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Christian Assurance in an Unsure World

BY JOHN COCKERTON

IN the nineteenth century mankind seemed to be travelling the road of limitless progress ; there seemed no end to what might be achieved by human determination and skill. It was the era which greeted Darwin's *Origin of Species* with acclamation, not because everybody appreciated the force of Darwin's scientific arguments, but because his main thrust fitted so well into the evolutionary outlook of the time. Those days are far behind us. We have been chastened by two appalling world wars since then and we are not nearly so sure about the idea of inevitable progress as we once were, not at any rate in the social and ethical spheres. Today the threat of nuclear war is ever with us and the terrible problems posed by the so-called "population explosion" are as urgent as they are acute.¹ The future of the whole of mankind, it would seem, is dreadfully uncertain.

This is the sombre background of the revolutionary change which marks almost every area of modern life. If there are those who are relatively undisturbed by the massive problems facing the world at large surely no one can fail to be affected by the enormous changes which are happening in his immediate environment. All around us we see evidence of change, perhaps nowhere so clearly as in the field of science and technology where achievements of such a kind have been registered that even the least scientifically-minded among us is left open-mouthed in amazement. But there is another sort of change which is very pervasive and which no one can fail to observe. This is the change which is generally called "the secularization of society". It has been going on in the West, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly, from the end of the Middle Ages and is now in many areas virtually complete. A great deal has been written about it of late² which applauds it as a sign of God's hand at work freeing men and women from the Church's apron strings, and theologians have called on Christians to appreciate the change and to move out, as it were, into the secular world (which is after all God's world, as they rightly point out) and witness there to God's activity in the ups and downs of secular life.

But there are great dangers in the process and we should be foolish to ignore them. One of the most obvious is the growth of a practical (if not always a theoretical) secularism which is bound to find new opportunities in the more "open" society which secularization is creating. And there is another danger implicit in the "openness" occasioned by the passing of the old structures of thought and ways of life. Colin Williams calls it "dizziness" and says that it goes along with the "awful freedom of knowing that we must create ourselves."³ "Dizziness" is a good word to use. It suggests that to modern man, "liberated" as he is from the old frameworks and controls, society seems to be spinning round and round. Nothing seems stable and secure any more. There are no fixed points now to hang on to. All is in a state of flux. And it requires an enormous effort of concentration

for man in this condition to remain upright and not to fall headlong to the ground. We all recognize in the metaphor something of what we see happening around us in ways that are sometimes serious and at other times comparatively trivial. But those in our changing world who have actually felt their cherished beliefs and standards being progressively destroyed and yet have found nothing adequate to put in their place will know exactly what the word "dizziness" means when it is used in this way.

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Drama since the war reflects something of it. For instance, patterns of behaviour dictated by society have come under heavy fire because (it is alleged) they inhibit people from developing their personalities to the full. There is an insistent call to let individuals be individuals. The result may be uncomfortable, even unpleasant, for the individuals and for the community as a whole, but it must be allowed to happen because people today are not content to go on living with inherited or imposed values; they must find their own values however agonizing the search may turn out to be. Such is the mood, and there are many excellent examples of it. Let us glance at a few plays which may fairly be regarded as representative of the post-war period.⁴

In *Look Back in Anger* John Osborne has given us a kind of anti-hero through whom he can show us what he calls "the texture of ordinary despair". Jimmy Porter is at odds with the world largely because he insists on his right to be an individual and because no one really understands him. He has a keen sense of the pain of life and he makes his own rather crude protest against the age in which he has to live. He complains because, as he puts it, "there aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you." Jimmy, one feels, has nothing to which he can give his energy; he is a man with strong drives inside him who lacks a focus outside himself.

In the years immediately after the War there arose in France a new kind of drama which came to be known as the *Theatre of the Absurd*. The term was coined by Martin Esslin who said of it that it "expresses the loss of the feeling that the world makes sense, or can be reduced into an integrated system of values—which is due to the decline of religion—that had been apparent since the end of the First World War, and the decline in the belief in the substitute religions of nationalism, faith in progress, and socialism, in the cynical disillusionment of the period after the Second World War." The playwrights whose work is most commonly referred to in this way are Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter; but there are others, and the description must be taken as giving only the very broadest indication of the content of their plays.

