

Worship in a Secular Age

Paper presented at the 8th General Assembly of Syndesmos in Boston, USA.

1971 July 18-24

Fr. Paul Verghese

Let me open the subject by painting **two pictures of worship services** I have seen during this year in two different parts of the world, under totally different circumstances.

I shall begin with what happened just ten days ago in Olinda, in the Northeast province of Brazil in a Roman Catholic Church. Olinda is perhaps the oldest Catholic community in **Latin America**, and the Benedictine Abbey Church where I went for a Sunday evening mass bore eloquent testimony to a bygone era of baroque triumphalism. The statuary was musty and repellent to a sensitive eastern mind, while the tarnished bronze and gold altar bespoke of neglect and decadence as well as of a loud and ugly Spanish splendour that had faded away.

The service, however, was in stark contrast with the setting. The altar had been placed down in the nave, and a handsome young Benedictine monk in shirt sleeves was flittering to and fro in the chancel getting things ready for the mass as the worshippers waited on their benches, chattering informally, some young lovers holding their beloveds in their arms; lots of teenagers and young people happily gossiping away or chewing gum; a few older and more traditional looking Catholics with rosaries in their hands. The Catholic priest did the first part of the mass up to the Gospel and sermon in his shirt sleeves and preached a sermon on the Good Samaritan—a very good secular sermon, substituting the priest by a Catholic bishop, the Levite by a Protestant pastor, and the Good Samaritan by a city prostitute who took the victim of a car accident to the nearest hospital in a taxi. He made it clear that he was by no means suggesting that it was better to be a city prostitute than a Catholic bishop, but simply that in this particular instance the prostitute was more Christian than the bishop. After this the priest invited a German Lutheran girl of about 20 to talk to the Church about her experiences in Brazil. The girl was clad in dirty red pants and a red striped T-shirt which had obviously not been washed for many weeks. I had noticed this girl coming to Church with a lit cigarette in her mouth, which she had carefully put out before entering, depositing the butt in her purse for later use. She spoke about how the churches had failed to do anything about the real problems of humanity and were insincere and hypocritical. She suggested that the word God should not be used at all since it was much misunderstood. After she finished, the priest vested himself, said mass, and half of those present took communion, while a group of youngsters played some mellow rhythm music on the guitar. What was left in the chalice and paten was given to some teenagers to consume at the altar, and they did so with obvious relish, looking at each other and giggling. There was a song about peace and then the benediction.

The two American Episcopalian friends who were with me were thrilled to their bones, and regretted that their own church could not do anything of the kind. This was truly worship in a secular age, which spoke to the needs of people.

The second experience I want to talk about happened in the Pechora monastery in **northwestern Russia** last April, during Lent. This monastery is also a silent witness of a bygone age in the history of the Russian Church, an age when Church and State were even more closely linked than in Portuguese Brazil. The gold in the chapels was well maintained and far from tarnished or faded. The icons and frescoes still shone with an inner spiritual vitality which seemed to be quite independent of the iconographer's technique of mixing paints. The monks were old and infirm, not very *au courant* with the passing clouds of ideology or fashion in the outside world. They faithfully did their manual labour in the monastery gardens, said their offices in the chapels, reverently laid incense in their golden censers and visited the rows of underground tombs of Russia's heroes and saints- all exactly as it had gone on for three or nine centuries in the past. There were some Russian tourists present, and from their clothes and attitudes, one would think that they were completely secular, drawn to this inaccessible monastery only by a historical or archaeological interest. They did not quite know how to make the sign of the Cross, but that did not seem to prevent them from reverent participation in what to many secular people in the west must have appeared sheer superstition and meaningless ritualism.

I must now make a confession to you. I was carried away by the vespers at the Pechora monastery and I had a deep sense of communion with God, with the Saints and with the Russian orthodox people in that ritual, which had no apparent relevance to our secular age, or to the problems confronted by Soviet Russia today. I must also confess that I felt I was a mere spectator at the service in Brazil, with absolutely no sense of participation, though I tried to sing the Portuguese hymns and say the Lord's Prayer in the Mass. Perhaps that confession is enough for some of you to stop listening to me. If so, I shall not be offended. Perhaps my mind and spirit are sick, and I need to be healed and restored to a renewed technological-secular consciousness.

But let me just make a series of simple statements which reveal my own difficulties with this ideology the "Secular" which has marked the ecumenical scene during the past 20 years and is today being quietly superseded.

1. The expression "secular age" is literally a tautology, like saying a "bovine cow" or an "ecclesiastical church" -for *seculum* means age or time - world. "Secular age" thus means "temporal time". My Latin is not very good, but it would, translated into Latin, read something like *Saeculum Saeculi*, and if we parody the response to the *Gloria Patri*, would sound like a good response to *Gloria tibi homine*. I will accept the terminology of "Secular age" as a working idea, but not as a concept which can stand philosophical or linguistic justification.

2. That leads me to my second point namely that the Secular ethos of our world today is characterized by two mutually related factors -(a) the eclipse of God and (b) the autonomy of man.

