

# The "World"

## The Church and the "Godless World" – 1

By Thomas Merton

*Redeeming the Time (London: Burns and Oates, 1966) is often referred to as the British edition of Seeds of Destruction, and the second and third of its three parts, "The Christian in the Diaspora" and "The Christian in World Crisis," are indeed taken from that book, published two years earlier. However the first section, entitled "The Church and the 'Godless World'," had not been previously published. It consists of six sections: "The 'World'"; "'Godless Christianity?'" ; "God and the World"; "The Protest of Vitalism"; "Christian Humanism in the Nuclear Era"; and "The Road Ahead." The two longest sections were later published in book form in America: "'Godless Christianity?'" appears in revised and expanded form as the final chapter in Faith and Violence (259-87), and "Christian Humanism in the Nuclear Era" is published (along with the first two paragraphs of the following section, "The Road Ahead") in the posthumous Love and Living (151-70). The remaining four sections, previously unavailable in America, will appear in the four issues of Volume 27 of The Merton Seasonal, beginning with the first section, which follows. This material is published with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.*

In the earliest ecumenical councils the problems confronted were purely theological, and they concerned chiefly the divine and human natures of Christ, the divine Persons of the Word and of the Holy Spirit. The councils of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the nineteenth century were concerned with the life of the Church, with faith, grace and the sacraments. The Second Vatican Council, while continuing to develop and clarify the theology of the Church, manifested a wholly new concern – *man himself*. If one reflects on the historical and theological continuity of the Councils, it is rather awe inspiring to see that a basic and permanent problem that once presented itself as a theoretical denial of the humanity of Christ now presents itself as a practical, concrete and existential denial of *man*. Thus the Council now found itself not merely affirming that in Christ God was made man in order that man might by grace attain to the freedom of the sons of God, but that man himself had a right to be man and to enjoy the elementary freedom and dignity due to the existential human person in his world of matter, in his everyday struggle to exist.

While the Fathers of the Council were engaged in their momentous deliberation on the "Church in the Modern World," the many voices of the world itself were no more silent than usual. Voices of hope, of suffering, of perplexity, of confidence, of violence, prodigiously amplified by all the versatile means of communication which man has at his disposal, a world of fantastic possibilities both for good and for evil – capable of abolishing poverty, hunger and misery on the one hand, and of abolishing humanity itself on the other.

The Council Fathers confronted a world in which more than one war was in progress, including one which was exceptionally cruel, pointless, morally and politically ambiguous, yet dictated by the best of intentions – that of "preserving freedom." While it was obvious that neither side could win a conclusive victory, still neither side could bring itself to negotiate – or rather while both were, at different times, disposed to negotiate, they could not manage to be so disposed at the same moment.

This war was arousing world-wide protest – protest so alarmed and so intense that men even burned themselves alive in their frenzy to be taken seriously. But this protest seemed only to harden the resolution of those who understood no other answer than “escalation.”

In the midst of this political turmoil the Vicar of Christ flew to New York and addressed the United Nations, there speaking of man’s urgent need for peace and justice and calling on the nations of the world to collaborate in abolishing war and eliminating poverty. The message was respectfully received. But the wars went on with unabated cruelty, and as a matter of fact a few weeks later a general of the U.S. Air Force declared that in his opinion the United States ought to “bomb North Vietnam back into the stone age.”

The contrast between these two statements – of a Pope and of a general – underlines the seriousness of the Council’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. This is one of the great theological statements of the contemporary Church, certainly one of the most significant pronouncements of the Council. While concerned mainly with practical problems, it is also in reality a theological statement on man’s capacity for good and evil. Not a denunciation of “sin” in the abstract, not praise of “virtue” as a concept, not contemplation of absolute Platonic good, but a declaration on good and evil as they manifest themselves concretely and existentially in man’s “world” and in man himself today.

