

## **‘Notes on History Bending’**

by Patrick E. Green

“Man must invent his future if his future is to have any meaning.”

-Robert Theobald

History bending” is a popular term used of late by various theologians, both lay and professional, to describe the stance of the Christian in relation to the world. The Christian, they claim, is the one who “bends history,” who forges new possibilities for human life out of the raw materials of the past amidst the openings provided by the future. History bending is thus synonymous with history making, history creating, or future inventing.

There are many theologians, to be sure, who wouldn’t think of using such patently awkward phrases. Generally the phrases are the products of the leaders of “popular theology,” i.e., theology aimed at laymen and meant to be immediately provocative. Nevertheless, the works of many theologians, ranging all the way from orthodox to the “death of God” and “secular city” representatives, betray a fundamental affirmation of “history bending” though their language be different.

The term is important for two reasons. First, it is receiving widespread acceptance among younger church leaders. The phrase is inviting a number of Christians to live their lives in and through its particular image. But, second, it is also a phrase which is subject to a fatal distortion, at least insofar as the Christian faith is concerned. It is both provocative and deadly, “true” and “false” to the Christian gospel. Or, to put this another way, the Christian must say both “yes” and “no” to Robert Theobald’s claim that unless man invents the future it will have no meaning.

If one simply equates “history bending” with a statement like that of Theobald’s—that is, if we really believe that apart from our inventing or creating a future that future will have no meaning—then from the Christian point of view such belief is a patent nonsense. To be sure it’s an appealing image. There is something of Prometheus in every one of us. We sense that it is the destiny of every man to wrestle with the chaotic and absurd forces which continually threaten us, our fellow men, our societies, cultures, indeed, the very planet itself. Not to take up that task is not to be human in the fullest sense of the word. Surely, many among us would argue, it is right to claim that “apart from man, all is chaos, all is chaos!” And clearly that claim must be heard by every one of us as a clarion call for intentional action which struggles with the chaos in the name of meaningful human history.

Yet, however grand and provocative these claims and demands, the Christian must necessarily offer a radical qualification. Against the prevailing sentiment of his time, perhaps even against his own emotions colored as they are by those of his time, the Christian must stand aside and bear witness.

Confronted with the glorious, if somewhat simplistic, optimism he reminds men that humanity is yet to escape the devastating conditions of its finitude. He fearlessly assays any future of man as a future leading to the grave, both for the individual and his

culture. Indeed, he could argue that the planet itself is doomed in some future time to a lifeless state and that the odds are heavily against the survival of man as a species. In any case, he points out that by any standard of common sense, brute fact or critical reason, man's future is utterly meaningless.

We search for a foundation upon which to ground our grand designs for humanity, but there are none to be found. "There ain't no bottom," and all the optimism in the world cannot change that. Bend, twist, turn, create history all you want; the final verdict will still be the silence which sweeps over the empty stage.

Many forms of humanism have simply been protests against this reminder. Theirs has been the role of courageous refusal. And while one can only admire their courage, it is still necessary to criticize sharply their stated reasons for doing what they do. "Live for humanity," they say. "Live for a better future for all men, for all cultures, for the entire race. Lay down your life for justice, compassion, beauty, truth. Yes, you will die, of course, but your work will live on in the glorious future it helped create."

Is this a word which finally escapes despair? Is this the image appropriate to a time in which the limitations of finitude, limitations imposed upon the entire race, have ground themselves into our common sense? Surely it is too much akin to that pitiful conspiracy of the living who agree to "speak no ill of the dead" in an effort to bestow some slight significance by remembering only the "good things" about them. But what of the time when no one will remember any longer, when that name will be swallowed up in the forgotten past? What meaning will there be when humanity itself is gone, just one more phase of life on an obscure planet in a remote corner of one of the many galaxies?

The optimistic humanists too easily clothe the nakedness of despair to serve us in any but a superficial way. The Christian is much more at home with a pessimistic humanist like Camus who urges men to participate in the travails of history but who never for a moment believes that reality is finally anything other than absurd. If we must wrestle with our destiny, and it seems we must, let us do so with our eyes wide open. History in itself has no meaning finally. Fight, struggle, create, but don't expect to win.

In short, when the Christian is confronted with a facile, if heroic, optimism, he is forced to brutal frankness. He cannot tolerate an image which of necessity requires us to close our eyes to the way things are. For the sake of the truth—which is to say, for the sake of the only ultimate meaning the Christian knows anything at all about—he becomes the pessimistic realist.

His realism is pessimistic of course only from the point of view of those who ascribe an inherent meaning to history itself. From this point of view, that is, from the point of view of the gospel, he is an out and out optimist. He truly believes that history has a meaning and that it will have one forever, but in no sense is it a meaning which history gives itself. It is given, finally, by God himself.

