

God's Flesh

by Simon Tugwell, O.P.

Two years ago, under the pretext of reviewing a motley collection of books, I offered some reflections on the play dimension of life and spirituality.¹ Now, two years later, a little sadder perhaps if no wiser, I want to take up my cudgels again, on a similar pretext. In 1970 I suggested that one of the crucial issues, often veiled by the more popular conservative-progressive polarity, is that of Tradition—a glance at the behaviour of children revealing a close relationship between tradition and play. In various ways Tradition is again the issue raised by the books under consideration this time.²

Mauss' *General Theory of Magic*, already quite a classic, but now for the first time translated into English, and Furst's collection, *Flesh of the Gods*, demonstrate how far experience is socially determined—to such an extent, it appears, that sorcerers in some societies, even though they are aware of the sleight of hand and other tricks involved in their own practice, nevertheless remain convinced of the validity of the whole magical system within which they operate.

Flesh of the Gods is a collection of essays by American 'ethnobotanists' on the ritual use of drugs in tribal societies. There are some signs that ethnobotany is a bit of a tribal religion itself (there is a kind of credo by R. Gordon Wasson), but all the same much of the material presented here is quite interesting. One thing that emerges over and over again is that members of a drug-using culture spontaneously all have the same, and the expected, experiences, often with no prompting from the shamanistic leader; outsiders, however, taking identical doses of the drug in an identical setting, experience nothing of the sort.

One consequence of this is, of course, the possibility of building up utterly self-contained and invulnerable systems of self-delusion. Such seems to be Mauss' verdict on magic, though he recognizes its social significance. Although there may be much talk about experiences, in fact there is a tendency towards ritualization and formalism, the emphasis being on form rather than content. There may also be attendant social prejudices unfounded on fact: women, for example, are universally regarded as pre-eminently guilty of

¹I'm Nobody—Who are You?' *New Blackfriars*, June 1970.

²*A General Theory of Magic*, by Marcel Mauss, trans. Robert Brain. Routledge and Kegan Paul. £2.25. 148 pp. 1972.

Flesh of the Gods, The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens, ed. by Peter T. Furst. George Allen and Unwin. £5. 304 pp. 1972.

Christianity, an End to Magic, by John Baptist Walker. Darton, Longman and Todd. £1.75. 118 pp. 1972.

Introduction to Indian Religious Thought, by Paul Younger. Darton, Longman and Todd. £1.30. 142 pp. 1972.

Drugs, Mysticism and Make-Believe, by R. C. Zaehner. Collins. £1.90. 223 pp. 1972.

Pentecostalism, a Theological Viewpoint, by Donald Gelpi, S.J. Paulist Press. \$1.95. 234 pp. 1971.

witchcraft, whereas it is in fact largely a male occupation. What we have, in fact, is a closed world, impervious to external challenge or validation.

Mauss stresses the role of social pressure in creating magicians and determining their behaviour and the powers with which they are credited, powers that need never be brought to the test, because whatever happens it can be explained without threatening their credibility. Furst and most of his colleagues, liberated as they are by sacred mushrooms, are more inclined to believe that something really does happen, that the shaman really does tap the sources of everlasting wisdom. It is more or less agreed by all of them that drugs account for religion, whether this is seen as upgrading drugs or rather as downgrading religion. The case is probably overstated, with believers' ardour, but at least it is likely, in view of evidence for the use of hallucinogens from extreme antiquity, that here we have at least one objective factor underlying the 'systematic self-delusion' of religious and magical beliefs.

The Furst book makes magic and religion more or less identical. Mauss keeps them apart, while stressing their inter-relatedness (which he does not elaborate on in this book). Magic is essentially activist, even though its activities tend to be self-validating rather than actually transitive to outside reality; religion is more concerned with contemplation and understanding. Obviously this is not a distinction to be pressed, but it does shed light on some things. Maybe there has sometimes been confusion because a vision has been taken too readily as a programme. One thinks of St Catherine of Siena, and perhaps Vincent McNabb—perhaps even *Humanae Vitae*. On the other hand, religion and magic are at one in requiring a certain kind of cultural wholeness within which to operate; to some extent, at least, they must be unavailable for inspection by outsiders. Even St Thomas recognizes this: you cannot even argue with someone unless there is some commonly accepted *authority*, something which will not be called in question.