Yet we shall immediately see that this is a new approach to the problem of evil in the world. The Church is not saying to the world, “You are radically evil – become good as I am,” but she is saying, “You and I are suffering together from the consequences of our past actions and from our present misunderstandings. The threat of great evil hangs over us both, but if we can be open and available to one another we can together avoid the evil and instead realize the immense possibilities for good that are now within reach, as we grow together towards historical maturity.” The Church, in other words, respects the adulthood of the world, with all that this implies of hope and risk.

In the contrasting statements of Pope Paul VI and the U.S. general, one might at first be tempted to recall the classic Augustinian antithesis between the two Cities, the City of God, of peace and love, the City of man, of conflict and hate. Yet in actual fact the Council was far from seeking to remind us of the “two Cities” and of the great gulf that has traditionally existed between them. This amounted to an admission that the habitual facility with which the “world” has been periodically damned and rejected has perhaps had something to do with its contemporary problems. It is not enough for the Church to say that the world is a moral and theological disaster from which individual souls are to be rescued piecemeal. Without minimizing the evil that is in the world, without naïve optimism about progress, the Council sought to identify the Church with twentieth-century man in all his problems, his hopes, his joys, his sorrows, his fears and his amazing possibilities. “The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Such are the opening words of the Council Constitution (n. 1).

As a matter of fact one can say that the crucially important thing about this Constitution is to be sought not merely in what the Church had to say about the world but in the way in which it was said. Before anything was said at all, the Church had to decide, in her own “heart” so to speak, how she looked at the world. Was the world an object entirely separate from herself? Was the world simply to be seen again as her traditional enemy, as the realm of the devil? Or was the Church herself not only “friendly towards” the world but even part of it, identified with it?

The Council adopted a midway position. The Church, the People of God, is not simply identified with the whole world of man. She is ontologically separate from the world in which she is on pilgrimage. But she identifies herself with the world by love and compassion.

The Council Constitution, as we shall see, makes a distinction between “the world” and “man.” The world is, for the Church, no longer a static concept. This is a key to the understanding of the Constitution. Instead of viewing man as placed between two static and eternal realities, Church and World, City of God and City of Man, between which he must choose, she sees man growing and evolving in history. She sees herself growing and evolving with him. Her history is inextricably bound up with his. The world is not something static and established – it is in the process of becoming. It is *being made* by man. In a sense man is “making himself,” creating by his freedom a new identity for himself. And the Church now clearly admits the importance of her own part in this. If she refuses to be open and positive towards man’s creative aspirations, she will contribute to the negative and destructive tendencies in man and she will also condemn herself to alienation and sterility in man’s world. If, on the other hand, she is open and responsive to modern man, she will help him to grow and find himself, to build a world of peace and reason – *and she will also discover new possibilities in herself.*

To some it might seem strange that in the past, when civilization was able to be called “Christian,” the Church seemed to take it for granted that the world was evil and that secular life was at best a poor risk compared with the unworldly life of monks, nuns and priests. It was a paradox that the culture of the Middle Ages, which was expressly world-denying in its ideals, was nevertheless far from being world-denying in actual fact. (Medieval art and literature, outside of times of crisis like the mid-fourteenth century, certainly reflect a very positive and lively view of life. St. Thomas is a theologian who most strongly affirmed the value and meaning of nature.) And our own age, which has celebrated the most fantastic and portentous achievements in science and material progress, has also discovered in itself the capacity for total self-destruction as well as a serious tendency to use this capacity in fact. Yet the Church seeks to affirm the good that is in this complex and tormented modern world. She seeks to recognize that good without rancor, without dubious gestures of patronage, without insinuation that all this good is really due to her when, in fact, some of it is not. She shows herself prepared to recognize that the secular world in its very secularity has values worthy of honor, and that men who have nothing to do with the Church and her faith may still be helping the human race to advance towards its spiritual maturity. More than that, they offer to the Church an opportunity for dialogue in which she herself can discover new possibilities of growth towards a new maturity. No longer does the Church assume that all her possibilities are in fact realized, that she has only to stand still and wait for everything else to find its proper relation to her in an unchanging pattern. She sees herself engaged in a dynamic process of growth together with all the rest of the world. Her fidelity to the Holy Spirit and to Christ her Lord and Head will determine the part she plays in this development, and will govern her contribution to man’s own growth. Indeed, by her openness to modern man the Church may exercise a decisive influence on his destinies and save him from self-destruction. The magnificent efforts of Pope Paul to bring peace in the Vietnam war have shown how conscious he is of this responsibility. But this responsibility cannot be exercised through pontifical warnings and anathemas alone. The Church cannot stand apart from the world and order it around. She can only be heard by the world if she participates as an equal in the common problems of other men.

