

HOLINESS AND THE TIMES*

GABRIEL REIDY, O.F.M.

THE function of the philosopher, or part of it, is to explain in terms of his system, the mysteries of time and space. The function of the scientist, or part of it, is to explore increasingly efficient techniques for manipulating time and space. The function of the theologian is to transmit a reasonable account of revealed religious doctrine and practice to all men, irrespective of time and space. As Karl Adam particularizes it for our own times, the aim of theology is to 'render the spirit of Catholicism intelligible to the contemporary mind'. (*Sidelights*, Sheed & Ward, p. 2.) Sometimes the theologian is distracted, sometimes disquieted by what is happening about him in the schools of the philosophers and in the laboratories of the scientists. Considering the amplitude of his task, it ought not to cause undue surprise if, occasionally, he seems neglectful of spatio-temporal affairs which loom so large in the minds of everybody else. Yet to him also, time and space are amongst the mysteries of human existence, though not what he calls 'entitatively supernatural' mysteries. Consequently he shelves them in order to insist on the greater importance, the larger inclusiveness of the genuinely revealed mysteries of faith. In a practical vein he harps on the need to imitate Christ and progress through self-denial and prayer to a mystical union with God, and in doing this he inevitably inclines towards a wary conservatism, leaning so heavily on what has been tested and proved through centuries of Christian experience, that his hearers are often tempted to regard him as cagily distrustful of everything new—pledged to a sort of professional obscurantism.

His task is certainly no easy one. It should cause no astonishment if, in this general treatment of *Holiness and the Times*, I am content to lay down some of the more radical theological principles which we can and must hold as absolutes, leaving the application and discussion of them to those who are to follow me.

* A paper read at the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, 'Science and Sanctity', September 1954.

Our problem is the perennial one of adaptation: in the sphere of expression the problem is one of intelligent translation and enlightened selection amongst the wellnigh innumerable symbols which have been stockpiling for so long, not merely from the accredited sources of revelation but from every other source of human activity, thought and feeling as well. Unavoidably, each generation tends to think of the problem as a new one or at least more urgently presented than ever before. Equally constant, I think, is the division amongst men largely temperamental into those who stand strictly by the *dictum* 'nil innovetur nisi quod traditum est' and those who, even at some risk, are willing to prove each new thing, in the hope of retaining what is good in it along with the old. Both attitudes are doubtless represented in a gathering of this size and variety, and that is a hopeful sign that our discussions may bear real fruit.

Those who have been present at previous LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conferences will recall the many shapes in which this problem continually presented itself, no matter what subject came under discussion. Last year, for example, we were engaged largely with the 'spiritual sense' of Holy Scripture and with the special symbolism to which its interpretation has given rise. No one could fail to realize that in order to share in the great riches there displayed, many modern people require a patient course of re-education in an outlook and a whole way of thought which have become alien to their daily outlook. This was evident in connection with gaining a proper appreciation of the Psalter, the basis of the official prayer of the Church. How strange, too, for anyone educated in these days, is the ancient Jewish cosmogony in the early part of Genesis, or indeed, the whole concept of history in that and the other Old Testament books. Equally puzzling and even exasperating must be what passes for natural history in Jacobus de Voragine or any of the other quarries of scholastic learning about nature, and the visible world. Exploded these things may be, but they once helped to form a satisfying religious-scientific synthesis, which was guarded from serious dogmatic error by the indefectible ecclesiastical *magisterium*. As scientific explanations such things are void and for some people there is little to take their place. Instead, we have a widespread notion, the residue of recent anti-religious criticism, that true science, considered as something apart, has knocked away these rotten

props of religious dogma, and now goes on developing as a substitute for, if not the positive enemy of religion. Religion itself, the growth of dogma, the history of Christianity, may be studied by scientific method, but the two spheres remain separate and somehow inimical. *We* do not believe so, but we have to deal with people who take it for granted.

The same problem came to the fore in our debates on Christian fellowship, or the need of understanding the mentality of primitive man (including 'neo-primitive' men). It concerned not merely the communication of doctrines and ideas, but the very means of doing so, including linguistic and all other pedagogical techniques.

