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**M. Colin Grant**

### THE ADOLESCENCE OF HUMANITY

The preference for reality at our fingertips has tended to obscure the fact that even in the sophisticated world of today man lives by generalizations. Since generalizations are notoriously elusive and totally unverifiable by any criteria that would satisfy the empirical bias of contemporary life, it is popular to assume that they are unimportant. Yet, if pressed, all but the thoroughly positivistic must surely concede that there are certain general affirmations which provide a frame of reference not only for our articulate view of life, but for the unreflective day-to-day business of living. Even though we may be unable to identify our generalizations with any precision, it is these general assumptions that make life intelligible.

#### I. "Man Come of Age"

One generalization which enjoys a wide influence today is the popular assumption that man has "come of age". In this instance the generalization is easily identified because one of its sources is clearly documented. The phrase originated in the writings of the German prisoner of war, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Having been smuggled out past the Nazi guards in the 1940s, the writings of this perceptive theologian penetrated the English-speaking world in the 50s, and constituted a major plank in the platform of the secular theologies of the 60s. It is perhaps in phrases such as this that Bonhoeffer has had his most profound influence.

Bonhoeffer himself might have been surprised at the way in which such enigmatic phrases as "man come of age", and the equally influential "religionless Christianity", have become foundation-stones for a theological world-view. It has become increasingly clear that the weight such phrases have been called to bear far exceeds anything anticipated by Bonhoeffer. In the case of the phrase "man come of age", J. A. T. Robinson, in his epoch-making *Honest to*

*God* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963, p. 104 n.1), noted that the phrase suggests an emotional and moral maturity that Bonhoeffer did not intend. The phrase Bonhoeffer used was meant to indicate a level of intellectual development that produced in man a sense of self-sufficiency.

Secular theologians absolutized Bonhoeffer's phrase so that it was no longer an indication of contemporary man's self-estimation, but rather a confirmation of that estimation. The scope of the phrase was expanded beyond the indication of a level of intellectual development, intended by Bonhoeffer, to encompass the emotional and moral maturity that the phrase itself implies. Thus instead of a generalization about man's self-understanding, the phrase became a generalization about man's reality. Man does not simply think he is mature, as Bonhoeffer suggested. He is in fact mature.

## II. *Mature Humanity*

The assumption behind the acceptance of "man come of age" as an appropriate generalization for the present state of man is the equation of autonomy with maturity. This, in fact, involves a two-fold assumption—that man is in fact autonomous, and that this constitutes maturity. It is generally evident that autonomy is assumed to be a fact. The level of mastery man has achieved through technological progress has inspired a basic confidence in man which produces a growing sense of self-sufficiency. In line with this is a pragmatic view of life in which all energies are directed to the immediate, in neglect, if not in ridicule, of any reality beyond the immediate. Thus both metaphysically and epistemologically the autonomy of man is affirmed as a self-evident feature of contemporary life. That this is justified, however, is another matter, and one that defies debate since we lack that Archimedian point outside the human situation from which we might confirm or deny man's autonomy.

The equation of autonomy with maturity is more accessible than the assumption that man is in fact autonomous. Maturity is a very broad concept, admitting of a wide variety of definitions. Psychologists differ on the criteria by which the maturity of an individual may be assessed. Consequently it is even more difficult to define the concept in relation to the human situation in general. It is this vagueness of the concept that makes it such an influential generalization. Maturity obviously involves a certain measure of independence. Thus maturity can be defined in terms of autonomy. But it can also be defined in other ways—the New Testament way, for example, which identifies maturity in terms of humility. It is possible to argue that

maturity should be the complete opposite of the arrogant self-sufficiency inherent in the assumption that autonomy constitutes maturity. Instead of Stoic self-sufficiency, Christian humility might be taken as the model of maturity. The mature individual would then be the humble individual, one who acknowledges his 'humility' in relation to his fellows and in relation to the vast mystery of life by which he is surrounded. Mature humanity would then be a compassionate, open society in which individual rights are respected and in which there is a pervasive openness to the mystery of life.

The assumption of man's autonomy can never be more than an assumption, since we lack the objective perspective from which to view the human situation. The other assumption behind the idea that man has "come of age", the assumption that what is taken to be a demonstration of man's autonomy constitutes maturity, would seem to be equally arbitrary in that one may define maturity on the basis of autonomy or on some other basis such as that of the New Testament which conceives of maturity in terms of humility. The one fact that emerges from this analysis is the incompatibility of these views of maturity. There is an unbridged gulf between the contemporary assumption of the autonomy-maturity equation and the theonomous perspective of the New Testament which regards maturity as being characterized by humility. Secular theology may be viewed as an attempt to bridge that gulf. Unfortunately, the bridge secular theology built offered only a circuitous route over the near shallows returning to the same bank. One of the most urgent tasks for theology today is a return to the drafting board in an attempt to sketch the contours for a viable bridge between contemporary life and life as the New Testament presents it.

### III. *Adolescent Humanity*

The impossibility of demonstrating that man is, or is not, autonomous, plus the vagueness of "maturity" which admits of such contradictory definitions as autonomy and humility, makes possible the popular assumption that man's technologically inspired self-sufficiency constitutes maturity. Taken separately, the assumption of autonomy, and the assumption that autonomy constitutes maturity, represent logically defensible positions. In combination, however, where it is asserted that man is autonomous and therefore mature, the assumptions are assailable. On the basis of the general 'common sense' notion of maturity, with which this combination operates, it is possible to argue that contemporary life may be more adequately viewed on the analogy of adolescence than on that of maturity.

