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Three Theologies of the Future

I

THREE very different, yet equally influential, branches of modern theology deal with the problem of the future. They arise from different countries, they have their origins in different decades, yet each in its own way seeks to shed light both on the future of man and of the world, and, in one case, even the "future of God" himself.

Our title, "Three Theologies of the Future" refers to these current trends in modern theology, not, as it might imply, to what, in future years, theologians might want to write about. These three schools of thought are the "theology of hope", the theology of Teilhard de Chardin, and process theology. In this paper, after dealing with a prior question we shall briefly look at each and then make some concluding evaluative remarks.

The prior question arises out of a strong and current suspicion directed against modern theology itself. Is it not only five minutes, it will be asked, since we were trying to digest Bultmann's demythologizing, Bonhoeffer's man "come of age" and Tillich's "ground of being"? Where is modern theology off to this time? Is not modern theology capricious in its choices of subject, now jumping on the band wagon of "futurology", while leaving behind (and unresolved?) the problems of a decade ago, and jettisoning other false starts like religionless Christianity, situation ethics and the "death of God" on the way? And, it might well be added, why make the considerable intellectual effort required to grapple with three different schools of thought, if, almost in the next breath, theology, true to recent form, turns to some other ephemeral sphere of interest, only, still later, then to return to the place where she was years ago? Such questions, however misconceived, have their force, and it could well be argued, that in a period when modern theology is teeming with important and relevant insights for Christianity in the seventies, fewer Christians, clerical and lay, take the trouble to grapple with the best of recent output.

To these theological cynics, two things should be said. First, the last decade has seen the rise of an extraordinary concern for the common future of man and his world, so much so that it would be bleak indeed for Christianity if none of her seminal minds sought to interpret this concern in terms of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the providence of God. The last few years has seen the rise of two infant but fast-growing sciences, ecology and futurology. "Conservation" and "anti-pollution" are now common battle cries, while the word "environment" is even found in the name of a new government ministry. The advances of technological, bio-medical and space research continue

to astound the mind. The recent "Blueprint for Survival",[1] with its formidable number of academic endorsements, warns of an inevitable world crisis by 2,000, an energy crisis, a food crisis, a population crisis, and an irreparable breakdown of life-support systems, unless urgent global action is taken now. Alvin Toffler warns of the state of "future shock".[2] Such topics are no more than random examples of what makes the gaze into the future both fascinating and stupefying. Events in the political realm give rise to an anxious questioning of the future from a Christian perspective, e.g., the slowness in combating racialism, the persistence of ideological divides, lack of progress in third world development, the suppression of "communism with a human face", and the steeply rising curve of Western inflation, all lead to a corporate and international sense of foreboding about the future. And among Christians, "apocalyptic pessimism" and the "sin of despair" (both phrases of Moltmann) largely sum up the prevailing mood. The theologies of the future find their agendas already written for them. Answers, of course, will not be found in them to any of the issues so far mentioned. What can be found, however, are three genuinely Christian perspectives where, future shock and ecological panic notwithstanding, God can be seen to be at work in his world, and where hope, however depleted, still "lasts for ever".

Secondly, of the three theologies, only the "theology of hope" is of recent origin. Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Theology of Hope* was first published in Germany in 1965 and in England in 1967. Teilhard de Chardin died in 1955, and his major work *The Phenomenon of Man* is over twenty-five years old. And the father of process theology, A. N. Whitehead, wrote *Process and Reality* in 1929! The new fact in the changing theological situation is, at least in the case of the last two writers, not the appearance of new material, but the rising significance of what they said several years ago, in the light of shared, and pressing, global concerns.

II

The theology of hope then, takes its name from the title of Moltmann's *magnum opus*.[3] Of the three theologies, it will be the most likely to appeal to Baptists because of its persistent appeal to scripture. Its conclusions however, stand at a considerable distance from the still popular eschatology which awaits (whatever this means) an imminent and literal return of Christ. Moltmann wants to reinstate the Christian gift of hope which alone will transform the mood of the Christian Churches from their obsessional entrenchment in the past, their defensiveness in the present, and their fear and lack of imagination in the face of the future. His chosen tools for the job are biblical through and through. Did not Abraham "against hope believe in hope",[4] and was not the God of the promise faithful to what he promised? Moltmann believes "promise" (επαγγελια) to be complementary to and correlative with "gospel" (ευαγγελιὸν)

