under the attacks of the 19th-century positivism and the old doctrines yielded to nominalistic relativism.

History, sociology, geography, cultural anthropology and psychology present the varieties of culture as equally interesting alternatives, the worth of which is not an object for scientific consideration. Modern science abhors evaluation, and tries to restrict its attention to factual statements on non-normative data. It takes the facts as they are and wants to abstain from every interpretation that would transform them by subjective additions. The meaning and task of science is not the creative integration or assimilation of important and interesting facts, but a neutral report on how things were, are and will be. Masses of information are stored in libraries which order them from A till Z, and exhibited in expositions which display them chronologically. The popularization of social science by mass media gives an even more distinct image of the relativistic indifference that animates the presentation of things, landscapes, birds, stars and persons. A tremendous trivialisation is the result of this fundamentally uninterested show. When holidays are spent touring, the show goes on: old and modern art, historical and functional architecture, French operas and American music halls, white, yellow and black faces, African, Asian and European clothes, music, dance, food and habits pass by tired eyes of the visitor for whom it is all the same. The best expression of our non-evaluative observation is perhaps seen in the stupidity of TV-quizzes, in which nothing else happens than the formulation of disparate truths without anybody asking why the stated facts are as they are, what their meaning may be or how they fit together with other truths and with the wholes of which they form a part.

The same levelling is observable in the radio’s and newspapers’ daily presentation of violence, robbery, murder, fire, hunger, war, torture,
revolution, liberation, strikes, unemployment and so on. Positivism triumphs in this meaningless and indifferent curiosity, which may be more dangerous for the quality of human life than any sort of pollution.

Even in morals, philosophy and religion the spirit of absolute equality prevails, when textbooks and scholars expose different opinions without trying to discover if they are true. If discussion degenerates into the simple exchange of different opinions, there is no reason why it should be continued. Thought is superfluous when the simple existence of a conception is enough for it to be considered as serious and as good as another conception. The most superficial speaker has the same rights to be listened to as the wise man who speaks after years of reflection. The abolition of every distinction between high and low is a good way to kill truth. At the same time, it kills the self which proudly labels "values" and opinions. For, by its indifference the self is degraded to a contentless tabula rasa, on which everything can make impressions without giving it a character of its own.

Besides this mixture of cultural interest and indifference, however, we observe a widespread enthusiasm for European literature, art and history. Yet the question has to be asked in what sense the appreciated works or texts are contemporary.

There is a great interest for romantic, classical, baroque and medieval music. Never has it been so well and so often performed as it is today. Everyone is able to enjoy a fine selection of highlights of our artistic heritage. Pocket editions of the classics of world literature are well sold and crowds rush to expositions of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Monet, Picasso, Chagall. Since art has become reproducible in good prints and records, the democratisation of culture is a real possibility.

Participation in art is, however, for the most part limited to passive enjoyment. Self-performance, creation and improvisation remain exceptions. Perhaps there exists a hidden connection between this consumptive passivity and the preference of most people for traditional art above that of today. Do they go back to forms which are full of life and affectivity, because they do not find it in most contemporary art?

In fact, if we turn our attention to creations which may be considered as contemporary, most of them show a lack of content. I see three groups of them: Some works, such as Das Schloss of Kafka and the theatre of Beckett, express the impossibility or the absurdity of our situation. The same can be said of deformations like those painted by Picasso or Bacon. A second type may be called "formalistic art", because it does not express anything, but thematizes only formal elements by experiments with colours, lines and forms, tones, timbres, rhythms, words. Mondriaan's paintings are a good example; Ligeti's music and a certain nonsensical poetry are others. A third group of artists construct new idioms, but not for their own sake. They have to "say" something, but sometimes it is so new that we do not know if we are fooled by it or not. Are these artists the creators or prophets of a new epoch? And then there is a lot of kitsch, and a very great number of fakes. Some even expose materials and elements instead of works, inviting the visitor to do himself with them what the well-paid artist was not able or did not want to do. He exaggerates the attitude of ab-
solute neutrality and disengagement, which is so typical for the modern observer of the modern spectacular world.

