

A keen old campus-ministry thinker concludes his CENTER MAGAZINE Nov/Dec-75 article "The Christian Norm" [from his 1966 Center Occasional Paper, "Technology and Human Values"] with this

EXERCISE:

In this column, and on the back of this thinksheet, critique Bloy's presentation of Jesus [as though you were responding to Bonhoeffer's poignant question, "Who is Jesus Christ, for, us, now?"]. Do this in three parts:

1. Of Jesus, what does this model leave out, if anything?
2. What foreign material, if any, does this model import into Jesus?
3. Write a paragraph presenting Jesus to folk living without ideology, i.e., to those whose inner life is the "technopsyche" [to use my term for this new consciousness], without conscious "religion" or "philosophy of life."

This is simply to say that if the Christian norm is to be useful it must also have enough body and definition to withstand the anti-normative tendencies of our time. In short, our vision of the life God has given us the freedom to grow into must be both flexible enough to exploit the rich promise of that freedom and coherent enough so that it will not dissolve under the pressures of our time, thus allowing our freedom to revert to chaos.

Whether Christianity can be culturally useful in this "hominized world" where man's power and freedom are so enlarged depends on how imaginatively Christians cope with the squeeze play between coherence and flexibility in understanding their own norm. I believe that the Van Buren/Hamilton/Altizer understanding of Jesus as the "contagious" model of our adulthood, given extension and depth by the Chardin/Ong understanding of grace (defined by the life of Jesus) as the evolutionary power of history, would be both honest to the church's experience and an extremely useful perspective for our society.

Jesus as the model of human adulthood and the eschatological clue to the meaning and direction of history is a coherent focus for our imagination while being dialectically open to every new experience and situation.

But the cultural usefulness of the Christian norm will develop only insofar as Christians determine never to let it become separated from the actual, concrete life of our society. This means that we must eschew any theological baggage that cannot be rendered in terms of specific, immanent issues of our society, and, conversely, that we must always struggle to find the inner meaning, from our normative perspective, of every crucial social issue. This cross-ruffing effort could help us gradually to bring our faith and culture into a lean, dynamic, functional relationship instead of perpetuating the fuzzy, honorific, often escapist relationship that exists now.

This is the prophetic stance which Christians must achieve in order to help our technological culture — this challenging "hominization of the world" — to become the occasion for new growth into our God-given adulthood rather than for the death of civilization.

*Myron Bloy is President of the National Institute for Campus Ministries.*

## SECOND EDITION/The Christian Norm

*Under the impact of technology, the prophetic vision*

*should be flexible but coherent.*

*From a 1966 Center Occasional Paper, "Technology and Human Values."*

Technology, both through the cornucopia of specific innovations and through the increasingly pervasive weight of what Hegel would call its "objective spirit," is successfully challenging the values and life-style of every traditional culture. What is the character of this vast cultural change? What is the function of Christian faith in relation to it?

Whatever ostensible religious sanctions for sexual behavior have been adduced in this country, it is clear that the so-called "prudential ethic" has been the real power behind them. This ethic has enforced extra-marital chastity by garishly describing the triple threat of infection, detection, and conception (a phrase coined by Joseph Fletcher of the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge). That is, so the threat goes, you had better not indulge in extra-marital sexual adventures because you are very likely to catch one of the dreaded venereal diseases, or you might be caught in the act and have to endure public shame and parental reprisal, or you might find yourself a parent perforce. The argument used to work well, but no more. The new wonder drugs which medical technology has produced cure venereal disease fairly swiftly and simply; the automobile, with the motel, offers nearly foolproof privacy; and new, easily obtainable drugs have reduced the risk of

unwanted pregnancy to a minimum. Technology has dealt a body blow to the prudential ethic and will eventually make it powerless.

The development of what Donald Michael calls "cybernation" — the meshing of automation and cybernetic devices into a single productive process — is also destined to have a massive impact on our traditional value system. Automation (the substitution of mechanical processes for human muscle and dexterity) and cybernetics (the substitution of electronic circuits for many mental skills), taken separately, abolish many traditional jobs, but linked together their functional capacity is geometrically increased. For example, cybernation has already eliminated almost all but custodial and top management jobs in the oil refining industry; the baking industry is developing in the same direction. Because automatic machinery can be controlled with computers which have digested not only production skills but also economic and inventory information, the middle-management as well as the blue-collar function is replaced by machines. Although the view of one economist that two per cent of the traditional labor force will eventually be able to perform all the necessary production tasks of the nation seems exaggerated, vast social and economic dislocations are bound to result from this

development. But what about the spiritual problem? In a society nurtured by the Protestant ethic, which has yoked man's identity firmly to his work, what happens to the man who is permanently excluded from the productive enterprise? The public dole may sustain him, but what of his self-esteem as a man?

