

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

God's Contemporary Presence: The Grave of God

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Philippine Studies vol. 16, no. 2 (1968): 399–402

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Book Reviews

GOD'S CONTEMPORARY PRESENCE

THE GRAVE OF GOD: HAS THE CHURCH A FUTURE? By Robert Adolfs, OSA, translated by N. D. Smith. London: Burns & Oates, 1967.

The question of reform has always been a touchy one especially in the Roman Catholic Church, and this is not the less so even in our Post-Vatican II period. However, since the Council laid down the guidelines for a *renewal* of spirit to be based on a renewal of the Church's understanding of her mission and role, particular steps for *reform* have been proposed or taken in various circles. The Church in Holland stands out among others for the boldness and facility with which it has initiated steps. Fr. Adolfs' book, coming from such a milieu as the Dutch Church, perhaps will raise eyebrows among those suspicious of the movements coming from that sector of the Christian Church.

But after being exposed to Bonhoeffer's ideas and to *Honest to God* and *The Secular City* and "death of God" literature, (Dewart's *Future of Belief* came out around the same time as Adolfs' original Dutch edition), many will no longer find this book excitingly new for it takes up ideas and themes first seen in those previously mentioned works. It is perhaps because the author has stressed certain points graphically and has spelled out consequences of his thesis with some detail that his work "merited" the suspicion and disapproval it generated among ecclesiastical circles.

The Grave of God shares with those other works mentioned the concern to make the Christian message "relevant to contemporary man," examining on the one hand the contemporary developments that have affected the human situation, and on the other, the implications of the Christian faith and the Christian message upon

that situation. In the light of this concern, Fr. Adolfs focuses his attention on the present forms and structures of the institutional Church. Accepting one conclusion of other theologians (he cites Bultmann, Tillich, and van Buren), namely, that the inadequacy of the proclamation of the Christian message is at the heart of the problem of contemporary Christianity, he goes on to ask: "May not the conservative character of ecclesiastical institutions be the reason for preaching (and theology) becoming unintelligible in the modern, secular world?" (p. 36.)

This question leads to the inquiry into the true role of the Church. Like her Founder and Master who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7)," she must see her task as one of *service*. But in history she has tended to confuse this task with that role she has played as political messiah, notably with her rise to power in the Roman empire; and the author points out that she has stuck to this image of herself as one of the "powers of this world." So the urgent need is for her to "empty herself," following the way of *kenosis* (self-emptying), and to discover what this "emptying" ought in fact to mean.

First of all, "it is impossible to find any justification for making the Church visible in the form of royal power, let alone for the Pope and the bishops appearing in the splendour of Renaissance princes" (p. 216). And with that, Adolfs gives some steps which could be taken by the Pope himself and by the rest of the "privileged" of God's people. Secondly, he suggests a shift of concentration in the ministry from the "territorial" (i.e., according to traditional parish boundaries) to the "personal" (i.e., based on the recognition of the manifold areas of human living, and redirecting apostolic efforts in their light). The consequence of such a shift would be the restructuring of the local Christian community, whose members will "know each other personally and will often work and live in similar spheres" (p. 132).

Other suggestions of Adolfs e.g., the utilization of leadership potential among the people of God by the ordination of some (including women) to clerical functions as administering baptism, the sacrament of the sick, etc.; the relaxation of the rule on clerical celibacy in order to relieve the acute problem of lack of manpower—have been made elsewhere by others.

As the author hints in his subtitle (*Has the Church a Future?*), if the Church is to have a future at all, the carrying out of such steps as he outlines seems to be called for. Otherwise she is bound to become a "grave of God." But there are two kinds of graves, the epilogue beautifully brings out: one kind is the whitened sepulchre mentioned in the Gospels, "the symbol of the false facade." The

other is the empty grave of the risen Christ, which, precisely in being empty, is the sign of new hope for man.

An assumption that this book works with, as others like *The Secular City* and *Honest to God*, etc., have worked with, is that contemporary development (i.e., in Europe and America) have been pushing the Church into a corner where she has become irrelevant to contemporary man. This assumption itself is one worth considering some more, but one inevitable question that comes to a reader on this side of the hemisphere runs thus: to what extent are the accounts of "contemporary developments" (implicitly assumed or explicitly described) in such works applicable here? Obvious to say, we cannot presume that solutions being proposed for ailments in one place are the ones called for in another.

But far from being made to dismiss these works as unprofitable here, this comment should make us aware of the dual task that faces us in this part of the world. First, there is the need to reexamine "the human situation" as we find it here, in the light of the unique socio-historical and cultural forces that have made the present, *our* present, what it actually is. For example, Philippine society is the milieu in which the Church in the Philippines must seek a particular expression. Secondly, there is a corresponding need to examine the implications that the Christian message can have in terms of this situation: what can being a Christian mean to a Filipino, and what need it not mean?

In this twofold task the sociologist and the historian and the student of culture on the one hand, and the theologian on the other, are called to join hands. From the sociologist's angle, one example worth mentioning here is the study being undertaken (at the time of this writing) by John J. Carroll, S.J., involving a sociological survey of Philippine society and its institutions, initially aimed "to provide the background for self-evaluation by the Society of Jesus in the Philippines of its works," also geared towards providing greater understanding of the needs of the Church in this country.

With this understanding of situations and concrete needs as a background, theologians can more fruitfully reassess not only the institutional forms the Church has taken, and those she ought to take for her to be faithful to her true role, but also the ways in which the Christian message has been received and understood by Filipinos. The phenomenon called "folk Christianity" and the syncretism with magical elements pointed out by sociologists come to mind here. The reaction in intellectual circles to the Church as the representative of "dogmatism and conservatism" especially in this country (on this, see Bulatao, "A Social-Psychological View of the Philippine Church," published in J. V. Braganza, SVD, *The*

Encounter, Manila; Catholic Trade School, 1965, pp. 201-213.) can also be looked into as a help in reassessing her image.

These are but a few of the considerations that must be kept in mind and it is not unlikely that they will lead to the conclusion that certain adjustments *must* be made in longstanding traditions and institutions. Fr. Adolfs' book, in presenting its own conclusions with clarity and with boldness, was bound to meet with opposition. True, Fr. Adolfs' ideas and his proposals demand further discussion. But it is perhaps his clarity and boldness that are needed for our time.

R. F. HABITO, S.J.

CHRIST AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

GOD IS WITH US. by Ladislaus Boros, S.J. New York: Herder & Herder, 1967. 199 pp.

What is striking about this book is its overall conception: to move from human experience as lived today and formulated in personal and existential categories to an analysis of the man Jesus. In this confrontation there gradually appears the fundamental inadequacy of our human concepts to describe the reality of the man Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament sources. The very failure of this attempt to comprehend Jesus thus becomes an "existential way to God" (pp. vii-ix).

The book is directed by the author to those who, "for whatever reason, live apart from God,"—not as formal proof of God's existence, but rather as a 'way', an invitation, which is not so much an intellectual construction as an existential exercise to be carried out personally. This exercise consists of a phenomenological analysis of a specific characteristic of human experience, which is then compared to the Scriptural image of Jesus. Through ten successive chapters, each treating of a different individual quality of human life, the conclusion is constant: there is in Jesus of Nazareth something that goes beyond, that is inaccessible to, human thought. The convergence of these individual studies creates a conclusiveness and certainty that exceed the results of individual arguments. Yet the value of the book will be missed if it is read in the context of the usual apologetics manual; as the author takes pains to point out, "the true progress of thought takes place not within the book itself, but in the reader," who is asked to "look beyond the implications of each individual essay ... to arrive at an existential synthesis, a per-