

THESES REGARDING THE OTHER WORLD

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Writing Post

INTRODUCTION

Clarification of the Summer '72 breakthrough regarding the "Other World" remains a task of major importance for the Movement.

Persons today are turning to horror movies, to novels of the exotic, and to mystery cults for a taste of the numinous. It's as if the bland mundanities of life have become distasteful, and persons are longing for a flavor of the transcendent to bring spice again into the ordinary. The Church has traditionally provided satisfaction for these longings with an extensive "Other Worldly" mythology and a **wealth** of rituals and symbols which pointed to a dimension of experience beyond the merely secular. But the Church married its wisdom in this area to a pre-scientific cosmology, so that when the latter collapsed, so also did the former. Bultmann's essay "The New Testament and Mythology: (Kerygma and Myth, I, pp. 1-44) is the clearest articulation of this collapse and its theological implications. But the result of this situation in practical Christianity has been a polarization between a conservative supernaturalism on the one hand and a liberal secularism on the other. The former verges on superstition and the latter, on trivialization. Both have lost the ability to articulate and to **celebrate the awesome depths of reality experienced by every man.**

During the Research Assembly of 1972, the Global Spirit Movement recovered a consciousness of "The Other World" in the midst of ordinary experience and devised a set of images for articulating this consciousness in an understandable fashion. The task now is to push this imagery for rational clarification so that the reality to which it points can be further investigated. This clarification will protect the imagery from collapse into a new superstition or a new romanticism.

Two issues come immediately to mind. The first is, "What IS 'The Other World'?" It is much easier to talk about and to rehearse experiences of its "topography" than to have a clear understanding of what one is talking ABOUT; but once one has clarified the dimension of reality which he is describing, then he is **free to move ahead with his description without fear of mere subjectivism.** The second issue is, "What is the Church's wisdom about this dimension?" The task here is to "demythologize" the Church's categories traditionally associated with "The Other World" such as "Hell", "Heaven", "Purgatory", "Angels", "Demons", etc. The recovery of the insights held in these images is of major importance in freeing the Church from its captivity to superstition or secularism for creative and profound ministry to the world.

These papers are presented not as final results, but as stimuli for informed brooding by the Movement. They could be used as items for individual reading, for Ecclesiola study, for Collegium workshops, or for corporate conversations. However used, they will have served their purpose if they enable the Movement to focus and to expand that remarkable breakthrough of consciousness called "The Other World."

IN EXPERIENCE

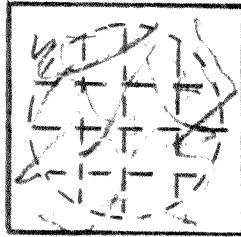
- I. "The Other World" points to a dimension of reality.
- II. "The Other World" points to a dimension of the self.
- III. "The Other World" points to a dynamic of consciousness.
- IV. "The Other World" is both attractive and repulsive.

IN THEOLOGY

- I. "The Other World" may be either Hell or Heaven.
- II. Jesus Christ converts "The Other World" from Hell to Heaven.
- III. Life in "The Other World" is a perpetual journey.
- IV. "The Other World" is populated by "angels" and "demons."

I. "The Other World" points to a dimension of reality.

As Bultmann notes, the world man encounters is uncanny--it has about it an element of mystery, riddle, darkness which does not diminish with scientific investigation. "The Other World" is a poetic image pointing to this finally incomprehensible dimension of reality with which every man deals, whether consciously or unconsciously.

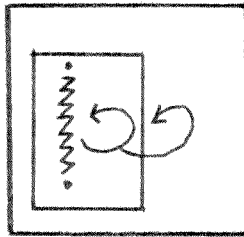


The ultimately puzzling nature of reality gives rise to science as well as to mythology, and it expands rather than diminishes with every scientific advance. No three good reasons or cosmic laws explain or account for the fact of man's life, either in general or in particular. Whether considered in the microcosm or the macrocosm, in the psyche or the society, in the physical or the intellectual, life remains a mystery of largely incomprehensible forces unpredictably interacting, weaving kaleidoscopic montages of sense and nonsense, meaning and absurdity, pattern and chaos throughout time and space. True and valid science both begins and ends here. Every man knows that finally he does not know, that he must finally come to terms with the unknown. The works of Loren Eiseley vividly expose this dimension of mystery and wonder in ordinary experience. He tells of a nuclear physicist who, on first discovering the reality of sub-atomic space and the illusory quality of solid matter, was unable to walk across a floor without snowshoes for fear of being swallowed up by the encompassing abyss.

