The Absence of God in Modern Culture

I think I should begin not with modern culture but with its classical pe predecessor. Even as little as fifty years ago it was still dominant in American Catholic circles. Then it was named simply culture. It was conceived absolutely, as the opposite of barbarism. It was a matter of acquiring and assimilating the opposite of barbarism. It was a matter of acquiring and assimilating the tastes and skills, the ideals, virtues, and ideas, that were pressed upon one in a good home and through a curriculum in the liberal arts. This notion, of course, had a very ancient lineage. It stemmed out of Greek paideia and Roman doctrinae studium atque humanitatis, out of the exuberance of the Renaissance and its pruning in the Counter-reformation schools of the Jesuits. Essentially it was a normative rather than an empirical notion of culture, a matter of models to be imitated, of ideal characters to be emulated, of eternal verities and universally valid laws.

The defect of this notion of culture was, of course, its particularity. It referred not to the cultures of mankind but to a particular culture that may be named classicist. The need to revise one's notion of culture -- to which I alluded a moment ago -- was a need to generalize, to discern in the cultures of mankind their common generic function and the differences in the mode in which that function was fulfilled whether among primitive tribes or in the ancient high civilisations or in the nations and states of historical times.

To this end I should like to recall a distinction sometimes made between the social and the cultural.[1] The social is conceived as a way of

life, a way in which men live together in some orderly and so predictable fashion. Such orderliness is to be observed in the family and in manners, in society with its classes and elites and in education, in the state and its laws, in the economy and technology, in the churches and sects. Such is the social and it is upon it that the cultural arises. For men not only do things. They wish to understand their own doing. They wish to discover and to express the appropriateness, the meaning, the significance, the value, the use of their way of life as a whole and in its parts. Such discovery and expression constitute the cultural and, quite evidently, culture stands to social order as soul to body, for any element of social order will be rejected the moment it is widely judged inappropriate, meaningless, irrelevant, useless, just not worth while.

Now if it is granted that culture is the meaning of a way of life, cultures may be divided according to the manner that meaning is apprehended and communicated. On all cultural levels there are rites and symbols, language and art. There meaning is felt and intuited and acted out. It is like the meaning already in the dream before the therapist interprets it, the meaning of the work of art before the critic focuses on it and relates it to other works, the endlessly nuanced and elusive and intricate meanings of everyday speech, the intersubjective meanings of smiles and frowns, speech and silence, intonation and gesture, the passionate meanings of interpersonal relations, of high deeds and great achievements, of all we admire, praise, revere, adore, and all we dislike, condemn, loathe, abominate. Such is meaning for undifferentiated consciousness, and it would seem to constitute the spontaneous substance of every culture.

Besides undifferentiated, there also is differentiated consciousness. It is not content to act out what it feels and intuits. Rather it seeks to mirror spontaneous living by analyzing it, making all its elements explicit, subjecting them to scrutiny, evaluation, criticism. So art and literature become the affair not only of artists and writers but also of critics and historians. The creations of craftsmen and artisans are supplanted by the discoveries of scientists and the inventions of technologists. The proverbs of wise men give place to the reflections of philosophers. Religions are complicated by theologies. The destinies of persons and peoples not only work themselves out but also are studied by biographers, historians, psychologists, economists, sociologists, and political theorists.

Modern culture shares with its classicist predecessor this reflexive, objectifying component. Both suppose ways of human living. Both ways have immanent meanings. In both this immanent meaning is elaborated, expanded, evaluated, justified or rejected in the criticism of art and of letters, in science and philosophy, in history and theology. In both there is the disastrous possibility of a conflict between human living as it can be lived and human living as arcultural superstructure dictates it should be lived.

