CONTEMPLATION PASSES INTO PRACTICE: RELIGION AND REALITY

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This is a previously unpublished manuscript and is the last entry in the annotated bibliography above. It is related to the counter culture articles, the liberation theology and Heidegger articles, and, indeed, to the whole corpus. It is offered here with the intention, and hope, that it will stimulate the reader to look closely at the related articles and by that to turn to the entire corpus. Any one of his articles should have a similar result.

In a review of Thomas O’Dea’s Alienation, Atheism, and the Religious Crisis (The Commonweal, October 24, 1969, p. 105) Mr. Bernard Murchland gives it as Mr. O’Dea’s opinion that “Western civilization arose within a value perspective that stressed withdrawal from the world.” Mr. O’Dea is reported as observing that “While our European ancestors of the 10th and 11th centuries worked out the solution to difficult environmental problems . . . they accepted a definition of what man should be doing here below of a pronounced other-worldly character.” The irony then, Mr. O’Dea says, is that Western man’s “fundamental world view (gave) him little basis for significant interpretation of his achievements.”

It is then, Mr. Murchland argues, not so much the collapse of our religious values that has left man bereft of self-definition as it is that those values were “unsatisfactorily secured to begin with;” they had “separated man from himself and severed him from the larger rhythms of nature and the community.” This of course, as Mr. Murchland says, is the Marxist humanist concept of alienation and it dominates contemporary revolutionary efforts. These efforts are intent upon exploring “new ways of conceiving the human enterprise and setting forth a fresh definition of what it means to be men.” They seek to relate man to “the larger rhythms of nature and the community.”

That past religious values were “in themselves inadequate” to furnish “significant interpretation” of man’s solving his difficult environmental problems, that those values “were unsatisfactorily secured to begin with” is surely a profoundly mistaken view, and I should like to adduce evidence to show that the traditional values were indeed rich in insights and in significant interpretations of man’s solving his difficult environmental problems.
It is, I think, only just and fitting to allude first indeed to the profound connection established by classical social thought (that of Aristotle in particular) between concrete worldly activity and metaphysical realities. The undeserved neglect of this point is undoubtedly to be attributed to the fact that, as the Greeks understood it (and properly), no analytical connection exists between metaphysics (first theology) and concrete conduct—that is, no connection such that in order to act well in this world one must subscribe to some metaphysical doctrine. Metaphysical doctrine does not come under any civil law nor is adherence to it required for citizenship. But in the order of things themselves there was held to be a profound connection: In the first book of the Ethics Aristotle maintains that whether we are engaged in building a ship or curing the body, or taking part in politics, the ultimate explanation of all this human enterprise is the imitating in some fashion of the Divine activity in governing and moving the entire universe. This is why Aristotle calls the good that is achieved for a whole community of men “more divine” than the good achieved for one man only. He calls it “more divine” because it is a more perfect likeness of the good of the entire universe and of the ultimate essential goodness (God) that draws all things to itself. Man was thought of as sharing proportionately in the activity of God by being the cause of goodness in the whole community of men (solving his “difficult environmental problems”) as God is the cause of goodness in the being of the entire universe. Is there any evidence here of estrangement from “the larger rhythms of nature and the community”? On the contrary; here, I submit, were theological (if not religious) values that gave a basis for significant interpretation of man’s achievements. One may say indeed that long before Karl Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach there was an understanding of a form of contemplation that passes into practice.

If the god of the Greek philosophers did not intervene in world history the God of Israel did indeed intervene, and intervened in the most crucial and unexpected ways to change that history. As the eminent Scripture scholar Bruce Vawter puts it, this was “the altogether revolutionary conception of the very meaning of what it was to be a god. . . (New Paths Through the Bible) For Israel the separation of religion from reality was inconceivable. “When the prophets of the eighth century appeared before their countrymen to denounce their crimes, chiefly social in nature, they did not take their stand on . . . philosophy but on the experienced facts of history”: The facts here were the voice of God who spoke through the prophets of the eighth century. And what the prophets had said was that sacrifice without mercy is unacceptable. “. . . Amos made it very clear why the Lord found this people’s sacrifices
 unacceptable. For, as he pointed out in detail, this religious people was also guilty of the most cynical selfishness and corruption, which included bribery, extortion, oppression of the poor, and economic enslavement." What prophecy did for Israel it does for us today. If there have been Christians who have similarly mistaken religious values to be simply "other-worldly" this does not repudiate the authentic Scriptural message. Such Christians have simply not gotten the message. The religion of such men has lost sight of God as he has been revealed in prophecy. As Father Vawter puts it: "Theirs could only be a perversion of Christianity, cut loose as it (is) from the moorings of social morality which are of the essence of Christianity (cf. John XXIII, Mater et Magistra, par.222)." It is not without reason that Karl Marx has been called the last of the great Jewish prophets. Marx spoke with such effect, Barbara Ward has remarked, because the prophetic voice of Christianity was—and is—too faint.

It was the Fathers of the Judaeo-Christian revelation who by joining together Greek and Hebrew thought overcame the separation of reality from religion that had left Greek thought an exercise and luxury for the professional philosopher. St. Augustine was a Father of the Church—a Father that is, of the new Israel. And the authentic voice of the prophets comes through in his warning that the just distribution of temporal goods is what is demanded by "the most just Disposer . . . of all the adjuncts of temporal peace—the visible light, the breathable air, the potable water and all the other necessaries of meat, drink and clothing." St. Augustine would evidently not countenance water and air pollution. What then can one mean by saying that past religious values were in themselves inadequate to furnish significant interpretation of man's solving his difficult environmental problems? " . . . the love of country; the honesty of virtue; the faith of friendship; just dealing and all the things belonging to good manners"—these, St. Augustine tells us, are ways to praise God.

