

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Computer with Legs and the Rough Beast
Slouching — Notes on Religion in the 1970s

MARTIN E. MARTY

Christian Humanism and the Reformation:
Erasmus and Melanchthon

CARL S. MEYER

Erasmus — Luther: One Theology, One Method,
Two Results

GOTTFRIED G. KRODEL

Theological Observer

Homiletics

Book Review

Vol. XLI

November 1970

No. 10

The Computer with Legs and the Rough Beast Slouching

Notes on Religion in the 1970s

MARTIN E. MARTY

The author is professor of modern church history at the University of Chicago and associate editor of The Christian Century.

THE AUTHOR REVIEWS A VARIETY OF MODELS USED IN RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS that were popular in the sixties as a prelude to his discussion of the trends and images that theologians must discern and deal with during the cultural revolution of the seventies.

The word is out: American society is on a new religious kick. That word is particularly disconcerting to ministers, priests, and rabbis, custodians of the old religion, who were just learning to come to terms with the secular world in new ways. The new religiousness has not served to benefit their institutions or revitalize their practices. When the Gallup people ask a sample of Americans, "*At the present time, do you think religion as a whole is increasing its influence on American life, or losing its influence?*" 75 percent of the respondents say that it is losing influence—whereas in 1957 only 14 percent of those replying thought so.

If the trustees of religious institutions are bewildered by a religiousness that they cannot incorporate into their operations, many theologians seem to be cheering it. They see in it a charter for new relevance—and theologians are always cheered by the possibility that somehow they might again become relevant to someone somewhere.

By "religious kick" I refer to the whole range of phenomena that frequently appear

wherever the restless, the gifted, the youthful, or the marginal people gather in the Western world today. Their alphabet of interests runs from astrology through mediums to yoga and zen. What unites these elements is the fact that few of them derive from the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, the West's characteristic but now—in the eyes of many—apparently exhausted religious heritage.

Whereas once only low little ladies in high-buttoned shoes were pictured as frequenting their friendly astrologer, today the zodiac receives due notice in late-night television talk shows, at the cocktail parties of intellectuals, and in columns on the horoscope in hundreds of newspapers. Not too long ago mediums were taken seriously only by pathetic gatherers at seances on wet afternoons, but now their messages attract some cultural mainliners. Zen was a code word among a few beats in the 1950s, but it has become a recognized option also in the suburbs, where the semi-liberated female now hurries off to yoga class at the "Y."

The new religious culture is as sec-

tarian, denominational, and schismatic as the old. One part in it retains something of Western religion's ethical concern. The peace cause has been nourished by religious ceremonies and symbols; from Martin Luther King's Southern Christians through Malcom X's Black Muslims to Ron Karenga's Afro-based cults, the black movement has in part lived off religious myths and messages. Just as often, however, recent religion has come to be detached from such movements and has been reapplied to personal and private matters.

While the theologians were still talking about today's man as being at heart always and only secular, the young and the blacks and the poets were looking for "soul." Soul included elements of symbolism that had to do with the inner life, the spiritual quest, and the personal search for experiences of transcendence.

The new concerns caused theologians to turn their heads and often even to do an about-face. The beginning of the 1970s saw publishers marketing a new list of their books on man's need to come to terms with his ultimate destiny, to engage in meditation, to celebrate in ceremonies, or to perceive magic and mystery in the world. Given the perspective of a millennium or two, one would expect religious thinkers and authors to concentrate consistently on such timeless or time-honored themes. But historians with shorter memories who reached back only five years found good reason to blink their eyes. Many of the same people who in the midsixties were writing scripts for a future that would belong to secular man in secular culture are now in the advance guard of advocates of the new religiosity. Questions arise for the uneasy: Should one pay attention

to a community that has so little of a normative character to offer, that has to scrap all its basic scripts and paradigms every five years, that is so dependent on momentary trends for its agenda?

If the drama of the turn in the theological community is to be experienced with force, it is necessary to refresh the memories of sons of the seventies concerning the way things were in the midsixties. Western theologians, particularly those in the Protestant and Catholic lineages, were converging on a nonreligious interpretation of man and culture, one that was to rule out all other future possibilities. Spokesmen were taking the term "secular" — a word once as dirty as "Pontius Pilate" — and scrubbing it up for the sanctuary. At the same time they were opening the sanctuary or moving out from it to the world where — as the phrase of that decade would have it — the action was. Extrapolating on the basis of rational, scientific, and industrializing trends in Western academic, technological, and intellectual circles, they presumed that the human future belonged to the godless, the beliefless, or the religionless.

The man of the future was to be a sort of computer with legs. Rather than go out of business in the face of this new kind of being — for whose needs they seemed to be so inappropriate — religious thinkers characteristically tried to adapt, to transport Christian motifs to him. They could not, of course, transport what they did not have, but their tradition did provide some translatable clues for the passage to the new secular world.

The doctrine of creation, for example, included the theme of man's centrality and dominion; he was to have mastery over

the world of nature. Secularization, it was noted (by the German Friedrich Gogarten and the Dutchman Arend van Leeuwen, among others), had been born out of the Biblical theme of dominion and the impulses it had produced. It was Western man, Christian and post-Christian, who had worked to demystify, demythologize, and disenchant the world of nature and politics.