Beyond similarities there are differences. Of these the most fundamental was the development of the modern notion of science, a development that has been described by Prof. Herbert Butterfield as one that "outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and the Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal

displacements, within the system of medieval Christendom."[2] For, as I should put it, what occurred towards the end of the seventeenth century was the beginning not merely of much more and much better science but, basically, of a notion of science quite different from the notion worked out by Aristotle and taken for granted by his followers. To put the matter summarily, necessity was a key notion for Aristotle but today it is marginal; in its place is verifiable possibility. Causality was a key notion for Aristotle but today in effect, if not in name, it is replaced by correlation. The universal and abstract were normative in Aristotelian science, but modern science uses universals as tools in its unrelenting efforts to approximate to concrete process. Where the Aristotelian claimed certitude, the modern scientist disclaims anything more than probability. Where the Aristotelian wished to know things in their essences and properties, the modern scientist is satisfied with control and results. Finally, the prestige of this new idea of science is unquestioned, its effectiveness has been palpably demonstrated, its continuing necessity for the survival of the earth's teeming population is beyond doubt.

It was inevitable that the success of the new idea of science should profoundly effect the rest of the cultural superstructure, that what worked in the natural sciences should have repercussions in the human sciences, in philosophy, in theology. However, the exact nature and measure of this influence have varied, and it will clarify issues, I think, if major differences are indicated.

The fields, to which I referred by speaking of the human sciences,

in America are known as behavioral sciences and in Germany as Geistes-wissenschaften. The American name stresses the analogy of natural and human science: in both one observes performance, proposes hypothetical correlations, and endeavors to verify one's hypotheses as probably true. The German name stresses the basic difference between natural and human science. As it was worked out by Wilhelm Dilthey, this difference lies in the very data of the two types. The data for a natural science are just given. One needs language to describe them, classify them, identify them; one needs instruments to observe and measure them; but what counts is, not the language, but just what happens to be given to this and any other observer. In the human sciences, on the other hand, there are of course data, but the data are data for a human science not simply inasmuch as they are given but only inasmuch as there attaches to them some commonsense meaning. Thus, one could send into a law-court as many physicists, chemists, and biologists as one pleased with as much equipment as they desired. They could count, measure, weigh, describe, record, analyse, dissect to their hearts' content. But it would be only by going beyond what is just given and by attending to the meaning of the proceedings that they could discover they were dealing with a court of law; and it is only in so far as the court of law is recognized as such and the appropriate meanings are attached to the sounds and actions that the data for a human science emerge.

A further consequence has to be noted. Precisely because everyday, commonsense meaning is constitutive of the data for a human science, phenomenology and hermeneutics and history assume basic importance. Phenomeno-

logy interprets our posture and movements, our acts and deeds. Hermeneutics interprets our words. History makes us aware that human meanings change with place and time. Clearly such an emphasis on meaning and such elaborate techniques for the study of meanings greatly reduce the relevance of counting, measuring, correlating and so move the Geisteswissenschaften away from the ambit of natural science and towards a close connection with - or a strong reaction against - idealist, historicist, phenomenological, personalist, or existentialist thought.

I am indicating, of course, no more than broad tendencies. Sigmund Freud interpreted meanings but, although he was a Viennese, he did so in terms of a primary process modelled on energy accumulation and discharge.[3] In contrast, a group of American Social scientists defined the orientation of action by the meaning which the actor attaches to it.[4] And while we have thorough-going behaviorists for whom, even when awake, we are somnambulists,[5] there is also a third force in psychology that avows the insufficiency both of Freud and of straight-forward experimentalists.[6] In brief, the point I am attempting to make in no way is a contrast between peoples or nations. Rather it has to do with a radical dilemma in modern culture. Is science to be conceived and worked out in total independence of philosophy or is it not?

Historically, then, modern science grew out of an opposition to Aristotle. Further, its development and its success are to a great extent due to the ground rule of the Royal Society that excluded from consideration questions that could not be settled by an appeal to observation or experiment.

Finally, philosophy is not the name of some one thing, such as are physics, chemistry, biology. On the contrary, it is the name of a shifting multitude of conflicting things. At least, until philosophers reach, if not agreement, then comprehensiveness in their disagreements, it would be suicidal for scientists not to insist on their autonomy.

Still, this is only one side of the picture. For the moment the scientist ceases to speak of the objects in his field and begins to speak of his science itself, he is subscribing to some account of human cognitional activity, to some view of the relation between such activity and its objects, to some opinion on the possible objects to be reached through that relation. Whether he knows it or not, whether he admits it or not, he is talking cognitional theory, epistemology, and metaphysics.[7] Molière depicted the médecin malgré lui, the doctor despite himself. The modern scientist with a claim to complete autonomy is the philosophe malgré lui.