The "Other World" is ontological. Any comprehensive schema for examining reality must necessarily include consideration of the mysteriousness of being, its finally impenetrable character which leaves its mark on all beings. "The Other World" is not peculiarly religious; it is a dimension of reality which, along with other dimensions, religion rehearses and celebrates. It is like gravity in that it is hardly ever noticed, but always present functioning as a basic presupposition for every action.

II. "The Other World" points to a dimension of the self.

As Kierkegaard notes, the self is a relationship which relates itself to its relationships and in taking a relationship to its relationships, grounds itself in the transcendent. In the process of taking a relationship to one's given relationships, one is dealing with that dimension of the self pointed to with the poetic image "The Other World."

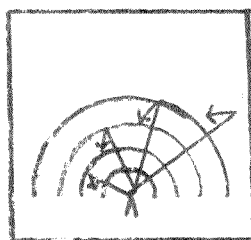


On a given morning, I awaken with a start to find a heavy load of work to be done. That is my immediate situation in the midst of which my identity will be created. Further, I find myself intensely irritated at the degree of expenditure required of me by the particular assignment--or, perhaps I find myself keenly exhilarated by the prospects of adventure during the day. These are emotional responses to my given situation which come from my subjectivity and which may be more or less controlled by my will. But at the moment of recognizing both my given situation and my moodal response, another issue is raised: How will I use my given mood in my given situation? Will I ignore it as insignificant (stoically)? Will I attempt to excuse it or hide it as evil (satanic)? or Will I receive it as good and strategize to use it for the sake of the given task (faith)? Any one of the three options is open. The arena of the self in which this issue is raised and these decisions made is pointed to by the poetic image "The Other World." Every man operates on this level, although usually the decision is unconscious and one tacitly assumes a set of rules or priorities. In fact, however, this decision is open at every moment, and when this openness is exposed, the experience is like having one's **securest foundations shaken. Everything seems to come unglued. The outer arrow represents this dimension.**

The Other World is elusive. The moment one is clear about his situations and his responses and his subsequent decisions, his clarified insight itself becomes that which demands another decision of him. It becomes that which may be used or received or rejected. The Other World thus slips from grasp at the very moment of its appearance. This phenomenon is the basis for the Church Fathers' insistence that the Other World is under the sovereignty of God alone: every effort to grasp the Mystery of my being only poses me with new dimensions of mystery and decision with which to deal. The mystery which forever prevents the securing of one's life by endlessly posing life-decisions is God. The experience is like pursuing the horizon: the reality is ever-visible but never attainable.

III. "The Other World" points to a dynamic of consciousness.

As H. Richard Niebuhr says, the self always operates within a context which provides meaning and value to his life. Furthermore, the context which one holds as primal in value exercises both a negative and positive function on all other contexts. In the context of the ultimate power and mystery of being, all that is, is relative, and all that is, is good. The manifestations of these dynamics in human consciousness are the states of being poetically designated as the "topography of the Other World."

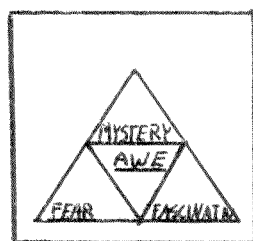


Often I operate out of the context of my own whims. Occasionally, however, I give priority to the context of my family. When that happens, my own whims undergo a strange transformation: they become relatively unimportant in determining my decisions. But they become critically important as factors to be considered in determining the style with which the task of the family is to be carried out. The same is true of any broadening of contexts. When, for example, the nation assumes priority, the family becomes unimportant as a source of value and a determiner of decisions, but crucially important as part of and means to furthering the cause of the country. When the ultimate power of being, or God, becomes one's operating context, all becomes both relativized AND valuable as participant in, exemplar of and instrument of that final reality. The outermost arrow represents this dynamic.

The Other World is in the midst of this world. The experience of consciousness of the sovereignty of radical mystery does not permit absorption and isolated contemplation. Rather, it throws one back into the midst of his situation with a transvaluation of values which includes both radical detachment and intensified engagement. The effect of this dynamic of consciousness is like that of jumping up: the higher you go, the more certain and powerful the impact on coming down.

