

## Books

### The Human Face of God by J. A. T. Robinson

(Westminster; 244 pp.; \$7.95)

### The Seduction of the Spirit by Harvey Cox

(Simon & Schuster; 350 pp.; \$8.95)

George W. Forell

It has been an eventful decade since J. A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* appeared in 1963 and Harvey Cox presented us with his apotheosis of the City in 1965. What did this decade do to the thinking of these theological superstars? In the autumn of 1973 we were offered two new books which answer this question, Robinson's *The Human Face of God* and Cox's *The Seduction of the Spirit*.

Both volumes display the rather surprising consistency of these spokesmen of mod-theology. In Robinson's book the substance of the present effort seems to agree with the earlier work, though the form is significantly different. In what is presented as a "full-scale Christology" the author deals with Christ as the human face of God under seven headings: (1) Our Man, (2) A Man, (3) The Man, (4) Man of God, (5) God's Man, (6) God for Us, (7) Man for All.

The thrust of the first chapter is the conviction that there is a clear one-directional and apparently irreversible development in the human perception of reality. It goes "from a mythological way of thinking to an ontological, and is moving from an ontological to a functional." As the Greeks moved Christology from Hebrew (mythological) to their own ontological categories, so we must

now, impelled by this inexorable process, move from ontological to functional categories.

The second chapter asserts Jesus' full humanity. In order to test the reader's reaction, Dr. Robinson asks how he responds to the question: "When the woman wiped Jesus' feet with her hair, she performed a highly sexual action . . . Did Jesus at that moment experience an erection?" While admitting that there is no answer to this question, Robinson sees it nevertheless as a "good question" to ask ourselves; apparently if we say yes we have passed safely the Scylla of Docetism, the early Christian heresy that Christ only seemed to have a human body.

Having disposed of Docetism, he turns in the third chapter to Jesus' perfection and concludes: "Jesus' obedience was certainly not automatic or necessary. He was fallible—yet when the crunch came, he did not fail."

The fourth chapter offers a discussion of the meaning of Jesus as the Man of God. Dr. Robinson wants to assert this fact while remaining agnostic about any of the conventional symbols, such as Virgin birth and physical resurrection. "I want rather to argue for retaining the possibility of ambiguity and openness, and therefore for agnosticism, rather than dogmatism. I wish to rule out

nothing—except what is excessively improbable on historical or psychological grounds."

In his discussion of Jesus as God's Man he advocates his own version of adoptionism (Jesus became Son of God by adoption, another early heresy), which he summarizes in the statement: "That one who was totally and utterly a man—and had never been anything other than a man or more than a man—so completely embodied what was from the beginning the meaning and purpose of God's self-expression . . . that it could be said and had to be said, of that man, 'He was God's Man.'"

Robinson moves on to align himself with process theology and says: "The Incarnation does not mean insertion into the living stream, intervention by God in the form of a man, but the embodiment, the realization of God in this Man."

Finally, in the chapter "Man for All" we learn that while, according to Robinson, the Christian tradition up to now has viewed the Incarnation "as a temporary visitation, like the trip of a being from another world, landing, staying for a time and then taking off again after finishing his work," "Jesus is but the clue, the parable, the sign by whom it is possible to recognize the Christ in others."

We observed earlier the startling consistency between *Honest To God* and *The Human Face of God*. Indeed the latter has more footnotes, 1,043 to be exact, but it is characterized by the same name-dropping approach to theology. Bultmann and Bonhoeffer, Barth and Tillich, Moltmann and Sölle, Teilhard de Chardin and Kierkegaard are used with about five hundred other authors as the erudite framework to support the pious Christian humanism of the author. Their profound differences are largely ignored.

While the classic Christian faith is caricatured, probably unintentionally, as in the citation above describing what the Christian tradition allegedly believed about the incarnation, Robinson tries to open the way into the possibility of belief in the physical resurrection of Christ by

way of Chögyam Trungpa's Tibetan story about a holy man who disappeared after death, leaving only his nails and hair. This illustrates a bizarre incomprehension of the issues at stake in the Christian resurrection faith. Similarly, other major Christological questions are dismissed or ignored. "Messianism is dead." We are called to believe in "atonement" not "the Atonement." Indeed this is a "full-scale Christology" which says practically nothing about the work of Christ, and yet, in spite of all these fashionable denials, I suspect the book won't sell. For while *Honest To God* was superficial and sprightly, this one is superficial and dull.

