

Mr. Smalley, who is a lecturer in Religious Studies in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, considers the Christian significance of 'the secular', one of the most dominant concepts of mid-twentieth century theology.

# HOLY WORLDLINESS

by Stephen Smalley

The Church exists today in a world which, to use the phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has 'come of age'. Both within the Church and beyond it, change and radical re-thinking are strikingly apparent. This is evident at one level, for example, in the area of ecumenical dialogue; whether we think of the projected union of churches in Nigeria, or the changed climate of debate between Protestants and Roman Catholics which has resulted from Vatican II. At another level, important reappraisals are taking place in the areas of liturgy and architecture; and a rediscovery of the doctrine of the Church as the people of God 'has' brought about on all hands an attempt to relate the concept of 'togetherness' both to the way we worship and also to the way

we build for worship. But evidence of change within the Church is also provided at a much deeper level, a level which is truly existential, by the kind of ultimate questioning that is going on. Within the ranks of the churches themselves, as well as among those of no faith, questions are being asked which challenge the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The traditional answers and categories of the Christian Church no longer satisfy; and apart from the isolated instances where an attempt is being made to come to terms with the present situation, and speak relevantly to it, the Church is being quietly passed by and forgotten because any voice it has is found to be utterly irrelevant. The ferment, and its too frequent corollary of in-

difference, is less marked in Nigeria than, say, England or America; but precisely the same pattern is emerging. It is apathy rather than hostility which is causing the student population to drift away from University Chapels; and the apathy is the outcome of preaching and teaching which are neither challenging nor relevant.

## 'New Theology'

We find ourselves as a result in an age characterized by the attempt to formulate a 'new theology'. Several recent books reflect this attempt. In 1962 there appeared a collection of essays by Cambridge theologians, edited by the then Dean of King's College, Dr. A. R. Vidler, entitled *Soundings*. As the name implies, this was intended to 'sound' the depths of the current waters of theological thought by re-opening major issues of faith; and these included the place of natural theology, the authority of the Bible and the nature of Christ's person. 1963 saw the publication of three important books. One was the notorious essay by the Bishop of Woolwich, Dr. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*. The second again came out of Cambridge; *Objections to Christian Belief*, also edited by Dr. Vidler, contains an analysis by four theologians of the philosophical, intellectual, historical and moral objections to the classic Christian position. And Paul van Buren's book, finally, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, is a plea for a secularized theology rather than for a theology of the secular.<sup>1</sup>

In 1965 two further volumes appeared which provide a significant contribution to this debate. John Robinson's

companion work, *The New Reformation?*, was balanced from America by Harvey Cox's important book, *The Secular City: A celebration of its liberties and an invitation to its discipline*. Both Robinson and Cox are continuing the search for a new theology which they feel must imperatively replace orthodox belief if Christianity is to survive. They and their colleagues are therefore posing the agonizing question of whether it is possible any longer to be a Christian in anything like the accepted sense of that term, and at the same time, let it be admitted, they see themselves as seeking positively to renew as well as replace the current, essentially medieval, statement of the Church's faith. Like William Hamilton, and the 'death of God' theologians of America, John Robinson asks in his latest book whether every Christian ought not in some sense to be an atheist, since 'God is dead'<sup>2</sup>. Everywhere the plea is, to use another phrase of Bonhoeffer, for 'religionless Christianity'.

John Robinson asks in *The New Reformation?* whether the Church in the twentieth century may not be involved in a theological reform akin to that of the sixteenth century in its radical nature. He doubts whether the actual term 'reformation' should be used in this context, but he notices at present a healthy inclination to ask fundamental questions; the waters are being troubled, the structures are being stripped and (to use a phrase of Paul Tillich) the foundations are being shaken. Furthermore, Christians are at the moment living 'in the overlap'<sup>3</sup>) in a way that is strikingly similar to the position of the Reformers. They shared in the tran-

sition from a medieval to a renaissance world, and for a time found themselves living in both at once. In the same way Christians today, we are told, are called to live a 'double life', as the change-over from 'traditional' to 'new' theology takes place.

