

The Loss of Transcendence: Reflections on the Contemporary Religious Crisis

M. Gerald Bradford

Alienation, Atheism, and The Religious Crisis. By Thomas F. O'Dea. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969. 189 pp. \$4.95. *The Catholic Crisis.* By Thomas F. O'Dea. Boston: Beacon Paperback, 1969, xix, 267 pp. \$2.95. M. Gerald Bradford is a faculty associate in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he is also Assistant to the Director of the Institute of Religious Studies. He is currently writing a Ph.D. dissertation on William James' concept of God.

The word "crisis" usually signifies a crucial point or situation in the course or history of something. It implies an unstable condition in a certain state of affairs in which an abrupt and decisive change is imminent or impending. More and more nowadays it seems our attention is being drawn to what certain social critics refer to as the "crisis of Western civilization" or the "crisis of contemporary man." No one has taken this situation more seriously nor attempted to understand its depth and scope more thoroughly than the sociologist Thomas F. O'Dea.¹ But unlike others who are concerned about the present crisis in order to accommodate themselves to it or in order to forestall any threatening confrontation with it, O'Dea seems to feel that we ought to confront it head-on, that we ought to understand it at its root level, i.e., at the level of the dilemmas of direction, of meaning, and of values haunting Western man. And we ought to label the present crisis for what it really is — a religion crisis. Only by such an approach can we really understand what is going on and hope to catch the vision of what is required in order radically to correct the situation.

In *Alienation, Atheism, and the Religious Crisis*, Professor O'Dea spells out, in detail, what he means by this assessment. He does so in a series of essays covering such topics as "Politics and the Religious Crisis," "Christianity, Humanism, and Science," "Christianity and the Atheism of Contemporary Youth," and "The Real Challenge of Secularism."

O'Dea suggests that every society is seen as an acted-out answer to the question, "What ought man to be doing here on earth being the kind of being that he is?" Different answers to this question are proffered and then pass away. And the changes in belief in this century clearly reveal a great deal of passing away. The two basic elements of any socio-cultural phenomenon, i.e., the beliefs and values by which man is defined and by which goals are established to elicit meaningful activity, and the realm of man's acted-out relationships with his environment, combine to identify and give meaning to any given culture and society. Yet when people experience a loss of direction, when they come to doubt the meaningfulness of what they are doing, when they reveal what O'Dea calls a sense of "false consciousness" about man's ideas of himself and what he ought to be doing, such is evidence of the failure of a culture to adequately face the above question by employing the older traditional answers.

¹Thomas F. O'Dea is professor of sociology and religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His book *The Mormons* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1957.

At present, it appears, much of our cultural heritage reflects contradictions and conflicts, inadequacies and obsolescence, and there is increasing uncertainty as to the meaning and value of the impact of science and technology upon our society. "Indeed," writes O'Dea, "it can be said that the present society which embodies the acted-out answer of the past to our fundamental question is rapidly becoming obsolete and begins to appear absurd." He concludes, "If the condition of our ideas and values challenges us to critical and creative rethinking, the prevailing relationship between advanced technology and society demands a radical and total change in priorities and an intelligent and rational development of social order. We are challenged to understand our history, our heritage and our present circumstances and to distill from that understanding a more adequate view of man and his possibilities for good and evil. We are challenged to . . . [suspend our] narrowly conceived vested interests and particularistically conceived securities, whether religious, ethnic, occupational or class."²

O'Dea sees this crisis as basically "religious" in character, first of all, because cultural values have always been influenced and even grounded in religious beliefs and orientations. When such beliefs are challenged, a traditional way of setting value priorities collapses. Second, the present crisis is religious in the sense that today "existence tends to be exercised in terms of its manifold contradictions" which is characteristic of religious crises. In such times as the present, "people have neither the noetic capacity to integrate an organized outlook nor the psychological ability to achieve a sense of meaningful participation in their society." But what is unique about this religious crisis is that it takes on a wholly different tone and importance when viewed from the condition of contemporary man, i.e., from the perspective of a secularized society embodying a scientific world-view.

The point that O'Dea makes is that secularized man evidences a sense of alienation and meaninglessness not only because he rejects religion — that is, he no longer accepts the traditional answers and directions of institutional Christianity and Judaism — but also because his new found religious surrogates, such as political ideologies, humanism, and science, have also been found wanting in the sense that they are unable to provide sought after answers to such questions as What is man? What ought he to be doing here upon earth? and What ought he to value? "Christianity, humanism, and science . . . each in its own characteristic way, has been one-sided in its perspective upon existence." All three "have led man, but they have also misled him. Moreover, to develop personal orientations for their own lives men have individually put parts of all three together, but the results produced were never adequate and are now less adequate than ever." The suggestion here is that religion is rejected, and rightly so, because, like various religious surrogates, traditional denominational stances have, in large measure, distorted the role and meaning of the religious dimension in life and thus have lost what O'Dea calls a "sense of transcendence."