I have been attempting to characterize the reflexive, objectifying superstructure in modern culture, and I may now draw closer to my topic and observe that the modern notion of science tends to replace theology, which treats of God and all other things in their relation to God, with religious studies, which treat of man in his supposed dealings with God or gods or goddesses.

For a modern science is an empirical science. Whether it studies nature or man, whether it is orientated by behaviorism or by the Geisteswissenschaften, it begins from data, it discerns intelligible unities and

relationships within data, and it is subject to the check of verification, to the correction and revision to be effected by confrontation with further relevant data. Now such procedures cannot lead one beyond this world. The divine is not a datum to be observed by sense or to be uncovered by introspection. Nor will any intelligible unity or relationship verifiable within such data lead us totally beyond such data to God. Precisely because modern science is specialized knowledge of man and of nature, it cannot include knowledge of God. God is neither man nor nature. It would only be the idolatry of identifying God with man or with nature if one attempted to know God through the methods of modern science.

Religion, however, is very human. So we have histories of religion, phenomenologies of religion, psychologies of religion, sociologies of religion, philosophies of religion and, to unite these many parts into a whole, the science of religion. These disciplines cannot, of course, escape the radical ddlemma confronting modern science. In the measure they follow the model provided by natural science, they tend towards a reductionism that empties human living and especially human religion of all serious content. In the measure they insist on their specific difference from the natural sciences, they risk losing their autonomy and becoming the captive of some fashion or fad in philosophy. But whichever way they tend, at least this much is certain: they cannot make scientific statements about God. As long as they remain within the boundaries specified by the methods of a modern science, they cannot get beyond describing and explaining the multiplicity and the variety of human religious attitudes.

God, then, is absent from modern science. Even the modern science of religion, though it bears witness to the divine, speaks not of God but of man. This, of course, is simply the inevitable result of specialization, of distinguishing different fields of investigation, of working out appropriate methods in each field, and of excluding conflicts of methodical precepts by pursuing different subjects separately. In the writings of St. Anselm there is no systematic distinction between theology and philosophy, and so his ontological argument is not what later would be desired, a strictly philosophic argument. In the writings of St. Thomas philosophy and theology are distinguished, but the distinction does not lead to a separation; so his celebrated five ways occur within a theological Summa. With Descartes occurs the effort to provide philosophy with its proper and independent foundations, and so not only to distinguish but also separate philosophy and theology. Still Descartes did not attempt to separate philosophy and science; on the contrary, he attempted to prove the conservation of momentum by appealing to the immutability of God. Such a separation was effected materially when Newton did for mechanics what Euclid had done for geometry. It was effected formally by the rule that, if a hypothesis is not verifiable, it is not scientific.

But if increasing specialization prevents modern science from speaking of God, one would expect it to enable modern theology to speak of God all the more fully and effectively. However, while I hope and labor that this will be so, I have to grant that it is not yet achieved. Contemporary theology and especially contemporary Catholic theology are in a feverish ferment. An old theology is being recognised as obsolete. There

is a scattering of new theological fragments. But a new integration - and by this I mean, not another integration of the old type, but a new type of integration - is not yet plainly in sight. Let me describe the situation briefly under five headings.

First, the modern science or discipline of religious studies has undercut the assumptions and antiquated the methods of a theology structured by Melchior Cano's De locis theologicis. Such a theology was classicist in its assumptions. Truth is eternal. Principles are immutable. Change is accidental. But religious studies deal meticulously with endless matters of detail. They find that the expressions of truth and the enunciations of principles are neither eternal nor immutable. They concentrate on the historical process in which these changes occur. They bring to light whole ranges of interesting facts and quite new types of problem. In brief, religious studies have stripped the old theology of its very sources in scripture, in patristic writings, in medieval and subsequent religious writers. They have done so by subjecting the sources to a fuller and more penetrating scrutiny than had been attempted by earlier methods.