in the New Testament, and he reaffirms the Pauline interpretation of the arrival of Jesus as God's fidelity to his promises and purposes. But while the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth fulfils the Old Testament promises of God (albeit in a manner unrecognizable to most of the Jews who witnessed his coming), so God's raising of Jesus from the dead constitutes his promise that he will put to rout those disruptive forces which separate man and the world from him and which can be called, for convenience, by the biblical generalities "sin" and "death". Moltmann sees the significance of God's raising of Jesus from the dead (despite the historical difficulties, and doubts about the nature of the appearances to the disciples or the form of the risen Christ) to be constituted in God's "promise" that what is begun with Jesus (new life and victory over sin and death) will embrace the entire created world. This is the object and the inspiration of Christian hope. If its realisation seems further off than ever, then, in a pointed analogy with the faith of Abraham (as Paul at any rate understood it), there was precious little likelihood of Sarah giving Abraham a son either, but he nevertheless believed and "it was imputed to him for righteousness". That Christians have little hope for the future of the *world* is due to a lack of that kind of faith on which Protestant Christianity is built. If we cannot see how God will "reconcile the world to himself", Moltmann urges, it does not matter. We are unable to see and to project beyond our present and limited "horizon", but God, who sees the world from the standpoint of its future, is as faithful to his promise now as he was in past history. How then can we believe in the realization of the objects of hope when so much evidence seems uniformly against it? Simply because God raised Jesus from the dead, both as evidence of his power and as anticipation ("firstfruits") of the new order which is to come.

The work of Wolfhart Pannenberg must also be included under the banner of "theology of hope", because of his similar emphasis on the resurrection of Christ and the Christian hope arising out of it. In his major Christological work, *Jesus, God and Man*,[5] Pannenberg defends the view that only as a result of God's raising Jesus was Jesus given the title "Son of God". If the resurrection of Jesus is understood, as it should be, within the context of the then current Jewish apocalyptic expectations, it can only be seen as foreshadowing and setting in action the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. With the raising of Jesus according to this view, the "end of the age" has *already* arrived, and, mythologically and chronologically speaking, we now live in a period the *terminus a quo* of which is the beginning of the *end* (the resurrection of Jesus) and the *terminus ad quem* the general resurrection of the dead, or the *end* itself. Pannenberg translates the myth of the "resurrection of the dead" as man's universal destiny. It is the summation of the world in the universal lordship of the risen Christ.

It follows from the thought of this school that beyond our present "horizon"[6] the universal destiny of man under the universal lordship

of Christ is assured, and is made known to the community of the faithful who believe in the promises of God and interpret them by the proleptic activity of God in raising Jesus from the dead. In a later book *Religion, Revolution and the Future*,[7] Moltmann crystallizes several of the major ideas earlier expounded in *The Theology of Hope* and tries to relate them practically to the Church's present global task in the light of God's future. He dislikes religious words beginning with the prefix "re-", e.g. *re*ligion, *re*velation, *re*newal, *re*vival, *re*formation, etc. because "re-" refers to the regaining or resembling of a lost past. He speaks instead of "*pro*ligion" as the religion of those who seek to follow the "God of the future" and "*pro*volution" as the kind of activity needed to bring God's future nearer. Provolutionary activities include "the economic liberation of man from hunger, . . . the political freeing of man from oppression by other men, . . . the human emancipation of man from racial humiliation", etc.[8] Political activity will include co-operation with Marxists, but the emphasis on political engagement will not be at the expense of the more customary emphasis on relieving the anxiety, guilt and emptiness of man. The strong hope which the Christian gospel imparts is measured by the strength of the Church's hopeful response, co-operating with the risen Christ to bring about the "new creation". The temptation of the Churches as they are summoned by the call of God is fourfold: to confine themselves to the saving of souls instead of broadcasting the salvation of the world: to address themselves to individuals instead of to the corporate universal institutions and structures of the human race: to embody a new pattern for humanity separate from the world rather than dialectically engaged in it: or to play up its role as a secure, unquestioning institution, providing a secure refuge for its members from the ambiguities and tensions of ordinary life. All such temptations must be rooted out and banished.[9] The true Church is "the Exodus Church" marching through the wilderness sustained by the promise of the Promised Land. But this new land is no spiritualised vapour or ethereal reward for a remnant of harassed Christians. It is nothing less than the salvation of the earth itself, on which the cross of Christ once stood.

