

Advent Expectations—A Third World Perspective

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One of our monthly Eucharists at the United Theological College of the West Indies had just ended with the Senior Student of the officiating denomination offering the closing prayer. With face upraised and in solemn tones he began with the well-known verse of Watts' hymn,

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small. . . .

After the service he was surrounded by a group of students who were discussing the prayer they had just heard. As I passed by one of them remarked amid laughter, "Because you know the whole realm of nature is not yours, that's why it is a present far too small!"

"Advent Expectations" reflects a condition in the Church which could provoke a similar comment. It is today a subject of wide and wild speculation. In ultra-fundamentalist circles it is the magnificent obsession. Biblical predictions, literally interpreted and directly applied, seem to be a recurrent theme in the electronic churches. Every new international crisis, every new wave of famine or pestilence, every new catastrophe, every earthquake, ever inundation, every volcanic eruption is a sign of the times. The end of the world is near. The rapture is at hand. The millenium is around the corner, and by this time next century the first heaven and the first earth should have passed away and the sea and time itself should be no more.

Because of the growing popularity of these speculations, a little scepticism might be in order. As a socio-religious phenomenon it prompts the question whether, paradoxically, the enthusiasm does not arise from the shrewd suspicion that it is largely illusion, and not even the vociferous exponents seriously expect or desire the predictions to be fulfilled in the manner and the time-frame that they so confidently propose. Like so much else in popular religion it is not expected to be taken seriously. Certainly it is not designed for meaningful application to public life. It is mostly religious diversion and holy entertainment couched in that picturesque symbolism which stirs the imagination and makes for emotional satisfaction.

I therefore approach the subject critically and, for that reason, with trepidation. I know that I shall be reminded with some vehemence that all these prophecies come out of the Bible, and that the preachers are saying what was foretold ages ago as events which are destined to occur within the life-span of "some (of us) standing here" (Mk. 9:1). Still, the fact that I have been invited to make a contribution from a Third World perspective suggests to me that a problem exists. As is the usual case with such problems, it should not be so

much a question of the claims of revelation *versus* reason, or dogma *versus* heresy, or faith *versus* science as a matter of investigating the relationship between reality and unreality in religious preoccupation. It is the special task of the theologian not merely to rehash the dogma, redefine the tradition, or refine the jargon but also to expose the unreality as well as explore, name, and explain the underlying reality.

The Unreality

The problem which attends much of the current apocalyptic mood and advent expectations is one of unreality. After twenty centuries of announcements and warnings about the imminent return of Christ, we are still being asked to prepare for it as for something which will happen in our lifetime. Like all of the eighty generations which have preceded, we are encouraged to believe that ours is the last, or the one before the last. The obvious conclusion to be drawn from all these postponements and delays has been blurred somewhat by the explanation that "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). This explanation, if taken seriously, must render the words "soon" and "not soon" theologically meaningless, and their presence in the vocabulary of Christian eschatology confusing and distracting. What is really so terrible about accepting that these ideas originated in a view of the universe which has long since become outmoded?

Four centuries have gone by since the Copernican revolution and the dissolution of the Ptolemaic universe. Ours is an era of ever-widening vistas of space exploration, yet we are still being invited to look for the arrival of the Son of Man from somewhere out there, coming on clouds of glory. In an age of proliferation of nuclear arsenals, of superpower confrontations, clashing ideologies and sophisticated techniques of diplomacy, propaganda and espionage, we are encouraged to expect that the final conflict, the Armageddon, will be fought somewhere in Palestine with supernatural horses and horsemen coming out of the skies.

It is a problem of unreality; and it is demonstrated in the daily lives of those who adhere to these beliefs. The Early Christians were at least consistent. They believed that the end was near and therefore entered into no long-term engagements with this world. They erected no permanent buildings. They were not preoccupied with ecclesiastical structures. Even the writing of the Gospels was an afterthought, brought on precisely by the fading away of the advent expectations. Whatever the empirical facts, for them it was all real and all of one piece. Even the inclination to marry was discountenanced by Paul in view of what was about to happen (1 Cor. 7:8). Faith was validated by life-style and life-style was consistent with faith. Today the two are at variance and it is this contradiction which establishes the unreality not only of what is proposed but also of the proponents. They erect solid edifices, set up elaborate structures and make large and long-term investments in a world which, according to their own predictions, is about to melt in fervent heat.

The Reality

Wherever a blatant unreality is avidly propagated, an unpalatable reality exists. Excessive indulgence in unreality is invariably an attempt to escape from reality and to evade the responsibility which it brings. It is a kind of cop-out. It is easier to entertain the end of the world, especially if you happen to be one of its beneficiaries, than to work for the change of the world. You have it made both ways. While the end tarries you are sitting pretty, but because you insist that the end is near there is no need to change the world out of which you, in the meantime, derive so much benefit. You still have your Cadillac. You still occupy your comfortable mansion. You still have your three square meals a day. Your future and the future of your descendants are as safe as the Bank of England and for the foreseeable future safe in this very world which, according to you, is hastening towards its end!!!

