The Meaning of The Secular

THIS was the theme of a Consultation of University teachers, at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland, upon which I deliberately and gratefully gate-crashed a year ago. Recognizing that this is a subject of growing interest and importance at the present time, I anticipated that such a conference would prove a seminal ground for further thinking in the next few years. And so I believe it will prove to be. The very fact that considerable difficulty was experienced even in defining the term indicated that this is indeed an idea in process of transition. Conventional Christian thinking upon it, however, is certainly getting out of date—and out of touch with the mind of the present student generation. This was strikingly illustrated at the World's Student Christian Federation's Teaching Conference at Strasbourg this last summer on the Life and Mission of the Church. There it was clearly revealed that it is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who holds the minds of Christian students today, as the patron saint of religionless Christianity and of holy worldliness. One of the most popular lectures at that large and very representative international gathering was given by Professor Hans Hoekendijk, who emphasized that "the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh is a 'secular' event: an event in the world and for the world." Christianity, he maintained, cannot be understood except as a secular movement; to treat it as a religion is a fundamental mistake! A Christian is a man who is being redeemed to become a normal human being. Traditional Church structures must therefore give way to open, mobile, flexible groups in living touch with the modern world; the Church must be "desacralized," and Christianity "dereligionized"!

Today secularism is being seen as the key to a vital renewal of the Christian faith, otherwise in many ways so seemingly irrelevant to man in the twentieth century. Yet in this same century, only thirty-two years ago, the I.M.C. Jerusalem Assembly proclaimed secularism as the arch-enemy of God and of the true welfare of mankind. From then onwards we have been accustomed to speak of secularism in its perjorative sense. As Archbishop Temple declared, Christianity is avowedly the most materialistic of all religions; when, therefore, Christians inveigh against "secular materialism," it must be the first, rather than the second, of these two words which they condemn. At Jerusalem, even other great faiths were essentially seen, not as the rivals of Christianity, but as its allies in a world-wide fight against the secularist temper. "We call on the followers of non-Christian religions to join with us in the study of Jesus Christ

as He stands before us in the Scriptures, His place in the life of the world, and His power to satisfy the human heart; to hold fast to faith in the unseen and eternal in face of the growing materialism of the world; to co-operate with us against all the evils of secularism. . . . "

What, then, is secularism? A Scriptural quotation which follows later in the Jerusalem Statement indicates the basis of their definition. " Still ringing in our ears is the call, ' Be not fashioned according to this world : but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind '." This is indeed a command which the disciples of Bonhoeffer must seek to understand and lay to heart. Yet this does not resolve our tension or dilemma. For though we all know that the Christian must forswear the world, in the sense of human society organized upon the basis of man's prideful self-assertion in vaunted independence of God, yet the real Biblical distinction is not between this world and the next, but between this age and the age to come—a reality which has already broken in upon this world, because the Son of God is come. As Dr. J. A. T. Robinson emphasizes, Christianity is essentially a this-worldly religion, even though it is a new earth and a new heaven for which it looks. " The only other-worldliness which the Bible encourages is the sort of other-worldliness, if that is the right term, of the Communist, who, like the Christian, refuses to let his thinking or his actions be conformed to the pattern of the present world-order " (cf. *Rom.* xii. 2).

Is, therefore, the bad quality of secularism, not that it is this-worldly, but that it represents the spirit of *this* age, man as the creator of his own destiny, human life with God left out? That is indeed close to the truth. Yet the dilemma persists, for many testify that secularism has been experienced as a liberating and creative force, through which the will of God for human destiny is in fact being fulfilled. The records of the Jerusalem Assembly show that even then at least one voice was raised to this effect. Canon Chas. Raven was thus reported : " All standards have been challenged, and people have been left bewildered. . . . For this the Church was largely to blame. The attitude of the Church, as expressed in its art, music, intellectual expression of its faith, and even its moral standards, has been definitely lower than the best thought of the time."

