

Donald Gray
Manhattan College

NEW CONSCIOUSNESS, NEW LIFE: A REFLECTION FROM THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Christians have recently been undergoing a transformation of consciousness. At least this is true of many Christians. Such a transformation of consciousness is not simply intellectual, an adopting of new ideas. It is something far more radical, a new relationship to others and hence a new relationship to self. Theologically, this transformation might be described in many ways: as a new attitude towards salvation; as a new attitude towards God, the source of salvation; as a new attitude to the Christ and the Church, the personal and communal lines of mediation of God's saving presence on behalf of the human. This transformation of consciousness may be observed at work within many different Christian communities and many different Christian traditions, for it is by no means limited to any single church. It is a transformation which has brought many Christians together in a new sense of solidarity with one another as well as with the adherents of other traditions. This "new consciousness" will be described here, however, principally from the perspective of Roman Catholic Christianity.

1. Salvation Outside the Church

In a recent essay,¹ Peter Schineller has attempted to present a typology of differing views to be found in the Christian community, and especially the Catholic community, regarding the respective roles of the Christ and the Church in the mediation of God's salvation. His typology offers a helpful point of departure.

1. J. Peter Schineller, "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views," *Theological Studies* 37 (December, 1976), 545-566.

We will present it here in terms of four differing forms of Christian consciousness:

(1) An *ecclesiocentric consciousness* perceives the Church as the sole mediator of salvation; outside the Church there is simply no opportunity for salvation. Such ecclesiocentrism entails an exclusivist christology which rules out the possibility of other mediators of salvation within other traditions. Other traditions are consequently viewed as having no value for salvation. This position has rarely existed in the Church in such a pure, unqualified form and has usually been moderated in various ways to allow for the possibility, however meagre, of salvation outside the Church for those of goodwill who conscientiously follow the light they have available to them. Ecclesiocentrism is hardly a viable position within the Roman Catholic tradition today in the light of the Second Vatican Council.

(2) More characteristic of the present situation is a *christocentric form of consciousness* which entails an inclusive christology. Jesus the Christ is the indispensable and constitutive mediator of salvation, but the saving grace he mediates is available everywhere. Outside of Christ there is no salvation but there exist many ways of making contact with him and belonging to him. Those in other traditions, whether religious or humanistic, who exhibit signs of salvation in their lives may thus be construed as "anonymously Christian." This subtle Christian imperialism is obviously objectionable to those outside the Christian tradition.

(3) Those within the Christian tradition for whom such a position is also felt to be objectionable tend to find themselves attracted to a *theocentric form of consciousness* which argues that there can be no salvation apart from the God whose saving graciousness is mediated within the human community in many different ways, not all of which are Christic. Nonetheless, Jesus Christ remains the definitive or normative revealer of God's saving activity throughout human history. Such christological normativeness is thought to safeguard the sense of Christian identity and uniqueness at the same time that it affirms the salvational significance of other traditions and of their Saviour figures. It might, of course, be objected that this position still devalues the universal significance of these mediators in the interests of Christian uniqueness. It might further be objected that this approach represents a form of theistic imperialism unacceptable to humanistic tradition or nontheistic religious traditions.

(4) Such traditions would undoubtedly also find objectionable an *alternative form of theocentric consciousness* which likewise

thinks of God as the indispensable source of human salvation; but which refuses to affirm that Jesus is either the constitutive or normative mediator of God's saving graciousness. Jesus is one among others and it is impossible to prove that he holds a position above and beyond the others. It is difficult to find examples of this last form of Christian consciousness among official or even theological representatives of the various Christian communities but, unquestionably, there are Christians who find themselves most comfortable with such an open-ended posture.

