

# Religion and the Meaning of History

**The Image of Man: A Review of Politics Reader** edited by M. A. Fitzsimons, Thomas T. McAvoy, C.S.C., and Frank O'Malley. University of Notre Dame Press. 451 pp. \$6.00.

by **Bernard Murchland**

"In a syncretistic age," Walter Kaufmann has written, "one must fight the comfortable blurring of all contours and the growing inability to say No. One must insist on important differences."

That the contours of human and world realities have become dangerously blurred in our own day could hardly be contested. Modern man finds himself in the presence of an overwhelming ambiguity that distorts his most serious efforts to cope with his problems. As he gropes his way through the settling darkness, he seems increasingly incapable of focusing his intellectual vision. His search, his commitments, indeed his high purpose are compromised and thwarted by the jarring bolts of reality that catch him unawares.

*The Image of Man*, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Notre Dame quarterly that year in and year out has been concerned with the philosophical and historical approach to the problems of human community, is primarily an excellent commentary on our terrifyingly complex civilization. Twenty-eight essays investigate these general areas of the problem: The Christian View of Man and Society, Man and History, Man's Plight in Modern Civilization, Man and Revolution, Man and Spiritual Problems, Man and the American World.

Among the noted contributors

Father Murchland teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame and edits *Perspectives*, a bi-monthly journal of religion and contemporary events.

are Jacques Maritain, Luigi Sturzo, Christopher Dawson, Jean Danielou, Hans Morgenthau, Hannah Arendt, Waldemar Gurian, Kenneth W. Thompson, Herbert Butterfield, and Eric Voegelin. There are essays on such figures as Richelieu, William Blake, Lamennais, Brownson, Newman and Reinhold Niebuhr, and on such themes as The Significance of Medieval Intellectual Culture, The Historic Origins of Liberalism, Marxist History and Sacred History, World Politics in the Mid-Twentieth Century, Totalitarian Religions, and Organized Religion and the American Creed.

No reviewer could possibly do justice to the wide-ranging ideas of these essays. However, some general observations are in order. In the first place, the reader is made aware of the tragic situation of the world today. Policymakers cannot assume that men are either good or intelligent; they cannot rely on easy formulae or pithy slogans to handle any given problem; they must see that no simplistic approach is valid.

Hans Morgenthau describes the ultimate dimensions of this tragic situation: "Total war waged by total populations for total stakes under the conditions of the contemporary balance of power may end in world dominion or in world destruction or in both," he writes. "For either one of the two contenders for world dominion may conquer with relatively small losses to himself, or they may destroy each other, neither being able to conquer, or the least weakened may conquer, presiding over universal devastation. Such are the prospects which overshadow world politics [today]."

When we lose our awareness that man is essentially a tragic creature, we have not only lost the most powerful insight we

have into human nature but also the key to intelligent political theory. Herbert Butterfield, in his essay "The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict," insists upon this: "As regards the real world of international relations, I should put forward the thesis . . . that this condition of absolute predicament or irreducible dilemma lies in the very geometry of human conflict. It is at the basis of the structure of any given episode in that conflict. It is at the basis of all the tensions of the present day, representing even now the residual problem that the world has not solved, the hard nut that we still have to crack . . . This tragedy of the absolute human predicament enters into the very fabric of historical narrative in proportion as we move further away from being mere contemporary historians."

Just as man is a tragic creature, so too is he a historical creature. That is to say, he can only find himself, his "true being," within the matrix of history. It is by now a truism that many, if not most, of our present problems are the result of our inability to learn from history. A persuasive school of thinkers has made it clear that the past is not only relevant to the present but that it is intrinsically implicated in the present, and *The Image of Man* makes a serious effort to draw out some of these implications. A substantial majority of these essays endeavor to establish some line of continuity between events that have already taken place and events that now confront us. Thus the articles treating medieval political theory, the origins of liberalism, colonialism, and Marxist history furnish insights into our present situation.

