

# Foreword

THE ESSAYS in this symposium are frequently troubling, occasionally grim, but always bravely confident. No symposiast here ignores the deep crisis of Christianity as the year 2000 approaches. None downplays the gravity of the conditions which now afflict Christian faith and practice. Invariably the symposiasts show a profound awareness of a widespread secular ideology that scorns the eternal supernatural world and renounces faith in transcendent revelation. That we should have absolutely no illusions about the kind of legacy which the twentieth century is bequeathing to the third millennium is a warning that ultimately reverberates in these essays. The symposiasts are united in their belief that radical developments and tendencies threaten the very foundations of Christianity in the modern world: the gradual eclipse of the religious mind and the concomitant growth of a religionless intellectual elite; the rampant liberalization of a culture divorced from religion; the general lessening of sacramental considerations in everyday life; the accommodation of church policies and practices to the premises of pluralism and to the politics of liberal civil society, as seen, above all, in the shift from the absolute of divine transcendence to political democracy as the new absolute. Indeed, the two constants that the symposiasts observe in the creation of a secular humanism, and a secular soteriology, are the democratization and the demystification of the Logos of God. In the full measure of their concern, their devotion, their percipience, the symposiasts exemplify the import of Tertullian's words, "We are a body united by our religious profession, by our godly discipline, by the bond of hope . . . we have exhortations, admonitions, and godly censure."

As the symposiasts show here, the crisis of Christianity is inseparable from the crisis of modernity. The devolution of Christian values reflects inevitably and

directly the ascendant features of modern civilization that shape the attitudes and the orientation of human existence. Of course, it is all too true, as some of the symposiasts contend, that Christianity is a matter of quality, not quantity; that, in matters of the spirit, quantity is meaningless; and that, in fact, it is not Christianity that is being judged today but modernity itself. And it is equally true, again as some of the symposiasts contend, that even some of the grotesque religious enthusiasms that we see all around us are in reality symptoms of the breakdown of modernity and of the deep spiritual dissatisfaction of mankind with the insensate lives they live. But as encouraging as those contentions may be, the data and the consequences of modernity remain powerful, inescapable, inclusive. Any promise of redemption must be seen and measured in the light of epochal spiritual upheavals in the modern world. These upheavals are unequivocally portrayed in this symposium, with a sense of regret, to be sure, but also with emphatic candor and sincerity. The subjectivism, the relativism, the nominalism, the naturalism, in short, the quantified reductionism, as it is termed, that both define and embody the whole spectrum of modernity are never underestimated or dismissed in the essays that follow. That the modernist mind is now dominant in setting the Christian agenda is a phenomenon that the symposiasts discern as a sad but incontrovertible truth of experience.

The specificities of what one symposiast calls "Christianity's dance with modernity" are fleshed out here with a suffering patience. The overthrow of the "permanent things" in favor of the "permanent city" is viewed as a cumulative process of destruction and attrition, as well as of blasphemy and heresy. The categorical dismissal of metaphysics; the denigration of traditional authority and the idea of hierarchy; the denial of the

unique value and meaning of human existence; the irresistible attractions of an empirical and often profane pluralism, as heralded in the all too common constituents of a modernity that has as one of its chief tasks the dismantling of the sacral, receive detailed critical attention in the essays that follow. Coping, too, with the resultant problems, even the afflictions, that beset orthodox Christian belief and leadership, as the symposiasts show, lacks both unity and unanimity, insofar as the divisions and fragmentation within the historic communities and authority of Christianity today are sharp and intense. Indeed, the antinomian diathesis which holds such powerful sway in modern society exerts an equal sway among Christian theologians and thinkers, in short, among the religious minds that are expected to proffer paradigms of Christian faith.

Reconceptualizations that are born of modernity thus lead to realignments within the body of the Christian faithful and, in the end, to an overall crisis of theology. The symposiasts' warning comments on this crisis, in general and in particular, are strikingly free of sectarian biases. No reader of these essays will fail to show deep concern with the depth and extent of insidious secular tendencies and practices in theological matters. Nominalist habits of mind and schismatic opinions relentlessly invade theological thought. Political passions, which transform veritably into a theology of politics, overshadow religious doctrine, making it more and more subservient to temporal demands that become, at once, the new ritual and the new morality. The alliance of theological radicals, agnostics, and hucksters, as several of the symposiasts note, castigates "revealed truth" to the point of neo-paganism. Often a speculative philosophy of religion conduces a sentimental ecumenism, envisioning a universal super-Church that would surrender doctrinal truth to the illusion of unity. In effect, illusion and irresponsibility are sanctioned, sometimes in the most impious ways, as embodied in wanton devia-

tions from "first principles." Certainly the matter of the authenticity of the Christian way of life is one that the symposiasts respond to in their immediate assessment of the symptoms of social, personal, and spiritual disintegration in modern times. What we observe in the twentieth century, above all, is not only the extensive rejection of the truth of the articles of the Christian faith but also the progressive displacement of traditional Christian beliefs and practices: Religious truth is reduced to internal psychological states and significance. Moral principles are transformed or abrogated. Spiritual values slip into an abyss of decadence, the more so as any perception of maintaining both a right order of soul and a right order of the polity diminishes in validity and relevance.