Ionesco, in his first play, put on the stage two married couples, Mr. and Mrs. Smith and their friends, the Martins. All four people were no more than puppets. They talked as if they were characters in an English phrase-book written for foreigners wanting to learn the language. They were stilted and unreal. They talked incessantly although they really had nothing of any importance to say. It is as if

in this play Ionesco is saying to his audience, " I want you to look at some people who no longer have any values or ideals of their own. Society has worked on them like a grinding-mill ; it has crushed out of them whatever individuality they may once have had. They are not real human beings any more ; they are just creatures of habit." It is a pathetic picture that he paints but he wants to show us, even if it means being ruthless with us, one of the problems which society faces. He is not giving an answer to the problem ; he is trying to show us what the problem is.

Samuel Beckett has given us one of the most controversial plays staged since the War. His *Waiting for Godot* is, in part, an attempt to strip away from life the old conventionalities and reveal some of the depths of human experience, frightening though these may be. The play is curiously devoid of action. It is in fact almost all talk. The two main characters are tramps who are together involved in an ordeal of waiting. Godot is the one for whom they are waiting but they do not know who he is. As they wait, they engage in desultory conversation. They would like to commit suicide and end it all but they talk themselves out of so decisive a step. They do not get on well together and they are dreadfully bored. In the end, when Godot has after all failed to appear, one tramp says to the other, " Well, shall we go ? ". And the reply comes, " Yes, let's go." But the final stage direction keeps them rooted to the spot. It says simply, " They do not move." It has been said that there are as many interpretations of this play as there are people who have seen it. That is part of the enigma of it—and of Beckett who will not break silence about it.* But we can surely sense here something of the helplessness of man when he is left to himself. The slave Lucky, who appears in the play, has a miserable existence but he does at least have the security which comes from being owned, from belonging to a master. The tramps are left very much to their own devices. That is what is so terrible about their situation. They are helpless, aimless, and despairing.

We have done no more than glance at a few illustrations, taken from the theatre, of a mood which has been discernible over the last twenty years in many areas of modern life, a " loss of the feeling that the world makes sense." We might have turned to quite different areas, but the theatre is perhaps as good a place as any in which to look for reflections of current attitudes. At all events it would seem that the description of " dizziness " which modern dramatists give us fits in very well with the picture we get from other sources.

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This is a scientific age, an age of experiment, an age which puts high value upon the methods of observation and which is consequently reluctant to interpret the observable world in terms of some sort of " reality " which is beyond the range of scientific investigation. People today who think seriously about the problems of existence, generally like to regard the world as a world of " becoming " and this is quite natural in view of the stress which they lay upon the value of observation. For when they actually " look " at the world they see something which is not at all static, but moving, growing, developing, in short

“becoming” always something different from what it was before, in spite of its obvious continuity. This kind of approach is very common.* If we were asked to characterize in a few words the age in which we live we would be inclined to say that it is an age of scientific observation. But there is more to be said than this. There is a negative side as well. This reveals itself in a great reluctance on all hands to think in terms of fixed, immutable principles and objective values. It is an age which does not take kindly to the idea of authorities (except perhaps scientific ones), especially if they claim to stand above and beyond the flux of time; it is profoundly suspicious of anything which has the appearance of coming authoritatively “from above” or “from outside”. Indeed it is fundamentally unsure whether any such authorities exist at all.

If this is, as we believe it to be, a true description of the prevailing intellectual climate it is not at all surprising that it should be in conflict with the Christian faith, for Christianity lives under authority (first and foremost under the authority of the sovereign God Himself) and rests upon the “givenness” of revelation, believing that God has made Himself known and declared His will for man. It is also pretty obvious why the conflict comes to particularly marked expression in the realm of morals. For it is widely held today that there can no longer be any question of principles and precepts impinging upon man as it were “from outside”. Such things belong to the infancy and adolescence of the race. They are now, in the time of its adulthood, safely left behind. Furthermore, they would be much too rigid to be operated successfully in the special, individual, and complicated circumstances in which moral decisions have these days to be made. And in any case, it is not simply that unchanging principles are wildly inappropriate when one is dealing with particular needs; it is rather that they are in fact nowhere to be found no matter how hard one looks for them.