In philosophy, too, we fear or we are unable to engage ourselves. It is better to stay in the margin and to observe how the others go their way. The history of philosophy or meta-language, methodology, the theory of theory and meta-philosophy are the subjects most treated. There is no reason why we should not retract further to a meta-meta-theory of meta-theory.

The neutrality of actual pluralism has important consequences for contemporary education. Because our society has no official doctrine about the good hierarchy of affective, normative and intellectual ends and meanings, it is not able to tell children what they should believe and love. We can give them much more information and documentation than any other time, but they themselves have to choose what they like. Education consists in the presentation of alternative ways of behaviour and a training in formal methods of orientation, discussion and decision so that the pupils learn how to choose by themselves.

At the same time we talk about “permanent education”, because the development of sciences and techniques is so rapid that, from time to time, one has to be informed about the new results in order to remain or to become again a useful member of society.

Information is useful. Wisdom and prudence seem old-fashioned. They are the fruits of experiences which create moral authority. What we need to know are the latest opinions of the most famous specialists.

In a pluralistic culture indoctrination becomes immoral. The students should learn an attitude of openness and distant benevolence towards every possible attitude or opinion and a strong aversion to all dogmatic and imperialistic ways of thinking. In the name of modern ideology they should hate every form of alienation and develop a sense of emancipatory progressivity. To this effect, much talk, listening and dialogue are necessary.

One can understand that some of the better students feel themselves deceived by the formalistic emptiness of this pedagogic ideal, and that they ask for a total formation of mind and body, including intelligence, morality and affectivity, in the style of Plato’s Academy, whereas other students demand a more explicit union of social practice with theory.

To conclude this survey of modern culture, I would like to add still a few words on the character of modern science. We have already seen that the great hierarchical Truth of metaphysics and of theology has been replaced by the sum of homogeneous truths expressable in propositions. Exact, calculating science is the model of truth, because the results permitted by its precision fit best in the technical Project which dominates our time. Its objectivity means that everybody can repeat the observations and experiments on which hypotheses and theories rest. So, here, too, intersubjectivity is thought in an indivi-
dualistic way: If everybody can repeat and check what other scientists did, trust is superfluous, although the contingencies of time, place and money will impede the actual repetition of every experiment. Respect for long experience and wisdom is no longer necessary. What about feeling, imagination and inventiveness?

After what has been said about the spirit of modern attitude and ideology, it will be clear that three forms of systematic philosophy are typical expressions of modernity: 1) positivism, with its special sort of exactitude, its definition of truth as a property of factual statements, and its ideal of neutral objectivity; 2) utilitarianism, which calculates everything in function of its use as a means to general well-being; and 3) different forms of formalistic philosophy for their refinement of conceptual structures and logical relations, but without answers to the most important questions of individual and social human life.

d) MORALITY

Little has to be added with regard to the moral ideas and ideals of modern culture, because most of what can be said has been implicitly stated in former sections. Respect for individual freedom and for the rights included in it forms the basis of morality. Everybody should have a real chance to realize his needs and aspirations. Therefore, private property or a proportional share in the collective property, protection against violence, robbery and death, freedom of conscience, realized by the intervention of the state, but this cannot take away the obligation of every individual human being to help his fellow-man in this respect. The ideal of modern morals is a humanism of universal welfare. It is this humanism which makes us ashamed of the still widespread misery of our world.

The great difficulty of modern morality lies in the meaning of the word “well-being” of “happiness”. “The greatest happiness for the greatest number” is its motto (“the greatest number” should properly be replaced by “all”). But, as Kant showed, it is not possible to determine the content of happiness as long as we remain on the level of our needs. On that level we always want more. If the spurious infinite of needs is the principle of our strivings, work and thought, there is no end to our lack of satisfaction, because every satisfaction calls for a new one of the same, temporary, finite sort. This may be the reason why the increase of comfort has not brought proportionate increase in happiness to our society, but seems, on the contrary, to have augmented a general mood of discontent.