Schineller's typology depicts a variety of options presently available within the Christian community at large, and in varying degrees with the Roman Catholic community in particular. At present the theological community seems polarized mainly around the two possibilities of a christocentric form of consciousness in which Jesus functions as constitutive mediator of salvation and a theocentric form of consciousness in which Jesus functions as normative revealer of salvation. The typology might be read, however, as representing stages in an evolution or transformation of consciousness. Beginning from a traditionalist ecclesiocentric mode of consciousness which is decidedly apologetic and defensive towards others, progress is discernible towards various possibilities of ecumenical relatedness and affirmation which expose a tension between christocentrism and theocentrism. The move to relativize the ecclesiological line of mediation seems to require some further relativization of the christological line of mediation as well. A tendency to a theocentric mode of consciousness becomes increasingly apparent even if Jesus is still valued as normative. A bond of unity with others is sought beyond obvious mediational differences in the affirmation of a common saving presence universally available within the human community as a whole. As Christians have attempted to understand more ecumenically the saving presence of God among others, they have also come to understand the saving presence of this same God among themselves in a new way. Inevitably, they have been forced to reinterpret the issue of salvational mediation anew.

2. God Present As Saving Mystery

This development is clearly described by Gregory Baum in his book *Man Becoming*,² which explores the transformation of

2. Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming*, (New York, 1970).

consciousness underlying the documents of the Second Vatican Council. After a long period of defensive recrimination against others, many Catholics have recently found themselves more open to others, sensing a new bond of solidarity and a new willingness to learn. The new ecumenism, according to Baum, is not due principally to a renewed humanistic spirit within the Church (although that is also in evidence) but rather is traceable to a fresh awareness of the saving presence of God in the traditions, communities, and lives of others. We are bound into solidarity with others by the saving mystery common to us all; we may learn from others because the same revelatory Word which has appeared in Jesus has also appeared elsewhere. God is no longer viewed as an Outsider to the world or to human life, One who must intervene from without to accomplish His purposes. God is, on the contrary, an Insider, one who is immanent in and present to the processes of world-making and human growth. We are still dealing with the transcendent other but it is his nearness and availability which have been newly experienced and articulated. He is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. At the root of this new openness, there resides a new experience of God and His saving graciousness: God is a saving mystery graciously present and at work in the life histories of all men and women. Such a conviction requires an *ecumenical* transformation of consciousness, a willingness to discover God's saving presence wherever it may be.

But more can be said: God is a saving mystery graciously present and at work in all the circumstances of life. While He is undoubtedly present within the sphere of the Church and the explicitly sacred, within the sphere of prayer and religious devotion, God is not limited to these spheres but is to be found throughout the whole range of human experience. He is a God of both the sacred and the so-called secular. Such a conviction requires a *secular* transformation of consciousness, a willingness to discover God's saving presence in the whole of life. Both of these convictions require a *mystical* transformation of consciousness, a willingness to discover God's saving presence in a very personal way in one's own experience, in one's own life-story. If God is present as saving mystery in the lives of all men and women, in all the circumstances of human life, then this mystery is immediately present and available to us all within our own life circumstances. Here we find a basis for a mystical life, a life of firsthand, immediate experience of God, available to all who desire it and not reserved to the élite. To resort to biblical language, we might say that the God revealed within the Christian tradition is coven-

antally bound to the entire human community as the immediate source of human salvation. This is the good news of the Gospel: that the saving mystery, acknowledged to be graciously present among us is likewise graciously present among all others and within all the circumstances of human life. In the light of Christian history such an affirmation requires a refocusing of the Gospel in the direction of salvational universalism after a period of narrow concern for institutional identities.³ Such an affirmation also requires a theocentric transformation of consciousness which is simultaneously ecumenical, secular, and mystical.

3. Jesus the Mystic

It is Baum's contention that in the light of this recent refocusing of the Gospel, the basic sacrament (*Ursakrament*) of God's saving graciousness becomes human life itself. God is to be found within the experiences of life not apart from them, within the very process of becoming human. In this way the sacramental principle, so essential to the development of Catholic forms of Christianity, is given the widest possible extension. Such sacramentalism encourages a mystical sensibility, a desire to make contact directly with God through the demands, challenges, and opportunities of one's own life-history. Universal sacramentality, however, is not necessarily in conflict with special forms of meditation within diverse cultural and traditional settings. Specific lines of religious mediation, both christological and ecclesiological, are needed precisely to awaken and keep alive a sense of the divine presence in human life.⁴ A pervasive forgetting of the saving mystery, a truly secularistic and thoroughly unmystical frame of mind, always threatens to overwhelm human life. One of the fundamental functions of the Christian tradition is to make possible a remembering of the divine saving mystery throughout the whole of life. As Teilhard de Chardin has put it: "*Nothing* here below is *profane* for those who know how to see."⁵ For the most part,

3. The tension between universality and identity in the Christian tradition is provocatively explored by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, (New York, 1959).