For Christians the figure of Jesus Christ is central in theology. What should they do with Him in a religionless world? He was now seen not as a mystical and transcendent divine being so much as a brother, "a man for others," a kind of first-century new frontiersman, a prototypical East Harlem Protestant social worker, or a humane computer technologist. The Jewish and Christian prophetic traditions were invoked to help speed the secularizing processes, for these traditions were iconoclastic and anti-idolatrous. The demons and angels, the shadows and the spooks were to be dispelled by prophecy. Man was coming of age, and in his adulthood he would need none of these.

For purposes of contrast, it has been necessary here to stress some of the aspects of secular theology which in retrospect seem less perceptive. In other circumstances it would be possible to pay tribute. The secular theologians did contribute much to ending the disgraceful retreat of religionists in the face of genuinely liberating forces — a retreat as old as their reactions to Renaissance and Enlightenment. They did rediscover long-obscured teachings and did quicken atrophied forces in their traditions — activities which could benefit people who had been enslaved by superstitions. They did discern that some-

thing profound has happened to the consciousness of thoughtful people in recent centuries, and that such a happening did not permit reflective people to be religious in the old ways.

At the same time they gave away more than they needed to. Ved Mehta in the *New Yorker* saw them trying to adapt old faith to a new reason and called this an attempt to square the circle. But even he did not note that the new reason to which they were adapting was not entirely promising for the human future. Still, they came on the scene at a time when people did look with more hope than many do now to technology, science, rationality, and politics. Seldom has religious thought been fashioned more suddenly or more appropriately for the *Zeitgeist*.

The Second Vatican Council freed Catholics to find new modes of religious interpretation; Protestants, long left out of the passing parade, were trying to get in step with modernity. People were in a shopping mood — and they bought books and made best sellers out of *Honest to God*, *The Comfortable Pew*, *The Secular City*, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, and, finally, *The Death of God*.

These were antireligious religious books; many of them attacked man's need, in Paul Tillich's term, to be "ultimately concerned"; they derided what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called man's religious adolescence, in which people clung to myth and symbol to interpret the world; they saw no need for discussion of transcendence or mystery. Man's faith, newly defined, would bring him freedom from fear and freedom from religion.

Vatican II's promise was to be denied; the Great Society did not turn out to be the kingdom of God; the secular city

turned out to be virtually uninhabitable; man-in-control misused nature and polluted unto death; the technocrat and computer expert plotted a plotless war in South Vietnam; assassins' bullets brought chaos; youthful radicals saw "mad rationality" in the modern academy. By the time theologians had begun adapting to secular man, other people had found reason to turn away from this model. Once again religious thinkers had to reverse themselves. Some were seen slinking away in silence. Others were saying: "That's not what we meant!" or "Back to the drawing boards." Still others are simply adapting to the new religiousness without explaining how they can make such a radical transition so suddenly.

The experience of the past five years makes clear that the theologian has joined the man of politics in experiencing what the loss of authority means in the modern world. Hannah Arendt in *Between Past and Future* surveyed the contemporary landscape and saw men revealed as unstable and futile beings, having lost the groundwork of the world, having experienced shifting, changing, and transformation, "as though [they] were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else."

To apply Arendt's law: "everything" secular had become "almost anything else" religious. The computer with legs was challenged or was on the verge of being displaced by another creature. The model for religious thought in the 1970s seems to be something like William Butler Yeats's rough beast, "its hour come round at last," seen to be "slouching toward Bethlehem to be born." Interpreters of

Yeats's *Second Coming* differ on whether that beast signals despair or hope; it is likewise too soon to tell whether one should look at the new religious man and his culture with fear or with a sense of promise. But one *should* look.

This is not the moment to deride fickle and faddist theologians so much as it is the time to try to understand their plight. Most of them, in their honesty, have experienced that loss of the old authority and the old groundwork. They seem to be at the mercy of cultural trends. Some are trying to make sense of the moment by recourse to Thomas S. Kuhn's picture (in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) of the experiments, the fumbling, and the false starts that are made whenever old paradigms and models give out. These are not years in which consistency is necessarily the highest virtue.

At the critical point, however, the flaw in the thinking of such theologians is becoming apparent. They have been attracted to too narrow an anthropological model; they have been exclusivistic in an age that calls for catholicity. They have dealt with various models of men and culture in chronological succession, when they were not really forced to choose. Uncertain about the gods, they have not looked carefully at man. "We . . . shall start out from the one point accessible to us, the one eternal center of all things — man, suffering, striving, doing, as he is and was and ever shall be." (Jacob Burckhardt)

Man often appears to have a double-sided nature. He is secular *or* religious, depending on his locale, his vocation, his role, his need, his preoccupation, his hope. My thesis is simple: "Man as he is" finds reason to be *ever increasingly secular and*

ever increasingly religious at the same time. The ante is up. The stakes on both sides are raised. In a crowded, mobile, media-filled, complex, kinetic world more signals reach him from all sides, and they are often equally attractive to both his secular demands and his religious nature.