It is important to note that it is the eclipse of God that makes possible the autonomy of man. The eclipse can be interpreted in at least **three different ways**.

One way has been to talk of the death of God, as an "event which took place in our life time" from which even humanity is to draw the conclusion that man is on his own, and that he must take the responsibility to shape and control reality. This way was first proposed in recent history by **Frederich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre** and a few so-called theologians.

A second way, which is still a life option for many theologians of the West, is the way proposed by **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**. Here the proclamation is that God wants man to live as if God did not exist -*etsi Deus non daretur*. The eclipse of God is thus something willed by God Himself in order to make humanity wake up from its passivity and inaction so that it can assume responsibility for the world and do what is needed. Here the demand is for a "church for others" in a "world come of age", practising a religionless Christianity, a secular gospel lived out in the secular world.

The third and more profound interpretation of the eclipse of God has come from the great Jewish philosopher, **Martin Buber**. Buber advances **two reasons for the eclipse of God** which I shall interpret in my own language. The first is an event in the consciousness of man- namely that he has now reached a stage beyond self-awareness. He is now conscious of his consciousness. He knows that he thinks, as for example, Descartes beginning his philosophy with the thought about the fact that he is thinking, and deriving the certainty of his existence from that fact. Now this consciousness of consciousness or thought bending back on itself rises up as a cloud between us and the other about whom I am conscious. In prayer, for example, the consciousness of the fact that I am praying, rises up as a cloud between me and God, and my awareness of myself in prayer shuts out the presence of God and thus makes prayer impossible. The eclipse of God is thus experienced most deeply in the inability to pray. Prayer does not get through. Like modern thought it turns upon itself and feeds upon itself.

A second reason for the eclipse of God, in this way of thinking, is that technology has developed an objectifying tendency on the part of man towards all reality, or in Buber's language, the tendency to turn every "Thou" into an "it". What was only personally addressed before has now become an object to manipulate and exploit, as we do with nature today. If God could have been caught in the web of our science, our technology would be there to objectify Him also and enslave Him in order to exploit Him for our own purposes. When God refuses to be caught by our objectifying consciousness, we deny His existence. It is thus the objectifying consciousness which is so central to science and technology that induced the eclipse of God.

3. This leads me to my third point. If the Secular age is one characterized by the eclipse of God, and if it is the eclipse of God that is behind the assertion of the autonomy of man, then the most characteristic feature of the Secular age is the eclipse of God, and we have to evaluate this phenomenon as objectively as we can. I believe that the idea of the death of God is valid and an explanation for the eclipse of God only in the sense that what has died is not God, but only our idea of God. This idea of God, on deeper analysis, turns out to be an idol that has been created by theologians, especially in the West. In that sense the death of this idol is a matter for rejoicing, especially for Christians whose relation to God is not through ideas, but rather through the act of worship and prayer in which God remains a subject and not an object, one who can be addressed, loved and adored, but who cannot be described or conceptualised or comprehended

While I have some sympathy thus with the idea of the death of God, interpreted in this special sense of the death of an idea or of an idol, I have no such sympathy for the second or Bonhoefferian type of interpretation of the eclipse of God. Let me briefly indicate my main difficulty with Bonhoeffer's central demand that God wants us to live "as if God did not exist". Bonhoeffer fully affirms the reality of God, but wants us to cease being passive and to assume full responsibility for the world, "as if God did not exist" *-etsi Deus non daretur*. I can understand the circumstances in which he developed this strange idea in the context of a demonic Third Reich in Nazi Germany. The pietistic majority in the Lutheran Church was too prone to take a literalistic view of the Lutheran idea of two kingdoms and to maintain faith or religion as a purely internal matter in one's consciousness, whereas in all "secular" matters one was simply to give un-questioning obedience to the regime in power, which had, after all, according to St. Paul in Romans 13, been "ordained by God". Neither was it enough, according to Bonhoeffer, simply to maintain the purity of one's faith by confessing only the Lordship of Jesus Christ as Earth had done in re-fusing to confess Hitler as Lord. It was necessary to accept responsibility for changing the situation and not merely to keep your religion in your heart or to profess it by word of mouth. When Bonhoeffer spoke about religionless Christianity in a secular age, he was rejecting the religion of the Pietists and the Barthians, and was asking for a faith that resulted not in piety or in words, but in action.

Where Bonhoeffer went wrong, it seems to me, was in suggesting that God wants us to live as if God did not exist. For if we are to live as if God did not exist, clearly we cannot pray or worship, since so to do would be to live as if God did exist. Bonhoeffer of course said some things about the *diplina arcani* or the hidden life of prayer, but he was basically mistaken about the place of prayer and worship in the life of the Christian. The Orthodox believe that personal prayer and community worship, rather than theology or proclamation, are the true modes of not only affirming the being of God, but also of confessing and acknowledging the fact that we are not our own, that we are not autonomous, that we have our being from God can only be addressed in prayer and worship.

