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Some Thoughts on the Church: The Church Tomorrow

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CHURCH

THE CHURCH TOMORROW. By George H. Tavard. New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. 190 pp.

The title of the present work would lead the reader to expect some projections regarding the future shape of the Church. However, there is very little theorizing regarding the Church of the future; much is said, instead, on the Church of yesterday and today. But the author's insights into the currents of change now reshaping the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches are intriguing, and from them the reader can make his own projections of what the Church of tomorrow might be like.

The Church Tomorrow is not a unified treatment of a single topic; it is a collection of various articles and lectures which Father Tavard brings together under one cover in the hope that they will thus reach a wider audience. He believes that there is need for a deepening of theological thought to go hand in hand with the contemporary renewal of the Church. ,

The first chapter deals with the problems of how religious practice can lose its spiritual substance, leaving only the empty shell of conventions and social gestures. Sociological Catholicism is that stage of religious evolution when the religious spirit has so permeated the culture and customs of a people that one can tell only with difficulty whether people observe religion out of vital conviction or out of social pressure, i.e., because it is the customary thing to do. Tavard fears that many of the old "Catholic Nations" have been guided by the spirit of Sociological Catholicism and not by the true Catholic spirit. Now it appears that the hold of Sociological Catholicism is gradually losing its power. What happens if this unifying power disappears? The Church must anticipate the breakdown of Sociological Catholicism.

In the second chapter, Tavard touches on the theme of the Counter-Reformation and its effects on the evolution of the life of the Church, especially on its doctrinal posture which has been that of defense and demonstration. Until recently, theological pronouncements were often made with the awareness of the Protestant presence. The Church moving to a new age where emphasis will be laid on contemplation, on understanding of the meaning of the Church, and on the discernment of the presence of Christ in the evolving world.

A further elaboration on the theme of reform is presented in a later chapter where the author shows that the idea of reform is built into the nature of the Church. The Church's idea of reform

is that of *metanoia*, a change of mind through penance, conversion and renewal, in brief, the periodic effort to return to the original and ideal form of the Church, from which men because of their weakness often fail away. The Protestant Reformation was a mis-adventure in the normal and necessary cycle of renewal.

Tavard also undertakes a reexamination of the nature and relationship of the religious and lay life. One lesson from history points to the fact that no Church renewal is lasting unless religious orders are likewise reformed. But the need of basic renewal in the whole structure of the religious orders is now more imperative in the light of the revolutionary changes in the structure of modern society. Times have changed and religious life is caught in a tense bifurcation of commitment: on the one hand religious orders have a deep sense of loyalty to their highly structured way of life, and on the other hand they are impelled by their religious profession to serve people whose way of life have been radically transformed by science and modern technology. Tavard believes that some of this tension may find resolution by reshaping religious life around the new liturgy.

Of interest to lay Catholics, and perhaps somewhat disturbing to religious, is the bold questioning of the age-old definition of the superiority of religious over that of lay life. Some would probably disagree with Tavard over the following ideas.

... it seems evident to me that there should be no room in our minds for concern about superiority or inferiority, about who is first and who is last in the kingdom of God and in the laws of the Church. The theological emphasis that has been and still is given to the spiritual superiority of the religious estate, as a "state of perfection," over the lay state or the simple clerical state, strikes me as entirely out of place. (p. 88)

The organic nature of the Church, of the Body of Christ, has been turned into a curious parody of parts when "we translate canonical categories into theological speculation. Thus there has developed a theology of the 'states of perfection': the people of God is divided in three degrees, that of ordinary Christians, who may seek perfection privately, but do not profess officially to do so; the religious, who by their vows or promises have placed themselves in a state of 'acquiring perfection'; and the order of bishops, who, by episcopal consecration, have been placed in a state of 'acquired perfection.' One knows in what difficulty we run as soon as we try to define the position of the diocesan priests in this scale."

Another provocative observation: "Jesus did not found a monastic order and did not organize a religious brotherhood segregated from the surrounding world. Yet we have tried to find a basis, in his words and doings, for making the religious vocation into a somehow superior calling. The distinction between precepts and counsels, which

is to be found in so many volumes on the religious life and is known in so many sermons, is an extremely doubtful one."

No one can write of the Church today without being caught up in the question of ecumenism. And Tvard is no exception. His illuminating analysis of what will be needed to reunite separated Christian communities deserves special mention. Tvard assumes that life and structure are fundamental elements in the Church. One cannot be without the other, although different Christian communities differ in their emphasis. Attempts at reunion between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches have ended up in failure in the past for failing to take account of these "two faces of unity." For instance, the failure of the Roman Catholic-Greek Orthodox experiment in re-merging can be traced to the neglect of the element of life. These attempts, first tried in the Council of Lyons, eventually ended up in the old split along the traditional lines of stress because in spite of all the formalities the ethos and life of ordinary Christians from both camps were not taken into account. It was a merger at the official top without touching the grass-roots. A contrary instance, where structure was left out in favor of life, of nondenominational spontaneity, is the case of Thomas Campbell who, in 1809 and later through his son, founded a nondenominational religious movement. Its chief aim was a "restoration of the church as founded by Christ through a renunciation of all denominational, i.e. structural, features." The experiment ended in failure. To quote Tvard: "When they rejected denominational status, they fell into a trap. Not only did they overlook the fact that the Church of the New Testament has a hierarchical structure; they also believed that life could last without structure. Yet structure, which was intentionally discarded returned with a vengeance." The Disciples (Campbell's) form today a denomination that has failed in its ecumenical purpose.

The Church Tomorrow, as we pointed out, is not a book but a collection of essays; it thus lacks organizational unity. Yet in spite of the resulting looseness and overlapping, the book somehow succeeds in stimulating one to profitable "introspection and prospection" about the Church.

ERIC CASIÑO