What lies behind these very contrasting attitudes to secularism? At the Bossey Consultation, Dr. van Peursen, a Dutch Professor of Philosophy, propounded the thesis that secularization means deliverance first from religious, and then from metaphysical, control over human reason and language. Throughout the history of Western science and thought, human reason has been striving for complete liberation from unverifiable suppositions. By freeing itself from all a priori reasoning, science has set itself to learn from the given fact,

and has in consequence made astounding progress. Space and time, instead of being treated as ontological entities, have become logical and mathematical relations in a system of description. "Formerly, moral behaviour was controlled by eternal values rooted in metaphysics. Social planning was guided by social philosophy and by natural law, and even economics was rooted in a kind of philosophy. Today we have in empiricism and existentialism the secularizing rejection of all of this." Through this process of secularization, moreover, it now becomes clear that the Bible itself gives neither metaphysic, nor ontology, nor natural history. "*Genesis* is more explosive than a scientific exposition on the origin of species. It expresses the presence of God in human history. The being of God is not a kind of *summum esse,* but could be translated as *to be with you.* Secularization as a deliverance from metaphysical categories helps us better to understand this language. . . . One is concerned, in Biblical language, with the presence of God, which functions as a liberation of human existence and precedes and enables freedom of research (there is no demonic or divine world; the sun is only created, not a divinity: as such it can be studied) and clarity of language (daily language demanding a concrete attitude towards one's fellow-men, nature, illness, death, joy, etc.)." On the other hand, it is also admitted that secularization presents a threat, for it has within itself a tendency towards self-sufficiency, which hampers our understanding of facts and events in their relation to the presence of God. The ultimate horizon of human thinking may be lost. "The limits of my language are the limits of my world," says Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus.* The tension for the Christian lies in his need to recognize that a metaphysical use of the Christian faith must be renounced, yet this secularization must not be allowed itself to become self-sufficient and an absolute. The Christian's responsibility is to establish real communication with the secular way of life.

Dr. Roger Mehl, a French Professor of Theology, similarly maintained that secularization is essentially a Christian phenomenon, with a Christian origin. "One of the earliest signs of this process was the conflict in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries between the faculty of Arts and the faculty of Theology, especially in the University of Paris. The issue was the autonomy of arts studies and was based on the discovery of Aristotle, by way of Averroes. What here began in the domain of sciences and knowledge eventually led to the disestablishment of the Christian Church and its relegation to the margin of public life." Here is a definition which he has given in one of his published works: "Secularization is the process by which a society disengages itself from the religious ideals, beliefs, and institutions which has ordered its existence, in order to constitute itself an autonomous reality, in order to find itself the principle of its organization and in order to enclose religion in the private

sector of life." Two further quotations will reveal striking similarities to the views of the Dutch professor. "The action of God in Christ does not sacralize but sanctifies the world. It does not create a sacred area of life or society. It is a phenomenon of time, a process of history. Thus eschatology has a direct connection with secularization. The work of Christ has a hidden effect which will not appear until the end of time. The unity of truth is from our point of view a broken unity. We cannot co-ordinate all truth from our perspective. Knowledge in history must therefore be secular. The medieval dream of a total harmony of truth, hierarchically ordered, is destroyed, not only by the secularizing process, but by the nature of God's action in Christ itself." As regards the abiding tension of which we have spoken, secularization "cannot face the final conclusions of its own process. It stops. We discover in the midst of secularized society a process of resacralization. Some turn back to the Church as a sacred structure, some turn to secular religions."