III

The writings of Teilhard de Chardin belong to a very different standpoint. The story of his life as a devout Roman Catholic priest and palaeontologist, whose religious writings were suppressed by his Church until after his death in 1955, is well-known. Commentaries on his life and thought now run into dozens and the supply shows no signs of abating. Two journals, the *Teilhard Review*[10] and *Acta Teilhardiana*,[11] are devoted to an exposition of his thought, and the Teilhard Centre for the Future of Man sponsors an ever growing network of discussion and study groups, calls regular conferences, and even produces, to the accompaniment of the cello, some of his works on record. For a certain cross-section of Christian opinion, liberal, intellectual, and with at least an interest in science, the appeal

of Teilhard is enormous. No attempt is made here to summarise his thought. This is constantly being done[12] even though the best, and in the long run the simplest, introduction to Teilhard is himself. All that can be attempted in this paper is to furnish some basic reasons why Teilhard de Chardin has provided us with one of our " theologies of the future ".

Whereas Moltmann's approach to the future is that of a biblical and systematic theologian, the approach of Teilhard is that of the natural scientist, whose profound reverence for life has often incurred him in the charge of pantheism. (Whether or not Teilhard is a " pantheist " will depend on what *we* mean by pantheism. If the term is used pejoratively to mean the absurd doctrine that God and the world are identical, such that God is exhausted in the totality of what is, then Teilhard is no pantheist. However, he often calls himself a pantheist, and seems to mean by this what we would call " pan-entheism ". This term, signifying that all things are " in God ", allows however, for the infinite distinction between God and his creatures, while at the same time allowing for their ontological dependence upon him). The evolutionary development of the world and of man is his primary datum. In *The Phenomenon of Man*, finished in 1947, and published in French in 1955 and in English in 1959, the evolutionary ascent of life over hundreds of millions of years, culminating in *homo sapiens* is described. The evolutionary process beginning with the first atoms, then molecules, mega-molecules, cells, etc. millions of years later to issue in the arrival of man, and later still in the birth of thought and ever increasing consciousness, unfolds in its pages as a panoramic view of the immense and complex structure of life which gave birth to mankind and yet sustains him. Man is now conscious of himself as evolving, as the summit and product of the ongoing universal stream of life that supports him. Now he is the bearer of the evolutionary process. He can even control it.

Biologically speaking, man has arrived. What is still evolving, and evolving very fast, is man's *social*, not his biological existence. The evolutionary description of life in *The Phenomenon of Man* does not end with our present but projects forward to a truly personal and unified universe. Discernable through the constant upheavals and conflicts of the human mass, more adequate forms of human corporate, social existence are presently evolving, where mankind, increasingly aware of himself as one and of his world as one, manages to dismantle the barriers of, e.g., nationalism, racialism, and economic, social, political and racial inequality.

As a Christian Teilhard interprets the entire birth and flowering of life as the presence of God or his Word within it, directing and developing it. No-one is more entitled than Teilhard to say with St. John " Without him was not anything made that was made ". But life also has a goal, a directedness towards and a convergence upon what Teilhard calls the " Omega point ". The divine at the heart of the cosmic process, leads the process to its consummation when all

things are fully in God, and the divine love has conquered all that remained opposed to it. The Word, the immanent divine principle at the heart of matter, is also manifest as Jesus Christ, the key to the divine purpose for the world and the revelation of the Father's love. His presence, locatable throughout the evolutionary process is locatable *now* as the " energising centre " of man's developing corporate forms of existence. For the harmonisation and gathering up of all men and things into their ultimate unity with God, the love of Christ, cosmic energy in its most developed and most personal form, is indispensable, and present to the extent that this is achieved. But Christ is also the Omega point, the ultimate destiny, the goal of the process of the cosmos. Speaking symbolically of this point, and with intense Catholic devotion, Teilhard sees it as the time when the whole universe, in its final phase of " Christification " becomes the body of Christ, a time gloriously prefigured in the action of the Mass.

The hope expressed in Teilhard's writings and the faith which produced them should not be seized on, as biblical prophecies even now are sometimes seized on, as being immediately fulfilled in current world events. Instead Teilhard gives us, from a different standpoint to the theology of hope a deeply incarnational and Christian understanding of the unfolding of life as the fulfilment of the purpose of God, an understanding moreover which depends upon the discoveries of natural science to express it. If the attainment of Omega is regarded as an impossibly long term hope, it should be remembered that man's total history is but a few seconds in the history of cosmic life, during which period the pace of his evolution has become ever quicker.