Secondly, there is the new demythologisation of scripture. The old demythologization took place at the end of the second century. It consisted in rejecting the bible's anthropomorphic conception of God. It may be summed up in Clement of Alexandria's statement: "Even though it is written, one must not so much as think of the Father of all as having a shape, as moving, as standing or seated or in a place, as having a right

hand or a left."[8] Now to this old philosophic critique of biblical statement there has been added a literary and historical critique that puts radical questions about the composition of the gospels, about the infancy narratives, the miracle stories, the sayings attributed to Jesus, the accounts of his resurrection, the origins of Pauline and Joannine theologoumena.

Thirdly, there is the thrust of modern philosophy. Theologians not only repeat the past but also speak to people of today. The old theology was content, for the most part, to operate with technical concepts derived from Greek and medieval thought. But the concreteness of modern science has imposed a similar concreteness on much modern philosophy. Historicism, phenomenology, personalism, existentialism belong to a climate utterly different from that of the per se subject with his necessary principles or processes and his claims to demonstration. Moreover, this movement of philosophy towards concreteness and especially to the concreteness of human living has brought to light a host of notions, approaches, procedures, that are proving very fertile and illuminating in theology.

Fourthly, there is the collapse of Thomism. In the thirties it seemed still in the ascendant. After the war it seemed for a while to be holding its ground. Since Vatican II it seems to have vanished. Aquinas still is a great and venerated figure in the history of Catholic thought. But Aquinas no longer is thought of or appealed to as an arbiter in contemporary Catholic thought. Nor is the sudden change really surprising. For the assumption, on which Thomism rested, was typically classicist. It

supposed the existence of a single perennial philosophy that might need to be adapted in this or that accidental detail but in substance remained the repository of human wisdom, a permanent oracle, and, like Thucydides' history, a possession for all time. In fact, there are a perennial materialism and a perennial idealism as well as a perennial realism. They all shift and change from one age to the next, for the questions they once treated become obsolete and the methods they employed are superseded.

Fifthly, there is a notable softening, if not weakening, of the dogmatic component once so prominent in Catholic theology. Nor can this be described as simply the correction of a former exaggeration, the advent of charity, ecumenism, dialogue, in place of less pleasant attitudes. The new philosophies are not capable of grounding objective statements about what really is so. But dogmas purport to be such objective statements. Accordingly, if one is to defend dogmas as meaningful, one has to get beyond historicism, phenomenology, personalism, existentialism. One has to meet head on the contention that the only meaningful statements are scientific statements. One has to do so not partially and fragmentarily but completely and thoroughly.

Further it is not only dogmas that are at stake, for it is not only dogmas that lie outside the range of a modern science. Not only every statement about God but also every statement about scientific method, about hermeneutics, about historiography supposes a reflexive procedure quite distinct from the direct procedures sanctioned by the success of modern

science.

To conclude, Catholic theology at present is at a critical juncture. If I may express a personal view, I should say that the contemporary task of assimilating the fruits both of religious studies and of the new philosophies, of handling the problems of demythologisation and of the possibility of objective religious statement, imposes on theology the task of recasting its notion of theological method in the most thorough-going and profound fashion.

I have been speaking, not of the whole of modern culture, not of its most vital part, but of its superstructure. I have said that God is absent from modern science precisely because such science systematically and exclusively is directed to knowledge of this world. Further I have said that Catholic theology is going through an unsettling period of transition in which older procedures are being repudiated and newer ones yield only incomplete and fragmentary benefits. But I have yet to ask whether God is absent not from the superstructure of modern culture but from the everyday, familiar domain of feeling, insight, judgement, decision.

On this more concrete level modern culture involves a reinterpretation of man and his world, a transformation of the ordering of society and of the control over nature, and a new sense of power and of responsibility. All three have a bearing on the absence of God in modern culture.

First, there is the reinterpretation of man in his world. This

reinterpretation primarily occurs in the cultural superstrucure, in the natural and the human sciences, in philosophy, history, and theology. But it is not confined to the superstructure. It is popularized, schematized, simplified. It is transposed from technical statement through simile and metaphor, image and narrative, catch-phrase and slogan, to what can be understood without too much effort and is judged to be , for practical purposes, sufficiently accurate.