IV. "The Other World" is both attractive and repulsive.

As Otto states, the experience of that dimension of reality designated as "the Other World" is an awe-filling experience including within it elements of both fear and fascination. Those moments in which the mysterious depths of reality are disclosed confront one with the radical insecurity of all existence and the illusory character of every reference point; simultaneously they expose that which alone endures--that vague and shadowy Reality which is ever-present and which alone is capable of ultimate reliance.



Movie-makers in our time have capitalized on this characteristic of the mysteriousness of life. Horror movies and episodes of mayhem in "ordinary" movies are commonplace. The movie-goer finds himself horrified and repelled with the violence, pain and terror portrayed on the screen. Yet he comes in droves to sit transfixed before scene after scene of gore dramatizing the radical strangeness of life in a kind of vicarious ecstasy. The spine tingles, muscles stiffen, breath shortens, adrenalin flows, and one finds oneself incredibly alert, keenly sensitive and ready to move in a moment. This experience, by no means limited to horror movies but occurring whenever the Transcendent is disclosed, is appealing despite its fearsomeness. Whenever one confronts that which demolishes all his security, every ounce of his creativity is elicited, and in the midst of his terror he finds himself keenly alive.

The Other World is man's home. That which elicits the full vitality of man is not the mundane, trivial, manageable tasks he undertakes. In our time, men have often reduced experience to this dimension and have found it boring or deadening. But vitality occurs when one finds himself dissatisfied, insecure, threatened and literally driven to creativity. The dimension of reality called "The Other World" performs this function and is therefore the source of life, man's home.

I. "The Other World" may be either Hell or Heaven.

As Tillich notes, the exposure of the whole arena of ultimate relationships and risk and uncertainty is a terrifying experience. The whole of one's life takes on a new, intensified importance. If this consciousness is received as good, it is Heaven--God-given and God-ruled forever. If, however, one relates to this final reality in distrust, disloyalty and hatred, it is Hell itself. "Hell" and "Heaven" are poetic images pointing towards one's relation to the final reality.

The resemblance between religious experience and psychosis has fascinated psychologists since the time of William James. In the sudden exposure to heretofore unrecognized dimensions of consciousness, all one's presuppositions are swallowed up in a re-valuation of what life is about and for. All the culturally-provided props for social and personal adjustment seem to be resting on nothing. Values swirl, certainties vanish, chaos appears, and a life-or-death struggle is imminent. Objectively, one experiences the naked questionableness of all of life. Subjectively, one experiences both total void and radical demand. The powerful responses to the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and subsequent revivalists illustrates the powerful impact of exposing to persons this recognizable but un-recognized dimension of reality.

Exposure of "The Other World" is dangerous. The times in history of "one-dimensionality" when either "This World" or "The Other World" is lost from consciousness are times when that experience becomes unbearable. In the Middle Ages "This World" was intolerable and persons flew to the other. In our time, "The Other World" is seen as unbearable and persons flee to this one. The exposure of the missing dimension, then, involves thrusting one into the midst of what seems to him to be Hell itself. And the one with the power to cast a soul into Hell is one to be feared. Only when one grasps this fact and faces its responsibility dare he deal publicly with this dimension of life.

II. Jesus Christ converts "The Other World" from Hell to Heaven.

That which allows the self to stand before the awesome depths of life is the Word alone. Without it, he must retreat in terror. With the exposure of his estrangement and the word of acceptance, however, man can stand before all the depths and heights that exist. In other words, the Christ event not only transforms my relations and actions in the penultimate realm; it ALSO transforms my experience of life's ultimate dimension from Hell to Heaven. These are two distinguishable but inseparable dynamics of the Christ event in a person's life. Gustav Aulen discovered this dimension of the Christ event was held by the classical Church Father, and only recently de-emphasized in the Church.