Burckhardt also threw in a view of man as he "ever shall be." The theologians are really arguing about the future even more than about the present. Nothing that they say will matter if the human story soon ends—as it may; or if genetic tampering or some new pill will drastically alter what we call human nature. But given some continuity with man as he is now put together, what sense can be made of the trends of today?

In *The Year 2000* Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Wiener provide two choices in their "framework for speculation" about the topics under discussion here. They, like the theologians in question, seem to think that either the "computer with legs" or the "rough beast slouching" will prevail or that the one will succeed the other. In the first element of their "basic, long-term multifold trend" they agree with the secular theologians of five years ago in envisaging "increasingly sensate (empirical, this-worldly, secular, humanistic, pragmatic, utilitarian, contractual, epicurean or hedonistic, and the like) cultures."

Nine pages later, however, they are reporting that "almost all of the nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophers of history seem to believe it likely that some new kind of 'religious' stage will follow a termination of Sensate culture." This stage could be spiritual and intellectual, or "properly religious," or synthetic. In any case, "it is usually argued that there will

be some unpleasant events between the Late Sensate chaos and the new religiosity." ("Unpleasant events" = our years?)

Must there be exclusivity and sequence? Could it not be that sensate, chaotic, and religious phenomena will coexist? In that case, theologians of the secular sixties or the religious seventies would be guilty of a lack of imagination in their failure to discern this or in failing to contribute to a sort of new style of religious consciousness.

In *The Future of Belief*, Canadian philosopher Leslie Dewart asked for such a development in consciousness, in preference to either a reliance on secular man or a resuscitation of old-style *homo religiosus*. We are ill-trained to look for such a fusion after centuries of either/or choices. When what is now called secularity first began to become highly visible in the West, religion occupied the high ground but was yielding, and people were forced to choose between being secular or being religious. In recent times secularity provides a kind of "given," an environmental envelope that does not disappear (like Hellenism once did, suggests Langdon B. Gilkey), and only recently has it had to begin to yield a bit. Once again, people are being asked to drop out of one culture or one way of perceiving reality and to identify with the other. Our current cultural revolution seems to be suggesting that these are false, unnecessary, unproductive choices.

I am never sure just what is implied when people talk about the development of a whole new consciousness. It is easy to mistrust the hunger for it or the term itself: our century has seen enough calls for new "phenotypes" and "supermen" to

be wary. But it is not necessary to imply a basic alteration in human nature so much as a change in *praxis*. It is possible to create an environment in which the question of whether or not men have seen their nature changed (how does one measure that?) is of lesser import than whether they have devised a milieu in which their needs can be met and their hopes reasonably fulfilled.

Man as he is and was is both "operative" and "passional." "Operative" man is busy producing effects, doing, acting; if he throws in God as an x in an equation, it will soon be x -ed out as an irrelevant factor. He is secular and no doubt will become increasingly so by all the standards theologians use to measure such things. But "passional" man is as busy as ever coming to terms with destiny and environment, and he resorts — this, at least, should be obvious — as much as ever to symbols and myths, ceremonies and cults to assist him.

With this understanding of man, it is possible that responsible people can at least occasionally intervene and offer choices during a cultural revolution. The computer with legs may need to be confronted with questions that seldom come up in his operations. The hippies in their communes and the poets wherever they are have served, for example, to stimulate some sense of wonder over nature, and thus have advanced concern for the environment. But the rough beast slouching also has to be faced with hard questions. Can one, without technology, counter technology? The view of the great gray-green smog cloud over Los Angeles may be hidden from the California commune-ist, but it

will not go away because of his withdrawal or as the result of his incantations.

In politics the computer with legs wrote scenarios of escalation, and the napalmed infant was a forgotten integer. The new humanism of the neoreligious has led to a rebirth of concern for that child. But the rough beast slouching, in his lack of political finesse, may resort to witchcraft and levitation of Pentagons to change the world — and produce not the Age of Aquarius but the Age of Agnew. These illustrations from the realms of nature and politics are only samples from a set of rich possibilities. Those who ask us to choose between the secular man that is and the religious man that was (a decade ago) or vice versa today are stuck with obsolete models and, in their desire to adapt to the "now," fail to provide men with the rich alternatives they need and deserve, if man is to survive and make his world livable.

No discussion of religion in the seventies is complete without at least a brief revisitation of the churches and synagogues, caught as they are between the forces of the cultural revolution. It is not likely that they will be wholly displaced by embodiments of non-Western modes of spirituality any more than they were supplanted entirely by secular concerns. Most viewers expect the churches and synagogues to experience some dwindling and decline, since they are involved with a crisis of belief, a disaffection born of internal squabbles, and a lack of interest on the part of the young. But these institutions are so "locked in" to Western ways of doing and seeing things that they can be expected to endure and to play some part in interpreting man and culture. The ingenious among their members are busy reenacting cere-

monies and exploring symbols from those traditions. Not a few of their leaders would like, in Miss Arendt's terms, to use their gifts to contribute to "the human capacity for building, preserving, and car-

ing for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live in for those who come after us."

Chicago, Ill.