It is often supposed that the Scholastic theologians were so wedded to Greek wisdom that they simply "baptized" Aristotle. On the contrary, St. Thomas Aquinas as much as the Fathers of the Church, treats of ethics and politics in the light of sacred doctrine, in the light of the revealed Word of God—the God Who speaks to man and changes the world. From what sources does St. Thomas derive his prescription for solving the following environmental problems?

. . . one who is about to establish a city . . . must, in the first place, choose a suitable site; healthy to ensure the health of the inhabitants; fertile, to provide for their sustenance; one which will delight the eye with its loveliness and give natural security. . . . Having
chosen the site, the next task . . . is to plan the area to meet all the requirements of a civic life, . . . one must decide where to build the towns and where to leave the countryside open. (On the Rule of Princes)

Delight the eye? Leave the countryside open? St. Thomas seems to have been an early conservationist and planner. And what is the source of this planning? He finds its prototype in the work that God does in the world: From what God does in the universe, he tells us, we shall see what the task of politics is. “There are . . . two aspects of the work of God in the world. The first is the act of creation; the second is His governance of it once He has created it.” The creative task of politics must be joined to the governing task. Further, the creative task of politics is to be linked to the considerations St. Thomas makes concerning the renewal of the world after the Last Judgment. The connection may be seen in the fact that since man does not indeed create social life out of nothing, the analogy with the creative work of God must be understood in terms of a politics of renewal. It is by a politics of renewal, likened to the renewal of the world after the Last Judgment, that the creative aspect of politics must be understood. “The world was made to be man’s dwelling. Therefore it should befit man. . . . Man has some likeness to the universe, wherefore he is called ‘little world’. Hence man loves the whole world naturally, and consequently desires its good. Therefore, that man’s desire be satisfied the universe must needs . . . be made better.”

We have noted St. Thomas’ plan for making it better right now. The politics of renewal calls for a using of resources at hand for the good of the whole community of men— for the perfection of the whole, which has to be brought into being by creative work. And of this work of renewal one may say what St. Thomas says of the renewal of the world after the Last Judgment: by it “the carnal eye will be fittingly comforted in the vision of God in His corporeal effects.” It is a form of contemplation— indeed it indicates the hidden objective of Marx’s celebrated call for a contemplation that passes into practice.

It is sufficiently clear that the fundamental world-view of Western man had not severed him from the world, we must ask what it more precisely is that prompts the holding of the contrary view. The answer, I suggest, lies in dissatisfaction with the manner in which traditional values had related man to the rest of nature. The real complaint is that the traditional religious values had not established that relation in a manner capable of reducing—as Cassirer says of the efforts of the Enlightenment— the mental and material sphere to a common denominator, composed of the same elements and combined according to the same laws. This is the root reason for the double charge of severing man from nature as well as from himself. The “self” in question
is taken to be (according, indeed, to the doctrine of Marxist humanism) man's "generic" self, the whole of nature, with which human nature is radically identified. This is the core reason too why the traditional values are said to have been "unsatisfactorily secured to begin with." And this is why "revolutionary efforts today are not concerned with reconstruction of a tradition; they are intent upon exploring new ways of conceiving the human enterprise and setting forth a fresh definition of what it means to be men." This fresh definition will seek to identify all objective reality with the reality of human forces, "that is to say," as Marx puts it, "the objective reality becomes the objectification of man himself."

In regard to this fresh definition (of what it means to be men) that looks upon objective reality as the objectification of human forces, the objectification of man himself, it would be well to heed the acute criticism made of it by Heidegger in his sympathetic examination of Marxist humanism. It sells man short Heidegger thinks; "possibility" and "passion" are greater than actuality, and this "possibility" Heidegger thinks of as anterior to all science and technics. He speaks of it as "every world-creating impulse of the spirit", and says that it is falsified when it is made to masquerade as "intelligence." If the complexus of tools and the relations of production are what first (Heidegger here agrees with Marx) give significance to the world of nature, these nonetheless have their principle and origin in something anterior to them: in "spirit" which is found neither in "the regulation and domination of the material conditions of production" nor in "the intelligent ordering and explanation of everything that is present and already posited at any time." (Introduction to Metaphysics) This language of Heidegger is evocative—as Werner Brock has convincingly pointed out—of the beginning passages of Genesis: and indeed it is suggestive of St. Thomas' allusion to those same passages in suggesting a model for the politics of renewal.

It is neither atheism nor the different contemporary understandings of alienation that are at the heart of modern man's religious crisis. Rather it is the astounding and frightening loss of touch with the authentic sources of the Western classical and Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is man's almost complete loss of contact with his moral, spiritual, and intellectual roots that has alienated him from himself. And the blame lies everywhere. Someone has remarked that what is most evident in contemporary works of Catholic scholars—sociologists, economists, political scientists—is the curious and striking absence of any constitutive part played by their Catholic faith in the development of their scientific interest. They are victims, it has been fairly suggested, of
the Church’s four centuries of withdrawal from and suspicion and hostility to the mainstreams of world thought. However right the instincts and however generous and humane the intentions of these scholars, they betray nonetheless the effects of the Church’s long estrangement from the modern world. It does not seem at all impossible that a renaissance of the traditional values will come in the future from the great secular centers of learning now that the doors of the Church are once more opening upon the world.