The morality of our society has more and more restricted its demands to formal rules concerning the liberty every human individual should have in choosing his own way of life, his own connections, his own goals and manners. “Nature”, church, traditions, “the wisdom of the past” have lost their influence. Even reason revealed itself as not strong enough to resist the invasion of relativism and subjectivism. The main command is that we should permit everyone to follow the way he chooses to go. There is only one condition: he
should, by his behaviour, permit the same to me and all other indi­ 
viduals. Since free love, for instance, if it is really love, does not 
harm anyone, no one should object to it. Euthanasia and suicide 
do not seem forbidden, if they are freely chosen. Abortion does not 
cause big problems to those for whom the promise and beginning 
of a new human being does not seem to have its own rights.

The formalistic spirit of modern morality does not give an answer 
to the question of the meaning of life. Its ideal of a completely 
“free” world does not contain any indication about the content of 
a free life. Has contemporary religion a task in this regard?

e) RELIGION

Modern culture tends to be an atomistic dispersion of “values” 
ordered by the preferential choices of those who “use” them in 
determining their behaviour. Traditional hierarchies and architectonic 
systematics, such as those found in Hegelian and Comtean philosophy, 
have been replaced by a fragmentation of sectors, roles, functions, 
values, plans, truths, and encyclopedias. There is no longer any such 
thing as a first Principle or highest Being which, by its creation or 
attraction, orders all beings within a harmonious totality. The death of 
that God went hand in hand with the crumbling down of the well-
ordered cultural and social totality. The death of the highest “Value” 
revealed the nihilism of modern life.

Western culture is becoming the culture of one, universal world, in 
which the particular cultures of nations and continents take on more 
and more the form of folkloric remnants of the past. The price western 
culture paid for its universalisation was the loss of its faith in na­
tionality, race, historical tradition, and particular language. Its for­
malism permits an adherence to every possible life style, under 
one condition; that the people, group or person living in such a style 
submits its own particularity to the formal universality included in 
the idea of freedom and human rights.

The basis of modern formalistic and nihilistic culture is — as we 
have tried to show — a certain conception of freedom and happiness: 
man’s autonomy and needs guide the political, economical, techno­
logical, artistic, scientific and pedagogic strivings of modern society.

This background explains the polemic of 18th- and 19th-century 
writers against a certain notion of God. The main argument has been 
most clearly stated by Feuerbach and Sartre: If man has to be free, 
God cannot exist, because — as they thought — the obedience to his 
commands would enslave man’s autonomy. The struggle against alie­
nation assumed that man’s autonomy and the autonomy of an infinite 
being conflict necessarily.

A further argument against the existence of God was and is 
that we do not need him anymore, because we provide by our own 
techniques for our needs. Properly speaking it is the same argument 
as the first one, insofar as it expresses one side of our autonomous 
behaviour: the technological planning and producing which has taken 
such a central role in modern times.
Modern man has thus eliminated “God” from his culture and society. His atheism is, however, tolerant, because it respects every conviction which does not do anyone any harm. It only becomes aggressive, when it meets with an imperialistic church claiming secular powers. The retreat of religion into the private sphere, which resulted from the modern Project, creates a new situation for church and state and asks for a new solution of their relations.

Where the state developed new dogmas of its own as in communist or fascist countries, the churches were forced either to return to premodern reflexes of rivalry, or to resign from all secular power.

The attitude of the Catholic Church towards various forms of fascism was rather weak, because it had not accepted completely the ideals of modern democracy. In France, Hungary and other lands, many bishops and priests remained royalist a long time after the foundation of a republican state; until recently the official Church sympathized with the dictators of South America, the Philippines and South Korea; its protests against torture and concentration camps were extremely feeble; few Christians championed the cause of social reform and structural change.