No wonder the Church in this setting sometimes looks ridiculous to non-believers when it insists upon truths of revelation and principles of conduct which it says have been given to man by God. Is not the Church’s attitude entirely out of keeping with the mood of the time? Is it not presumptuous of the Church to proclaim certainties at a time when everything is being questioned? Regretfully one must say that the Church has sometimes given way in the face of such criticisms and become timid and unsure of its message. But let us not minimize the problem which it has to face. The pressure which society exerts upon it to conform to the current outlook is as relentless as it is subtle. Christians, we must remember, live not only in the Church but also in the world and they are not immune to the world’s sickness. It may therefore sadden us but it should not surprise us if from time to time they seem to lose their awareness of those eternal realities which endure for ever and cannot be shaken.

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To put it at its simplest the Church is faced today with two sets of problems. First of all there are the acute problems which arise from industrialization and urbanization and, secondly, there are the problems within the life and thought of the Church itself which have been amply ventilated recently in what is called somewhat misleadingly, the “new

theology". In many respects the latter set of problems is the most critical because it will be small use making organizational and other changes to bring the Church into line with modern conditions if the message which the Church exists to proclaim is badly understood or perhaps in some way distorted. Theology is second only in importance to a living faith and each is meant to inform and strengthen the other.

It would be surprising indeed if the thinking of the Church as represented by its theologians were entirely uninfluenced by the uncertainties and perplexities of the time. In fact the new theology often shows its dependence upon current trends of thought in quite obvious and clearly definable ways. For instance, the modern scientific view of the universe has no room for what we should call the "supernatural" and this outlook, modified but still recognizable, appears in the new theology in the form of an impatience with all talk of a "world" or "sphere" other than this one or (to put it in more traditional terms) of a heaven which is to be distinguished from the earth. The result, at any rate in the most radical types of thought, looks very much like an earth-bound theology.⁷ Particularly is this so when it expressly says that it intends its talk about God to be understood primarily in terms of the self-understanding of man.

We may feel that a good deal of the modern programme of re-interpretation springs from a double failure: first, a failure to appreciate that the biblical faith is not the same thing as a theism arrived at by a process of philosophical reasoning (if it were, it would certainly have to undergo radical reinterpretation at the very least)⁸, and, secondly, a failure to do full justice to the fact that the biblical language is essentially religious in character and intends to describe a meeting with a God who has not been arrived at by reasoning but has disclosed Himself, unexpectedly and dramatically, in the history of a chosen people. At all events the programme involves radically untraditional thinking on the part of some of its practitioners. This may, of course, be regarded as an unavoidable feature of a distressing period of uncertainty through which we have to pass. Perhaps that is the right way to look at it. But the point we want to make is simply this: like so many other areas of human thought and endeavour today theology is in a state of "openness" and change. An influential stream of it (certainly not *all* of it) is breaking radically with traditional ways of thinking and the result for many Christians, pastors and people alike, who are not in a position to study all the issues involved, is a deep disquiet, an unexpressed feeling that God is being "bowed out" not only of His Church but also of His universe, and that soon it will not be possible to believe in Him at all. We do not want to exaggerate here. Large sections of the Church seem to be surprisingly little affected by the ferment which is going on. We are only wanting to say that the upheaval tends to increase the feeling of uncertainty which is already and perhaps for quite other reasons abroad in the Church.

But the danger needs to be faced. What *are* lay people to make of some of the more extreme reinterpretations of the faith? Professor G. C. Berkouwer of Amsterdam, who himself has entered into most sympathetic dialogue with all the main streams of contemporary theological thought, has described the danger in this way: "I recall a

theologian who said that the article 'born of the Virgin Mary' was a myth, but he did not want it struck from the Apostolic Creed. And when we read, 'conceived by the Holy Spirit,' according to his opinion, we are to understand it in this way: Spirit means being independent; so Jesus Christ was characterized by his saying 'no' against nature and against sin. It is evident that in this exegesis the words of the creed are completely devaluated, and if the Church in taking this direction still maintains the old language of the Church, she is deceiving the world; she no longer speaks the truth and becomes more and more ambiguous and double-tongued." These are strong words and they come from an academic who has shown himself to be a true pastor of souls in both the pulpit and the study. They are not lightly spoken but spring from a real concern for the flock, which in the Netherlands as in England and elsewhere is so often left puzzled and distressed by the teaching which it is receiving or which it is getting at second hand from popular books and newspaper articles.

