



You See Lights Breaking Upon Us

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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Abstract:

Scientific advance has raised issues for the Faith which are far too profound to be treated only ethically. This advance demands a major development of Christian doctrine on our bodied existence. This volume explores the beginning of that development using sacramental and covenantal doctrinal themes. These themes are presented in a hope that work will begin on posing the correct doctrinal and spiritual questions.

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Foreword:

More than fifty years ago, at the Chicago International Exposition, called the Century of Progress, the official Guidebook announced... the dawn of an unprecedented era of discovery, invention and development of things to effect the comfort, convenience, and welfare of mankind. . . An epic theme! You grasp its tremendous stature only when you stop to contemplate the wonders which this century has wrought.

Perhaps even more striking than the Guidebook was Louise Lantz Woodruff's sculpture in the foyer of the Exposition Hall -- "Science Advancing Mankind." The sculpture presented two life-sized figures, male and female, faced forward with arms uplifted. Both the man and the woman were dwarfed by the figure of a robot twice their size. Lenox Lehr, the manager of the Exposition, explained that the robot typified "the exactitude, force and onward movement of science, with its hand at the backs of the figures of a man and a woman, urging them on to the fuller life."

This sculpture's theme was fully reinforced, lest one did not understand, by the Guidebook's stunning, boldly-printed motto:

Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms

Fifty five years later this motto still has the power to send chills up my spine. We have done much in the intervening years, learned much about the power of the new technologies -- for good and for evil. Yet the rhetorical art form has not vanished; it is still practiced. In my naiveté, I was appalled to hear accents very much like that motto at a conference on the wonders of biotechnology. I sat and listened to that type of pronouncement from serious scientists with fine international reputations. I would have thought that we would all know better by now.

The utopian rhetoric is still with us. In the long run it is at best unnecessary and even counter-productive; at its worst it is a lie. The salvation of mankind will not come by way of computers, superconductors or

biotechnology any more than it came by steam, by electricity or by atomic power. It is -- I hope it always will be -- the human being, human ignorance and sinfulness notwithstanding, who directs the advance of our human technological adventure -- and not the robot of the Chicago Exposition. But let's never forget that part of the Guidebook's motto which proclaims and prophesies that MAN CONFORMS. Conforms to what? On whose authorization?

About 3000 years ago, the Psalmist asked a question we still cannot answer fully or with any surety: “. . . ah, what is Man that you should spare a thought for him, the son of Man that you should care for him?”

What is a human being? What is a human being meant to be? We live in an age in which we shall be able to decide this question, at least in part. Are we going to continue the adventure that is our humanness or are we going to foreclose future development, either by not doing enough or by doing too much?

Our own personal history tells us that we are unfolding creatures, that our story is not yet finished. Each one of us, born of woman, lives in this stunningly beautiful blue and white world. Each one of us grows and then dies, to be born again into the “ages upon endless ages” of God's Kingdom. None of us is to be defined; each is to be read as the story which he or she is, one with a beginning but with no ending. What is true of the individual human being is true also of the human race.

Ours is an age when the Psalmist's question is timelier, more appropriate, more poignant and more “pregnant” than ever before. We human beings live in a world grown at once smaller and more distant, in a cultural climate undergoing sudden and revolutionary change and strain. We are beginning to catch the hint of a sea change in human history.

The tremendous advances of the last thirty years in the biological sciences and in our ability to exploit that knowledge technologically and industrially will assuredly alter our perceptions of ourselves. As a race we are beginning a new chapter in our story, one that is filled with an expectation of a revolutionary new future. We are turning a corner in our growth as a species. In earlier chapters of human history our ancestors learned how to change the stuff of the planet -- inorganic material, plants and animals -- for human betterment. Very soon we shall be able predictably and reproducibly to remake ourselves for human bettering. Human beings are beginning to appropriate to themselves a new and radical power that will forever change the direction of the human story.

