

THE CHRISTIAN IN A TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD

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POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

Nothing is easier than to damn the negative in favor of the positive, and, like shooting a sitting duck, nothing is more unsporting. Precisely because the negative does not have a leg to stand on nor wings to bear it up, we must fight the temptation to take aim against it. A case in point is furnished by the tendency among Catholic writers at the present time to damn the eschatological approach to the world in favor of the incarnational. It is unsporting. Worse, it is untrue.

Evidence for the tendency can be seen in the discussions which often arise about the place of the Church and the Christian in the modern age. Such has been the revolution in scientific knowledge and such the explosion in technical achievement that Christians everywhere are forced to inquire more deeply into the question of the proper stance to be adopted by the follower of Christ towards the new efforts of man to understand and control his environment. A choice presents itself. Should the Christian hang back from the effort of technology on the grounds that in the end the world is but a temporary stage designed for destruction as soon as it has served its purpose—a view ambiguously identified with Christian eschatology? Or should the Christian throw himself vigorously into the world of research and development, fully confident that since the resurrection of the Incarnate Word, the specter of cosmic doom has been banished from the world so that our technological effort will now by God's indwelling in his universe assist in bringing to birth the cosmic pleroma—a view ambiguously identified with incarnational Christianity? How should he choose?

Nothing is easier in such a debate than to damn the eschatological (sic) in favor of the incarnational (sic). The first is so coldly negative and the second is so warmly positive that one is tempted to join the cult of those who are in such a hurry to say 'Yes' to life that they lose their wits and say 'No' to death. In truth, both must be asserted in any integral humanism. The purpose of this article is to make clear how this double assertion of life and death is to be made in the matter of the relation of technology to the physical universe. We maintain that a proper stance to the contemporary world is best maintained by the fullest assertion of the eschatological and the incarnational elements of Christianity, the negative as well as the positive, and this in relation to the physical universe.

EATING AND THE BODY

We begin by setting up the case of eating in relation to the body to serve as the paradigm for the understanding of the case of technology and in relation to the universe. It is possible for a man to put an end to the life of his body in two ways, viz., by not eating at all and by eating too much. Either way, the body goes down. It might seem, then, that moderation in eating is the proper course of action. And it is. Yet it would not be wise to lose sight of the fact that they also die who eat moderately. It is never man's hope when he sits down at the table that he can stop the progress of his body towards its end. On the contrary, it ought to be his intent that, by eating in moderation, he carry his body forward through all of its stages of growth, maturity, decline, to the moment of its death. Clearly, he need not be thinking of death at every meal—that would be morbid—but, on the other hand, he cannot possibly exclude death from his table, unless he wishes to live in a dream world. He must have a positive approach to the negative side of eating.

Herein lies the interesting contrast between starving and stuffing, on the one hand, and moderation in eating, on the other hand. By his starving or stuffing, a man positively hurls his body into the grave. Whether he knows it or not, he is

preferring death to life. But by moderate eating a man does something quite different, He positively lowers himself into the grave. Note the word “lower.” A body is “lowered” by the exercise of a steady upward thrust against the downward pull of gravity. The tension of the opposites is what permits the gentle descent, unlike “hurling,” where one assists the downward forces. The moderate eater acts upward, not so as to keep himself out of the grave—for that cannot be done—but so as to permit his reverent descent into it. By so doing he says ‘Yes’ to life without saying ‘No’ to death.

Some distinctions are in order at this point. During the first half of life it is true that moderate eating puts the body ahead, making it move upward. Hence the altogether rightful joy of youth in the positive element of eating, the upward thrust. Nevertheless, the whole movement of the developing organism is towards a point where the multiplication of cells leads to a point of diminishing returns and increasing toxicity. Hence the altogether worthy consenting of the older person to the negative element of eating, that ‘it lets you down.’ We are like the man who exhausts himself by hauling in a rope to which the load is tied so that he is unable to continue and must, at length, begin to pay out the rope and let the load down.

If the reader insists that this is a lugubrious attitude to bring to the table and its delights, the reply must take the form of a distinction. Does the reader hold to a belief in the resurrection of the body or does he not? If he does not, then the negative element in the act of eating is poorly compensated by the positive. But if he does so believe, then the eater gladly lowers his body to the grave (negative) by the upward thrust of his eating (positive) since he thereby puts his body in the position from which God, not he, can lift it up. Eating for him is an expression of loving consent to death. It is through this consent that his eating is able to dispose him to receive for his body the unending life that his eating was able to promise but unable to achieve. In brief, eating, for the Christian, is dispositive rather than efficient in relation to the final life of the body.