#### *Space and Immanence*

For the Bishop of Woolwich and his followers the newness of the new theology consists largely of a determination to begin 'at the other end'. Christologically this means estimating the person of Jesus Christ as above all 'the man for others'<sup>4</sup>. God is no longer to be thought of as 'up there' or 'out there', but as the 'ground of our being'; He is discoverable in others, and around us in the culture and cultures of the world. This is not the place to attempt a critique of John Robinson's theological position, sorely as it demands passing mention. One is that in his concern to demythologize the Christian doctrine of God, in a truly Bultmannian manner, the Bishop has drawn upon language which is equally spatial and equally capable of misinterpretation, in an immanent rather than a transcendental direction. And secondly, the insistence on immanence which is characteristic of the new theologians reads dangerously like a return to a frankly natural theology. While the apprehension of the knowledge of God in so to say 'horizontal' terms cannot be ignored, a central place must be found, if theology is to remain genuinely biblical, for the concept of revelation, of God's gracious self-disclosure.

#### *Secularism...*

We have been considering the radical questioning and reformulation of theology that has been going on within the churches. But what is happening beyond the churches is equally radical, and indeed provides the backcloth for the contemporary reappraisal that is at the moment so popular among Christians. For this is essentially a secular age; and the day of the secular city (to use Harvey Cox's descriptive term) has in fact dawned. Even in Africa we are fast being overtaken by a new outlook in society which finds no place for religion, let alone for the Christian faith. It is not that religion has been relegated to a second or even third place; rather, ours is an age of no religion at all. There may be formal assent given to the existence of the Church and its teaching; but in fact society is no longer looking to religious rules and rituals for its morality and meanings. Or if it does so in theory, the result is the plethora of glaring contradictions in practice with which we are all familiar.

#### *... and Secularization*

It is important at the outset, however, to distinguish between 'secularism', which is the attitude I have just been describing, and 'secularization', of which many contemporary theologians approve. To be thoroughly secularist is in essence to find no place for God; whereas to secularize our society or our thought or our theology is in essence to purge it of wrong associations and ideas. There is, in fact, a right and a wrong way to be 'secular'; and in order to understand this more clearly it will be

necessary to examine carefully some of the technical terms which relate to this discussion.

The word 'secular' comes from the Latin *saeculum*, which is a time-word translating the Greek *αἰών* (age). But *saeculum* is properly translated 'world', and is one of the two Latin words meaning 'world'. The other is *mundus*, and this is a space-word translating the Greek *κόσμος* (world). Here we have two world-views. One looks at the world as time, history, life in general and in all its totality. This is in fact the Hebrew world-view, and it is the one which underlies the theology of the Bible. The Hebrews possessed a rounded view of existence. For them, the 'body' was not a collection of unrelated parts; even less was it just one of those parts, say flesh and blood. It was a corporate whole, a somatic totality<sup>5</sup>. In just the same way, the Hebrews saw the 'world' as the theatre of history, and notably the history of God's people. It was the dimension in which the drama of salvation, and of God's covenant activity, was being played out. In the Old Testament, therefore, 'world' means history as well as the creation itself; and God is the Lord of both (Is. 40:12-26).

The Greeks, on the other hand, interpreted the concept of the 'world' in much more precisely spatial terms. For them the world was very little more than the creation, the material order of things, by itself. While the Hebrews looked at the world as history, the Greeks looked at it as space, as material existence which was evil at that. With the coming of Christianity, these two views become merged and confused. The cradling

of the Christian gospel, with its Hebraic background, in an environment which was Hellenistic - Greek-speaking, and even more importantly Greek-thinking - brought about a fusing of the ideas of the 'world' as temporal and spatial. What happens in fact is that the thought of the world as history becomes absorbed into the thought of the world as space; the Jewish and biblical view disappears behind the Greek. The result is that, following the characteristic Greek position, the 'world' in any sense tends to be regarded as evil, and indeed undesirable.