Religiously, the advances in the biological sciences and technologies represent the greatest challenge that Christianity has ever had to face. That large statement will be borne out, I think, in the pages that follow. Human beings stand at the threshold of taking control of human physical (and hence spiritual) evolution as individuals and as a species. What direction shall we humans, shall we Christians, take? Why shall we take it rather than another? Shall we reread the earlier chapters of the human saga to help us decide how to write the present and future chapters? What estimates of human meaning and human destiny will we admit into our corporate consideration? Will Christianity tell its story well? In brief, do we Christians still believe enough of our story to care deeply about its future writing?

We Christians are facing a glorious challenge, one from which Christian Churches can emerge richer in understanding and in holiness. The Creed we often recite so blithely on Sunday was hammered out of more than a century of struggle and attempts to understand the riches of biblical revelation. It is in struggle and in weakness and in controversy that Christianity most truly finds her Lord and is enlightened and made bold by his Spirit. These advances in understanding and in capability can (will?) lead the Church to a far deeper understanding of herself and of the marvels God has wrought in and through his people. Bioscience and biotechnology, for instance, will have an enormous impact on the Christian understanding of what God has created and his will for that creation. Christians can and must contribute to that Christian growth by their concern, thoughts and, above all, holiness.

The rapidly increasing knowledge of living systems and of the human body itself can be of great aid in our never-ending human and Christian efforts to understand ourselves and, in that very process, help us to understand more fully what God wants of us and how he wants us, his sons and daughters, to be united to him.

When I was studying theology, during the heady days of the Vatican Council, I was taught by professors, who were *periti* at the Council, that theologians had a double task: first, they were creatively and radically (in the root meaning of that word) to ponder the issues of our times which are related to our Christian union with God; second, they were to make sure that their conclusions were compatible with the doctrinal tradition of the Church. Does the answer fit? Is it in conformity to, appropriate to, the perennial belief of the Church? Does it confirm, extend, our attempts to “understand” God and his will for us and for creation? Does it enhance our effort to live the essentials of the faith we have received from those who have lived before us? Does it, as Cardinal Newman stated in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, corroborate the Christian tradition; or does it attempt to correct? The latter, Newman says, is a corruption. I have tried to be diligent in maintaining this double perspective, because I firmly believe that dropping one or the other of these tasks fatally flaws any attempt at theological understanding.

Some years ago in a *Peanuts* cartoon, Snoopy was shown catching soap bubbles in his teeth without breaking them. One of the characters -- Charlie Brown, if I remember correctly -- remarked that Snoopy's skill showed clearly the difference between a true professional and a merely competent amateur. This is the work of a competent amateur. I am a theologian only in the way that any Christian, who seeks to be united to God consciously and conscientiously, is a theologian.

A former professor of theology at Saint Louis University used to distinguish three types of theological endeavor: monastic, seminary and university theology. This volume is closer to the monastic type than to either of the other two. This approach is the result of a long and prayerful reflection on a set of important contemporary issues in the light of the Church's doctrinal tradition. It is not “university theology” in any ordinary sense of the word; I am not interested in scholarly precision nor in scholarly apparatus. I handle that material in a way that is different from its usual treatment. I have been convinced for a long time that we Catholics must develop our doctrine if we are to cope with the challenges that are coming our way from the life sciences and technologies.

Human beings do not live by ethics alone. Yet Church leaders and the majority of theologians seem to approach these questions almost solely in terms of ethics. That bioethics has become a force in our thinking is very much to the good; but deeper reflection must be done. I hope that this book raises interest in these issues on the level of belief. Thus, I offer this book as something to respond to, in the hope that it will promote a serious doctrinal conversation within the Church.

This volume is based primarily on my perception of the Church's doctrinal tradition. Naturally enough, it does not draw heavily on the work of contemporary theologians, since they have had little to say about the doctrinal issues enmeshed in the advances of bioscience, biotechnology and bioindustry.

This treatment is not, and never was intended to be, a compendium of the Catholic faith. I have been selective in what I have included and in what I have omitted. For instance, Chapter V on Unity would be greatly enhanced by an appropriate treatment of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life. The Spirit is at the very heart of our vital union with God, but I feel I must leave that development to someone more competent than I am.