J. B. Walker's thesis is that Christianity is the radical denial of all such closed systems of religion and magic. For him Jesus is the end of magic, and the history of the Church is the constant battle between his authentic message, and the recurring recrudescence of religion and magic. Obviously it is a familiar enough contention, and Walker has little that is new to contribute to it. He has an axe to grind, and, even though he permits the early Christians to use 'religious language', he is determined not to allow any such freedom to their modern successors. The return from the Exile is only 'almost miraculous', the sacraments are an 'invitation'; petitionary prayer is, improbably enough, commended, but only after it has been twisted out of recognition.

But the book is interesting, all the same, as an indication of how cramping 'tradition' can become. For Walker—and there is some-

thing in this—Jesus is the one who liberates us from the shadowy world of closed self-validating systems. He came to lead us into the light, where things can be faced squarely and honestly, without taking refuge in rites and formulae. The Christ-like life is a life lived out in the open: the powers of heaven and hell are defeated, we can come out of hiding.

What Walker perhaps could not be expected to realize is just how cramping this very liberation can become too. Younger's book is an equally personal testimony to the experience of being liberated from just this kind of secularism. In the form of an introduction to Indian religious thought, his book sometimes recalls the raptures of writers on 'Hebrew' thought: the exotic world of elsewhere is used to lever us out of our own worn categories. Accordingly certain aspects of Indian thought are a bit neglected—faith, for instance, and also ritualism and some kinds of devotionalism. But by and large it is a very sympathetic book, offering a much wider vision of the Indian experience than we find in most western neo-Vedantism. It is, in fact, especially the wholeness of the Indian tradition that appeals to Younger. He draws our attention to the whole idea of *dharma*, including social order as well as religious practices. There is a framework within which life can unfold meaningfully, diverse enough to allow for very different expression and understanding, yet firm enough to give real personal and intellectual support. The quest for God thus arises naturally out of everyday experience.

This may perhaps be a rather glamorized account of Indian life (the author has lived in India for some time, but perhaps only in Universities). But it is a wonderful vision of what Tradition is all about, Catholic Tradition included (Younger's Protestant background prevents him from knowing about that).

Younger helps us to see the weakness both of Walker's own position, and of that 'tradition' he is reacting against. A theology that is not rooted in nature must misfire: the experience of God, of seeking God, arises within a context of all kinds of ordinary human experience. If we take the Incarnation seriously, the quest for the divine can never be detached from the quest for the human. Without this openness to everyday experience, religion must turn into a neurotic, self-enclosed escapism. It is interesting that Mauss, as many others have done since, points to a recurrent connexion between nervous and other kinds of disability, and shamanistic powers.

On the other hand, a 'nature' without a theology is also not enough. Man does have a kind of transcendental itch, and this must find expression one way or another. It was the great achievement of St Thomas' ethical teaching to situate the whole of Christian ethics, even the most 'supernatural' bits, in the context of man's discovery of what it is he really wants, what it is he really *is*. And society exists to help man make this discovery.

Younger knows nothing of St Thomas, but his account of Indian

religious thought is very reminiscent of St Thomas. Society with all its structures of thought, myth, polity, and so on, must provide a context in which man can find *total* satisfaction, and that means that it must be open to being transcended.

This is what a traditional society offers. But we do not live in a traditional society; Christendom is no more. We can no longer sin and pray, work and play, in a context that leads us gently and freely towards the gates of heaven. So what do we do? It is all very well to inveigh against magic and mysticism as Walker does, but the urge towards such things is a symptom of a basic human need, and if Christ comes to them with only a prohibition, then redemption is unnatural and anti-human. But equally, simply lamenting the lack of tradition does not get us very far. (How far and in what ways we can reactivate the genuine tradition of the Church is a vital question, but I cannot go into that here.)