The weakness of the Catholic Church can be explained (although not approved of) through a consideration of sympathy with authority, domination and obedience, moralism, law and order. How could it bear prophetic testimony against the kings — as Nathan, Amos, Jeremiah, Jesus, Gandhi did — as long as it was characterized by the same style of — be it “spiritual” — domination, wealth and power? It would, however, be inexact and unjust to identify the doings of the Catholic and the other Churches (which, besides, were less authoritarian and powerful than the Church of Rome) with Christian religion. The latter hates the sword. Many Christians helped the miserable, brought peace and promoted justice. Innumerable examples of humble dedication, love and indignation concerning unjust actions, situations and structures contradict the image of a continuous collaboration between the Christian faith and the powers of oppression. Fortunately, religion does not coincide with the official acts and opinions of the clergy and the notables who sit in the first pews of the church. It has to be recognized, however, that most of the work Christians did in order to improve society was done on a private basis: by individual saints or religious orders which did not try to inaugurate a radical transformation of unjust structures. They founded clinics and schools, took care of poor and hungry people, bought off slaves and preached charity to the rich and powerful. Even if they protested against the political and economical structures of modern society, their protest was mostly contaminated by a false identification of the Christian message with secular structures and habits of the past. Socialism was, much more than capitalism, their target. It is only a hundred years ago that the first official, timid accusations against capitalism were heard. Nowadays the criticism of capitalistic alienation is so common that the churches also adhere to it. But criticisms of dictatorial systems are even now rare. When they are expressed, it is done in an extremely cautious (“prudent”) way.
The many good actions of Christians, the great missionary élan which brought the ideals of justice and charity to every part and civilization of the world and the spiritual life lived by religious and mystics passed as it were alongside the great world history of states and nations. In spite of much collaboration and many compromises between churches and states, Christian faith had already retired into the private sphere.

A clear expression of this state of affairs is seen on the level of science, philosophy and theology. While modern philosophy and science made a new start on the basis of human autonomy, self-consciousness, evidence, observation and experimentation, and constructed their systems in a very specific, modern spirit, Christian theology continued on the paths of late medieval doctrine, rehashing it for centuries in various forms of neo-scholasticism. The conservation of premodern philosophy at the service of old theology split western philosophy into two streams: one which has been characterized above as positivistic, utilitarian and formalistic, and another which stuck to the contents of medieval or pseudo-medieval metaphysics. The latter had lost its soul, because the individual and social life in which it was rooted did not exist any more. Modern philosophy on the other hand lacked soul just as well, insofar as its formalism and positivistic factualism lacked humanity. The rejection of important theses of modern astronomy, physics, biology, history and so forth manifested the reactionary character of most theologians. Their longstanding enmity against what they considered to be the pride of modern science exiled them into the margins of western civilization. The outstanding wisdom of great mystics and the renovators of spiritual life expressed itself in non-scientific prose and — sometimes beautiful, but “subjective” — poetry. When they used the conceptual language of traditional theology, it was for want of better and not a creative retaking of living traditions as was done in patristic and medieval times.

3. MODERNITY AND POST-MODERNITY

If the picture of modern society we have given is exact, we may state that it can be for the greater part understood through the principles of modern philosophy, taking this to be the philosophical movement from Bacon and Descartes until Hegel and Comte. The Hegelian system realized for the last time a synthesis of modern thought with the Greek and medieval hierarchy of a divine totality. After his Encyclopedia, nominalism, which had originated long before Hegel, conquered the western world, imposing upon it its indifference and formalistic universality. The apotheosis of Hegel’s all-embracing philosophy marked the end of traditional onto-theology. The harmonious whole of all beings with their variety of value and meanings, which had received their highest consecration by the well-ordered self-expression of absolute spirit, finally exploded. Its splinters — atoms, numbers, charges, waves, values, links — revealed a radical emptiness: the desert of nihilism, described and analysed by Nietzsche and his followers.
Those surrounded by 19th century optimism who dared pronounce their verdict on its emptiness were considered to be ridiculous and foolish. Only after 1900 was their negative wisdom listened to and repeated by a whole literature of absurdity. The end of modern times, even the end of European civilization, became a favored theme of essays, plays and books.