#### *Influence of the Greek View of the World*

Some early Christians took this view to excess, and produced the gnostic systems and ideas with which we are all familiar, and which are resisted even within the pages of the New Testament<sup>6</sup>. The underlying assumption is that creation in all aspects is to be avoided; and this unbiblical idea, which has influenced Christian thought for generations, gave rise to the negative elements within primitive monasticism. It also shaped Latin theology up to the Middle Ages and beyond; so that by the medieval period the division between the so-called 'sacred' and 'secular' was complete. The 'world' in any sense was considered inferior and indeed wrong, while the 'sacred' was identified with the 'religious' and 'non-worldly'. This false distinction, which still obtains consciously or unconsciously in the minds of some Christians today, is admirably illustrated by the fact that in the Middle Ages the 'religious' clergy were those who had retreated from the world into monastic orders;

while the 'secular' priests were those pursuing a parochial ministry out in the world.

The term 'secular' not surprisingly preserves this pejorative connotation, and thus perpetuates in Christian theology a heresy which is fundamentally Grecian, and non-biblical. Our task as preachers and expositors of the gospel is therefore to rescue the important concept of the secular from its Greek misinterpretation, and to recover its Hebraic background and genuinely biblical meaning. As we turn accordingly to the biblical evidence for the importance and significance of the secular, we shall find that it is discoverable in three basic Christian doctrines which belong to any system of biblical theology. These are the doctrines of creation, incarnation and sanctification. We shall consider these in turn.

#### *The Secular and Creation*

First, let us notice the theology of the secular which is contained within the Christian doctrine of creation. God's creation is essentially His self-expression. It is a mark of His grace, since He created freely; and it is also a mark of His sovereignty, since He created *ex nihilo* (from nothing), and was prepared to limit Himself to His own creation and to work within it. Above all, and this is one of the distinctively Christian aspects of this doctrine, God's creation is good, even 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). Furthermore, the biblical view of creation desacralizes nature; it maintains that God is sovereign Creator without saying that He is to be identified with His creation *tout court*. It allows that God's creation is good, without the added pantheistic confusion of

saying that it is 'sacred' because God is submerged in it, or the gnostic error of saying that it is 'secular' and indeed evil because God has no hand in it.

On the biblical showing, then, there is and can be nothing wrong with the secular world, with material existence, as such. On the contrary, when God acted in Christ in terms of redemption He loved the *world* (the word in Jn. 3:16 is *κόσμος*) which included man as its crown, the crown of creation. This does not of course alter the fact that like man the world needs redemption; things go wrong with it just as they do with men. The world needs redemption because it shares in the effects of the fall of man<sup>7</sup>; and one of the effects of the fall on man himself is that he is inclined to adopt an attitude of worldliness. That man is a creature of the secular world is a perfectly acceptable fact of existence; but that in the world he inclines to an attitude that anchors him to the world so as to exclude God is a mark of his sinfulness.

#### *The Secular and Incarnation*

For purposes of redemption, moreover, God works in terms of His own creation. He does not abandon it but uses it. God's creation is good because He is the Creator; and as the Redeemer He implements the plan of salvation through it. This brings us to the second doctrine from which the biblical theology of the secular may be defined, the doctrine of the incarnation.

The activity of God in history – that is to say, in time (the Hebrew worldview) and space (the Greek) – involves what may be termed the con-

secration of the material, since God acts within and not apart from His creation. The supreme example of this, and indeed the climactic expression of God's total redemptive activity, is to be found in the incarnation, when the *Logos* becomes flesh and tabernacles among men (Jn. 1:14). At this moment in history the distinction between the sacred and the secular is forever blurred. It is not that the divine and the human are or become indistinguishable, but that (as the Fourth Evangelist saw so clearly) flesh becomes the carrier of spirit, the historical is seen to contain that which is beyond history. The marked, almost brutal juxtaposition of flesh and spirit, human and divine, time and eternity, is characteristically Christian and biblical; anything remotely approaching this kind of combination would have been unthinkable for a Greek.

