

Ideology of Flux

Christian Humanism: A Critique of the Secular City and Its Ideology, by Thomas Molnar, *Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978. x + 172 pp. \$7.95.*

IT IS ALTOGETHER possible that to some future observer the crisis of the Catholic Church will seem the most significant event of the third quarter of the twentieth century. Suddenly, it appears, a great rock, a "temple of order" as Maurras evocatively called it, has shifted, and once moved it has not ceased to roll. The temple of order has become, in Latin America for instance, more like a riotous assembly, and in the continent of Camillo Torres the vision of Bernanos of being shot by a gun-sliding Bolshevik priest has moved uncomfortably out of the realm of fantasy. So much has happened at so many levels, from the shift to the Left of much of the church hierarchy to the abandonment of the Latin Mass, that it is not hard for a sympathetic outsider to understand the anguish and confusion of so many believers and the appeal of the integral reaction of a man like Archbishop Lefebvre.

Thomas Molnar's new book is a product of this crisis, but though primarily addressed to his fellow Catholic Christians it will be read with almost equal profit by those outside the Church. For, as Professor Molnar says, "The content of the Christian religion is divinely revealed but, considered also in itself, it is the most accurate set of statements that one may hold about man's nature, about the balance between faith and reason, the interior and the exterior man, the condition on which society rests, human relations." Whatever else it may be, the traditional teaching of the Church is a treasure-house of insights into the nature of man and his place in the universe, and what seems to be an abandonment of this teaching by its privileged custodians represents nothing less than a spiritual catastrophe for the human race. If the Church is flooded, as it seems increasingly to be, by the tidal wave of

ideological illusion, it is not only the teaching of Christ that faces oblivion but also the unsurpassed wisdom of the ancient world which was incorporated in Christian thought. This, for sure, is an outsider's reaction but of one who feels keenly the dangers of the movement which Molnar aims to combat.

As one would expect from this author, Molnar's critique of man-centered humanism is based firmly in an acute analysis of the intellectual pre-history of modernity. His discussion of Joachim of Flora, of Nicholas of Cusa, and of Pico della Mirandola is the result neither of intellectual showiness nor of a taste for the obscure. These men are discussed because, as the title of Richard Weaver's famous book reminds us, "ideas have consequences" and in the ideas of these men we find the seed of a world-view which has elevated man to the status of a god and has, in the process, distorted our understanding of reality and the place of the human creature within it. Schematically stated, the view of reality as an order in which each being has its nature and its place has been replaced by what Molnar calls, in his criticism of the theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, an "ideology of flux."

According to Moltmann there is a conflict between what he sees as the two roots of Christianity, "the oriental religion of promise and the Greek speculative corpus which insists, with Parmenides, on Being. This Being of the Greeks, Moltmann and his confreres argue, was transferred to the oriental/Christian God, lending him its attributes of changelessness, eternal immutability, and lordship over a similarly rigid, once-for-all creation. The strategy against this idol must begin with a firm No; the real God is not characterized by the Parmenidian/Platonic 'he is' (that is Being), but by the 'he arrives' (that is Becoming), the hope of the good news announced in the Gospels." In the work of Moltmann, and he is not untypical of an influential strand in theology, the promise of the Gospel is all too easily identified with the earthly utopia of a Marxist like Ernst Bloch.

It seems to me that Molnar is quite right to identify this idolization of "Process" or "Becoming" as the deadly living core of modern ontology and, that being the case, to view Hegel as the single most important figure in the history of man's forgetfulness of the limitations of his nature. Nevertheless, as the author realizes, the characterization of this view as "Humanism" is not without problems. Most of those who now call themselves humanists probably subscribe to the sort of positions Molnar criticizes, but many others with similar views would reject the label "humanist." And, anyway, there is an alternative humanist tradition that accepts what Molnar calls "the tension of incarnation" and with it a realistic view of what it is to be a Man. Nor need this alternative take the form of a specifically Christian humanism, like the God-centered humanism of Jacques Maritain. The lesson of realism is learned in the experience of our limited being in the world and our understanding that cosmos and humanity alike depend upon a level of being that transcends them utterly.

This may fairly be called a religious sense of being but it is not in principle dependent upon any revealed message, as the experience of the Greek philosophers shows. The fearful thing about the "humanism" that Molnar opposes is that, in the very heart of organized religion itself, it is striving to abolish this sense of limit and proportion, and with it our grasp on our real humanity. Molnar is in the forefront of that battle to reverse this process and, more clearly than most commentators, he realizes what has, historically and intellectually, contributed to its present advances. May success attend him in his effort for it is a battle that concerns us all.

Reviewed by DAVID J. LEVY