Nihilism provoked various reactions. On the level of philosophical thought, some looked back to the good old times and tried to reanimate former summits in the form of neo-Thomism, neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, neo-rationalism, neo-empirism and so on.

Marxism and neo-Marxism should be numbered among the movements which try to deny the radicality of contemporary nihilism, or to overcome it by a return to modern, "pre-postmodern", principles and manners of thought. For Marxism reproduces in a consequent way the main principles of modern ideology, centered around freedom, universal rights, utopian equality and the primordiality of consumption and production.

Existentialism, too, is a conservative philosophy, insofar as its protest against every form of alienation and against the abstract, impersonal, "impossible" character of contemporary life appeals to the modern conception of freedom. Its ethics, for instance, is clearly marked by modern formalism. The seeming originality of its situation is just an extreme form of the arbitrariness included in the central role of personal choice, which belongs to modern individualism.

It is difficult to see what the characteristics of post-modern philosophy are or will be. Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein are, notwithstanding their enormous differences, in a sense congenial. But what is their message? The negative side of their thought is clearer than the positive perspectives which they announce.

A more popular criticism of nihilistic modernity is found in the following attempts to get away from it.

A first form is reactionary. Retreating to some golden age, it tries to revive an agrarian, pre-industrial way of life, dreams away in the celebration of perfectly performed old art, or clings to past beliefs and habits. In philosophy we saw a parallel in the revival of classical doctrines. In religion and theology there are all sorts of fundamentalism and traditionalism.

Of the more progressive movements, three tendencies seem the most important: 1) anarchism, 2) a playful way of "dropping-out" (formerly known as "flower-power"), 3) mysticism.

1) The widespread anarchistic tendency has some affinity with the modern ideals of liberty and equality, but it testifies also to a faith in man's good nature and benevolence and to a striving for universal brotherhood. Its refusal of every hierarchy is not an apology for individualistic isolation, but rather the consequence of its ideal: non-hypocritical, universal and concrete sympathy without any violence or constraint.

2) A special form of "dropping-out" indicates (in a not always serious way) the insanity of absolutizing achievement, power, domination, money, luxury and haste, such as occurs today. Life is love, not
work. The game of happiness has to be played with imagination and grace. Calculation should be replaced by confidence in nature and spontaneity.

3) Various forms of mysticism express — mostly in a bad, illusory way — the spiritual hunger that cannot be satisfied by affluence. Drugs, astrology, oriental breathing techniques and meditation are tried out, in search of a transcendent reality that answers the radical desire for the infinite.

Love, a natural, fraternal life, a profound relation with the infinite — in which sense are these ideals opposed to the modern forms of power, labour, wealth and technology? Which role could religion play with regard to the tensions between modern society and post-modernity?

4. RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Roughly speaking there are three possibilities for religion to survive in contemporary society: 1) by clinging to the past; 2) by assimilating itself to modern culture; 3) by renewing itself by a creative retaking of its origins and its purest traditions.

“Back to the past” — is the — not necessarily explicit — motto of a religious attitude which tries to remain outside of the modern world by means of a certain version of and fixation on the traditional faith. In fact it is not at all certain that this version is a faithful repetition of the past. As is the case with all copies, it lacks precisely that which it needs to make it real and alive; sometimes it even looks like real kitsch. The best known example of reactionary religion in Western Europe is a form of Christian faith characterized by a series of dualistic positions. In dogmatic theology it stresses the gap between the visible world of politics, economy and modern culture in which we live, and the invisible world of God, in which man can be saved if he has faith in the son of God who came from and returned there. The moral preaching of this religion is dominated by commanding and obedience. It tries to control the main decisions and even the sexual life of its members. The practice of its charity is marked by the dualism which separates the spending of alms and the giving of private help on one side, from the contributing to protest and reform with regard to social institutions on the other. Its conservative mentality sympathizes with the rhetorics and the practices of the establishment, on the condition that the latter is not socialist or atheistic.