This curious assertion is the Word by which Christians are called to live, both individually and corporately. To put it in traditional terms, God loves the world and through that love bestows significance on all that takes place. Things "matter" finally, because they matter to God. Every event, every person is important because God Himself lovingly receives each and every moment into Himself and, in doing so, bestows an internal status on all that is. The world will literally live forever in the life of God; every person, every event, every emotion, every creature, from the smallest of the nuclear

particles to the most complex societal organisms, all are received, all are granted a status which nothing can alter.

The classical doctrine of God's judgment participates in the same complex of ideas. Man does not finally judge his neighbor, nor indeed, even himself, for judgment is the prerogative of God who alone knows "the secrets of the heart," who alone knows how to evaluate a particular reality in the light of all that has been, all that is, and all that might be. Though it perhaps seems strange to us today, Christians in the past were more concerned to be known by than to know God. They had hit upon the elemental truth that they were not the final "disposers" of their lives; that they put their trust in one who knew them perfectly, who loved them without prejudice and sealed the mystery of their particular lives with significance.

For many, of course, the problem is precisely the collapse of traditional language and classical doctrine. Such language as the above suggests no clear image to them; or, which is worse perhaps, it suggests images from their childhood faith—the grandfather in the sky, the great day of judgment in heaven with the book of good and bad deeds open before the judge. For that reason the contemporary witness of the gospel must be stated perhaps in a quite different way. It must do its work, as it were, with the crumbs of the Word and not the whole loaf, even though, in both instances it is the same word.

Perhaps it should center on the simple fact that all men believe their life to be significant even though every shred of evidence from history is against them. That is, all men believe they matter—not because of what they do or could do, not because of this or that particularity which is added to their life—just because they are. They somehow choose to affirm the givenness of their life as important in spite of the fact that all their experiences point to a different conclusion.

The only evidence I can offer for this extraordinary assertion is that you and I believe it is fundamentally true. Even if the form of an essay like this one the statement, "You are significant," addressed to that sense of one's self which stands even in the most depressing times, is perhaps the best way to feel the weight of the assertion. Let me put the question: Is there one of us who will deny this significance? Is there anyone who can truly say he is insignificant and mean it with his whole being?

Is such an affirmation merely a fanciful thing thrown up by men to stave off the utterly terrifying chaos? From the common sense point of view it is certainly without foundation. Or is it rather that we all perceive from the very first of our existence, however dimly, a significance which is simply there, given, to be affirmed and lived out of? Could it be that the scriptures have always been correct, that no man is left unaware that his life is grounded and affirmed by that reality which is mysteriously beyond his control, but which is yet present to him amidst the concrete realities of his life? Could it be, as some of our theologians have suggested, that every man is to some degree a faithful man, that he, with his very life, assumes a primordial meaning at the very heart of all that is?

In any case, I believe our common perception of such significance is at one with the claims of the Christian faith and highly suggestive as a means of restating the traditional language. For doesn't such perception point directly to what the gospel has always intended to be by the word "grace?" Does it not make clear that life's significance is indeed a gift which in no way comes from man himself?

What has the Church meant by “sin” except man’s refusal to accept the gift of life’s significance (which is to say, to accept the final mystery as the ground of our life)? Certainly the picture we have of Jesus in the Gospels is a portrait of a radical, absurd figure who bade men to affirm their lives, marked by finitude, as utterly significant. The bifurcated symbol of cross and empty tomb does not accidentally haunt the gospel as their central theme; it is the Word that men may dare to trust their lives, living or dying, to that final reality.

What would it mean to truly understand the “gifted” significance of our lives out of those very particular, unique lives in this time and place? For isn’t our time marked by an enormous desperation that lies just beneath the surface of all that we do? After we have engorged ourselves with affluence, titillated ourselves silly with the latest fad, sated our appetites with the current project to dispel the boredom, or rested from our grandiose history-making, is there not an awful fear that none of this ultimately matters at all?

How free a man would be if he were to dare to trust that he is indeed already significant! Think of the energy he would save that is now spent on convincing anyone who will listen that he is “somebody.” We men could put behind a lust for prestige, status and success. The women would perhaps be able to come into their own at last, assured that they are already “somebody” and that they need not wait to live vicarious lives through their husbands and children.

We must be quite clear, of course, that trusting in this primal significance is as threatening as it is liberating. For we are being asked to place our lives in the hand of that mystery which continually demands that we trust nothing but itself. Absolutely nothing else can stand in its place as our ultimate loyalty. But dare we trust it? Dare we confidently face our deaths and the death of our culture, indeed, the death of humanity itself, with the assurance that all is well? The Christian, again with brutal frankness, might observe that we really have no choice. We either trust that mystery, affirm this strange sense of significance each of us has, or spend our lives burdened, or even destroyed, by a sense of meaninglessness. But that is unnecessarily harsh.