4. Donald Gray, "Sacramental Consciousness-Raising," *Worship* 46 (March 1972), pp. 130-140.

5. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York, 1965), P. 69.

however, such seeing is problematic and inconstant in human life; the abiding presence of the divine frequently goes unrecognized and unacknowledged. The Christian tradition exists to serve the transformation of such limited, one-dimensional forms of consciousness into sacramental, theocentric modes of awareness. One of its prime purposes is to enable us to see, to cure our blindness.

The work of Jesus, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, need not be thought of as constitutive of this saving situation, which might preferably be thought of as arising simply out of the divine compassion, not being conditioned by anything within human history. As a result, Jesus might better be understood as the revealer of this divine saving mystery which is everywhere at work in human life and throughout human history. For Christians he represents the definitive or normative revealer. This is, of course, a personal confession of conviction which cannot be compellingly proved to others but can be effectively witnessed to in a way of life. In relation to the mystery which he called Father, indeed which he called Abba (dear Father),⁶ we might think of him as the great mystagogue, the one who is able to lead others in to the mystery, to acquaint them with the mystery which he knows personally in his own experience. He is the one who knows the Father because he walks in the way of the Son, he is concerned to do himself what he sees the Father doing in human life. He seeks to open to others the possibility of likewise doing what the Father does. To play the role of the mystagogue, Jesus must be himself the great mystic, the one whose understanding of the ways of the Father and of the Father's heart arises out of the most intimate relationship, the most profound communion.⁷ A mystic is one who has been personally initiated into the mystery and who is thus able to act as a mystagogue on behalf of others. Jesus plays this role for those who are willing to enter into his discipleship, to enter into the mystical way he has pioneered. The Christian tradition is itself rich in mystics and in mystical insights. Today, perhaps, a new opportunity is being offered to many more Christians to enter upon a mystical way precisely in relation to their very personal experience of becoming human.

6. On Jesus' unusual use of the term Abba, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, (London, 1967), Ch. 1.

7. The understanding of Jesus as mystic is developed by John Yungblut, *Rediscovering The Christ*, (New York, 1974).

4. The Meaning of Salvation

"To be human is the gift of God."⁸ This is how David Jenkins speaks of the Christian meaning of salvation. To long for salvation is to long to be fully human; to be saved is to find one's humanity. The process of salvation is the process of humanization. For Christians this accomplishment is not simply the achievement of the human alone and unsupported; it is an accomplishment of divine graciousness (even if human response and co-operation play an indispensable role in its realization). God is the source and support of our humanity; to be human is the gift of God. In the struggle to become human, a struggle which is going on all over the world today in the face of destructive dehumanization, God is involved, God is actively participant. We are not left to ourselves, to our own resources. God is the companion of human beings on their long journey towards their own hoped-for humanity, on their long journey towards freedom from oppression, freedom from self-hatred and self-preoccupation, freedom for a creative life with others.

According to the biblical tradition as well as the later Christian tradition, man is described as the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). To be image and likeness of the divine is the highest aspiration and attainment of human life, the most exalted and demanding task of human existence. For Christians Jesus represents the revelation of what it means to live human life in a divine way, what it means to be the image and likeness of God. In him can be seen what it means to stand prayerfully before God, to receive God into one's life in obedience and faithfulness, to live in trust and hope, to know the Father in mystical simplicity. In him it is also possible to see what it means to do what God is doing: healing, caring, nurturing, supporting, reconciling. Jesus does only what he sees the Father doing. He performs in the Father's name the Father's compassionate works. His is a life of receiving what the Father gives and sharing with others the Father's gifts. He opens to others the way of receiving and giving, the way to humanity, the way to a divine life. The process of humanization is thus a process of divinization, a process of becoming like God and living His life. It is the work of God in the human.

