Towards a Cautious Optimism

We Christians in the twentieth century have now experienced the full impact of the world's hostility and indifference. We are staggered and alarmed by the extent of it, and dumbfounded by its partial success. Numerically we are drastically reduced, proportionately to the enormously increased population, and we shall probably continue in that way, perhaps with even greater numerical reductions, at least for the remainder of this century. We have been made aware of our own weakness, shocked out of our complacency, and compelled to recognize our failures. On the other hand we still survive and we are obviously going to. No doubt we survive as a minority but by no means as a pitiful or contemptible minority. We die daily because of our own weakness and unworthiness, yet we live, nevertheless, because God is with us.

Our modern experience of calamity has taught us more than the shame and extent of our own inadequacy. If that were all it had to teach us we should be utterly confounded. But we have also experienced the power and faithfulness of God and the ineffectiveness of our world's hostility. In less than a century we have undergone the worst that the world can do, and it has been far less effective than we might have feared or supposed. There are so many pessimists among us
that perhaps it might be as well to set down those aspects of our melancholy experiences which nevertheless conduce to optimism.

(a) *We have discovered that we cannot be persecuted out of existence.* Our century has witnessed, under communism and under Nazism, anti-Christian religious persecution on a scale unparalleled since the Emperor Diocletian. Persecutions have occurred far more efficient and probably far more bloody than any of the persecutions endured under the Roman Empire. We have discovered that even ordinary Christians like ourselves can, in fact, face up to this sort of thing very much better than we should ever have dared to hope. The persecutions have not destroyed the Christian minority, which still exists in the persecuting countries—or in what were the persecuting countries, for in all probability the persecutions are now over everywhere, and it may be long before they come again.

(b) *We have discovered that self-assured intellectual superiority cannot argue us out of existence.* On the whole, the intellectual climate of opinion in the so-called Christian countries has been anti-Christian for some three centuries, yet we survive, not because we are anti-intellectuals who despise intellectualism and the intellectual worker—on the contrary we have our own intellectuals who are busy not only with the maintenance but also the development of a Christian intellectualism. Probably it is true that our élite is much more aware of what is valid and creative in the work of secular intellectuals than secular intellectuals are aware of what is valid and creative in that of Christian intellectuals. The fact is that we have come out of a long struggle with the eighteenth-century enlightenment, and its strange survival through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in very much better shape than the typical eighteenth-century intellectual would have expected. We have certainly not
given up the struggle on the intellectual level. On the contrary, we have been greatly illuminated and strengthened by it. If we are going to fail, it is certainly not going to be on this sector of the battle front.

(c) Satire cannot laugh us out of existence. It has certainly tried very hard to do so, often in a most witty and amusing way, so that we ourselves are constrained to enjoy the ridicule. But we have discovered that few weapons in the hands of our antagonists have so little effect upon us as this. On the contrary, the weapon of satire can be just as effective in our hands as in theirs. If the world can laugh at us we can laugh at the world. A little sadly perhaps, for after all the world is our world too; the only trouble is that our Church is not the world’s Church. Humour is really God’s weapon, our way of realizing how ridiculous we are when we take ourselves too seriously. Like all mortal men, Christian men are not infrequently absurd. It is good to be reminded of this. Vehement satirists of the Church, however unwillingly, are preaching to us a kind of sermon, to which it is most profitable to listen very carefully. We like to hear human beings laughing, even when they are laughing at us, because laughter is a continual reminder that man indeed is made in the image of God, and because when men laugh they are much less likely to hate or kill.

(d) The planned society cannot organize us out of existence. Of course it has tried and will try. By ignoring the religious factors in human existence, and by multiplying the non-religious factors, so that men will have no time for anything else, the planned modern society has undoubtedly dealt us terrible blows. Perhaps this comes nearer to success as an anti-Christian weapon than almost any other that has been tried. Yet the signs are that it will not succeed. Even in the most rigorously planned modern society, human beings remain individual people, capable of reaction as well as
conformity, always more vividly aware of what the existing social order is depriving them of than what it confers upon them, in the long run more distressed by the failures of their world than pleased by its successes. Conformism in an affluent society will not set at rest the longings that lie most deeply at the hearts of men. On the contrary, it will set free the longings which the age of poverty stifled. A social order composed of happy materialists, passively grateful for the affluence that the social planners have conferred upon them, asking no more because they now have all the heart really desires, would be a kind of secular Utopia, but one that will most certainly never be attained—not because affluence cannot and will not be achieved. On the contrary, it probably can and will. But the age of affluence, which often seemed the most entrancing of all prospects when we lacked it, is not really our heart’s desire at all. The planned affluent society of conforming materialists (already we can see the signs of it) is turning out to be excruciatingly boring. Some will take refuge in exciting delinquencies, others will go to Church. I prefer the latter to the former reaction, but they are both genuine reactions, and heartening reminders that even in the age of planned affluence, human beings will insist on remaining human beings.