What the Christian might better say is that life is good, fundamentally good, when one commits him-self in this way. For there is then no event, joyful or sad, which can separate us from meaningful living, from our humanity as creatures. Even in the last hour of our life we are able to trust that power. And why not? It is what we have always trusted, either faithfully or unfaithfully, to some degree or another, in every moment of our lives.

The simple act of getting out of bed in the morning to face all the unknowns, the absurdities, the chaotic events which await us, is itself an immense act of faith. We may be unaware that it is so. We may consciously say and intentionally act as if our ultimate significance comes from ourselves, our work, our families, our success, or whatever. After all it is very hard to put the weight of one’s life down into mystery and to expect that mystery to be the most supportive, the most comforting, the most substantial of all realities. But nevertheless it is so for every man whether he chooses to believe it or not, whether he chooses to live out of it joyously or fight it desperately. It is the Word which has always been true and which shall always be true until the end of time. “You are already significant. It is a gift. Receive it, and live by it.”

Even as I write the above words, I am ever aware how inadequate they are to say all that is necessary at this point. Without doubt, they must be amended, corrected, and

evaluated. But they, hopefully, make clear why the Christian must reject any simple humanistic understanding of man's struggle with historical existence. The Christian, to put it simply, seeks a reversal in the common sense order. The humanist claims that meaning is given after one has achieved this or that. The Christian claims that such an image leads to despair and that only when significance is given primordially can man meaningfully struggle with his and humanity's destiny. Without such a reversal the Christian must suspect that every scheme 'thinly covers a destructive nihilism ready to explode at any moment . With it he is confident that the demonic powers of history – powers which tempt us to worship idols and then to destroy all when the idols fail-have been overcome.

But after rejecting the humanist image and after reminding ourselves of the Word which must serve as the basis for all that is done, it is completely necessary to ask in what sense the Christian is to be a "history bender." The question could not be asked before, since, apart from the Word, history and all its changes for good or ill is meaningless. But once the Word is grasped as the basic factor of any Christian image, it must be asked. The Word itself demands it.

This is simply to say that the Word as such sends men into the world. It does not serve as the escape hatch from the cares, trials, sufferings and joys of historical existence. It strangely frees one from the world as the source of ultimate meaning, and in so doing frees one for the world as a person who can see things as they are, who has no need to be either naively optimistic or bitterly pessimistic. The Christian is principle, is the hardheaded realist with no sacred cows to defend, no idols to shore up, no sacred institutions, no personage, or ideas. He is, in principle, supremely suited to the task of creating a future.

Now we must be clear that the Christian is not seeking ultimate significance in and through his historical projects. That significance is given primordially to every man whether or not he chooses to be a "history bender, whether he spends his life for something worthwhile or whether he wastes it in careless frivolity. Nothing is more fundamental to the gospel: God loves every man quite the same; which is to say, every man is significant be he saint or scoundrel. What the Christians, or any man, is doing when he takes up this or that project is attempting to find a way to express appropriately the significance already inherent in his existence. He is attempting to act out a significance which is utterly secure and which demands expression.

One senses, for instance, that an impatience with trivia has a great deal to do with the need to express significance. Its almost as if we were saying, "a constant involvement with the trivial is not worthy of the wonderfully significant person I am." Some how our lives, their wonder and mystery, demand expressions in accord with what they are.

But how does one express himself in and through history? Surely history is too complex, too set in its patterns, too immense to serve as the arena for the puny expressions of our lives. Surely, at most, we can only hope to do some little bit in our own parochial corners. At this point we do well to listen to those who are warning us that we have no choice but to participate in the creation of future history if we think it good for mankind to have a future. For unless we act, whether or not we will have a future at all is a moot question. There are a number of ideas which support this argument:

1. History is man made and, therefore, man can remake it. All that we see in history –nations, institutions, political, economic and social structures, system of law, religious ideas, cultural values in general-all are the expressions of man and are always, in principle, subject to change.

The Christian would agree. History itself is not sacred; it is a creature which, like any creature, tends to reflect the glory of its creator. Whatever tends to do that is to be kept so long as it serves the purpose. Whatever does not from the outset, or whatever has outlived its original vitality, is to be put aside. History, in principle, is open to the creative act of man. As such it is the responsibility of man.

2. But men like Robert Theobald and Kenneth Boulding go much further than this. They insist that we have suddenly come upon a time when history cannot be changed in principle only but in fact. They argue persuasively that we suddenly find ourselves with the immense technical resources for dealing with the problems which have confronted mankind from its very beginning. We are now in the position technically to control the world's population, to feed, clothe, and house every person on the globe, to turn tremendous resources of nuclear energy into enough power to produce any item men might need. Technically, the future is hazardously open, and it is clear that literally thousands of crucial decisions will have to be made.