One of the most obvious features of contemporary society is the massive disorientation which often takes the form of an identity crisis. The telescopic march of technological progress produces a steady transformation in the physical basis of life, and, as a consequence, in the mode and values of life. In this atmosphere of rapid social change the anchors of the past are set adrift and a massive disorientation results. The patterns of life by which we identified ourselves change so that we are caught in an identity crisis. Now, presumably a mature individual knows who he or she is. Identity crisis is not the norm for maturity, but it is for adolescence. One of the distinctive characteristics of adolescence is the disorientation, and accompanying identity crisis, that marks the transition from childhood to maturity. Consequently, in so far as our present age is marked by disorientation and the accompanying identity crisis, it is more accurately described as adolescent rather than mature.

Another distinctive feature of contemporary society is the pathological preoccupation with sex. It has long been fashionable to smile condescendingly at the Victorian repression of sexuality. In the open, "mature" atmosphere of today, everyone knows that sex is wholesome and natural. It is not a beastly vestige to be repressed and concealed, but a basic fact of life to be appreciated and enjoyed. In fact, sex is such a wholesome and natural aspect of life that it has spawned a highly lucrative pornography industry. The wholesome, "mature" attitude to sexuality has resulted in a pathological obsession with sensuality. Once again, this is hardly a "mature" attitude. It is more characteristic of the adolescent who has just begun to discover the mystery of sex and is preoccupied with his or her own blossoming sexuality. Consequently, in so far as our present age is marked by sexual obsession, which is really sensual obsession, it is more accurately described as adolescent rather than mature.

One final characteristic of contemporary society is the 'emptiness' of religion. It might be argued that we are living in one of the most religious ages in history. But it is apparent that the widespread interest in religion is largely a phenomenon of youth. Apart from the rather unorthodox manifestations of religious fervour on the part of the young, there is a general feeling of apathy on the part of people who in the past were, or would have been, pillars of the religious establishment. Possibly this defection from religious ranks may be seen as one manifestation of the general disorientation and identity crisis that characterizes contemporary life. In any event that there is a widespread disenchantment with religion in its traditional forms can hardly be denied. Once again, this is a characteristic of adolescent, rather than of adult, life. One of the first 'authorities' to suffer the ignominy of adolescent rebel-

lion is the religious authority. Consequently, in so far as our present age is marked by defection from religion, it is more accurately described as adolescent rather than mature.

A little imaginative reflection will extend the list of parallels between the general tenor of contemporary life and the typical characteristics of adolescence. But perhaps the features mentioned are sufficient to establish the thesis that adolescence rather than maturity is a more accurate generalization to characterize the contemporary human situation.

#### IV. *Prognosis for Adolescent Humanity*

The substitution of adolescence for maturity as a generalization about the present state of humanity is much more than an academic exercise. The difficulty evident in the attempt to state the secular meaning of the Gospel illustrates the gap between the autonomy premise and the theonomous perspective of the New Testament. The crux of the problem is that the New Testament does not have a secular meaning *per se*. Its assumption is that man is essentially theonomous, a derived being whose basic characteristic is dependence. In this context, maturity involves an acknowledgment of that dependence, and consequently is characterized by creaturely humility. This is in direct opposition to the inherent arrogance of the autonomy perspective. The New Testament outlook is quite consistent, however, with the adolescent analogy. To admit our adolescence demands a degree of humility, and, therefore, to some extent, participates in the maturity envisaged by the New Testament. On the other hand, in so far as this is a serious acknowledgment, maturity remains a future goal, as the New Testament also presents it. Thus, in conjunction with the New Testament perspective, the acknowledgment of our lack of maturity is itself a mark of maturity and an indication that we are on the right road.

The compatibility between the adolescent analogy and the New Testament view of the nature and destiny of human life suggests that this may be one way of restating the relevance of the New Testament to contemporary life. Seen in this way, this substitution of "adolescence" for "maturity" as a generalization about the present state of humanity could be significant both for those who are experiencing the present crisis of faith and for those who have rejected faith as a vestige of man's "pre-mature" phase.

Secular theology added considerable coals to the fires of the popular assumption of man's maturity. The wholesale adoption of this assumption as the major premise resulted in a Gospel so altered as to be unrecognizable

and irrelevant. So great was the concern for relevance, the concern to speak meaningfully in the contemporary context, that that context came to define the message. The message thus defined had nothing to add to what "autonomous" man already knew, and so rightly was regarded as irrelevant. The disconcerting spectacle of theologians proclaiming an irrelevant Gospel has contributed in no small measure to the present crisis of faith. The baptism of man's contemporary consciousness as the criterion of truth has undermined the credibility of the Gospel. It may be of some consolation to those who are experiencing the present crisis of faith to see this as itself a symptom of the adolescence of humanity. The secular meaning, or perhaps better 'meaninglessness', of the Gospel is then not a final pronouncement from man's maturity, but a misguided reduction of the Gospel symptomatic of the disorientation of man's adolescence.

If the attempt to restate the Gospel in terms compatible with man's assumed maturity has been abortive both as a restatement of the Gospel, and as an apologetic carrying conviction for "mature" man, it is, nevertheless, a valiant attempt to reach man where he is. The one incontrovertible result of secular theology is the affirmation that contemporary man is impressed with his own maturity. Any attempt to communicate with contemporary man must be aimed at man who is so impressed by the technological mastery of recent years that he assumes that man has demonstrated his self-sufficiency, and consequently enjoys a maturity unknown in previous ages. In some sense man has "come of age" so that his new-found maturity makes the perspectives of former ages as irrelevant as childhood games are to the mature adult. In this situation, the substitution of "adolescence" for "maturity" as a more adequate generalization about the present state of man may constitute an effective apologetic device. If "mature" man can be induced to consider the appropriateness of "adolescence" as a generalization about our present situation, and thus see the inadequacy of the facile assumption of man's "maturity", a point of contact may be established for a consideration of the post-secular meaning of the Gospel.