From the moment of the incarnation, then, it becomes impossible to despise or avoid the material, or indeed the world in any sense. God was in Christ; and in this event He used elements of His own creation to express Himself in terms of re-creation. It is no accident that there is a normative biblical balance between the creation and the new creation<sup>8</sup>. But not only is it important not to despise the secular world; it is even more important to be properly and positively related to it. We can no longer flee from the world or from our humanity; we must as Christians accept them, and rejoice in them. The very significance of the incarnation, in association with the death and resurrection of Christ, is that this kind of acceptance becomes possible; since in Christ the eternal

has entered the historical, the historical perpetually contains the possibility of being the carrier of the eternal (*cf.* Jn. 6:63). Now through Christ and while involved in time and space, man for the first time has the chance of becoming what he should be; he is able to become truly human as Christ was truly Man.

#### *Resurrection of the Body*

In line with this theological interpretation is the Christian doctrine (equally alien to the Greek mind) of the resurrection body. The New Testament writers do not view death and resurrection as a means of escape from flesh and blood, because in any case the 'body' to them was a totality which went beyond mere physicality. Rather, resurrection involves both continuity and discontinuity. There is a 'body' in the sense of an expression of personality on both sides of the line of physical death; but one is 'physical' and the other 'spiritual' (1 Cor. 15:42-50; 2 Cor. 5:1-5). St. Paul, for one, was not escapist in his theology of the resurrection body; it was not that for him death meant the release of disembodied spirit from flesh, but that in his view there was after death a 'swallowing up' of mortality by immortality (1 Cor. 15:53f.), and an exchange of the 'earthly tent' we live in for our 'heavenly dwelling' (2 Cor. 5:1f.)<sup>9</sup>. The Pauline conception of the resurrection body, in fact, by pursuing the connection between the historical and the supra-historical in what may be termed his eschatology of personality, reminds us of the importance of a this-worldly dimension in a further important area of biblical thought.

We have considered the theology of the secular which is associated with two primary Christian doctrines, creation and incarnation. We turn finally to a third crucial doctrine, that of sanctification, to determine its teaching on this particular topic.

The Christian is called to live in the world, even though his citizenship is ultimately in heaven; he is in the world although he does not originate from it. The prayer of Jesus which is recorded in John 17 is illuminating at this point. Jesus draws a parallel between His own relation to the world and that of His disciples. For purposes of the incarnation He has been *in* (*ἐν*) the world (Jn. 17:11). After the resurrection He will be in the world 'no longer', although manifestly His disciples will still be *in* (*ἐν*) it (*ibid.*). But at no point can it be said of either Jesus or His disciples that they are *of* (*ἐκ*, meaning 'out of') the world (vers 16). Both Jesus and the Christian, in other words, are called to be in the world for a period of time; but neither He nor the Christian owes his origin to the world.

This is a theological truth of far-reaching importance, and it accords with the significant fact that in the same prayer Jesus asks not that the disciples should be taken out of the world, even though they are not 'of' it in the sense of generation, but that they should be kept from the evil one<sup>10</sup> while they are *in* it (verse 15). The demand of the gospel is that those who are in Christ should be increasingly 'set apart' for Him as they grow in holiness and as the harvest of the gifts of the Spirit

are seen in their lives. But this setting apart, or sanctification, does not mean isolation or even insulation from the world around. The Christian is to be positively related to the things of this world, and involved in the total situation which surrounds him. And this kind of relation means that he can and should enjoy the good things of the world, since these are even better for a Christian and richer because of Christ (1 Cor. 1:5), as well as seeking to reform the bad.