Now we can hardly overlook the fact that these projections about the future, glorious as they are, are always bracketed with dire warnings as to what will happen if we do not find the will to bring these potentials to realization. The population problem alone, if left to itself, promises misery and suffering almost beyond our comprehension.

3. Virtually all the visionary writers insist that history awaits those committed groups of men and women who have become intentional about their individual and corporate lives as they insulate themselves into the historical process. They point out that the great turns in history have almost always been brought about by the relatively small groups of people. The masses of people have hardly ever been the force which has turned a historical period on its axis, and when they have done so it has most often been under the leadership of a few visionary men. History is not only open, we not only possess the technical knowledge to solve many of the problems before us, but, many argue, history stands ready to be redirected by any group of sufficiently dedicated people.
4. Finally, there is a rather commonly agreed upon description of the decision-makers. Between what has been and what is coming there is the knife-edge of the present. Most of us do not live on that edge. We are content to remain largely within the immediate past, amidst those well-known structures, relationships,

ideas, which by now seem comfortable to us. As paradoxical as it sounds, very few of us live in the present. We are creatures of habit, of the familiar, of what can only be called the past.

However, there have always been those who choose the present as their unstable abode. In behalf of their destiny, as well as in behalf of all other men, they make decisions which determine what kind of future we will all have. For one reason or another, they have sprung loose from the past, at least to the extent that they can decide against the past if necessary. And somehow they are sprung into the future, into decisions that this possibility and not that one will be the future. They stand between the raw materials given by the past and the openings provided by a future and decide on the course history will take. They are the referents for one of the main terms of this essay. They are the “history benders”- those who are literally laying down the stuff of their life in behalf of us all. Someone must decide; historical time is not automatic, set in tracks that run on toward some goal. Time is neutral, trackless, and these are the men willing to live with the burdens of such neutrality, to be the decision-makers.

Almost as soon as these ideas are before us, and certainly as soon as we understand that they imply a certain very distinct role for the Church in our time, it is very tempting to throw in the towel. How incredible, to think that the present Church could become a community of men dedicated to the creation of a more humane future for every man. What? This institution? This stick-in-the-mud unwieldy monster of committees, boards, bishops, timid preachers, fat little ladies with funny hats, men whose most adventurous dream has been to win the local Rotary Club lottery two weeks in a row? Surely the implication is a ludicrously improper one; surely it is the very height of foolishness to believe that the Church in its present form is any way suited for this difficult task.

Yet, however foolish this seems, there are today small groups of Christians scattered across the land who have come to understand themselves precisely in this way. They have somewhere along the line heard that the Church is to be mission to the world- a fairly vague mandate at best- and they have responded the call by taking responsibility for their history. One might say that they are the “faithful remnant “ within the Body of Christ. But, in any case, together they constitute an “intentional community” which is leading the Church as a whole toward new and definite responsibilities.

They do serious theological study, for they know that without the witness of the Word the most visionary project, even if successful, is but a thin patch over the gaping wound of meaninglessness. Just as intently, they seek the best training in the secular disciplines, for they know that the Word demands the hard work of bringing each institution, every social, political, and economic structure, to the point where it adequately supports and reflects the significance of man. They have come to understand that not only is the Word to be preached so that individuals may have the courage and confidence to live their lives as significant human beings; they also understand that this

significance cannot tolerate any social or political realities which tend to degrade or destroy the human being.

I believe these groups have hit upon a viable image for the Church as a whole in its relation to the world. This image is grounded in the Word from start to finish; it neither isolates the Church from the world nor capitulates to those desperate schemes which seek to find ultimate meaning in a world which cannot provide such meaning. The model is general enough to be applicable in any corporate body of Christians anywhere, and it is so specific that one cannot disregard the twofold, yet single, nature of the Church as mission.

Each corporate Christian body and, for that matter, each individual Christian must make the decision to be such a mission. Herein lies our greatest pessimism. It is indeed very difficult to believe that the Church as a whole will rise to this call. But we should remember that finally we can only decide for ourselves and our immediate corporate body. We cannot decide for anyone else. Of course, we should also remember that we must decide for ourselves, whether we stand alone in that decision or be joined by multitudes. The Word which frees and calls is not made more or less compelling by a majority decision. It stands as true even if all men reject it. We do not vote it in; it is "in" already as the Alpha and the Omega, the height and the depth, the very substance of all that is. We simply respond one way or another, which is to say, we either live life under the terms it provides and so find life itself or we futilely wait for some other world and waste the very significance which we have received.

Is it too much to expect greatness in a time marked by lack of greatness? I cannot but hope that the Word, which is there whether we want it to be or not, will once again insinuate itself into our lives with such power and vision so as to produce a "company of the committed," a corporate body intent on bending history in word and deed. For Paul's words are still true today: "The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own."