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This book is not concerned primarily with the question how the Christian message should be presented to the non-believer. It is not a book of apologetics. It is concerned with the Church, the believer, at a time when Christian certainties are in grave danger of being eroded away by a prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty in the world around. But we must look at the situation in the world if we want to gain some understanding of the situation in the Church for the Church is not an "ivory tower", proof against every external force and influence. How could it do its job in the world if it were? The Church is "open" both ways; it is listening to the world and it is speaking to the world, and this means that its members are subject to the influences which operate in the world just as much as they are subject to the influences which are at work in the Church. Here we want to draw attention to two attitudes towards man or two ways of looking at man which are found in secular society and are also, not surprisingly, found in the Church. The first attitude concentrates attention upon man in his weakness.

In this chapter we have been looking at some of the signs of that weakness in our modern world and we have labelled them collectively "dizziness". But we must now add that the weakness of man stems ultimately from his own fallen, sinful nature and is not to be put down simply to the turbulence of the times. There is that in the very human situation itself which makes man weak and makes him weak in every age, not just in this. Basically, his weakness, moral and spiritual, comes from the fact of his alienation from God in his sinfulness. The "dizziness" which is so prevalent today, the aimlessness and the despair, are not caused solely by the current revolution in the social order or the displacement of old-established norms. To think this would be to take a much too superficial view of the matter. The root cause is far deeper. Contemporary circumstances may aggravate it and provide occasion for it to come to the surface, but in itself it is estrangement from God, contempt for God, rebellion against God. And this is manifestly not a peculiarity of our own time.

Paul Tillich has written of this situation in his own special idiom. James Richmond describes his picture of man as follows: "Tillich believes firmly in *homo religiosus*, who . . . is very much afraid of the dark. Man cannot escape God, because his awareness is constantly invaded by despair, finitude, guilt, suffering, loneliness, estrangement, doubt, and meaninglessness. These factors throw men beyond themselves to God."¹⁰ When we turn to Tillich's own words in, for instance, *The Courage to Be* we miss some of those dimensions of the problem which the Bible brings to the fore, but as an analysis of the deepest troubles of the human heart, done primarily from the standpoint of philosophy and psychology, his treatment of man's weakness is of the very greatest value. He describes the character of human anxiety. It is the state, he says, in which a being is aware of its possible non-being. This is the natural anxiety of man as man which cannot be eliminated, because it belongs to existence itself. It comes to expression in several different but related forms. The form which is most characteristic of our own day is that of meaninglessness. This particular form of anxiety he describes as "the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual centre, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence."¹¹ Such an extreme situation of despair, he points out, is probably reached infrequently. Most people manage somehow or other to avoid it. But he offers his account of it as an indication of a possibility in the light of which less extreme situations must be understood.

Very often the Church has concentrated in its preaching and teaching on human weakness and helplessness with a view to bringing home the absolute necessity of divine intervention if man is to be delivered from his plight. And it seems to us that there will always be a place for this as long as man remains alienated from God, from his neighbours, and from himself. There can be no doubt that even Western man with all his skills and fine achievements is still at the mercy of deep anxieties and still knows what it is to feel terribly lost and helpless in the world. But there is a second attitude towards man which is showing itself quite strongly in these days. This lays stress upon man in his strength.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the prophet of this position.¹² He tells us that man has now "come of age", by which he means that man no longer feels any need of religion to help him deal with the mysterious and threatening elements in his experience. In former times man was bound by religion but nowadays his increasing competence in all sorts of fields makes him able to stand on his own feet and assert his freedom. He has no need now to call in God to take charge of his affairs and give him guidance and protection; he is quite capable of looking after himself. At one time indeed he was rather like a child, under guardians and tutors, but now he is grown up, he has reached adulthood, he has "come of age", and so he does not need to be (and certainly does not want to be) under tutelage any more. Bonhoeffer's conception is nothing if it is not arresting, and understandably it has caused a great deal of interest. He is highlighting the situation which we have called "man in his strength", that is, man with his newly-found capabilities, man with his freedom and responsibility.

It is not our purpose here to offer criticisms of this conception. We mention it because it does represent an important strain in modern thinking. And it seems to us undeniable that in some of his moods modern man shows a remarkable degree of self-assurance; he *can* master his environment given time; he *can* shape his own destiny. It is not the whole story by any means, as we have already indicated, but it is part of the story and it needs to be taken into account.