(e) Most important of all, we have learned that our own mediocrity cannot shame us out of existence. It may and should indeed shame us, but it need not drive us to suicide. Once we can experience our failures and frustrations as God’s stern but just judgement on our mediocrity, we can learn even from our own littleness the immensity of his purpose and the breadth of his love. If God can endure our mediocrity, we can at least endure the secular world’s alternating moods of snarling hatred and cock-sure superiority. We not only can, but we do. We laugh at the former, because of its ineffectiveness, and we are amused by the latter, because of its stupidity.
Christians may well ask themselves whether their frustrating but stimulating experience in the twentieth century is part of a tragedy or part of a comedy. Of course, it is full of many tragic episodes. Like St Paul we still die daily, and rightly the Christian is no stranger to the cross. The spectacle of the mass irreligion of mankind is our Gethsemane. As we think of the vast extent of irresponsible indifference, the venom of the hostility, the strange social and intellectual inhumanity which causes living men to reject the Lord of life, our sweat is like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground. Yet at the same time there is something conceptually comic about it all. Even the atheist is upheld in his atheism by the loving and eternal arms of God beneath him, enabling him to continue in being and freedom. Without God, after all, there would be no atheists. One is reminded of the story of the speaker at Hyde Park Corner who was launching a frenzied and rhetorical attack on the police, those lackeys of the capitalists, with their regrettable habit of grinding the faces of the poor. A passing motorist drew up at the curb to listen and a policeman approached him with the remark, “Begging your pardon, sir, would you mind switching off your engine. Some of the people on the edge of the crowd can’t quite hear.” How amusing it will be to meet some of the great atheists in heaven. I always imagine them clubbing together in an indignant union, demanding that God should take their pasts seriously enough to send them to Hell, which, of course, he will certainly decline to do.

The biblical category is comedy, not tragedy. Of course, tragic episodes occur in history, but the story itself, however terrible and destructive its more lurid phases, has nevertheless a happy ending. This is what is called the Bible’s eschatological view of history, and comedy, as a literary form and as a way of experiencing and interpreting life, is
the secular counterpart of the eschatology of the Bible. So long as we see and interpret what is happening merely in the category of tragedy we are not seeing and interpreting it as God does. To ignore the category of comedy is not only to be far removed from the Bible and Christian faith, it is also to be defective in the breadth of our humanity. Tragedy is the category of those rather inhumane people called heroes. Comedy, on the other hand, is both theological and humanist. No doubt, God truly weeps at times, but we may be very sure that he laughs at last. Heaven means, among other things, that we shall laugh with him, discovering for ourselves the truth of the ancient proverb that “he who laughs last, laughs best”.

“And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” This is a rather unfashionable way of stating the Christian faith in these tormented times, but ultimately it is still an essential part of the Christian vision of the world. No doubt it rests on faith, but I have tried to provide it, in this summary of what the twentieth century has taught us, with a kind of natural theology of hope. As I interpret the course of events, this is the truth to which they point, this is what is really happening now and going to happen in the future.

On the other hand, and this also we must never forget, the immediate circumstances are very threatening. It is very difficult for the western Christian, with his falsely optimistic ideas about national Churches and Christian countries, to get used to the idea of living as a member of what must for a long time remain a minority.

We must face the fact that we are a minority everywhere and are likely to remain so for a considerable period of time. This means that we must disabuse our minds of the illusions that have given birth to the notion we have already discussed, the idea of a Christendom, a collection of so-called
Christian countries more or less synonymous with what is called western civilization. In Europe, and especially in England, this has produced the idea of something called the Church of England which is supposed to be, or at least to aim at being, the whole nation on its knees before God. Probably at no time in the past has this idea ever, in fact, corresponded to any real state of affairs, and the sooner we abandon it the better. There are no national Churches, and in any case the Church is inherently an international idea. The Catholic Church is not an association of local or national Churches but a world-wide reality with local branches and representation. The idea of independent local national Churches is, in fact, as outmoded as the idea of independent nations. The reality to which the Church must address itself is not the nation but mankind, certainly not a nation that is even in theory a believing nation, but a human race which is, in fact, for the most part an unbelieving human race.