8. David Jenkins, "What Does Salvation Mean To Christians Today?" *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals*, ed. S. J. Samartha (Maryknoll, N. Y., 1974), p. 34.

5. Trinitarian Mysticism

God is experienced in human life as the source and support of our humanity in a variety of ways. The Christian tradition has spoken of God's presence, and our experience of that presence, in three ways specifically.⁹ To believe that God is Father¹⁰ is to believe that God is the source of our lives, the one from whom we come and to whom we return. It is to believe that our lives are grounded in graciousness and loving concern, that we are never left without support. It is to believe that God is creatively at work in human life and that we are able to trust. To believe that God is Word is to believe that God communicates Himself to us in all the circumstances of life, that He reveals Himself to us and seeks a response, that He addresses us and calls us forward to enter more deeply into our humanity. It is to believe that we are often called into question, submitted to judgment, required to die in order to live. It is to believe that the Father's creative activity takes form in human life as a conversation in which we know ourselves to be addressed and asked to reply in return. To believe that God is Word is to become a listener, a hearer of the Word. Without listening to God's Word we cannot enter deeply into our own humanity, we cannot find our way to transformation of life. To believe that God is Spirit is to believe that God is a powerful presence in our lives, that we are not left solely to our own resources. It is to believe that God is the power to free us from our past and from ourselves, the power to free us for life and service. It is to believe that reconciliation is possible, that community and communion and communication are not impossible.

To believe that the saving mystery is present in human life as Father, Word, and Spirit is to believe that God is available to us in our experience and therefore that it is possible for us to make contact with Him, to know Him as the source and support of that unending process of transformation, death and new life, which enables us to be human. Christians need not think of themselves as limited to a secondhand knowledge of this God,

9. For what follows, see Gregory Baum, *Faith and Doctrine* (New York, 1969), pp. 14-29; and John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York, 1977), Ch. 9.

10. Increasingly the limitations of such unilaterally masculine language are being felt by Christians together with a need to speak also of God as Mother. Jesus' own understanding of the Father seems definitely to include feminine elements.

entirely dependent on what others have to say of Him. They are invited to know Him at firsthand, transformatively at work in their own lives today. To live theocentrically is to live mystically, in touch with the spiritual world which constantly impinges on our experience. For a Christian, to live theocentrically is also to live in the spirit of Jesus whose pervasive preoccupation was the penetration of human life and the elevation of humanity to the divine intention.

The mystical sensibility, for a Christian, is rooted in an abiding sense of divine presence, of divine nearness to human life. Such a sensibility can only be nurtured by prayer although it can never be limited to times of prayer. Such a sensibility awakens in human life a need to listen to what is being spoken by God and to receive what is being given by God. Such a sensibility can also awaken a desire to hear what is being spoken through other traditions and to receive what they are offering as gifts. Today for an increasing number of Christians, other traditions, in addition to their own, have become transforming mediations of God's Word and Spirit, instruments of the Father's graciousness and compassion. Such are the consequences of the new consciousness now emerging within the Christian community, a consciousness at once theocentric, ecumenical, secular and mystical. To enter into this new mode of consciousness is to experience a creative and healing transformation. It is also to experience an enlargement and deepening of one's humanity through greater solidarity with others; it is to know in one's own life-history both death and new life. It is the Father's Word which challenges us to die for familiar but confining modes of consciousness; it is the Father's Word which provides this new opportunity to be more fully human. It is the Father's Spirit which frees us from the past, from what is settled and comfortable; it is the Father's Spirit which frees us for a richer and more vital communion with one another. This is one of the ways in which Christians are attempting to interpret quite concretely how God is present and at work in the human community as the source and support of our common humanity. God is to be found, is to be experienced, in the trials and turmoil of the present cultural convergence of communities and traditions. This is a time of death yet it is also an extraordinarily creative movement in history. It is an invitation to be human in a new way.