Hence, the idea of the “sanctification of the temporal order” now takes on an entirely new mean-

ing; so new that the expression no longer seems adequate to convey it.

The idea of "sanctification" belongs to a world-view of ancient religions which dedicated things and persons to God by visibly and symbolically removing them from the temporal order, setting them apart in a different realm recognized as holy, sacred and "belonging to God." This ritualistic view of sanctification prevailed in the Middle Ages, and let us admit that it is not entirely worthy of derision. As modern a consciousness as that of Rainer Maria Rilke, whose "Young Workman's Letter" forty-five years ago anticipated much of the "religionless Christianity" now popular among Protestant theologians, was fully aware of the religious values of this ancient culture and deplored their loss, while realistically doubting our capacity to revive them.

With the development of modern technological humanism, the concept of a temporal order sanctified by the presence of numerous clerics and monks who mediated between it and the City of God became more and more unreal, more and more arbitrary, until in recent years, in practice if not in theory, the Christian felt himself to be divided between an "outer" world of frenzied activity and business and an "interior" world to which he retired to recover his senses and his supernatural perspective or, in other terms, an outer world of bitter and morally dubious struggle and an inner world of "pure intention." Thus he engaged in the ruthless conflict of temporalities with an eye for eternal reward.

The problem was, then, to do the best one could for oneself in the wicked and disreputable world, which was altogether negligible in itself, while preserving one's title to a place at the eternal banquet which alone was "real." Hence one was able, by reason of this pious disavowal of "the world," to participate fully in it and indeed to deprive others of its iniquitous benefits. One could therefore join eagerly in a war to "bomb one's enemies back to the stone age" provided one had a pure intention and an eye on eternity. But now the Church declares she will no longer be content to let the generals bomb other nations "back into the stone age" while she closes her eyes to the violence of war and merely sees that the Catholic airman is properly shriven before he takes off to do the bombing. On the contrary, in "turning to the world" and defending the good that is in the world and in man, the Church articulately questions the need for these violent solutions to the world's problems and warns that bombs will never solve anything.

This implies a new view of the world, a different decision about the world and its meaning, or, to be more accurate, a different accent, a different emphasis in the Church's traditional awareness of her relation to "the world." She no longer warns and encourages the world as one entirely outside it, but as one who is *in* it and implicated in all its hopes and problems in so far as they concern the future of man himself. And she can even contribute indirectly to increasing the evil and turmoil of the world if she forgets the love, the understanding, the compassion that she owes to man and even to "the world."

It is no secret that the term "the world" can have many meanings. The standard concept of the world in medieval Christendom, and after, tended to be largely monastic. The "world" was something to be renounced and forgotten. In the First Epistle of John (2.15-17), the individual Christian was exhorted to "love not the world nor yet what is in the world; if anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the proud glory of life, belongs not to the Father but to the world; and the world is passing away with its desire, while he who does the will of God remains forever." Clearly there was nothing ambiguous or half-hearted about this. The "world" here is the realm of self-will and of sin. But is it

not simply the realm of “Godlessness” or “irreligion”? According to the New Testament, religious ambiguity is in fact condemned more bluntly and more completely than an overt sinfulness of the passionate and the weak. “I tell you truly,” said Christ to the most severely religious men of his time, “the tax-gatherers and harlots are going into the Kingdom of God before you” (Matt. 21.31). Even in the Bible, then, the “world” is not simply the realm of the irreligious and the Kingdom of God is not simply the Kingdom of religious piety. The distinction between the world and the Kingdom is a distinction between self-seeking and selfless love, not between the temporal and eternal or the material and spiritual only. But in any case, there is clearly in the New Testament writings a dark view of “this world” which failed to recognize Christ (John 1.10; I Cor. 1.20ff.) and to which his enemies belonged (John 8.23) while he was “not of this world” (*ibid.*).