At the other end of the economic and social spectrum it is also a cop-out. The moral energy and stamina which are required for, and the risks and dangers which are involved in changing the world are so immense that it is far easier to contemplate the end of the world than to undertake the change even of the neighbourhood. Celestial shoes and robes in which to gallivant all over God's heaven are adequate compensation for the barefeet and the rags in which you drift around God's earth. It is safer to phantasize about your vast rewards over there than to ask for your due desserts here. That way you don't get into trouble. You don't get fired. You don't get mugged. You believe in the *end* of the world, not in the *change* of the world. You look for the sign of the times rather than for the sin of the times. Out of a mixture of fatalism, fear, frustration and resignation, advent expectations acquire extraordinary appeal among the demoralized and gullible poor, confusing their minds and comforting their hearts with their "pie-in-the-sky-bye-and-bye."

This is the reality which is covered over by the unreality of advent expectations. It is a way of preserving the status quo. Towards the perpetuation of this unreality the wealthiest of the First World and the poorest of the Third World can happily collaborate and concur even in the wildest expectations. Is it any wonder that the impresarios, who promulgate these expectations in season and out of season, enjoy substantial backing from secular institutions which are not in the least interested in these speculations. It is a bargain for those who have no wish for any change of the world and who therefore do not mind hearing about an imminent end, always soon to occur, always near at hand, but never actually taking place. Is it any wonder that it is these very persons and institutions which see "red" and cry "communist" when a Theology of Liberation shifts the emphasis from the *ending* of the world to the *changing* of the world?

Advent and U.S. Politics

But there is another and an even more sinister prospect. Advent expectations and apocalyptic language and symbols are being cynically exploited for purposes of power politics. It has not gone unnoticed that while the President

of the United States, on the one hand, has envisioned Armageddon as an imminent event, the more extreme fundamentalist and dispensationalist preachers are discovering their political clout, flexing their political muscles and even aspiring to high office. Given the eccentricities of voting patterns now in the United States, the future outlook on American foreign policy begins to take on a somewhat bizarre appearance. The State Department and the Pentagon as well as the White House could be captured by the weirdest kind of eschatology and American propaganda could become even more obviously marked by self-righteousness, arrogance, irrationality, fanaticism and paranoia. American involvement in international conflicts could be promoted or (if you prefer) degraded to the long awaited Armageddon—the titanic clash between the totally good and the utterly evil. Before long the President of the United States will become the archangel Michael himself. Whoever opposes, resists, or even dares to offend his apocalyptic dignity, be he Fidel Castro, Muammar Gaddafi or Daniel Ortega becomes by definition the anti-Christ; and to attack the opponent, to devastate his cities and to rain death, destruction and indiscriminate suffering on the hapless victims who find themselves caught in the crossfire is to do God a service. Meanwhile the empirical reality remains undisturbed. American hegemony remains unchallenged. American interests all around the world remain paramount. The American *psyche* remains paranoid about its security, and America, notwithstanding, insists on its claim to be an *alias* on earth of the Kingdom of God.

Advent and Change

That there is another and a more realistic and faithful interpretation of the advent expectations will already have become apparent. Eschatology, properly understood, reflects as much on the change of the world as on the end of the world. The two are intimately and logically connected. They proceed from the common departure point that the present order is discredited and must be replaced. Therefore “end” means change and “change” means end. Nothing that we can say or do as churches or in the churches can be regarded as remotely Christian which leaves out of account the promise, the desirability, and the possibility of the end and change of the present disorder. No theology is worth the ink it is printed with or the paper it is printed on if it can speak of an *end* that is coming soon but not of a *change* that is happening now. It is the prospect it offers of that change of and end to the current disorder which makes the Gospel good news, the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). The present disorder has already been invaded, infiltrated and infused by the powers of the age to come. This is the advent expectation which can be sustained and proclaimed as a reality. It is this expectation which brings judgment and hope to the nations. It is this prospect which gives the word “soon” invigorating power. It is the travail of this change which raises the tension between the two ages to the high drama of an Armageddon. It is in the throes of that change that the Son of man will appear and we shall see him as he is.

Is this a Third World perspective? I am not sure, nor do I greatly care. For “Third World” might be variously defined as the world *under*, the world

between, the world *within*, the world *against*, and the world *after* the First and Second Worlds. It is not a geographical location so much as a social and economic condition. It is everywhere revealed in tension especially where the powerful and the privileged will do all they can, use every means, try every trick, even religion, to keep things as they are; and where there are other peoples, long defrauded, long deceived, long denied, who will no longer be kept down or kept back or kept out, not even in the name of religion. That is where the real Armageddon is joined, and there is no theologian, no pastor, no preacher, no priest who is undecided as to where he or she stands in relation to this conflict.

I have sometimes wondered in my more pensive moods what might have been the consequences for theology and the Church if the "end of the world" and all its eschatological concomitants had never been part of Christian belief. What might have been the nature of the Church's witness and its involvement in the world had the conviction triumphed that there was no other world beside this? What if all the energies and enthusiasm which had been used for the promotion of the other world and the preparation of people for it had been directed to preparing and changing this world for all the people? I have sometimes wondered what the record would have been if, with all the economic power and social influence it had accumulated over the years, the Church had invested as heavily in changing the world as it undoubtedly has in changing people. I wonder what this Christian hemisphere would have become. I wonder whether there would have been any need for a Marx or an Engels, a Lenin or a Trotsky in Socialist Russia. And then I am savagely awakened out of my reverie by the startling conclusion that if the Church had concentrated on changing the world for the people as it has on changing people for another world, it could never have acquired the power and the prestige it acquired, and it might still have been a much maligned and abused sect, persecuted and harassed as well by the communists as by the capitalists. I think there is a parable in all of this.