The opposite of this old-fashioned faith is a form of Christian religion which adapts itself so well to the trends of the epoch that it seems thereby to lose its Christian distinctiveness. Even after the criticism of modernity by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas, this adaptive religion docilely follows modern culture, as if it were the ultimate wisdom about the universe. Repeating on every occasion that “God is dead”, it considers man as the center of the universe. It rejects the idea of superhuman rules and commands, and reduces “the voice of nature”, conscience and prophetic words to human decisions or conventions. Free choice and human rights are
the pillars of its ethics. With regard to such question as free love, abortion, euthanasia and suicide, it gives the same tolerant answers as do the non-Christian humanists of our times. Unlike the first type of faith, adaptive religion sympathizes rather with socialism, be it revolutionary. In its extreme form, this religion hardly differs from modern humanism: the humanistic ideals are preached and practiced within the framework of a modernized version of the Gospel, the core of which is identified with those ideals. The rest of the biblical message is alleged to be a historical illustration of that humanism, giving outstanding examples or a symbolic (even “mythical”) representation of truths that have waited until modern times to be formulated in accordance with the demands of human reason.

The great task of contemporary Christianity is a renewal of faith, such that the Christians do not betray either the purity of their faith, or their belonging to the social and historical world as it is today.

Modern culture has helped us to demystify certain idolatrous images of God. The God of needs and miracles, the Possessor of a universal supermarket, the king of the armies, the Emperor of a superstate, the highest being of an all-encompassing hierarchy, — this God is dead. The message of the prophets, concerning the hidden God who destroys the idols, can be heard again. God exists in another way; he is otherwise. His reign is “not of this world”. But neither is he of a second world — of a better, idealized version of this one, a paradise to which we may have recourse from our painful existence in “this” world.

In “this” world, God’s powers do not compete with the secular powers of politics and economy unless the latter claim an absolute and divine significance. Religion has become the private affairs of the faithful and their private associations. This new situation contains new possibilities for Christian religion.

In the first place, it urges Christianity to deliver itself from the temptation of an alliance with the powers of money and the sword, and from identification with a particular (e.g. Latin, western, feudal or bourgeois) culture. A danger which is the reverse of this possibility is that faith may degenerate into an abstract, bloodless way of believing, without any social or cultural consequences, or that it may will-lessly follow the latest fashion. Deliverance from the alliance of religion with secular powers and particular cultures demands a difficult struggle. Mystics and other writers on spiritual life stress the pain of individual purification on the way towards the Good. Collectivities also have their pains and passions, their break-throughs and rebellions, when they try to transform their structures and ways of life into better ones.

A second possibility of the contemporary situation is that an active religious life has become more than ever before a question of free choice. Membership in a church no longer is a matter of fact. The search for God is a personal adventure full of joys and risks, and not a docile going along with the crowd. Here too, there is a danger: an extreme individualisation of religious life, which puts an end to every form of fraternal communion.

The situation of religion in contemporary society is often described in terms of sacredness and profanity. Secularisation is alleged to have
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separated the sacred functions of religion from the profane life, which is monopolized by nonreligious institutions. Religion is considered to have become a celebration of the sacred by private associations of people believing in it. This view restricts religion to sacred affairs, such as preaching and the distribution of the sacraments. The common life of the average man is for the most part marked by secular society. Only on the occasions of birth, marriage and death do believers ask the benediction of their church. This benediction enhances their solemnity, but does not make much difference for their social meaning and consequences. Everyday life seems to remain outside of religion, and under the influence of profane institutions alone.