It will not be out of place to indicate briefly here the manner in which the problem might be stated and then solved in a rather formalistic and doctrinaire fashion, as in certain old-fashioned manuals of theology and scholastic philosophy. The method was to minimize the problem to such a degree as to imply its effective non-existence. This was, of course, unfair to the more serious of our critics and served only to exasperate them; consequently it was very dangerous to our own position.

In our introduction to the Sacred Sciences we still normally make out a case, and a respectable one, for such a systemization of all human knowledge (actual and possible) that in it theology occupies a rightfully supreme position. We attempt to show that theology is a true science, and indeed the mistress and queen of all the others. Since it is a participation in God's own truth, based on his revealing authority, led up to, supported and clarified by the certain deliveries of the human reason, therefore all the other sciences, dependent as they are upon human reason alone, must be regarded as tributary or ancillary to theology. The supreme sacred science leads us towards the eternal contemplation of God. Primarily speculative, it is nevertheless eminently practical also, because it teaches us the actual means which, even in our conditions of time and space, lead to that great end—contemplation and enjoyment of God. There is really no true knowledge, and no legitimate art, which has a meaning apart; it is significant only in so far as it conduces to the end of theology.

I might perhaps be expected, as a Franciscan, to tie my remarks on to such a work as the *De Reductione omnium artium ad theologiam* of the Seraphic Doctor; or perhaps to adopt as my text the secondary motto of our Order (also associated with the name of St

Bonaventure): 'in sanctitate et doctrina'. But since the whole of that sort of synthesis is a typical product of the Ages of Faith, and we now live at an epoch in which for a vast number of our educated contemporaries that synthesis has disintegrated, another approach seems advisable. If we are to have a new synthesis out of the fragments of our ancient Christian culture, then assuredly it will not be made with the help of Augustine's Plato, the Schoolmen's Aristotle, or the seventeenth-century mystical theology *alone*. For better or worse (and I can see no reason why not for better), our materials, even the most venerable of them, will be sieved through the mesh of modern scientific method and outlook.

The problem really does exist and thrusts itself on all who have to live a spiritual life or teach others to do so. We live in a mental climate deeply influenced by real and sudden scientific advance, which is, as yet, by no means well digested. The danger and uncertainty necessarily inherent in the situation is aggravated because we were so ill-prepared spiritually for it. One has but to reflect on the great changes in such studies as physics, psychology and anthropology alone during the last couple of generations in order to realize the urgency of a proper adjustment between the professional theologian and the professional scientist if either is to retain the confidence of the people. Theological manuals still confine themselves to safe generalizations on these matters. There can be no real conflict, they tell us, between religion and science, for both are parts of the one supreme truth. Specialists in each field must tirelessly investigate that truth according to their scope and with their appropriate method. Contradictions can be only apparent and are to be solved by patient re-investigation, or, where evidence is lacking, by humble suspension of judgment. This is all true enough, but sometimes small comfort to the actual workers, especially the vulgarizers. There are, however, a number of recent papal pronouncements which show a different attitude, more enlightened, positive and therefore helpful. Specialists in psychology, in gynaecology and other branches of study have been able to hear authoritative treatment of their own chosen subjects by a Pontiff who has taken trouble to be up to date, who appreciates their problems, and who can talk to them in their own language. The 'more true science progresses, the more it discovers God, as if God were waiting *aux aguets*, behind every door that

science opens'. (Pius XII, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 22 November, 1951.)

On the other hand we must not forget the large number of those who look for a new synthesis in which the claims of religion are not recognized, or only inadequately. Theology would be no queen in the Russellian new world, and readers of Kathleen Notcutt's recent attack on a group of English writers who have sought to draw once again upon the funds of Christian theology and tradition will know how the attitude which we tend to take for granted can arouse not mere derision and rejection, but indignation of an almost hysterical and panicky kind. (*The Emperor's Clothes*, 1954.)