The consciousness of that realm of open decision and mystery designated as "The Other World" often appears dark, chaotic, tumultuous, agonizing and altogether terrifying. I experience the raw demands and possibilities of my life as dread-filled, and my normal tendency is to recoil in horror. This recoil can take many forms: naivete, phariseeism, sensuality, etc. Underneath them all, and not far below the conscious level, is a deep fear of the depths of life. And this is hell itself, for it amounts to running frantically from that which is inescapable. But sometimes an occasion happens when a Word is addressed to me that THAT dimension of life is not only approved, but is a unique, unrepeatable, missionally efficacious and altogether GOOD facet of my being. At such moments the chaos and turmoil does not vanish, but it becomes transformed into Heavenly rest. The experience is that of being made one with the depths of life, or finding one's being justified. The Church has always understood this dynamic and has spoken poetically of Christ, not only as savior of this world, but ALSO as a cosmic, eschatological figure who does battle with and defeats Satan himself, thereby freeing man from Hell. The cosmic Christ engages in a cataclysmic battle with Satan himself and emerges Christus Victor in the "Other World."

One can now grasp why the Fathers insisted on maintaining the two natures of Christ. Save that Word reaches both elements of one's life, one is left in a state of rebellion which devastates him.

III. Life in "The Other World" is a perpetual journey.

As Tillich notes, exploration of the depths of life is an ongoing process. The move from addiction to surface appearance into more profound awareness of the self and of reality is never finally achieved. Man always faces new crises which challenge his assumptions, violate his expectations and demand his creativity, regardless of the perceptual level he has achieved.

The journey of the human consciousness from naivete to profundity has been the topic of theologians, mystics, myth-makers, poets, and philosophers from time immemorial. Abstractly, the continued development of one's experience and reflective capacities provides new data to confound one. In addition to this, however, one's insights into life's final mystery have a way of becoming themselves "un-hinged" and occasions for further probing into increasingly obscure and terrifying areas. St. John of the Cross's Dark Night of the Soul, St. Teresa's Interior Castles and Bunyon's Pilgrim's Progress are literary expressions of this journey into consciousness, and each takes care to mark out various stops along the route. Initially the break with appearances comes primarily as an incursion of Mystery which, when pursued, leads to radical consciousness of one's decisional capacity. When this is followed, one is confronted by strange, passionate care for all that is, and out of the frenzy of active caring comes a tranquility which exceeds comprehension and constitutes human fulfillment. The 64 "States of Being" in the "Other World" do not represent sequential progress. Nor are they static entities. Rather, they represent signposts for locating oneself in a journey that moves erratically without a fixed sequence and with varying degrees of depth.

Roman Catholic mythology has held the images of Purgatory to indicate the process involved in the transformation of the "Other World" from Hell to Heaven. Protestants have spurned this image, primarily because of superstitious practices surrounding it, but have pointed to the same reality with the category of "sanctification." The initial transvaluation of values comes with the Christ event, but the complete embodiment of them is a lifelong struggle.

IV. "The Other World" is populated by "angels" and "demons."

As Calvin notes, "angels" are those forces which function to manifest the mysteriousness and depths of life to men. The incursion into consciousness of strangeness of reality comes in the midst of experiences which appear from the outside--or even on later reflection--to be altogether ordinary, mundane or even trivial. Yet for the subject, they are unexplainable occasions of transparency when another dimension of reality is perceived. The imagery of "angels" and "demons" points to whatever it is--whether psychological or social forces or something else--that transforms ordinary experience into disclosure situations.

History texts are filled with stories of ordinary events which occasioned a major transformation in the life of the person to whom it occurred. Augustine's overhearing of a children's song--Luther's experience of a thunderstorm--Wesley's terrifying voyage through a storm at sea. In each case an "ordinary" event suddenly became an occasion which illumined one's life in great depth and intensity. Every person experiences the dynamic--whether it be in a breathtaking view of a rural landscape or a confrontation with ghetto squalor--whether in facing Nature's rawness or in meeting urban magnificence. The occasions are infinite. Every event has the potential for becoming suddenly transparent to the Other. This transformation of events from trivia to windows into reality itself is indicated mythologically as the activity of angels and demons.

"Angels" and "demons" are distinguished by the value given to that which is manifest. If the mysteriousness and depths of life is **received** as benevolent and trustworthy, the forces are considered "angelic" if, on the other hand, it seems malevolent and fearsome, the forces occasioning its perception are considered "demonic." The similarity of the disclosing function of these forces is indicated in Christian mythology with the notion that demons are rebellious or fallen angels. The struggle of the self with the issue of evaluating the "Other World" is held by the imagery of a celestial battle raging between angels and demons.