Religion has traditionally inculcated in man a sense of relation, cele-

²From a paper entitled, "Significant 20th Century Transformations of Thought in America," read before the American Sociological Association meeting in N.Y., September, 1970. This paper represents, in large measure, a synthesis and summation of ideas expressed in both of the books under review.

bration, and cultivation with regards to the world rather than one of manipulation and control. And in this respect a loss of the sense of the transcendence is tragic because now man lacks ascendancy and leverage, making critical and rational choice impossible with respect to the confusing array of human possibilities. This is what O'Dea means when he says that while the religious crisis of the 19th century could be seen as a confrontation between Christianity and science, liberalism, and socialism, the 20th century crisis is a confrontation between Christianity and various Christian religious surrogates on the one hand and nihilism on the other.

In one place O'Dea suggests that the solution lies in a renewed attempt to coordinate the best of Christianity, science and humanism in order to better understand our human situation. But his more radical answer is contained in the book's concluding essay. Here he suggests that it is time to see secularism for the bankrupt movement that it is. It is necessary to face the fact that "if the loss of transcendence leaves us a mundane man without the leverage for long range initiative in changing society; if the loss of celebration leaves us with one-dimensional man based upon a highly developed problem-solving mentality, then the loss of any concern with serious personal responsibility for interior personal development in terms of our greatly increased knowledge leaves the whole matter of human realization to chance or to charlatany." If this reading of man's current status is correct then this alone is sufficient reason to argue that in order for man to rediscover the relevance of his heritage he must, in O'Dea's words, achieve authentic transcendence and genuine community.

In *The Catholic Crisis*, O'Dea concentrates his attention on the significance of the recent Vatican II Council in the Catholic church's on-going attempt to confront the current crisis. In this book, O'Dea analyses key documents of the recent Council, especially the Dogmatic Constitutions on the Church and on Divine Revelation and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. He approaches this study not only as a sociologist but also as a historian and attempts to put the whole topic into proper perspective within the history of Christianity and within recent attempts at Catholic reform sought for over a century and a half.

The particular approach of the Catholic church to the current religious crisis is uniquely important, O'Dea feels, because the present situation of the Catholic church is diagnostic of the position of Christianity as a whole. The Council represents more than renewal and *aggiornamento*; now that such reforms are backed by church authority, it represents the second major attempt in the history of Christianity to bring the Christian religion into a relevant relationship with the evolving world. "Liberal Protestantism" represented the first attempt. Protestantism tried to reform and renew Christianity and render it relevant to the modern world. "Its achievements were impressive, but it was not successful on the whole. Humanism, Marxism, and scientism had proposed substitutes for Christianity, but, in the form in which they have come to us . . . these are as obsolete and outmoded as the traditional forms of Christianity."

However, the Catholic endeavor is different in at least two important respects. The Catholic efforts toward renewal are taking place within a broad community of faith and tradition while earlier Protestant efforts saw

a break-up of such community. Secondly, the current effort enjoys the advantage of a changed estimate as to the value of the secularized world, i.e., as some religious thinkers come to appreciate more the positive aspects of secularization, secular thinkers are increasingly concerned about the loss of substance which that phenomenon reveals.

The documents of the council represent a compromise — “a temporary equilibrium” — between the old and the new. A brief description of what is implied in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church best illustrates this point. The document reveals the following developments:

1. A change in emphasis from a strictly “ontological” understanding of the world toward incorporation of a “historical” notion of the world. A change which corresponds to different acceptable concepts of the church, namely, the traditional view of the church as a meditating sacramental institution, and the newly emphasized image of the church as the Pilgrim People of God — the Wayfaring Church.

2. Changes from a rigid hierarchical leadership structure toward increased emphasis on lay leadership. That is, an attempt toward further reconciliation between the position of the priest in the vertically conceived Church and the recognition of the priesthood of all believers in the Church of the Pilgrim People of God.

3. Changes in favor of scriptural concepts as well as scholastic categories in formation of doctrinal and religious positions. This is evident in the example that the scholastic notions of “nature” and “supernature” are never explicitly used in this document nor in other conciliar documents.

The document itself reflects a considerable conceptual change. That which underlies the changes mentioned is an attempt to reconcile two contrasting theoretical positions. On the one hand, that of traditional scholastic theology (with its corresponding stress on substance, permanence, and transcendence) and on the other hand, process theology (with an emphasis on change and immanence.) And this brings us back to the point where O’Dea again introduces the question of the role and importance of a sense of the transcendence. “A recognition of man’s historicity — of the horizontal dimension in human life and what it implies for the meaning of religion — is certainly required. Catholicism can no longer close itself to these new forms of experience and thought, i.e., to the presuppositions and implications of ‘process’ thought. But there is a serious danger of losing the sense of transcendence, of reducing God to the interpretation of a “natural experience” or to a psychological projection. Real possibilities of the loss of the traditional bases of faith lurk in this pathway though the pathway must be taken.” O’Dea feels that Catholicism has recognized the great insights of modern natural and social sciences — that process is in some way fundamental. What he worries about, like before, is that if this view is not qualified by the older insight into structure, this will undermine not only an ethic based on natural law but also an ethic based on personalism. In other words, O’Dea cautions the Catholic to avoid any loss of a sense of the transcendence, although it is evident that he feels the church is quite aware of the potential dangers and he seems optimistic that this will not happen. According to O’Dea the stakes are high. The success or failure in this crisis may well prove the strategic element in determining whether Western Civilization will