An intellectual and spiritual vision animates *The Image of Man*. Ideas must always inspire deeds; theories must be the basis of in-

stitutions; and tough intellectual activity is a *sine qua non* of vital civil life. Thinkers must examine the conditions of life, ideas and assumptions. They must do this not fitfully but constantly; not abstractly but with concrete awareness of the drama of history; not from the point of view of some inadequately partisan position, but with a view to the human community as a whole.

A thinker must, of course, adopt a position. But an intellectual position need not necessarily be identified with fanaticism or narrow-mindedness. The editors of *The Image of Man* note that they have been specifically affected by the tradition and thought of the Catholic Church. Yet they also note that they are interested in providing, and effectively provide, a meeting ground for scholars of different faiths and intellectual connections. Consequently, an encouraging universality of tone emerges.

Maritain's article on "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times" strikes me as one of this thinker's superior efforts. It sketches an intellectual and spiritual view that might be broadly embraced by those who do not share Maritain's ultimate convictions. He argues that theoretically tenable positions must be cast aside if they prove unlivable, that an *open* human nature and an *open* reason must be preferred to a nature and reason isolated in some ivory tower, that the rational must take final precedence over the irrational, that the bourgeois pharisee, the respectable conventional man, must be unmasked, and that primacy must be given to the spiritual.

I myself can readily subscribe to Maritain's "humanism of the Incarnation," and can accept both "the vertical movement toward eternal life and the horizontal movement whereby the substance and creative forces of man are progressively revealed in history." But Maritain is a little harder to take when he proposes a kind of medieval ideal. "In my opinion," he writes, "we have today to deal with a considerable liquidation—a liquidation of five centuries of classical culture—the culture in question being a brilliant dissolution . . . of medieval civilization."

Maritain admits that new creative forces have appeared in the process of dissolution, but it seems to me that his position in this matter is much more irrational than the irrationalism he decries, more non-historical than the idealism he rejects. Rather, I would suggest that our problem is in the nature of coming to terms with the past five centuries.

This I am convinced modern man has not done. It would be the sheerest folly to liquidate such a span of human creativity; it would be equally absurd to accept everything in those eras indiscriminately. No past age—either in its good or bad qualities—can serve as a model for the present age. Each age has its own specificity. Human nature takes on new hues in successive historical epochs. Yet it is also true that through all historical changes there is a permanently fixed plan of human existence, a perennial humanity.

The past and present must be integrated within some common

vision that respects both what is old and what is new, tradition and creativity. Hans Urs von Balthasar has perhaps provided a key to our dilemma in these words: "It is possible to trace in earlier epochs all the characteristic elements of the contemporary interpretation of the world. Man has always been taken to be the epitome of the world, and especially of those realms of nature that are below him. And it has always been known that he could be this epitome not merely by summarizing the world, but by transcending it, by being spirit. This transcendence has always been understood as a capacity for the absolute, an openness to being as such, and, lastly, as having 'an ear for God.' Hence, the modern world interpretation and philosophy do not leave the boundary of the great tradition; rather, they are a variation of the perennial theme."

Man has always had a hard time of it in the world. But there is a force within him that drives him toward a higher ideal. This *elan* has always been at the heart of any significant intellectual or religious vision of man. An always-present combination of his imprisoned condition and his will to transcendence constitutes his unique mystery. This is certainly as true today as it has ever been. And it is within this paradox that man must work out his problems; it is out of this paradox, too, that hope for tomorrow will spring. It is the final merit of *The Image of Man* that it offers this kind of hope. This book respects the paradox but it also distinguishes the contours.

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*One of the worst vices of the modern world is its dualism, the dissociation between the things of God and the things of the world. The latter, the things of the social, economic, and political life, have been abandoned to their own carnal law, removed from the exigencies of the Gospel. The result is that they have become more and more unlivable. At the same time, Christian ethics, not really carried out in the social life of peoples, became in this connection . . . a universe of formulas and words . . . Such a disorder can be remedied only by a renewal of the profoundest energies of religious conscience rising into temporal existence.*

Jacques Maritain in *The Image of Man*

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A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
 volume 2, no. 11 / November 1959

WORLDVIEW is published monthly by The Church Peace Union.  
 Subscription: \$2.00 per year.  
 Address: 170 East 64th Street, New York 21, N. Y.

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