The world in this sense “cannot receive the Holy Spirit” (John 14.7). Christ’s peace is a gift which is not like the gifts of this world (John 14.27). The devil is called simply “the Prince of this world” (John 14.30) and this implies that he has power over all its kingdoms, which indeed he offers to Christ in his temptation (Matt. 4.8-9). The “world” in this sense must obviously not be taken as an “evil creation” opposed by its very nature, as material, to the spiritual world of God and the angels. Unfortunately this Manichaeian or Gnostic interpretation has been put upon it too often in the past. To understand this “dark” view of the world we must see it as, by its own choice, deprived of the light of Christ and as opposed to the will of the Father. But matter as such is not “dark” and does not by its nature “resist God.” The darkness of the world lies not in its materiality, but in the sin of selfish wills that have rejected God’s love – often in the name of religion itself. The world, in this dark sense, is the world without love, the world without Christ – a world of individuals closed in upon themselves or upon the collective interests of a social or national group.

Now, to understand this view of the world we must remember how much it owed to the Old Testament idea of the gentile world of idolatry. In New Testament times, the struggle against “the world” was frankly a struggle against the demands of an idolatrous society. Christian “hatred of the world” was never hatred of the created world of nature as such, but an embattled resistance against a society which had deified the forces and passions of nature and which regarded the Christian worship of a transcendent and invisible God, manifested in his crucified and risen Son, as a kind of atheism.

But since religious values were in fact identified with the social values of a pagan culture, and a world-view which was entirely closed in upon itself, the desire of the Christian to free himself from the moral servitude implied by a “worldly” and pagan religiosity was regarded as impiety and irreligion. Traditionally the Christian opposition to “the world” is a theological one, which rejects the world in so far as it constitutes the realm and focus of a false and superstitious religion – a religion which imprisons and confines the liberty of the human person in a servitude to prejudice and passion summarily described by St. Paul in Romans (1.18-32).

At the same time we must remember the positive side of this picture. If the Christian was commanded to be “in the world but not of it” (John 15.18-19; 17.11), yet he must nevertheless remain in the world as a witness to, a manifestation of, Christ who is himself the *light of the world* (John 8.12) and who by his death casts out the prince of this world (John 12.31) and draws all men to himself (*ibid.*). Thus, in the end, John’s final and most profound word on the world is that “*God so loved the world* that he gave his only-begotten Son that all who believe in him may have everlasting life” (John 3.16).

When the Council speaks of the Church in the world, three possible senses of the “world” must

therefore be kept in mind:\* one in which the world is simply God's creation, and as such manifests the wisdom of the Creator; another in which the world is "fallen" and "dark" due to the self-idolatry of godless man and his society; and a third in which the world is loved, redeemed and saved by God, and destined to be "recapitulated," summed up, perfected and completed in Christ (Eph. 1.9-12). The world is all these three things at the same time: it is God's creation, it is the arena of a struggle between God's love and the evil which manifests itself in sin, rebellion against love, and ultimate death, and it is also God's Kingdom in which Christ already reigns and in which history is pointing to its final conclusion in him.

In any discussion of the Christian outlook on "the world," one must be quite clear which of the three senses is being used. Now, in the past, it was generally assumed that when the Church spoke of "the world" she meant, as a matter of course, the "dark" world, the fallen and sinful world, the world in rebellion against the word of God and even against the light of reason. Furthermore, it was assumed that the men living in the world, the concrete flesh-and-blood people who for better or for worse participated in the world's history, were for the most part inclined to identify themselves with all that was dark and fallen in the world. In fact, to follow "nature" was simply to yield to the world's tendency to evil and go along with it. If the Church herself did not always assume this, many of her preachers and teachers did. So also did some of the saints. Not so the Second Vatican Council.