What, then, should be the position and responsibility of the Christian theologian and minister of the Gospel? Professor Ronald Gregor Smith gave his answer thus: "My fundamental assumption is that the world which the theologian looks at and the world which the sociologist looks at are one and the same. . . . The centre of the picture is man . . . man in his wholeness as man, and man as responsible for history. . . . Theology is not the elaboration of propositions or doctrines about God. It is not the assertion or maintenance of a specific world-view, or a metaphysic, against some other. . . . The main issue I put provisionally in the form of a question: is the controlling power in human life made by men, or not? My own answer, as any real answer, rests upon a decision. My decision is that the primary and ultimately controlling power is not made by men, but is given to men. . . . It is given to men in such a way that it is also made by them. . . . It is in this paradoxical situation, where man recognizes both his dependence and his independence, his being controlled and his controlling, his being both limited and unlimited, that the main theological issue lies, so far as the perspective leads towards the meaning of the secular. . . . While dogmatics is an absolutely essential discipline for Christianity, especially as the internal or domestic effort to understand what it is concerned with, and furthermore, as the effort to make clear to the non-Christian what its general intention and scope are, so that it may make clear what is the minimum space which it requires as a breathing-space in the world—a true dogmatics must never be equated with a structure or system of thought consisting of a series of propositions, whether inter-linked or not, about God and the world. But a true theological concern has to do with this question, Whence do we receive? The theological key-word here is grace. In less strict but more contem-

porary language—at least in the language of men like Martin Buber and Karl Jaspers—the key-word would be otherness. . . . The God that Christian theology speaks about here is not God in isolation, but God in the world. . . . Christian theology has to try to speak about this givenness in such a way that while God is given in and for the world, the world in turn is recognized as distinct from Him. . . . In Barth's language, God is always subject, that is, He can never be an object of experience, if by experience you mean a direct perceptual apprehension of an object among other objects in the world. . . . His presence is apprehended rather as an action or event in and through the structures of the world, and apprehended in faith. . . . Faith itself is basically a decision about your life, which involves you in a recognition of this otherness which presses in upon you. The focus of this otherness is the historical figure of Jesus, otherwise pregnantly described as the Word which God has uttered, and that means the Word which God has done, in historical human circumstances."

Dr. Gregor Smith also recognized secularist thought, in spite of its complex origins, as deriving from Christian conceptions and Christian experience. He, too, spoke of what happens when an ultimate secularism is reached—not when everything has been separated off into sheer autonomous regions, but when, released from all ideologies, and in complete freedom, man is then left entirely by himself. At this point a question arises which may bring him to a new theonomy. This question is, Who am I? "And the answer comes in the form of another question, 'Adam, where art thou' . . . the liberating word spoken by God in the free historical situation of man." Christian faith, which allows the maximum place for man's freedom and responsibility, springs from God's veiled appearance in Christ. In his conclusion Dr. Smith quoted Gerhard Ebeling: "Because faith does not live on and from the world, it makes it possible to live for the world. Because it puts an end to the misuse of the world, it opens up the right use of the world. Because faith breaks the domination of the world, it gives domination over the world and responsibility for the world. And because it drives out the pleasure and the misliking of the world, it makes room for pure joy in the world."

These sketchy indications of only some of the contents of but three out of a dozen meaty lectures have done little justice to the Bossey Consultation. Some impressive agreements can, however, be noted from a lively conference in which agreements proved difficult to reach. It is hoped that a clue or two has emerged, along with some provocative ideas. Once again we have come upon a phenomenon familiar in Christian thinking—the paradox. For secularization, which has long been regarded as the great enemy of religion, has been shown to have deeply Christian origins. The

disciplines which have successively broken free from an authoritarian and over-arching control have abundantly justified their claims to autonomy, yet thereby they have left man in an increasingly meaningless world. The apparent denial of faith has created a new opportunity for faith. Leaving God out of the world has paved the way for a new understanding of His presence within it. Secularization, which has refused to let religion have the last word in every realm of thought, has found itself quite incapable of saying any final word, and is creating a new vacuum for religion. Is not a divine dialectic revealed in all this? Churches have been turned in upon themselves instead of turned outwards to the world. Yet, thanks to a secularist movement of thought, the thing which Christian students today seem to be most positively sure about is that Christ's ministry is to the world, not just to the Church, and that Christian discipleship means sharing in that service of the world for which He died. The danger is that many of them almost seem to think that the world is always right, and the Church always wrong. They have to learn that the Christian has to be called out of the world before he can be sent into the world. But it is high time that the world came into its own as the true correlative term to the Gospel.

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