\* \* \*

In each of the three doctrines we have examined, creation, incarnation and sanctification, there is expressed an activity of God. It is God who creates, redeems and sanctifies. It is God Himself who is at work; God in all His fulness, as Father, Son and Spirit. And in each of these activities we find that God works *through* the world, and in terms of His own creation. It is possible therefore to conclude that in this way there is a threefold hallowing of the secular world, of existence, that is, as we know it, of the material universe as the setting of ages (*saecula*) of history. Here is the biblical reply to the view that there is anything suspect about the secular world; and the reply is that precisely in this context God acts, to create and redeem and sanctify.

It remains true, of course, that (as we have already noticed) man and society share in the effects of the fall. Man is a fallen creature, in constant need of forgiveness and salvation. Precisely because he has been redeemed, the Christian constantly needs redemption; and like the Christian Church as a whole, he needs to be renewed

because he is renewed. As a result, there is a perpetual possibility that the Christian, like anyone else, will not in fact be properly related to the world around him, and that he will misuse the gifts of God that are certainly to be found in the secular city. The East Harlem section of New York is a reminder of the extent to which the world, man and society, can go wrong; for into a few blocks of that most secular of secular cities, seem to have drained all the evils and aberrations ever devised by man. But even in this case it is not East Harlem that is wrong, but the attitudes of those who gravitate there. It is not the universe that is wrong, as the doctrine of creation reminds us, nor the flesh of those who exist there, as the doctrine of the incarnation reminds us. Rather, it is the spiritual attitudes of worldliness and fleshliness that are wrong; and the doctrine of sanctification reminds us that the Christian is called to walk not in terms of the flesh but of the Spirit, and that it is the Spirit Himself who can enable us to do this. It is just here that the battle rages, and just here that the warfare of Christian existence is most painfully experienced (Gal. 5:16f.).

It is therefore right for the Christian to be secular and world-affirming in the right sense. His 'worldliness' is to be a *holy* worldliness; he is to be 'secularized' in the sense of being freed from a wrong and unbiblical world-view. But it is also terribly possible for the Christian to become a secularist, denying God and replacing the Creator with the creature by adopting the wrong kind of worldly attitude. At the same time as being

world-affirming, therefore, we must (as Emil Brunner says) be world-denying. Here is a normative Christian tension; for the world is, at one and the same time, good *and* in need of salvation.

It is important that we should not avoid the tension involved in being citizens of two 'worlds'; our citizenship on both levels is important. There are risks; but these must be taken. Those who belong to the Body of Christ are to live fully committed both to Christ Himself and to the secular society around; their secularity is to be genuine, and their worldliness is to be holy.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1)</sup> On the other side may be mentioned E. L. Mascall, *The Secularization of Christianity*, 1965; and A. M. Ramsey, *Sacred and Secular*, 1965.

<sup>2)</sup> This startling phrase does not in fact mean much more than that the old and traditional views of God are dead, and new ones must take their place.

<sup>3)</sup> The phrase echoes Paul's expression, used eschatologically, τὰ τέλη τῶν αἰώνων (1 Cor. 10:11).

<sup>4)</sup> See D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ET 1953, p. 179.

<sup>5)</sup> There is a useful examination of the 'totality' concept in Semitic thought in M. E. Dahl, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 1962, pp. 59ff.

<sup>6)</sup> Notably in Colossians and 1 John.

<sup>7)</sup> Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:19-21.

<sup>8)</sup> Cf. Gen. 1:1 and Jn. 1:1.

<sup>9)</sup> For a fascinating account of the difference between the two views expressed in 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 5, see C. F. D. Moule, 'St. Paul and Dualism: The Pauline Conception of Resurrection', *New Testament Studies* 12.2 (January, 1966), pp. 106-23.

<sup>10)</sup> Or, 'from evil'.