The interpretation exposed here seems a rather superficial one, because if religion is anything at all, it must permeate the totality of human, individual and social life. It is clear that modern life is no longer in the grip of the rules and actions of the official churches, but church life and religion are not the same. Christian faith as the love of God and men is a radical attitude of simple gratitude, hope and dedication, expressing itself in every detail of common life. In some cases it conflicts with the existing rules and customs of politics, economics and culture, but if the situation does not impede the expression of that attitude, the latter transforms all of life through its own perspective: the earth, the sun, landscapes, things, work, people, society and history are seen in the light of God and received as given in order to enjoy them and to offer them to others in a spirit of serving and sharing. It is not the quantity or solemnity of ecclesiastical interventions that determines the importance of religion in a certain period of history, but the quality of spiritual life and its (almost invisible) influence on the ordinary life of those who take a loyal part in the social network of our unique world and history, without trying to escape from it through love for an other world or an other time. The God of authentic religion does not reveal himself by the well-being or the influence of a church. The “profanity” of everyday life does not exclude its being made profound by religious practice and conceptions. The real God is not only the extraordinary Other who reveals himself by prophetic criticism; he is also the ultimate sense of everyday life. He is ordinary in an extraordinary way.

The great historical moments of most European states are no longer celebrated by religious services. The installation of a president, for instance, is not surrounded — as it is in the United States — by biblical lectures and religious hymns. When the enthronement of a king or queen takes place in England, Norway or Holland within the liturgical scenery of a church, the main function of that religious lustre seems historical and decorative. The swearing of an oath can easily be replaced by a promise in which God does not play any role. On the level of public affairs religion has lost its seriousness and force.

The extraordinary events of a man’s life, such as birth, coming of age, sexual initiation, marriage, illness and death, have such a great importance for the person who lives them that religion — if he “has” one — cannot be excluded from them. If religion is concerned with the
ultimate meaning of human life, the decisive events determining the shape of a concrete personal history lend themselves to a religious interpretation and consecration by which they receive their meaning in the most radical dimension of man’s relation to God.

This dimension has to express itself in the believer’s everyday life and work. A certain “tone” testifies to its being rooted in an invisible, but very “efficacious” Ground. Gratitude, inner certitude, peace and a special sort of enjoyment “colour” the ordinary, so-called “profane” doings and experiences of a Christian who does not betray this world, but loves it as a daily gift of which he has to take care. In the light of religion, he accepts and understands suffering and pains, as an expression of the fact that world and history are not everything, and that the Infinite — although it is not an other world — is otherwise. The experience of this Other, who does not compete with the perfections and progresses of the finite, but gives, confirms and enlightens them, is the contrary of modern curiosity: it is grateful “non-indifference”.

Christian religion is also hope for deliverance, justice and peace. The reign of God is coming and has come, putting an end to the power of violence and corruption. How is this to be believed, since our world seems more cruel and unjust than ever before? Futurology counts on the uniform progress of contemporary development; the utopian movements of protest against the spirit of modern society look for non-violence and world peace on the level of politics and economy. Jewish and Christian eschatology believe in the prophetic announcement of God’s coming, which is future and present at the same time. The time in which the reign of God establishes itself is another one than that of world history. Love (and “all we need is love”) shows its presence by the special, joyful and patient way in which individuals and groups offer their lives and goods for other people. Their dedication has, however, another dimension and meaning than that of a humanism without any transcendence (if this were possible), because the face of my neighbour reveals the presence of the Infinite to me, while I experience myself and everything in the world as given by his care. These experiences determine in a radical way my “mood” and the feelings, thoughts and actions by which I express my attitude towards the meaning of existence.

The communion resulting from giving and sharing of our daily bread does not necessarily conflict with the dominant institutions of existing society. Nor does it coincide with an ideal state, because religiously-grounded fraternity lies deeper than the levels of finite history. Although brotherhood in God has its own eschatological time, it is in a sense simultaneous with the time of human society, even if the latter is full of injustice and hate. Even if we cannot convert bad institutions into better ones, this objective impossibility does not condemn us to collaboration with the reign of corruption and violence.