WORK AND THE WORLD

The purpose of this long digression on eating and man’s body has been to set up a paradigm whereby the Christian may better know what posture to adopt in today’s world towards technology and the world’s body. The suggestion that we offer is that the body of the world, like the body of man, moves forward through the stages of development and upbuilding into stages of decline, ‘toxicity’ and death. Working upon such a world—which is what the effort of technology amounts to—is comparable to moderate eating in that it assists the world along its way to death, By a reasonable technology, human society lowers the world reverently into its grave in the very act of putting it forward. The effort, of course, is upward (positive); but the movement, at least in the second half of the world’s life, is downward (negative). Reasonable technology is a service of reverence to the world as moderate eating is a service of reverence for the body. To refuse the effort of technology altogether, or to over-exercise technology in a mad Faustian gesture, is to hurl the world into its grave. One is like starving; the other is like stuffing. But to put forth a reasonable and thoughtful technological effort is to carry the world lovingly to its point of exhaustion. By so doing man says ‘Yes’ to the life of the world without saying ‘No’ to its death.

We will return in a moment to the notion of ‘death’ as applied to the world, but first a few distinctions are in order. During the first half of the world’s life (we may still be passing through it) it is true that there is gain and upbuilding. Hence the altogether rightful joy of young human society in the wonderful things that Nature has wrought. Hence the eagerness of men to take active part in that work by their own efforts—draining the marshes, damming the rivers, bridging space and time, reaching out to the planets, synthesizing the materials, building ‘living’ machines, etc. Nevertheless, the whole movement of the universe is towards a state of enveloping stagnation, however distant. Hence the altogether worthy consenting of an older and more mature human society to the negative element in technology. Hence, too, the senility of a triumphalist attitude to

technology, the kind of second childhood that refuses to grow forward and insists on keeping young.

Now if the reader objects that this is a rather lugubrious view of technology and its benefits, the reply must take the form of a distinction. Does the technologist in question believe in a supernatural consummation for the world of matter, or does he not? If he does not, then the objection stands. But if he does, we must see the matter differently. For what could more ennobling technology than to see its function as a loving consenting to a death of matter from which God will raise it. By our technology we would then be disposing the world to receive the unending vigor that our efforts were unable to achieve for it. In brief, technology for the Christian would be dispositive rather than efficient in relation to the final perfecting of the world—if there is to be a perfecting of the world. Here we must grant that the ‘resurrection’ of the world’s body has a more questionable status in Catholic theology than the resurrection of the body of man. At the same time it is not without strong and ancient support both in the documents of revelation and in patristic tradition.

All along we have been presupposing that it makes sense to speak of the death of the world’s body. To this we now turn. Biologists may tend to forget it, but physicists are forced to remember that in a closed universe the net trend is toward the unavailability of energy for further upbuilding. The fantastic emergence of highly ordered systems on the local level—what the biologist observes—is dearly bought by the collapse of ordered systems on a cosmic scale. The stars burn to ashes in their effort to provide a flux of particles and radiation for building up in other places. The very ashes of the stars—the chemical elements—are not without a significant role in the development of terrestrial life. Much is being accomplished locally. But the overall picture is one of increasing entropy, and at a certain point the cosmic fires that sustain the upbuilding must die out. All building then is over. Cosmic development, like corporeal development, is in the direction of ceasing and death. It is useless to hope that the appearance or intelligent

spirit on the scene, hominization, alters the picture. It is quite true that intelligent man can with his engines harness the forces of nature to the task of upbuilding. But again, as any physicist knows, barring the production of reversible engines (impossible in practice), the gain in degree of order that is made by human technology is bought at the cost of an even greater measure of physical disorder. If anything, the appearance of man on the scene has greatly accelerated the approach of the world toward its end point. The nature of the argument is not affected by the remoteness, however great, of that day. Nevertheless, in view of the foregoing analysis, this is as little a thing to be mourned over as is the fact that eating lowers a man’s body into the grave—provided only that man’s world also is to be saved by God, and not just man’s body.

THE MASS AND TECHNOLOGY

Our last point must be brief. The Mass is a mystery of death, of the body and of eating. The Eucharist is often spoken of as the Bread of Life. Let us not forget that it is also the Bread of Death. We communicate in the Body that died and rose. It would be foolish to forget the negative in our hurry to recognize the positive, to exalt life at the expense of death. In the Mass, above all, we give assent to the fact that eating lowers us into a tomb from which God, not ourselves, will lift us. Might we not include in the meaning of the Mass a reference to the whole effort of technology which man expends on the world’s body, and of which eating is but a paradigm? The transubstantiation of the terrestrial bread and wine would then be a foreshadowing of the new day that will dawn for the world of matter which we can only lower gently and lovingly into the grave. The Mass in this view would express a dedication of man, not to a triumphalistic technology, but to an integral Christian humanism in which the incarnational and eschatological are kept together, in which a ‘Yes’ to life is not turned into a ‘No’ to death, in which the negative is not damned in favor of the positive.