But whatever their sense of regret or of alarm, the symposiasts disclose critical poise and prudence, and unfailingly the virtues of patience and fortitude infuse their biblical faith and their Christian witness. In their estimation of the difficulties that face Christianity, they recognize acute realities but at the same time they affirm possibilities. The future will be, to be sure, more difficult and problematic than can be imagined, but also, they insist, in greater need of Christian spiritual values, discipline, and authority. Astonishingly, the healing note of religion is now even becoming evident in Marxist countries, with no less a figure than the President of the U.S.S.R., Mikhail S. Gorbachev, recently confessing that "the moral values that religion generated and embodied for centuries can help in the work of renewal in our country, too." The inextinguishable religious nature of man, as one symposiast asserts, provides for us now "the Pentecostal moment of the present." And still another symposiast asserts that, in spite of the spiritual losses that Christianity has suffered in modern times, "faithful remnants seem to be emerging, which, alone, seek to maintain the historic Christian faith in its fundamental, pristine purity." What one finds unusually firm and consistent in the symposium is the yearning to maintain standards of Christian belief that

categorically oppose the conditions of desanctification that, like a plague, assault religious life and allegiance. Given the suffusion of these conditions, as well as the secular climate of opinion that systematically radicalizes all attitudes towards life, the symposiasts reveal strength of conviction and faith. There is an uncompromising aspect in their testimony that refuses to kneel to the world at a time when kneeling to the world has become a perverse and even a diabolic addiction. Throughout, then, the canon and the rule of faith are fearlessly defended against backsliding.

This symposium is, in essence, a conservative critique of the problems that confront Christianity on the eve of the third millennium. There is no need in the least to apologize for presenting a conservative religious perspective. When one stops to think of the liberal critique of religion that has aggressively prevailed in modern times, one should surely be willing to honor a dissenting viewpoint as it is variously delineated in this symposium. Certainly the liberal viewpoint is everywhere in evidence, rigorously advanced and insisted upon in the intellectual community, in the educational realm, in the political process, in newspapers and periodicals, in the electronics media, and in religious circles themselves. We are led to believe that the liberal viewpoint is the only one that is credible and necessary; the only one that is worth heeding and endorsing. To deviate from it or to question its authority, we are further led to believe, signifies a reactionary stance. The secularist dogma, as it is espoused and dictated in the land, is defiant and unconditional in its asseverations and requirements. There exists, then, a party-line disposition—that it is in the renunciatory grain of Americans to destroy the hierarchical and the traditional—which brooks no defiance of its dictates. At least one of the symposiasts refers to this disposition as harboring a totalitarian spirit. This may very well be an extreme feeling, but it is one that underlines the fear of those who discern the triumphalism of the modernist habits

of deconstruction as these seek to nullify Christian principles and Christian spirituality.

The symposiasts in this special issue of *Modern Age* bravely defy and reject secularist triumphalism in its twin forms of antichristianism and dechristianism. They disclose that the crisis of Christianity in sight of the third millennium is not a terminal one. Indeed, the essays here are not so much a systematic critique of the changing conditions of Christian life and faith in the modern age as they are the critical reflections of thinking Christians—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant, and including devout and distinguished laity, teachers, theologians, and ministers of the Word. These essays also constitute a confession of faith that revolves around the unending need to “hold fast the confidence” (Heb. 3:16). Throughout the symposium radiates the mystery of the second virtue, hope. To be sure, these essays frequently underline an apocalyptic time but not, however, in the sense of the coming of either the catastrophic end of the world or “the world’s last night.” Rather, the symposiasts focus on the supreme spiritual battle that continues to engulf Christianity and that Nietzsche summed up in the phrase “war against the Christian ideal.” They are especially aware that the gospel not of the Universal Church but of a “universal sociocracy” is excruciatingly strong and tempting in what is clearly a post-Christian period of history. Their perception of things visible and invisible is, then, at once stern, austere, keen, forthright, never acceding to an “impatience of limitations,” and yet steadfastly summoning Christians to strain “upwards.” Finally it should be clear that the symposiasts recognize that the mission of Christianity, in word and work, is truly revolutionary: to overcome the old pagan order—and “the last enemy”—that persists in the world entering into the third millennium.

—George A. Panichas