It is sometimes tritely, but nevertheless truly, said that all the world is now one mission field. The qualification to be insisted upon is that this is not a state of affairs which has come to pass only recently and obtains now. It is the permanent state of affairs, and we have no reason to suppose that it will cease to be so. Only if we proclaim that the whole world is a mission field can we hope to rescue the Church in African and Oriental regions from the stigma of being a westernizing agency. We in the Church are no more interested in westernizing Africa and the Orient than we are concerned to africanize or orientalize the West. We seek only to christianize mankind. No doubt in the course of the next period of social development men will tend more and more to discover the roots of a secular unity, a greater equivalence in conditions of life all over the world. We should welcome such developments, but our real concern is with the spiritual solidarity of mankind, and we can only
offer "one Church, one Faith and one Lord" to whom men can adhere even in such sociological plurality and economic differences as may survive the social changes which are bearing down upon us.

The reunion of Christendom must not be allowed to mean the resurrection of national Churches as the result of local agreements between denominations concluded on a national level. The reunion of Christendom must mean the recovery of the idea of a genuinely catholic international Church which will lie at the very heart of the unity of mankind. Probably, so far as we can foresee—that is to the very horizon of our vision and far beyond it—the members of such an international Church will be a minority everywhere and in every nation. They will not be a contemptibly small minority, however, and their public influence and the strength that will inevitably accompany their rediscovered solidarity will be strong and noticeable everywhere and, at some times and in some places, the decisive element in social development.

Minority status is not a sign of weakness. The creative elements in history are almost always highly unified, utterly convinced minorities. Churches do not die because they get numerically smaller. On the contrary they may actually be strengthened by such a purgation. The present anxiety about the numerical constriction of the Church, so noticeable in England, Scandinavia, and some other European countries, is largely motivated by the kind of shocked horror with which men react to the sudden realization that what they thought was a national Church is not really a national Church at all. It is in such moods that they contemplate radical and drastic transformations of ecclesiastical methods and institutions which, as they rather vainly hope, might enable them to become national Churches once more. They put their trust in modernizations of the liturgy, new translations
of the Bible into more intelligible common speech, a re-shuffling of ecclesiastical finance and personnel. No doubt, many of these suggestions and expedients are quite good ones, but surely it is impossible to suppose that the world can be saved, or even the mere appearance of a national Church resurrected, by such gestures as these.

The challenge of the times demands more than a piece-meal reorganization of ecclesiastical and pastoral machinery. Even if the reorganization measures are judicious and helpful in themselves, they will make almost no impression on the problems that confront us. The illusion that they could conceivably do so can only be described as pathetic. No doubt, many things are sadly out of joint in the Church. We are half-hearted and corrupt, and many of the institutions we have inherited and tolerated are extremely inefficient, but we enormously exaggerate the causal efficacy of our sins and shortcomings if we suppose that they have produced or could produce the situation in which we now find ourselves. It is changes in the structure of the world itself that have produced that situation, and merely tinkering with life and thought in the Church will make little or no contribution to the solution of our problems.

Far more serious is the tendency of many in the Church to try to improvise a fresh gospel and a new theology in order to meet the necessities of the changing situation. The fashionable modernisms and liberalisms of the time seem to suppose that the fault lies neither in ourselves nor even necessarily in our institutions, but in our basic message to mankind. We shall do well to heed the comment of the former Harvard sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, when he tells us that “the decline of a system does not necessarily entail its dissolution or extinction, for it frequently recovers its vitality in one or more respects. Only when its ideology disintegrates to such an extent that it loses its identity...
does it actually become extinct.”¹ Such a loss of identity on the part of the Church has become a real danger in a time when so many theologians, who are called to be the mouthpieces through which the Christian mind expresses itself, have so manifestly lost their nerve and given birth to modernistic and liberal theologies of panic. Such men have lost the power to transmit either the authentic Gospel or an integrated tradition, and as represented, or misrepresented, by them the Church has indeed lost its identity. Unless from resources within the Church we can utterly overcome such intellectual treachery, we shall continue to stand in danger of a terrible judgement of God, bringing upon us the total loss of our Christian identity and the utter frustration of all our hopes.