Professor Zaehner's latest book tackles, in an even more disorderly way than usual, the question of what the Church is about in our modern condition. He undermines the evolutionism of Teilhard de Chardin more ruthlessly than ever, with the help of Monod and Bernanos, and the revelation that Chardin, apparently, like certain others, saw Hitler as, if not a providential hero, at least an evolutionary necessity. But, as usual, the chief enemy is Huxley's vision of drug-induced nirvana (though apparently Huxley himself recanted on his death bed, a fact I did not know before). Richard Jefferies is used a lot in this attack; Jefferies, nature mystic as he was, nevertheless refused to interpret life on the basis of his mystical experiences, contrasting the nature of his mysticism with that of the real world outside. Zaehner sees this as a quite remarkable bit of human honesty: real life does not substantiate the ecstatic claims of the nature mystics or the evolutionary visionaries. In fact, in a way the data given in Furst supports this claim: the experiences induced by drugs do not, of themselves, carry any meaning at all for the rest of life. A modern Zen master is also called in to give evidence against any kind of 'religion' based only on such experiences: they tend to produce, or are symptomatic of, only ego-inflation, a very unsure basis for life.

Zaehner allows that such experiences *can* be helpful: but that is due to the total context, the 'tradition-factor', not to the experience in itself.

There is a definite challenge to the Church in all this: we must show that Christianity is vitality as well as formality. But the heart of the challenge is to a kind of asceticism. 'Renounce' runs through the book as a kind of refrain; 'renounce and enjoy', as the Upanisads say. If I read him aright, Zaehner is telling us that we must renounce even the security of knowing what Christianity is all about. The Church is, he says, entering her adolescence, a time of chaos and confusion. We must be prepared to suffer; and to be involved:

involved with the young, seeking the Absolute, involved with the mediocre churchgoers seeking mechanical sacraments, involved in all the real things and real people that make up our world. But, in being involved, to remain ever more doggedly loyal to the institution of the Church, and to the sacraments. It is not more ministry of the word we want: we are deluged with words as it is. It is sacraments: that 'make-believe' that yet really can make us believe. Zaehner sees the sacraments not as 'experiences', but as something to do with the very root or precondition of all experiences. Whatever comes to us is seen and felt in the light of a determination to stay in the Church—again Bernanos and Chardin are called upon. Our actual experiences may be chaotic, our understanding very confused, but somehow the Church is still the highway on which men go to God.

I suppose it is inevitable that we have come round full circle, back to self-validating rites and a world-view that, by definition, cannot be shaken by anything that turns up. What is surely right and essential in Zaehner's vision is that it invites us to *accept* everything, suffering and all, and not to turn away from it; and to accept it within the framework of the sacramental church. To this extent, at least, Tradition still exists. The revelation of absolute love, of absolute bliss, is in the agony and death of Jesus. A whole life centred on this, mediated in the Church—surely this is an authentic Christian vision, doing justice both to the realities of everyday life (or perhaps, more truly, everyday death) and to the itch for and intuition of immortality.

It is because I believe Zaehner to be, fundamentally, right, that I am very unhappy about Gelpi's book on Pentecostalism.

In 1970 I suggested that Catholic Pentecostalism might be the Church's own psychedelic movement, and I still think that this is a useful analogy, suggesting as it does the ambiguity of Pentecostal experience: in itself it can yield simply an inflated ego, but in a proper context of total Christian dedication it can be a real breath of life-giving fresh air.

However, I think that developments over the past years, as typified by Gelpi's book, suggest a rather different and far more drastic kind of critique. Most noticeably, Catholic Pentecostals are now on the whole much less concerned with the spectacular phenomena of Pentecostalism, and talk a lot more about the whole Christian life, and especially about communities. In general these developments have met with approval (e.g. Mme Feller and Père Besnard, both in *Cahiers Saint Dominique* for September-October 1972; the latter refers to McDonnell's article in *La Vie Spirituelle Supplement* for September 1972), always excepting the stalwart Josephine Massingberd Ford (most recently in *Doctrine and Life* for September 1972). I find them alarming rather than reassuring.

Let us start again at the beginning. The classic Pentecostals are

—or were—characterized by a great stress on experience, and the amazing spread of Pentecostalism among the depressed peoples of the world (so that it is now a major factor in Third World religion and even politics) is still a matter chiefly of great experiential vitality, speaking to the heart of people where they actually are. Far from developing an 'inner' spirituality unsusceptible of normal investigation, there was and is a strong insistence on outward signs. The essential mark of their 'initiation' is 'the physical sign of speaking in tongues'. By comparison with this visible, experiential vitality, their theology of the Holy Spirit (as Prof. Hollenweger's massive *The Pentecostals* brings out) is quite secondary and unimportant. All the same, while insisting on the spectacular, they were, and at their best still are, also insistent on integrating this into a total experience of life. As a well-known Elim pastor, George Canty, says, Pentecostalism is not just charismatic renewal. And it is a fact that the progressive hardening of Pentecostalism in some places into a rigid and closed system has gone hand in hand with a decline in the incidence of speaking in tongues.