Now it is quite conceivable that in a process of great cultural change all parts of the superstructure should keep in step and the popularizations of the several parts should be coherent. Such, however, has not been the transition from classicist to modern culture. For, in the first place, the classicist believed that he could escape history, that he could encapsulate culture in the universal, the normative, the ideal, the immutable, that, while times would change, still the changes necessarily would be minor, accidental, of no serious significance. In the second place, the classicist judged modern science in the light of the Aristotelian notion of science and by that standard found it wanting, for modern science does not proceed from self-evident, necessary principles and it does not demonstrate conclusions from such principles. In the third place, classicist churchmen found that the natural sciences frequently were presented in a reductionist version that was materialistic and, if not atheistic, at least agnostic, while the historical sciences were the locus of continuous attacks on traditional views of the Church in its origins and throughout its development. In brief, so far were churchmen from acknowledging the distinc-

tive character of modern culture that they regarded it as an aberration that had to be resisted and overcome. When they were confronted with a heresy, which they considered to be the sum and substance of all heresy, they named it modernism. So far were they from seeking to enrich modern culture with a relgious interpretation that they had only mistrust for a Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Today the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. Whatever is old, is out. Whatever is new, is in. But a mere swing of the pendulum, while it involves plenty of novelty, falls far short of aggiornamento. For aggiornamento is not some simple-minded rejection of all that is old and some breezy acceptance of everything new. Rather it is a disengagement from a culture that no longer exists and an involvement in a distinct culture that has replaced it. Christians have been depicted as utterly other-worldly, as idly standing about awaiting the second coming of Christ without any interest or concern or commitment for the things of this life of ours on earth. But the fact of the matter is that the ancient Church went about transforming Greek and Roman culture, that the medieval Church was a principal agent in the formation of medieval culture, that the Renaissance Church was scandalously involved in Renaissance culture. If the modern Church had stood aloof from the modern world, the fact is not too hard to explain. On the one hand, the Church's involvement in classicist culture was an involvement in a very limited view that totally underestimated the possibilites of cultural change and so precluded advertence to the need for adaptation and zeal to effect it. On the other hand, modern culture

with its many excellences and its unprecedented achievements none the less is not just a realm of sweetness and light. The suffering, the sins, the crimes, the destructive power, the sustained blindness of the twentieth century have disenchanted us with progress and made us suspicious of development and advance. Aggiornamento is not desertion of the past but only a discerning and discriminating disengagement from its limitations. Aggiornamento is not just acceptance of the present; it is acknowledgement of its evils as well as of its good; and, as acknowledgement alone is not enough, it also is, by the power of the cross, that meeting of evil with good that transforms evil into good.

Besides its reinterpretation of man in his world, modern culture transforms man's control over nature and in consequence involves a reordering of society. The new scene is one of technology, automation, built-in obsolescence, a population explosion, increasing longevity, urbanism, mobility, detached and functional relations between persons, universal, prolonged, and continuing education, increasing leisure and travel, instantaneous information, and perpetually available entertainment. In this ever changing scene God, when not totally absent, appears an intruder. To mention him, if not meaningless, seems to be irrelevant. The greatest of financial powers, the power to increase gross national income by taxing and spending for worthy purposes, is restricted to non-religious ends, so that pluralism is given lip-service while secularism is the religion -- or, perhaps, the anti-religion - by law established. At the same time, a rigorously codified religious organization finds itself ever less capable

to move with ever fluid situations, to enter meaningfully into people's lives, significantly to further all good causes, effectively to help the weak, heal the hurt, restore and reinvigorate the disheartened. Here, perhaps, as Father Karl Rahner argued in his paper at the Toronto Congress last summer, the difficulty has been an integrism in the sense that it was believed possible for authority to solve problems by laying down principles and deducing conclusions. However true such principles, however accurate such conclusions may be, it remains that they can become relevant to concrete situations only through familiarity with the situation, only through adequate insight into its causes and its potentialities, only through the ingenuity that discovers lines of solution and keeps developing and adapting them in accord with an on-going process of change. Once more, then, we have to move beyond the classicist position and operate in the modern world. Ideals and principles and exhortations have not been antiquated. But the crying need is for the competent man on the spot free to deal with real issues as they arise and develop.