As a last example, consider the erosion of the value-forming power of the family under the impact of technology. Many familial functions of the past have gradually been taken over by such institutions as schools, hospitals, and the Little League. More recently, the rapidly increasing mobility of youth has further removed children from close family control, and where knowledge of the wide world was once selectively filtered through parental values to the children, now the whole raw world is televised into the family living room. Consider the plight of the classical music *aficionado* who finds his child captivated by the "go-go" music shows or that of the pacifist parents trying to counter the effects of "U.N.C.L.E." in their children. What does this lessening potency of the family mean for the health of the culture?

But before considering the significance of the breakdown of the traditional culture under the weight of rapidly proliferating technological innovations, we should remember that such innovations must also be seen as symptomatic of a worldview which is far weightier and, in the end, more profoundly significant than any of these specific symptoms. That is, these "outward and visible signs" have an "inward and spiritual" worldview which is challenging the traditional culture at a deeper level.

One of the best current renderings of the conflict between this technological spirit and the traditional orientation to life is in the following scene from *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, in which the Communist agent, Fiedler, is interrogating the captured English agent, Leamas. What — Fiedler wants passionately to know — is the philosophy that motivates English agents in their fight against Communism?

"What do you mean, a philosophy?" Leamas replied. "We're not Marxists, we're nothing. Just people."

"Are you Christians then?"

"Not many, I shouldn't think. I don't know many."

"What makes them do it, then?" Fiedler persisted. "They must have a philosophy."

"Why must they? Perhaps they don't know; don't even care. Not everyone has a philosophy," Leamas answered, a little helplessly.

"Then tell me what is your philosophy?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Leamas snapped, and they walked on in silence for a while. . . ."

The Marxist in this scene represents the traditional, ideologically centered culture: in Marxism he has a vision of the Ultimate Truth of history which determines the loyalties, the values, and the style of his life; Fiedler cannot conceive of living at all except around some passionately held "philosophy of life." Leamas, on the other hand, is a true representative of the technological spirit: his loyalty is simply to the job on hand, to good workmanship; he is non-reflective, his satisfactions being in the immediate experience and not in the vision of some grand design which is presumed to lie behind the façade of history. When these two archetypal figures meet, they are a source of deep puzzlement and frustration to each other; it is as if they spoke different languages.

In the novel the traditionalists, whether Eastern Communists or Western idealists, all go down to defeat before the non-ideological, technological "pros." The novel is a paradigm of the massive cultural shift that is occurring everywhere in the world. For example, the thaw in the Cold War is not, as we might like to think, the result of a mutual upsurge of goodwill, but, rather, of the growing obsolescence of "capitalism" and "Communism" before the onslaught of a common, functionalist concern to raise the gross national product by whatever means computers and sophisticated mathematical techniques indicate.

The destruction of traditional ideologies by the technological spirit is reflected in more homely ways too. Political party leaders may argue that loyal party membership is the essence of American democracy; company brass and/or union leaders may vie for the worker's allegiance; parents may struggle to inculcate family traditions in their children; community leaders may use every promotional gimmick they can think of to get their neighbors out to the local bandstand for the Memorial Day speeches; the Daughters of the American Revolution may still imagine that it can call us to some historically determined social distinction; and a Paul Tillich may advance the apologetic gambit that everyone has some "ultimate concern" which necessarily implicates him in at least a covert religion.

But all these appeals to some form of ideological loyalty are less and less effective. Experience, metaphysically undifferentiated, is trusted to yield up whatever perspectives are necessary for any given decision. Men everywhere increasingly identify themselves with William James' pragmatist: "He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solu-

tions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns toward concreteness and adequacy, toward facts, toward action, and toward power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretense of finality in truth."



Technology, works and spirit, is clearly bringing about the swift collapse of the traditional culture, and those of us with a vested interest in that culture are bound to be dismayed. But perhaps we traditionalists have been so mesmerized by the destructive aspects of this massive historical event, perhaps our cultural shock has been so great, that we have not yet been able to see that in the larger view the event can portend a great step forward in man's growth towards his maturity. The Jesuit Walter Ong has provided the classical text for this perspective: "Seen in larger historical, and prehistorical, perspectives, the age of technology is part of the great and mysterious evolution of the universe devised by God. It can be considered as an epoch in what we may call the 'hominization' of the world, that is, the taking over of our planet by mankind."

Each one of the changes I have described does, in fact, enlarge man's freedom over heretofore implacably contingent factors of his existence. The prudential sex ethic, based on nothing but fear, made moral morons of us all; now we can make decisions about sexual behavior on the basis of a positive understanding of sexuality. Similarly, by breaking the stranglehold that productive necessity has always had on man's self-identity, cybernation is giving up the opportunity to evolve richer, more satisfying models of self-identity for ourselves. And the family, which has traditionally exacted an often tyrannous value — conformity in exchange for the security it provides the child — is now in a position to become a supportive setting for the young in which they have the freedom to explore value systems other than their parents'. Finally, there is no gainsaying the sense of exhilaration and release in James' description of man freed from the ideological straitjackets of the traditional culture.