Harvey Cox, on the other hand, is never dull. In his book it is the form that is consistent with his past efforts, while the substance is ever changing. In Cox's version of *The City of God*, *The Secular City*, he celebrated secularization and the end of religion. In the new book, his version of Augustine's *Confessions*, he celebrates religion and the resurgence of the sacred. Unlike Robinson, Cox always knows whence the wind is blowing and thus is able to present an interesting *Guide Michelin* to current trends in religion. This is not abstract and boring theological reflection. It is autobiographical theology, and Harvey Cox has been everywhere and spoken to everybody. Having come a long way from Malvern, Pennsylvania, he now tries to come to terms with the Baptist boy from Malvern who became a superstar and was "personally received (and mildly condemned) by Pope Paul VI."

Taking a second look at the City and admitting that his first look may have been unduly influenced by his nostalgic remembrance of Christmas shopping trips from Malvern to Philadelphia, he now tells us "our actual cities are in deep, deep trouble." Nevertheless he argues against Ellul's pessimistic analysis and hopes to save the city with the help of Richard Sennett and Paolo Soleri.

In the second part of the book, called "People's Religion," Cox takes us to Santa Fe's *barrio* and an ex-

amination of the collective unconscious. He traces "some of the steps that led [him] in one decade from 'secular Christianity' to people's religion." In *The Secular City* he had tried "to do for the American scene what Bonhoeffer had done for his." Now he must go further, for people's religion is the wave of the future. But where does that leave "radical theology"? "It means that the basic metaphor of radical theology today can no longer be *death*, of God or anything else. It must be *birth* . . . This means we must now read Nietzsche, who coined the phrase 'God is dead,' in the light of Fanon, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh." For "history shows that critical theology first arose as an emancipatory activity. It was inspired by the desire to deliver men from political absolutism and the religious superstitions that undergirded it."

And the journey continues. The next four-star restaurant is Esalen. The gentle waters of its baths reveal to him "the underlying unity of

Brahman and Atman, the oneness of self, other, and All." And it becomes evident that we need a new church which will not "write off Zen or the Taj Mahal or druidic worship or the Koran as 'theirs,'" for Professor Cox has sensed the holy within a span of weeks "at an Apollo temple in Delphi, a Toltec pyramid in Xochicalco, and a Moslem mosque on the island of Rhodes."

Apparently the new radical experience of the sacred comes by journeys through exterior space rather than the interior journey reported by mystics of the past. Now we can have the best of all worlds, for "We celebrate a Seder at Passover. We often attend Catholic Masses, never missing on Christmas Eve. A straw Mexican Indian crucifix blesses our living room, and a Jewish *mazuzah* enclosing a text from the Torah stands watch at our doorway. A serene Buddha gazes from just over the inside windowsill of our front room. Nearby stands

# JESUS NOW

A book that supersedes any previous work on Jesus of Nazareth, and will begin a greater furor than the "God is Dead" debate

by **MALACHI MARTIN**

"A timely book, a controversial book, a great book. With it, Malachi Martin proves himself a prophet for the Seventies....deserves to be read with the best of Niebuhr and Buber."  
—Time Inc. Book Clubs

"The Jesus-Self could not have found a prophet more stimulating and more articulate than Malachi Martin."  
—Kirkus Reviews

Book-of-the-Month Club Alternate  
Book Find Club Alternate  
Psychology Today Book Club Alternate  
\$7.95 at booksellers

dutton



Ganesh, the elephant god, who is the Hindu patron of sagacity and worldly wisdom." Only a Gideon Bible and a totem pole seem to be missing.

The final section of the book is called "The Electronic Icon." Here Cox discusses the possibilities of TV and the threat to the "religions of the book" from the coming cultural revolution based on images rather than print. But after seeing "The Flintstones" on TV in Recife, Brazil, he feels that at present "the mass media are distributing a destructive and debasing form of religion." This can be helped only if the source of control of the media is closer to those who eventually hear the message.