Whether we happen to like it or not, our age is a scientific age in a special sense, and if it continues at all (a point on which some of the scientists themselves have been manifesting a certain lack of optimism lately) it will become yet more scientific. It is much more self-consciously so than former ages, and increasingly voluble on the matter. Mgr Knox, in a sad mood engendered by his contemplation of *God and the Atom*, calls it a 'science-ridden age'. This multiplies the uncertainties that we are suffering. Pseudo-science spreads its influence even more easily than true science. This makes it relevant to insist (always pre-supposing our survival) that whether religion or science reigns in the synthesis of the future, whether our lives be regulated by theology, or by materialism, or communism, or any other -ism, there will undoubtedly be a mysticism of sorts, and it is our task now to do what we can to ensure its being a salutary instead of a harmful mysticism. David Knowles, in his study of *The English Mystics*, remarks that 'it is somewhat tempting to say that a wave of mystical expression comes over the world immediately after an epoch of scientific progress. Thus the mystical fourteenth century succeeded the scholastic and legalistic thirteenth . . . the mysticism of St Teresa, Boehme and the English Quakers followed a period of controversial theology, during which a vast territory of hitherto uncultivated land had been fenced by dogmatic formulas and new canons and rubrics, and finally, the cult of mysticism in our own day is consequent upon an era of scientific method and discovery in the world of religion and ethics.' (p. 42. But note that he discusses and partly disputes it. *ibid.* 43 i:e: in 1927.) Is the age of nuclear fission to produce a *mystique* reinforcing the one we

know, or to devastate it like another Hiroshima? New spatial aspirations are being felt, and the planetary explorers are straining at the leash; but for what? To conquer new solitudes and silences wherein to deepen our union with the Creator of the vast universe, or merely to enlarge the spiritual deserts of the known world and people new spheres with terrifying ghosts? A new world order may be served by perfected robots and governed by a bureau of cybernetics, but will it be a better world? As Christians we are bound to hope, and entitled to be optimistic, in our reliance on the inexhaustible riches of Christ and his divine omnipotence, but it would be a false hope and an ill-founded optimism which failed to recognize the very real dangers lurking in our present state.

Although I do not wish to prejudice what is going to be said seriously about the serious side of scientific symbolism in contemporary life, I may perhaps be allowed to note in passing the already dangerous prevalence of pseudo-scientific symbols. Some of you may have picked up Aldous Huxley's slim volume, *The Doors of Perception*, with the same interest as I. This work set out to give an account of its author's experiences under the influence of the drug mescaline. His perception of ordinary objects became immensely more vivid, satisfying and significant: whilst his normal habits of worrying about, puzzling over, willing and wishing in regard to them were dulled. Interesting to those who are interested in that sort of thing, but not quite so interesting, I think, as one had been led to expect. There was the rueful feeling of having been bamboozled again, as with each new wonder-food, wonder-diet, wonder-drug that is launched upon its dubious career. The doors of perception were opened but not wide enough: one got a fleeting glance within, serving only to whet the curiosity, but one could not get a foot on the door-mat. This was irritating enough, but there was worse behind. We have grown accustomed to Aldous Huxley as a commentator on the deepest aspects of religious psychology: more than once he has undertaken to interpret for us key passages in the history of western spirituality, pronouncing fearlessly on essentials no less than accidentals. Thus, when he comes straight (straight?) from drug-induced contemplation of a rose or the books in his study, to suggest that the Churches should 'cash in', so to speak, on this new discovery and use it as a normal technique of spiritual develop-

ment, replacing the traditional modes of ascetical preparation for mystical union, we feel that we are being hustled. Are we to look forward to a future in which the clinic will replace the cloister or retreat-house? Shall we be able to by-pass the 'dark nights of the soul' by aid of the hypodermic needle, or will it be merely a matter of getting tablets from the local health stores and having them specially blessed at the presbytery? But an outlook which seems so bizarre to us is not uncommon and not uncharacteristic in this age which is proud to call itself scientific.

Recently my life was threatened, by a small boy with a toy pistol: but no, there was a tiny plastic addition of indeterminate shape and function which transformed the toy into a space-gun with a devastating atomic ray. Space-fiction, written and broadcast, not only has its devotees amongst sensation-lovers as we should expect: it has also produced its own serious criticism. I was astonished recently in the London streets to note how many little bicycle-shops, having also a few radio and television sets for sale, were pretentiously describing themselves as 'specialists in electronics'. The minds and hearts of many of our contemporaries are already filling up not so much with the new furniture of science, as with the bric-à-brac of its less reputable step-sister. How will this new stuff of the mind fit in with the old? Or will it fit in at all? Here is one by no means negligible aspect of the problem of conveying, as our Lord himself did, the great religious truths by means of the current symbols of everyday life.