Daniel Bell put this whole growth toward freedom in sociological perspective when he said, in his *The End of Ideology*: "If it is granted that mass society is compartmentalized, superficial in personal relations,

anonymous, transitory, specialized, utilitarian, competitive, acquisitive, mobile, and status-hungry, the obverse side of the coin must be shown, too — the right of privacy, to free choice of friends and occupation, status on the basis of achievement rather than exclusive and monopolistic social controls of a single dominant group. For if, as Sir Henry Maine once put it, the movement of modern society has been from status to contract, then it has been, in that light, a movement from a fixed place in the world to possible freedom."

Whatever dangers our rapid growth into a technological culture entail — and they are hard to underestimate — we must stop simply wailing through the shambles of the past and learn to use our expanded freedom as the occasion for new growth toward our adulthood. This is clearly a highly bruited moment in history, for the only alternative to using our freedom for fresh maturation is to allow it to dissolve into mere anarchy — an end that many traditionalists actually seem to desire as they passively wring their hands over the present simply because it confounds so much of the past.

Freedom is not simply our release from captivity, but, more fully, the occasion, the elbow-room, to lay hold of our destiny as men. We are not only freed *from* the prudential ethic, the slavery to production, the tight little family, or the metaphysical jails of the past for no other reason than to revel in the new roominess of life (although reveling is clearly in order too); we are freed for the task of growing up. And in order to grow up, men must make the risky commitment to *some* norm of what the mature life is and therefore to those political and social forces which tend to establish the possibility of that life.

In short, without the commitment to some judgment-empowering perspective, freedom never fulfills its true function in the economy of existence, but is likely, rather, to deteriorate\* into anarchy. Thus, our goal must be to develop dynamic cultural norms which are coherent enough to give society and individuals a sense of historical orientation and direction while remaining flexible enough to interpret new dimensions of freedom as new opportunities for growth.



The Christian faith has an opportunity to be crucially useful at this historical juncture, but the church will first have to rid itself of those rigid metaphysical and moralistic commitments which function as mere inhibitions of the new freedom. John Wren-Lewis,

English physicist and theologian, describes how such metaphysical structures function: "A culture which restricts human creativity to the cultivation of the natural world within the limits of a set pattern, on the ground that this pattern reflects the will of higher powers beyond, is just as much motivated by the desire to avoid responsibility for the state of the world as is the frightened neurotic who lives by compulsive private rituals. In fact, the moral stability of societies governed by 'belief' (in the ordinary sense of that term) is not a safeguard of man's humanity, as modern defenders of the traditional human outlook usually claim; it is stability purchased at the price of inhibiting the expression of man's humanity."

Wren-Lewis goes on to argue that freedom from the metaphysical rigidities of religion is one of the marks of technological culture. But we know that the church is still an escapist haven to the weak, passive, frightened people of our culture, to the authoritarian personalities who cannot stand the ambiguities and risk of free, creative living. Although we venerate as models of manhood the freedom-enlarging persons of our tradition — the prophets and saints — we know that the most ardent supporters of the church are generally the escapists rather than the bold innovators of society.

Furthermore, I have no doubt that if church leaders continue their tendency to label indiscriminately this emerging culture as anti-human and to man the apologetic barricades against it, thus implicitly strengthening the role of the church as an unhealthy nest for cultural dropouts, the Christian faith will have no share in determining the character of the new culture. To be useful, the Christian perspective must be dynamic rather than depressive, flexible rather than rigid. It must, in short, help men to use their new freedom to cope creatively with a world of constant change rather than to deny the existence of both their freedom and this real world.

On the other hand, one wonders how useful such a vague norm as "the expression of man's humanity" (which is often heard from liberal religious quarters) can be to contemporary man. Surely any society needs norms that are coherent and concrete enough to provide a solid perspective from which to understand and make judgments on its life, but such norms are hard to come by in our time. Daniel Bell argues that our culture is increasingly characterized by an "eclipse of distance," that our penchant for "immediacy, impact, simultaneity, and sensation" tends to break up "all fixed points of reference"; and Marshall McLuhan has described, in his *Understanding*

*Media*, the subtle pressure of the electronic age to inhibit "private points of view."

This is simply to say that if the Christian norm is to be useful it must also have enough body and definition to withstand the anti-normative tendencies of our time. In short, our vision of the life God has given us the freedom to grow into must be both flexible enough to exploit the rich promise of that freedom and coherent enough so that it will not dissolve under the pressures of our time, thus allowing our freedom to revert to chaos.

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