He concludes by advocating that the "theology of the future should be 'a kind of play' in three senses: play as 'making fun of,' play as 'making believe,' and play as useless or non-productive activity." The future theologian should be "like a vaudeville trouper or a repertory player, he must master the technique of moving in and out of different religious traditions without losing his own psyche in the process." Indeed one is reminded of Wagner's observation in Goethe's *Faust*: "*Ich hab es öfters rühmen hören, ein Komödiant könnt einen Pfarrer lehren.*" To which *Faust* replies: "*Ja wenn der Pfarrer ein Komödiant ist, wie das wohl zuzeiten kommen mag.*" (Wagner: I've often heard the boast: a preacher might take an actor as his teacher. *Faust*: Yes, if the preacher is an actor, there's no doubt that may happen.)

Professor Cox puts on a great show. If theology is essentially showmanship, and Cox does not hide his conviction that this is indeed the case, we have here a major work of theology. But if he is serious in his claim that religion is like language and is as concrete and particular as any language, this farrago of languages is simply not very useful. The problem with Cox seems to be that he does not know or does not like his own Protestant Baptist language and thus tries to get at the

religious reality by means of snippets of languages of which he knows only a few words. In spite of his obvious gifts of observation and interpretation, he does not really help the reader understand any religion, because he is so clearly blocked out from his own religious tradition. He speaks of his resentment at being baptized at ten, before he was ready, and this resentment blinds him to his own past. That is why the Bible is not among the religious symbols he lists as meaningful to him. That is why, in his list of significant religious ceremonies, the Yaqui medicine man is present but the Baptist immersion is not. Should he ever stop traveling long enough to come to terms with his own religious past he might very well advance the cause of theology significantly.

But what does it mean for all of us that our theological superstars are still writing books such as these? The message this reviewer received is that some, like J. A. T. Robinson, are still fighting the battle against nineteenth-century unbelievers, as if today's theological questions were still being raised by J. S. Mill, T. H. Huxley, Matthew Arnold or A. H. Clough, who wrote: "Eat, drink, and die, for we are souls bereaved: Of all the creatures under heaven's wide cope we are most hopeless, who had once most hope, and most beliefless, that had most believed."

But theology has today to deal with people who have never had much hope or faith and who are acquainted with such religious categories only from hearsay through the to them incomprehensible language of traditional religion. Such people are not helped by Robinson's reductionism—even the minimalist Christology he offers is far too much for them. They are not helped much more by Cox's theological travelogues, although they may find them entertaining.

No amount of rationalistic subtraction from the substance of the classic Christian faith will make the pitiful residue credible to such people. And the religious cotton candy collected from far and near will only confirm them in their opinion that

they should look for nourishment elsewhere. One hundred years after the Victorian unbelievers and ten years after the "death of God" movement we must first of all apprehend *one* set of religious symbols in the complexity of their cognitive, emotional, moral and communal depth and thus gain a clue to the eternal reality to which these symbols point. We need some insight into the quality of the religious reality, not facile reductionism nor titillating glimpses of the surface of all the religions of mankind.

## Beaverbrook by A. J. P. Taylor

(Simon & Schuster; 712 + xvii pp.; \$12.95)

### George A. Lanyi

When Max Aitken, the first Lord Beaverbrook, died in 1964 a friend asked A. J. P. Taylor, the distinguished British historian, whether he thought him a "great man." Taylor replied: "I cannot say, I only know I loved him more than any human being I have ever met." For him, "Max could do no wrong." The *enfant terrible* among British historians narrates rather than analyzes the life of the *enfant terrible* of British politics. Clever, irresponsible, indomitably active, idiosyncratic, generous and fabulously successful, the life of Max Aitkin, poor son of a New Brunswick Presbyterian minister, is a twentieth-century Horatio Alger story.

Taylor regards himself a socialist, Beaverbrook, no matter how unorthodox and radical, emphatically a free-enterprise capitalist. Yet they were drawn together not only by genuine friendship late in life but also by sharing many idiosyncratic beliefs, such as an admiration for active, imaginative "great men" who triumph over dull creatures of habit as well as over bureaucracies and institutions; a diehard support of