The same is true of a theology of the Fall and of Original Sin. I presume that we are fallen members of a fallen race, but I do not explicitly consider how it is that the body and soul carry within themselves a stance or character that is anti-God, that alienates from him. Our being is thoroughly weakened and tainted by sin. No matter how well our scientists learn how to “improve” the human body, that taint of evil will still infect the whole. The results of the Fall will continue to bias us toward evil and restrain us in our efforts toward the covenantal union with God for which we have been created. Fr. John Sheets, S.J., to whom I owe much, has

written to me: “No matter how one improves the wine, it will pick up the odor of the vessel into which it is poured, and no amount of genetic engineering will allow us to be conceived immaculately.”

The whole treatment presumes, but never explicitly says, that we are not dealing with some faulty or balky machine when we talk about the human body. We are not simply working out the body’s “bugs” through an improved and sophisticated technology. The mystery of evil always hovers above and even permeates creation and our approach to it. Evil in the human heart and in the human enterprise is implicit in this approach. I presume -- and deeply believe -- that only one name is given to us to resolve the evil within us and to lead us in our quest for union with God. That name is Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This volume has a complex unity, one built analogously and adaptively on the notion of “elaboration” which Teilhard de Chardin uses in the *Phenomenon of Man*. He notes that the whole of life lies in the verb “to see”: “That is why the history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always more to be seen.” Elaboration -- ever more perfect eyes in a developing cosmos -- has two components: what I call *process* and *event*. The present perfection of the eye, the nervous system, the whole sensorium belongs to *process*, to evolution. The extension of the sensorium -- microscopes, telescopes, ultra-violet and infra-red detectors, anything that helps us “see” more -- is the result of *event* playing back on *process*. In this part of the universe which we can reach, *process* is more and more influenced by *event*.

In my development, *process* denotes physical growth; it includes the birth and death of stars and galaxies as well as that of insects and bacteria. It relates to what Teilhard calls cosmogenesis. *Event* is the new reality which entered the universe with the creation of man and woman, namely, the ability consciously and deliberately to share in God’s own creative power. This is the human ability to love God, to love each other and to love the creation *in freedom*. Characterized by the conscious bringing forth of new life, this power is not situated simply within process. It raises the giving of new life beyond reproduction to procreation.

In speaking of the “Christian Phenomenon” Teilhard refers to the coming of a totally new reality, that of Christian *agape* -- the “new creation” of which St. Paul speaks. Integrating over that most amazing of realities, human love between a man and a woman, Christian *agape* is the re-presentation of God’s creative and sharing love. That love of God, as revealed to us, establishes a covenant between himself and us and with all of creation through us. Revelation shows this covenantal love as a two-in-one-flesh covenant. *Event* as covenant increasingly directs *process*.

In treating *event* from the revealed perspective of the new creation in Christ, we must consider the covenant in the Body and Blood of Christ. I approach the New Creation particularly through the image of the Church as the Bride of Christ; this highlights a very rich theme for building a Christian appreciation of the meaning of current advances in the life sciences and technologies.

Chapters I through IV look to an appraisal of the contemporary situation. They can be grouped under the overarching question: *is not all one?* Chapter V is transitional, asking *what unity means* in the Christian tradition. Chapters VI through IX consider the two-in-one-flesh covenant under the aegis of Christ’s prayer at The Last Supper: “*may they all be one. . .*” Chapter X is a *preliminary* attempt to apply the theology of covenant to some of the new scientific, technical and industrial procedures.

I have written this book primarily for myself. It is written out of a Catholic perspective, for Catholics, relying heavily on a Catholic spirit. I believe, though, that all Christians could read it with some faith-resonance, if only as an example of how one concerned Christian approaches such issues. I do not expect agreement in detail, but I hope that this effort might spur involvement in these issues in other Christian traditions. Non-Christians, I hope, could come to see that Catholic concerns about the life sciences and technologies do not issue from a narrow-minded, or even close-minded, assent to “outmoded authority.” We have genuine concerns about which we must think and pray.