In fact, the Constitution on the Church and the World sees the world in our third sense: as loved and redeemed by God.

The People of God believes that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher the authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human.

This Council, first of all, wishes to assess in this light those values which are most highly prized today and to relate them to their divine source. Insofar as they stem from endowments conferred by God on man, these values are exceedingly good. Yet they are often wrenched from their rightful function by the taint in man's heart, and hence stand in need of purification.

What does the Church think of man? What needs to be recommended for the upbuilding of contemporary society? What is the ultimate significance of human activity throughout the world? People are waiting for an answer to these questions. From the answers it will be increasingly clear that the People of God and the human race in whose midst it lives render service to each other. Thus the mission of the Church will show its religious, and by that very fact its supremely human, character (n. 11).

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\* Obviously there are many non-theological meanings that could be given to the expression "the Church and the World" – for example, the Church and *science*, or the Church and *secular culture*, or the Church and *politics*. Actually, many such ideas did find a place in the Constitution, at least by implication. Another important point is of course that "secular society" means one thing in the United States, another in Chile, another in Katanga, another in Rhodesia, another in France, another in Russia and another in China. These cannot all be lumped together as if they were exactly the same world sociologically. Obviously there may be elements of godlessness present in all these societies, but they do not form a single, homogeneous "godless world."

Even though the men in the world may be weak, confused, or even ruthless, greedy and cruel, yet nevertheless they are loved by God and sought by his Spirit. In order to avoid ambiguity on this subject, the Constitution usually speaks not simply of the “world” (which is after all an abstraction) but of men, and more particularly of “the men of this age.” And this concrete term is all-inclusive. The Constitution is concerned with the problems and hopes of *all men*. In particular, it makes clear that the aspirations of all men, not only of Christians, for a better world and even for material well-being, are not to be reproved as evil.

God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in like manner. Whatever the forms of property may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of peoples, according to diverse and changeable circumstances, attention must always be paid to this universal destination of earthly goods. In using them, therefore, man should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others. On the other hand, the right of having a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family belongs to everyone (n. 69).

There is obviously no incompatibility between man’s desire for a good and decent life of relative happiness on earth, and his aspiration to the vision of truth and union with the ultimate principle of all life, that union with God in eternal life which is man’s last end. The Church, then, implicitly recognizes that she has no right to accuse and harass modern man in his desire for a good life (according to the norms of reason) in peace and security. She has no commission to make him doubt the value of the world in which he lives, no mandate to torment him by arousing his guilt and anxiety over existence in a contingent and material setting. But note, if she recognizes this, it is precisely because in her compassion she sees that he already has plenty of problems of his own, and that life is not all as simple and as delightful as it is claimed to be in our technological paradise. It has its good points, but it has its pressures, its risks and its inhumanities. We do, after all, live in the age of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. There does unfortunately exist a ruthless greed which builds for itself magnificent cities with the blood of exploited races and peoples.

The world in which the Christian lives is, then, a world which knows the presence of evil and of hate, of greed, frustration and despair, yet still has as its central and most intimate reality the saving promises of God, the Kingship of Christ, who has already completed his work of salvation. Faith, in apprehending this central truth, this saving presence of Christ as King and Redeemer in the midst of the suffering world, grasps the key to the whole meaning of man, the world, and history – including all the injustices and inhumanities of history. But precisely because faith is not based on clear, external, scientific evidence, it implies a personal commitment to Christ *in opposition* to the manifest claims of a reason that is scandalized by evil and demands to be *shown* that God exists, that he loves the world, that he has redeemed man, and that he holds man’s destiny in his own hands. In other words, the Church is now concerned with evil as a scandal – as an obstacle to the light of revealed truth – and with the inadequacy of past attempts to explain evil away.