IV

Process theology is the third of our theologies of the future. Its commonly accepted basis is Whitehead's metaphysics. Incredibly Whitehead's *Process and Reality* is nearly forty-five years old, and has suffered from neglect due to the strong religious and equally strong philosophical prejudice against metaphysics. However, Whitehead's brand of metaphysics is increasingly seen as peculiarly useful in restating a modern doctrine of God at a time when God-language and the concepts and symbols we apply to him and to his activity, are rightly receiving much attention. Process theology has become widely known since Whitehead through Charles Hartshorne, and more recently through Norman Pittenger, who in the last few years has applied the general dimension of process thought to most areas of systematic theology.[13] In America the names of John Cobb, Schubert Ogden and Daniel Day Williams are among several leading theologians associated with process thought.

According to the process metaphysic God is spoken of as having two natures, his " primordial " nature and his " consequent " nature (di-polar theism). The former safeguards the divine transcendence. It is inscrutable, eternal and inaccessible to thought. The latter

however, in polar tension with the former, is God's temporal nature. It is that in God which enables us to speak of him as involved in the life of the world. It is what makes God dynamic, what allows him to include the endless stream of becoming within himself. God acts upon the world by "prehension", i.e., metaphysically speaking, he interacts with it, "luring" it on to the fulfilment he wills for it. The evolutionary process is for process theology the supreme natural example of the divine activity. God draws the creation onwards "prehending" it, luring it towards himself in his great work of love. On this interpretation God is intimately involved with his creation, as "cosmic love" (or, as Pittenger insists, "the cosmic Lover"), acting in and upon his beloved world, suffering and rejoicing with it, both enriched and impoverished by how the world, and the beings within the world, respond to, or spurn, his love.

This is, at least for the present writer, a concept of God preferable to several of its acknowledged or unacknowledged rivals, the Changeless One of Graeco-Christian thought, the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover, the Scholastic *ens realissimum,* or the more recent and implicit popular conceptions of the Person-up-there, or the stern Victorian father, or the grave moral ruler, or the authoritarian despot. More importantly, what is the relevance of this kind of concept of God for a theology of the future? First let us say that Christian theology is not bound to the thought of Whitehead but is free to borrow from and adapt his writings. Process theologians, be it noted, do not wish to canonise Whitehead's works, only to exercise their freedom, as Christians, to draw, from any source whatever, material which may help them to speak more plainly about "the deep things of God". Now when the on-going work of the God of the Christian faith is reconceptualised and reinterpreted with the aid of insights drawn from process theology, so that the processive character of life is metaphysically interpreted as the response of creation to the divine initiative, then patently, the divine will for the world cannot but be seen as the fulfilment of the process already begun. To assert this, however tentatively, is not to assert a bland, mechanistic optimism, that because God is Love-in-action, it will all work out right in the end. Rather it is to assert that God is supremely open to the world and the world supremely open to God, and my individual response, and the response or lack of response to him of each generation affects him infinitely. His life is enriched by our free response to his Love-in-action upon the world. We daily contribute to his life, as he to ours, and as any lover might be said to contribute to the life of his beloved. Equally, by means of human sin or refusal of love, God himself is refused and rejected. The work of God is that of continuous creation and re-creation, and is accompanied by the hope that, with the active co-operation of man, God will finish what he has begun. The completion of the divine work is simultaneously the eradication of everything that excludes itself from the divine love and resists the divine action upon it.

V

In October 1971 the leading representatives of all three schools of thought held a conference in New York, the proceedings of which are reproduced in an intriguing paperback *Hope and the Future of Man.*[14] The conference produced a fruitful interchange of ideas as each school replied to papers from the others. Moltmann expresses his disillusionment with liberal theology—only "liberation theology" interests him, and he thinks fashionable speculation about the future has become something of a game for "white, affluent, technologically-advanced, capitalist societies", whose comfortable present is built on "the institutional oppression of their neighbours". The process theologians disagree with the Teilhardians and the theologians of hope over the propriety of a "final event" eschatology, whether literally or mythologically understood. D. D. Williams asks "how can life be serious if in a final event it will all be one absolute good, no matter what has happened?" The theology of hope school finds in the others a dangerous inability to take evil seriously, and Moltmann slyly contrasts the "coming God" of biblical faith with the "becoming God" of the process school. The Teilhardians see human energy activated by concrete images of the future which awaken and sustain the needful human zest to achieve the progressive realisation of those images themselves.[15] Whiteheadians confess themselves unable to agree about either life after death or the future of the cosmos itself. Given the newly-discovered psychosomatic unity of man, how can he be said to live on after death, when, as this unity, he has manifestly ceased to live? Cobb speculates about some kind of life after death in which disembodied psyches, purified and made whole, contribute to the ongoing life of "myriads of free and open selves". Ford envisages "an endless series of expansions and contractions of the universe", surmising about the possibility of a new "physical organization" of cosmic life in its next phase, based on a different atomic structure. Probably at this point the tension between Christian hope and scientific projection finally snaps.