Finally, the conclusions in Chapter X are *tentative*. They came from the theological development; the development did not come from them. I would not have predicted these conclusions when I started this work. It seems to me now that any attempt to decide the shape of human life and human living by some scientific process that bypasses the re-presentation of God's sharing love falls "outside God's Kingdom." Reproduction by itself, for example, is not a re-presentation of God's covenantal love in Christ Jesus. A process of acting on ourselves, of deliberately altering our physical composition which ignores the covenantal imaging of God to which we are called, which ignores the two-in-one-flesh giftedness of creation, which raises process over event, is a regression to the state of the world before the appearance of man and woman. It would begin the human story again, without reference to the past which has resulted in us. It would remove our rootedness.

At the same time, however, these new powers can represent a powerful mode of altering *process* in terms of *event*. We human beings can "improve" ourselves. We can use the new biotechnologies to increase our individuality-in-community. These new means of influencing *process* can help fulfill Christ's prayer that we may all be one. Our great challenge is to recognize the potential good that these new powers represent and make our best effort to direct them toward the true (sacramental and covenantal) destiny of the human and the cosmos.

We can say with a very high degree of probability that the work in the biological sciences and technologies will continue whether or not Christians involve themselves in the whole process. Our doing so or not doing so will flow from our estimate of God's purpose in his creation and our own role in helping to fulfill that purpose. Has our Baptism and Confirmation sent us out to convert the world to Christ or has it not? If so, we cannot avoid this challenge. Are we called to be Christians at a distance from one of the most impelling forces of our day? I maintain in this volume that we cannot avoid the challenge if we are to be faithful to the task before the Church. In a review of a recent book, *The Churches and the Third Reich: Vol 1, 1918-1934*, in the January 16, 1988 issue of *The Tablet*, Edwin Robertson wrote:

...This is the first book I have read which really answers the question why the German Churches did not oppose Hitler until it was too late. It was their theology that failed them"

Rightly, Klaus Scholder begins with the Churches' inability to cope theologically with the new political movements that arose out of the collapse of 1918. . . .

From the disorders of Germany in 1918, and the cruel Treaty of Versailles, which was designed to humiliate a great people, Klaus Scholder takes us through the complex documents which tell of the failure by both Catholics and Protestants to match their theological insights to the problems of the day. Uninformed by the theology they had learned, supporters and opponents of the regime were equally confused about the reason for their attitudes.

It is clearly a parallel situation we face. It does not seem that our present theology is adequate to the task at hand. The 1920s and 1930s should be a caution to us.

It seems clear that we cannot be fully involved in this process until we understand what is happening and what it means socially and especially religiously. We are not yet prepared to answer the questions that these new powers raise: is the human being an apt object (or subject) for predictable and reproducible intervention; are there physical limits to the Kingdom of God; are we icons of Jesus Christ or artifacts of human technological skill, or both; are there limits, in other words, and if so, what are they? To approach these issues seriously we need a major development of doctrine "on the body." This book is dedicated to raising the issues in a doctrinal fashion.

I have attempted to address the broad front of advances in the life sciences and technologies and what they might mean for the Church. The approach and conclusions represent only my personal attempt to meet this

great challenge in the light of the Catholic tradition as I understand it. It has not been only an intellectual exercise; rather it has been a labor of love, love of science and love of the Church. My one hope is that it will promote a discussion of these issues by others far more capable of approaching them scientifically, socially and theologically. I wish them well in their efforts to help the Church in this great challenge.

The people who have contributed to my thinking over the years are too numerous to mention. The names of some of them will be found in the text. I thank all of them. I wish to single out Jean Cavanaugh and Sr. Marianne Postiglione, RSM who among others patiently and thoroughly criticized earlier drafts and Mrs. Bernice Morris who typed the manuscript through its many revisions. I must thank Richard Cusack who helped the progress of my thought far more than he knows. Finally, I wish to thank Fr. Donald Keefe, S.J. and the late Fr. Joseph McCallin, S.J. whose patient wisdom in lengthy discussions opened so many of the paths I have trod in this work.

Robert A. Brungs, SJ
September 8, 1989



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