The trouble is that so many people have been led to suppose that the authentic Gospel and the Christian tradition in its integrity have now become what it is fashionable to call “irrelevant” to the needs of the time. Perhaps there is more to this charge of irrelevance than orthodox Christians are usually willing to admit. After all, the relevance of the authentic Gospel is a relevance to the purposes of God rather than to the purposes of men. From the standpoint of the purposes which men consciously and almost inevitably purpose, in so far as they exhibit a conformity to the aims and structure of contemporary society, the Gospel is indeed irrelevant. We have to face the fact that God and his Gospel are not particularly interested in the successful performance of what men think they ought to try to perform in order to be good and acceptable members of the contemporary social order.

In our day the trouble is not so much that the Gospel is irrelevant to life as that life is irrelevant to reality and to the

¹ Society, Culture and Personality, Cooper Square, New York, 1962, p. 592.
purposes of God. When men seek God the Gospel is relevant. When men long for justice and righteousness and the peace which is the tranquillity of human order, then the Gospel is relevant. But when men seek commercial success in the affluent society, when they aspire to mundane equality with people to whom they may even be superior, when they dream of a fantastic Utopian world that will be safe for sinners to sin in, then indeed the Gospel is irrelevant. But when they desire the preordained and majestic Kingdom of God rather than a comfortable kingdom of man, when, in other words, they are really men again and have shed their illusions, then the Gospel is relevant once more.

We have argued in this book that we are standing on the threshold of two revolutions, a commercial and industrial automotive revolution on the one hand, which must inevitably transform the structure of society and the familiar shape of day-to-day human experience, and the renewal and reunion of the Christian Church on the other, so that what is coming to pass during the next century will be the confrontation of a new world by a renewed Church. Of course, as in most revolutions there will be a conservative element in all this. The new world will revive many of the modes of life and values which for some time now modern men have been taught to regard as outmoded, and the renewed Church will be in many ways a revival of the great Catholic Church of the ages. The more we change, the more we turn out to be the same thing. We have seen reason to suppose that the world as reconstituted by the automotive revolution will provide a better and more hopeful context for the work of the Church than the social structures that have become familiar during the last three or four centuries. We have also seen reason to suppose that the renewed Church will be in a better position to take advantage of the new opportunities.
In the period of history immediately behind us a hopelessly divided Church strove in vain to relate itself constructively and redemptively to a profoundly alienated social structure, which neither submitted itself, on the one hand, to the purposes of God nor, on the other hand, either satisfied or accommodated the deepest urges of human nature. For centuries our civilization has been neither theologically oriented nor truly humane in its values. Theology and humanism go together: without theological orientation human values are inevitably falsified and frustrated. I am not arguing that the Church will overcome the kind of problems with which it has been confronted in the age of the sovereign secular State and the industrial revolution. I think they are insoluble.

Of course, it will always be difficult for fallen men to be Christians. Indeed it is hard enough for fallen men even to be men. To exist as an authentic human being is an almost intolerable vocation. It is, perhaps, even more difficult for fallen human beings like ourselves to gather together and constitute an authentic Church. We know that God will have mercy on us, but we still find it almost impossible to have mercy on each other. Perhaps the only way to endure the corruption, mediocrity, and stupidity of other people is to learn, through penitential discipline, to recognize the same failings in ourselves. Nevertheless, even in the darkness of so much that might well make us despair, we can trace the faint outline of hope. The fact is that we do not despair. We cannot and do not do so, not merely because we know we ought not to, but also because, as we look about us and strive to read the signs of the times and discern the shape of the future, we cannot find any very good reason why we should.

The world needs the Church, and the fellowship and services of the Gospel bearers, far more desperately than the
Church needs the world. Our civilization needs its Christians more than its Christians need our civilization. Provided we have God we can dispense, if need be, with everything else. Our world, on the other hand, can, at a pinch, dispense with God, but it cannot dispense with anything else. Modern man relies on nothing that will not some day be taken away from him. Those who are utterly committed to the Christian faith rely in the last resort on nothing that could possibly be taken away. That is why the Church, contrary to all appearances, is stronger than the world. And that is why it is the duty of Christians to be sympathetic, compassionate, and merciful in their dealings with their estranged brethren. We have, therefore, to work out our salvation here and now with faithfulness, fear, and trembling. But at least we know that, although that salvation may still be very far away, it is certainly a little nearer than when we first believed.