Besides a reinterpretation of man in his world, a transformation of man's control over nature and a consequent reordering of society, modern culture has generated a new sense of power and responsibility. Superficially the sense of power might be illustrated by space-exploration, and the sense of responsibility by concern over nuclear bombs. But the matter goes far deeper. Modern culture is the culture that knows about itself and other cultures. It is aware that they are man-made. It is aware that the cultural may sustain or destroy or refashion the ~~social~~ social. So it is that modern man not only individually is responsible for the life he leads but

also collectively is responsible for the world in which he leads it. So modern culture is culture on the move. It is not dedicated to perpetuating the wisdom of ancestors, to handing on the traditions it has inherited. The past is just the spring-board to the future. It is the set of good things to be improved and of evils to be eliminated. The future will belong to those that think about it, that grasp real possibilities, that project a coherent sequence of cumulative realisations, that speak to man's longing for achievement more wisely than the liberal apostles of automatic progress and more humanly than the liquidating Marxists.

Now this concern with the future of humanity is a concern for humanity in this world and so it has been thought to be purely secular. Such a conclusion is, I believe, mistaken. It is true that concern for the future is incompatible with a blind traditionalism, but a blind traditionalism is not the essence of religion. It is true that concern for the future will work itself out by human means, by drawing on human experience, human intelligence, human judgement, human decision, but again this is quite compatible with a profoundly religious attitude, It was St. Ignatius Loyola that gave the advice: Act as though results depended exclusively on you, but await the results as though they depended entirely on God. What is false is that human concern for the future can generate a better future on the basis of individual and group egoism. For to know what is truly good and to effect it calls for a self-transcendence that seeks to benefit not self at the cost of the group, not the group at the cost of mankind, not present mankind at the cost of mankind's future. Concern for the future, if it is not just high-sounding hypocrisy, supposes

rare moral attainment. It calls for what Christians name heroic charity. In the measure that Christians practise and radiate heroic charity they need not fear they will be superfluous either in the task of discerning man's true good in this life or in the task of bringing it about.

I have been speaking of the absence of God in modern culture. I have dwelt at length on the many ways in which he is absent both in the superstructure and on the day-to-day level of that culture. But every absence is also a potential presence, not indeed in the sense that the past is to be restored, but in the sense that our creativity has to discover the future and our determination has to realize it. Nor is God's presence only potential. Evidently, almost palpably, it is actual. Pope John spoke to the whole world. Vatican II stirred it profoundly. For the Spirit of God is moving the hearts of many and, in Paul Tillich's phrase, ultimate concern has grasped them.

NOTES

1) E. Rothacker, Systematik und Logik der Geisteswissenschaften, Bonn 1947.

2) H. Butterfield, The Origins of Modern Science 1300-1800, Revised edition, New York (Free Press Paperback) 1965, p. 7.

3) See Jospeh Nuttin, "Human motivation and Freud's Theory of Energy Discharge," in Irwin Sarason (ed.), Science and Theory in Psychoanalysis, Princeton, Van Nostrand, 1965. Also Paul Ricoeur, De l'interprétation, essai sur Freud, Paris, du Seuil, 1965.

4) Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils (ed.), Toward a General Theory of Action, New York, Harper and Row, 1965, p. 4.

5) F.W. Matson, The Broken Image, New York, Doubleday, 1964, pp. 38-65.

6) See Abraham Maslow, Toward a Psychology of Being, Princeton, Van Nostrand, 1962.

7) For a distinction between the scientific and the philosophic elements in the Principle of Complementarity, see Patrick Heelan, Quantum Mechanics and Objectivity, The Hague, Marinus Nijhoff, 1965, pp. 55 - 80.

8) Clemens Alexandrinus, Stromateis V, 11; 71, 4. Stählin II, 374, 15. MG 9, 110 a.