Now Catholic Pentecostalism has more and more played down the 'physical sign'—indeed, all the physical signs. On the other hand, it uses words like 'charismatic' more and more. I find Gelpi irritating and disturbing here: he uses the word 'charismatic' sometimes in such a wide sense that it includes absolutely everything, and then, suddenly and without warning, restricts it to mean some special kind of experience. But then this is never defined either. One is left with the feeling that all that can be said of it is that it is the kind of thing that Catholic Pentecostals experience. And, of course, the unspoken conclusion must be that all Catholics ought to be Catholic Pentecostals. The procedure is, of course, familiar: in those far distant days when politics was *the* issue, political Christians argued us all into politics with just such a sleight of tongue.

But this is a very revealing abuse of language. First, it exemplifies something that Zaehner warns us of: the danger of misappropriating a certain pattern of language to fit an isolated experience. Just as Huxley and Leary and Co., on the basis of certain very subjective and isolated experiences, started using the language of the mystics (in a very proprietorial way), so Gelpi and Co. now, on the basis of a particular kind of experience, take possession of a whole theological language about the Holy Spirit and his operations. In itself, this is perfectly good language, and much of what Gelpi says is quite unexceptionable. The trouble is, it doesn't *fit*.

But then there is a further problem. The particular kind of experiences underlying Pentecostalism are never defined; indeed, there is a quite deliberate refusal to define them. What was for the classic Pentecostals a definite experience, thus becomes for the Catholic Pentecostals only a definite form, with no fixed content. In fact, we find just that tendency towards self-validating ritual that

Mauss points to. One of the most extraordinary facets of Catholic Pentecostalism as it now is, is its 'catechumenate for baptism in the Holy Spirit'. Now that this 'baptism' contains no specific experience, and is indeed compatible with there being no experience at all, we seem to have reached a state of pure 'magic', as defined by Mauss: form has taken over from content. As I have consistently maintained, 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' is theologically a non-starter anyway; but if the phrase is going to be used, at least let it mean something.

Gelpi exemplifies all this in a fairly extreme form: a beautiful theoretical structure, linked merely by verbal sleight of hand to a particular social structure, in such a way that there is a large, but unnoticed, gap between the conceptual structure, and the actual pattern of experience presented for conceptualization; and a further gap between that pattern of experience, and the actual realities of the situation as it can be seen by an outsider.

Now this inevitably produces a closed society; it is quite inevitable that the Catholic Pentecostal Movement, set as it seems to be on this path, should be putting more and more stress (as it is) on the *structures* of 'charismatic renewal', and less and less on any actual experience, let alone leaving room for the acceptance and encouragement of spontaneity.

Of course this is a condemnation of what Gelpi stands for, far more than just a critique of his book. But perhaps the fairness of this critique is borne out by a very curious feature in the book. Gelpi defines charisms as permanent endowments of a particular kind, and bases this on St Thomas' doctrine of the gifts of the Spirit, which he says can be easily fitted to the charisms. But St Thomas quite specifically contrasts the gifts and the charisms on this very point: the gifts are *habitus*, the charisms are not. He discusses at length whether prophecy can be called a *habitus*, and concludes that it cannot; the most he will concede is that there can be a kind of *habilitas*. And I think that the experience of the charisms supports St Thomas: they are a manifestation of God's freedom and spontaneity, and must be received with corresponding human freedom and spontaneity. It is, as Mauss informs us, magical ordination that leads to permanent spiritual powers; is it being too hard on Gelpi to see here an unconscious harking back to magical structures? At any rate, it seems to betray a drive towards formalization and institutionalization remarkably parallel to the situation disclosed by Mauss.

Anyway, it seems to me that Gelpi's book is yet another pointer that Catholic Pentecostalism has disastrously missed the point of both Pentecostalism and Catholicism, and is busy setting up the narrow kind of self-contained, self-validating religion that Walker deplores, and that, in one way or another, we are all committed to breaking out of; the kind of religion that must in the long run pull away from that other, but infinitely richer, self-contained, self-validating system which is the catholic and apostolic Church.