

# philippine studies

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## **A Radical Assessment of Christianity: Toward a Contemporary Christianity**

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*"The dancers, of course," Fil answered. "They're arriving today...."*

A person reading that passage would get the impression that the "Fil" in the story is a boy. His reaction to the prospect of snow is that of a boy—or at least of a very young man. It is with dismay that the reader afterwards finds that Fil is fifty years old, who has served in the U. S. Army and has become an American citizen and has drifted through many jobs, to whom, in short, snow is not a new phenomenon.

What Mr. Santos of course wanted to convey was that in his preoccupation with the visiting Filipino dancers, Fil becomes excited at the prospect of snow, since it would give the visitors from the Philippines their first opportunity to see a snow-covered landscape.

Fair enough. But Fil must act his age. If he is to get excited at the prospect of snow, it should be the quiet, pleased anticipation of a 50-year-old ex-corporal, not the jubilant enthusiasms of a teen-ager.

*"For Fil, time was the villain. In the beginning the words he often heard were: too young, too young; but all of a sudden too young became too old, too late. What had happened in between? A weariness, a mist covering all things. You don't have to look at your face in a mirror to know that you are old, suddenly old, grown useless for a lot of things and too late for all the dreams you had wrapped up well against a day of need."*

That is Bienvenido Santos at his best.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

## A RADICAL ASSESSMENT OF CHRISTIANITY

TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY. By Brian Wicker.  
Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967. xi, 805 pp.

Readers of *Philippine Studies* may have been disappointed in finding Leslie Dewart's book, *The Future of Belief*, surprisingly short (222 pages, including index) in proportion to the review (67 pages), which it received in a recent issue. There are other reasons, to be sure, for being disappointed with Dewart, and those who still hope to see an erudite and daring assessment of theism in our time may

derive far greater satisfaction from Brian Wicker than they ever will from Leslie Dewart.

There are several ways of indicating what the scope of Wicker's book is. First, as the author mentions in the Foreword, it is an attempt to give philosophical underpinning to the main topics of a previous book, *Culture and Liturgy* (London, 1963), in which he presented "a cultural and theological position, together with some of its implications in the field of literary criticism and political commitment." Second, in the Introduction, he asks what is to be put in the place of the old, familiar expressions of institutional Christianity that are now dying or dead. Three answers can be given: secularism, modernism and radicalism. Wicker's own answer is the third, and the book amounts to an intellectual support for the radical position.

Another clearer understanding of the extent of the author's interest in this book is given in the fourth chapter, "Rediscovering the Sacred." Here Wicker states: "the argument of this book is that, in order to preserve a concept of the sacred which makes sense in the modern world, we need to return to the original understanding of the sacred and to see that properly understood, it is not only compatible with, but is actually given a new lease of life by some of the most fruitful elements in contemporary thought."

Throughout the book but more so in the first sections, Wicker takes strong issue with secularism, choosing it as a more important target of criticism than modernism, because of its deeper influence in his homeland, England. Secularism has failed as a philosophy, Wicker asserts, because of its inadequate account of human experience and its uselessness for modern problems. It forces wedges between thought and work, soul and body, man and world, individual and society. It is obsolete when questions of personal relationships are raised, or when problems about the inviolability of human life or the nature of individual freedom vis-a-vis an industrialized community are presented. It is silent about evil and death.

And so, the author says, we are forced to return to an older set of presuppositions, which the author presents somewhat paradoxically, through the works of three modern figures: Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Karl Marx. These seem a rather unlikely collection, but certain common efforts at a reintegration of elements too sharply separated in the secular tradition, can be discerned.

For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experience presents us with a world which is not something standing over against us, but is first of all that in which we inhere, and which gives us our own identity as individuals. From this position it is possible to go on to show (with Wittgenstein) that this world is

more than something given in perception: it is a world structured, to its very roots, by our own capacity for, and use of, language. We live in a linguistic world; and it is this world which gives us our own humanity. Finally, Marx adds to this insight the understanding that the linguistic world becomes ours only because we are trying all the time to transform it, to humanise it, in the process of ensuring our survival in it—that is, by the economic process. We live in a world which we make by our own labour: and it is in this labour that we come to understand our union with each other in society. (pp. 15 ff.)

These three nonbelievers have furnished for the believer-theologian an interpretation of man's commerce with the world—an interpretation that has roots much more ancient than those of the secular philosophy. The interpretation goes back to the world view of the unsophisticated religious man, especially to his understanding of "participation" in a familiar world. All three philosophers exhibit concern with the analysis and description of perceptual, linguistic, and social experience, a concern which the philosopher finds common to himself and to the student of religion. Phenomenological studies whether of language and perception or of religious experience, lead to an understanding of society and community. For the believer, what is called for is an understanding of the Church community as Christ present in the world, and of the same community as facing the resurrected, eschatological and transfigured world of the coming Kingdom.

Relying somewhat on Levy-Bruhl, but more on van der Leeuw and Eliade, Wicker keeps stressing that the sacred is built on (and even into) our bodiliness and our capacity for language, and that the Church can be helpfully, even properly, understood as the culmination of the social, communitarian aspirations of mankind.

Going even farther, he maintains that Christianity *needs* to face the problem of total humanization, total human control of the world, if it is to be "relevant" to men of our age. What he seems to mean by this is that the world has become—and presumably will continue to become—increasingly subject to human control. Up to now this growing "humanization" has taken place under the auspices of a philosophy, secularism, whose foundations are now badly crumbling. What the serious Christian thinker is called upon to do at present is to develop a philosophy of progressive humanization that will be much more adequate than the dying secularism has been. In addition the serious Christian thinker must face the challenge to discern and welcome the valuable elements in the technical and moral revolutions that have already taken place.

The enormity of the spiritual task facing the contemporary Christian thinker has been sketched by Brian Wicker with light and lightness. It may be that the followers of Leslie Dewart, like Tareyton smokers, would rather fight than switch; but those who are more intellectually nimble and who are in search of an up-to-date appraisal of Christianity in our time, may derive greater satisfaction from switching to Brian Wicker.

FRANCIS E. REILLY, S.J.