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The term “non-indifference” is, in another context and with a different meaning, introduced by Emmanuel Levinas in his book Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974, from which I also borrowed the expression of God’s “being otherwise”.
Fraternity becomes then the best I can do, seen the given situation: a real form of goodness and consolation. In no way can Christian charity restrict itself to material, psychological or social help, because its source and the end of its hope are nothing other than God himself. It is, however, extremely important to understand that this does not contradict but rather includes the most common and concrete forms of help and service, as well as serious dedication to man's real liberation.

Authentic fraternity implies a freedom of thought and speech which contrasts with the style of many churches of past and present. By its monopoly of power, the modern state has promoted within some churches a change from authoritarian to more democratic ways of decision, but it is also the spirit of the Gospel itself which demands a radical equality of those adhering to it. This equality does not, however, mean the absolute levelling of an individualism without any hierarchy of ranks and roles. The leaders should prepare, propose and, sometimes, decide. But since the only valid criterion for their doings is the spirit of the Gospel, their thoughts and actions are always to be compared with evangelical inspiration. This comparison and, possibly, criticism is the work of the whole community of Christians. Respectful attention to the words of those whose roles demand that they take the lead has to be complemented by the words of the listeners, who may feel that they have to criticize what has been said. A fraternal dialogue, which does not deny the necessity of different functions, has to be organized. Christ does not unite his followers by a spirit of domination: indeed, he abolished the principle of mastery and slavery.

The ideal of a free-speaking, reciprocally benevolent and critical communion of believers does not coincide with one or more of the existing churches nor with their totality. The evangelical fraternity is itself an eschatological reality. It grows in and under its imperfect fragments: the individual churches in which authentic inspiration is mingled with contingent particularities and false or vicious attitudes. Their purification, and therewith the meaning of the whole ecumenical movement, depends on the quality of the dialogue that is held.

Undeniably, the development of modern politics has played an important role in the Christian's rediscovery of the non-totalitarian structure of Christian fraternity. The latter maintains, however, a certain distance from contemporary democracy insofar as the Christian spirit of benevolence and communion surpasses the ideals of formalistic equality.

In our time, no church can overlook the fact that its members develop habits and styles which are in accordance with the modern mentality, due to their participation in everyday life. It is impossible to practice a completely different life-style in the church, when one is brought up in a democratic society. In the attempt, one would have either to behave as an ill-adapted member of society, or to play-act when one takes part in church life. On the other hand our time is not a criterion by itself; the Christian has to judge it by the standards of his faith, insofar as these have moral implications. An absolute and a priori identification with prevailing trends hands Christian faith over to secular vogues.
This dialectic relation has to be guided — within the fraternal communion of all those who live from the same inspiration — by a persistent search for the true meaning of the Bible and of the best traditions and practices which have come forth from it. But this search itself is a dialectic movement that should just as much elude a fundamentalist repetition of words, rites and gestures of the past, as a complete assimilation of the old message with scientific and philosophical conceptions of our time. The “retaking”, translation and concrete realisation of pure faith is not a passive reception of what been said and done once and for all, but a creative loyalty demanding a progressive conversion of our minds to another, deeper spirit than that of the prevailing mentalities of a certain time.

Only a purified, modest, hospitable, non-powerful, compassionate, fraternal and Christ-like life is able to give testimony to a God who does not rob anything from human freedom and happiness, but who on the contrary enjoys man's joy, confirms and frees man's autonomy and offers him an ultimate meaning for his life and suffering and death. Much of the talk concerning alienation and emancipation would be ennobled if it were reformulated in the light of the eschatological promises, the realization of which is anticipated by the everyday life of prophetic individuals and communities. Perhaps such concrete examples of religious, but not therefore less worldly life will convince us that faith is not a danger, but the condition of man's truly becoming what he is.

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3 I would like to thank Ms. M. E. Petrisko for correcting the English of this text.

Editor's note. The problems put forward in the present paper will be further discussed in one of the forthcoming issues.