The present writer finds much in each of the theologies under review to deepen and enrich his understanding of Christian faith and hope, and to provide an alternative to the eschatological gloom of many Baptist congregations, who "don't know what the world's coming to", and who even encourage a deliberately despairing moral account of the contemporary world in order to justify their belief in an immediate second advent. But to learn from the theologies of the future, and to express an indebtedness towards them is not to endorse, or even to understand everything they say. Each of them furnishes the Church with a stronger, healthier hope than the attitude just described. Moltmann and Pannenberg paint a very different picture, with an equal appeal to scripture, and they relate it to a programme of global action in partnership with the God who "is making all things new". The stature accorded to the cosmic Christ of Teilhard's visionary works, towers above those narrower and deficient accounts of our Lord's work which bind him to the exclusively "spiritual"

and believe him to be unconcerned with the redemption of the physical, evolving world which socio-genetically produced him. Here at least is a vision of Christ to whom "the world to come" is undeniably subjected.[16] And that understanding of the character of God which is influenced by the insights of process metaphysics, and which depicts God as even yet giving himself to the world in suffering love and luring it and everything in it towards himself, is with many other novel and original ideas, a great gain for theology. The great visions of the Old Testament prophets were, and still are, an inspiration to hope in the God who vindicates his people. These more modern theologies give us rudimentary yet contemporary visions of what God has done and has yet to do with his world. The prophet Joel and the apostle Peter spoke of the time when young men would see visions and old men would dream dreams. The time for dreaming about and envisioning God's future for the world is now, and these fallible theologies of the future nevertheless provide us with the kind of explicit visions and dreams out of which man's future is built. For, as the old sage wisely put it, "Where there is no vision, the people perish".[17]

NOTES

[1] *The Ecologist* Vol 2, no. 1, 1972, now revised and reprinted (1973) as a Penguin Special.
[2] *Future Shock,* Pan Books, 1972.
[3] *The Theology of Hope,* SCM 1967 (third impression 1970).
[4] Romans 4.20, *v. The Theology of Hope,* ch. 3, sections 1-3.
[5] *Jesus, God and Man,* SCM, 1968.
[6] "Horizon" is a common term in the theology of hope. It seems to mean all that Tillich used to mean by his well-known concept of "boundary".
[7] *Religion, Revolution and the Future,* New York, Scribners, 1969.
[8] *op. cit.* 40-1.
[9] *The Theology of Hope,* ch. 5.
[10] *The Teilhard Review,* Vol. 1, no. 1, Summer 1966.
[11] A German periodical devoted to Teilhard's writings.
[12] One of the many good introductions to Teilhard's thought is the Fontana paperback by N. M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin.* For more advanced reading, Emile Rideau's *Teilhard de Chardin: A Guide to His Thought* (Collins) displays an encyclopaedic knowledge of Teilhard's writings.
[13] *v.* (on God) *God in Process,* SCM, 1967: (on Providence) *God's Way With Men,* London, 1969: (on sin) *Goodness Distorted,* Mowbrays, 1970: (on Christology) *Christology Reconsidered,* SCM, 1970: (on eschatology) *The Last Things in a Process Perspective,* Epworth, 1970: (on the Church) *The Christian Church as Social Process,* Epworth, 1971: (on the Christian life) *Life in Christ,* Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1972.
[14] *Hope and the Future of Man* (ed. E. H. Cousins), Fortress Press, Philadelphia, and Teilhard Centre for the Future of Man, 1972.
[15] *op. cit.*: v. Philip Hefner's article, "The Future as Our Future . . ."
[16] Hebrews 2.5f.
[17] Proverbs 29.18.

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