But to return to the main problem. What are the fundamentals on which its solution depends? Speaking generally, the fact of Christian sanctity must be independent of any discoveries that human science has made or can make. Our Saviour's own programme for perfection is larger than any accidents of time and place. Any expression of that programme, to be effective, must be equally transcendent: in its essentials it must be an intelligible and workable scheme handed from man to man. Its accidentals may change, to the immediate advantage or disadvantage of particular individuals in different times and places. But such changes are, in my opinion, like those introduced by the invention of printing, or of modern means of communication, always of mixed, equivocal effect. It behoves us both as learners and teachers of Christian holiness to be enlightened and discreetly selective in the use we make of them.

But now to enumerate some of the great classic positions of theology which appear to me to have the closest bearing on the matter we are discussing.

First, we must stress the doctrine of the eternity of God, in his Unity and Trinity, utterly transcendent of the categories of time and space by virtue of the fact that he and he alone brought them, like created being itself, out of nothing, by a free act of his omnipotent will. Accordingly, no actual or possible modification of them either *in se* or in any created mind can do anything at all to change the essential relationships subsisting between God the Creator and every part of what he has created.

Secondly, the eternal generation of the Father's only-begotten Son, *in principio*, is equally transcendent and absolute in value. Even its temporal expression through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and all his unique mediatorship shares in the eternity of his divine nature. Hence all the changeful phenomena of created existence, from the beginning to the end of time, pivot around Christ as their central and fixed point. He who is *principium et finis*. 'Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever', suffers no change: neither do those who are fully incorporated in him.

Thirdly, the redemptive work of Christ—forgiveness of sins and infusion of supernatural life—is also of permanent and Catholic value, for all men, in all times, and in all places. The very core of it is the application to us of Christ's merits through the sacraments of the Church coupled with her charismatic preaching of the doctrine and means of sanctity. A human perfection—limited, no doubt, yet described boldly as being like to God's own perfection—is authentically put before us as universally possible and universally obligatory.

Fourthly, since human nature itself does not essentially change, certain basic techniques of asceticism and prayer, attested alike by reason and the experience of many thousands of holy lives, when properly joined with the revealed teaching of the Church, guarded and controlled by her infallible magisterium, remain unshakable and irreversible in their Godward tendency.

Lastly, the progressive growth of devotional life in the Church, no less than in her dogmatic and moral teaching, ensures that no essential gain, from whatever source obtained, can ever be wholly lost. On the contrary, what we possess will become plainer,

fuller, richer, and more scientifically exact in statement.¹ Partial, accidental, local and temporal *obscuration* there may be, but when it occurs, it will seldom if ever be possible to attribute it to external catastrophes alone: it will always be at least partly someone's fault. It is this which justifies and renders imperative a discussion of this kind.

To hold tenaciously to the faith one has received, through thick and thin, even under persecution, even to the point of martyrdom, is virtuous: indeed there are circumstances in which that is the only sort of virtue we can practise. But normally we are under obligation to live our faith and to grow in it as far as we can. But the growth may seem to be intermittent: any time-lag between our reception of new scientific data and the full integration of them with our faith, to the enhancement of both, is necessarily a time of trial and temptation. But that is God's own way of making us worthy to enter into a higher contemplation of his inexhaustible Wisdom and Beauty.

¹ 'Crescat igitur oportet et multum vehementerque proficiat tam singulorum quam omnium, tam unius hominis quam totius ecclesiae, aetatum et saeculorum gradibus, intelligentia, scientia, sapientia, sed in uno dumtaxat genere, in eodem sensu, eademque sententia.' (Vincent of Lerins, *Commonit.* an. 434, ch. 23 RJ 2174.)



SYMBOLS AND THE SCIENTISTS*

DONALD NICHOLL

I WOULD not venture to read a paper on this subject to a gathering of natural scientists did I not hold that the process by which the natural scientist comes to understand the natural world is often analogous to the process of understanding carried out by other scientists, such as historians, for instance. Holding this opinion, I believe that other scientists may have helpful observations to offer to natural scientists on methodology and the basic principles of understanding phenomena.

The three observations I wish to put forward are as follows. That in all our knowing-processes (the natural sciences included)

* A paper read at the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, September 1954.