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We are not concerned here with the implications of all this for the Church's approach to the world outside. The doctrine of assurance is, of course, a doctrine of interest primarily to Christians, to those who have already believed in Christ and now want to find out how they can become more sure of the One in whom they have believed and of their own relationship to Him. But still we think it true to say that the two attitudes we have outlined above find their counterpart in the minds of many Christian people. What does the doctrine of assurance have to say to the Christian who is conscious of his helplessness and need? And what does it have to say to the Christian who is equally aware of his strength? As far as the first is concerned we would say this: the doctrine of assurance has to do with assurance concerning God. Assurance does indeed spell comfort to troubled souls, but this is not the essence of it. Assurance is assurance about God. It is the assurance that God is the great and ultimate reality, the sovereign Lord of the universe and the Redeemer of men. And it is because assurance is this before it is anything else that when it comes to a man it comes to disturb as well as to comfort him. That is the paradox of assurance. It is the awesome experience of meeting the living God in all His holiness and majesty and it is at the same time the eternal solace of knowing that same God in all His love and grace. This is something beyond psychological comfort. It is the knowing of God as God. Any other sort of comfort would seem cheap and inadequate by comparison. Man in his weakness may imagine that he needs a God who will come to him when bidden and give him a sense of security and warmth. In fact, he needs nothing of the sort. He needs a God who will truly be God in his life. Only so will he come to experience the ultimate comfort and the peace which passes all understanding.

And what of the Christian who feels strong, in the sense that he is relatively untroubled by doubts and fears, lives confidently and happily, and really does not see the need to concern himself about assurance at all? We have in mind here the Christian whose confidence is well-founded; we are not thinking of the man who merely *imagines* that he trusts in God when actually he does not. What does the doctrine say to him? We believe it says to him that he is not to go in search of hitherto unrealized weaknesses or unsuspected sins. He is not to rummage around in the chambers of his soul until he finds things which will make him less confident and less happy. It tells him rather that there are experiences of God which he has not yet glimpsed, even from afar. He has been too content, too satisfied perhaps with the experience that he has so far enjoyed; or he has honestly thought that there was little more to be had—at least for him—this side of heaven. Actually God is

wanting to make Himself known to him more richly than before. What that will involve for him in the way of discovering weaknesses and confessing sins only God knows at this stage. But the call is to let God be God, to reckon with the reality of God as One who is concerned with the whole of life, to reckon at least with the possibility of getting to know God better as the Person who is over against us, different from us in many ways, yet close to us in every aspect of our lives. In short, it is a call to seek a deeper experimental realization of the presence of God.

NOTES

¹ The American Christian sociologist, Dr. R. M. Fagley, at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961 called the "population explosion" the most neglected world problem.

² Cf. for instance, P. van Buren : *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London, 1963), Harvey Cox : *The Secular City* (New York, 1965), R. Gregor Smith : *Secular Christianity* (London, 1966), Colin Williams : *Faith in a Secular Age* (London, 1966).

³ *Faith in a Secular Age* (London, 1966), pp. 76f.

⁴ A good review of the main trends in the modern theatre is to be found in John Kershaw : *The Present Stage* (London, 1966).

⁵ Cf. K. M. Baxter : *Speak What We Feel* (London, 1964), pp. 9ff. On the playwright himself see Richard N. Coe : *Beckett* (London, 1964).

⁶ Comment on its appearance in current philosophy will be found conveniently in Harry Prosch : *The Genesis of Twentieth Century Philosophy* (New York, 1964), part iv.

⁷ For an historical and theological examination of modern anti-supernaturalism see Kenneth Hamilton : *Revolt Against Heaven* (Grand Rapids, 1965).

⁸ This is one of the main points in Helmut Gollwitzer : *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith* (E. T. London, 1965).

⁹ *Modern Uncertainty and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, 1953).

¹⁰ James Richmond's remarks appear in Alan Richardson, ed.: *Four Anchors from the Stern* (London, 1963), pp. 41f.

¹¹ *The Courage to Be* (Welwyn, 1952), p. 44.

¹² Cf. especially his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London, 1959), pp. 106ff.