To live as if God did not exist would therefore be to live without prayer and worship, and to live that way is truly to perish in the lack of the knowledge of God. It is for this reason that the

outdated monks of Pechora monastery were more directly relevant to our own existence than the apparently relevant worship of the Abbey Church in Olinda.

4. Here we come to the fourth point. The "Secular Age" is a natural consequence of a God-objectifying theology, and the right way to prevent this happening to our own Orthodox Churches is to renew worship in such a way that it becomes the authentic means of addressing the transcendent God through the incarnate Christ in the Holy Spirit, and of experiencing our union with the transcendent God. Theology has to remain a handmaid of worship, love and service, but not the object or even the mode of expression of faith. The Spirit of Scholasticism with its tendency to objectify God and to analyse Him had already involved and pervaded our own Orthodox Churches quite some few centuries ago, partly due to our struggle with the Latins and with the Protestants. We need today to pull back from this scholastic tendency in our theology to make theology ancillary to worship and mission, rather than the central pre-occupation of the Church. This is particularly urgent because the very ecumenical movement may expose us to the temptation of expressing the difference between us, the Eastern tradition and those of the Western tradition in purely dogmatic or theological terms. We may be tempted to defend dogma, just because it is being attacked by Western theologians ever since Harnack, despite Barth's attempts to reinstate dogma.

5. Fifthly, I would like to say that we of the Eastern tradition have to learn something from this phenomenon of a secular faith and a secular theology. Our tradition is just as much in danger as was Western theology some centuries ago, of carving out a certain realm of life as the proper field of "religion" and regarding the rest as "secular", of no concern to the Church. This danger calls for **three definite reforms** in our own Church tradition.

First, our prayer and worship have to become more deeply saturated with a genuine and authentic concern for the life of humanity, especially of the poor and the oppressed. This does not mean developing new and "relevant" forms of experimental worship; but it does mean a thorough revision of all our litanies and intercessory prayers used in the Eucharistic liturgy and in daily offices, as well as in personal or family prayer. The litanies and intercessory prayers that we now use are sadly dated in the past, and we need to create new prayers related to the current situation of our Churches and of the people around us. This calls for a certain boldness in liturgical innovation, which is sure to be strongly resisted and opposed by our own people, but unless this is done we would not truly be fulfilling the role of the Christian Church as the Body of Him who is the Priest of Creation, even Jesus Christ the perpetual Intercessor for the world.

Secondly, the same concern for suffering humanity- and that includes the desperate poor and the lonely rich, the struggling revolutionaries and the callous upper classes - should be expressed also in our preaching, which should always strive to relate the lessons from the Scriptures to the lives of the people around us. A new programme of intensive training of the priests for the understanding of the Bible and for its authentic interpretation has to be envisaged by the Eastern Churches. We are still deplorably weak at this point, and there should be an

attempt in which all the seminaries and theological faculties of the Orthodox world can cooperate to make Biblical preaching once again relevant as it was in the days of St. John Chrysostom and the Cappadocian Fathers.

Third, the Orthodox Churches have also been hit by the malaise that has befallen almost all Christian Churches - what I call our middle-class isolation for the masses of people. The people who are most active in the local Church, priest and laity -are usually out of touch with the people of lower socio-economic levels. This phenomenon fundamentally distorts the true character of the Church where the rich and the poor, the Greek and the Russian, the Syrian and the American all belong to the same and only Body of Christ. A special effort has to be made, to interpret the poor and the dispossessed first in the Eucharistic assembly inside the Church building, and also in a life of genuine compassion and sharing in the daily life of the Christian community as a whole. If any one member of the Church suffers, the whole body suffers. This reality must be manifested in the life of the Church which must become a genuine commune, with authentic mutual aid and support. Here is an area where the young are in a better position to pioneer in bringing the healing and comforting presence of the Church to the aid of the poor, the depressed, the oppressed, the lonely, the sick, the bereaved, etc. Women too, it seems to me, have a special role in this ministry of diakonia, without which intercessory prayer in a secular age becomes meaningless and hypocritical.

6. Sixth, it is a matter of rejoicing that the reaction against traditional forms of worship are not half as acute or wide-spread in the Eastern Church as it is in the Western Churches. We can take comfort in the fact that Eastern worship, which follows the authentic tradition of the Church, is a time-tested and basically healthy form. We do not need the gimmicks of experimental worship to pander to the sensation-seeking and the bored. But the fact that we need much less liturgical reform than the West should not lead us to the conclusion that we need none at all.

I want to mention here a **few reforms** which seem to be totally and urgently necessary.

a. Regular Communion

I would place as the first reform necessary the restoration of regular communion by all members of the Church except those that have been ex-communicated. I do not doubt that participation in the Divine Liturgy without participation in the Eucharistic Communion has its own value for the Christian, and does help him to be open to God through the Scriptures and through the prayers and the drama of the liturgy. This is why the Tradition insists that even ex-communicated Christians should attend the liturgy without taking communion. But is it not ironic that the majority of Christians should act like ex-communicated Christians every Sunday? What good reasons are there for our believing people not being encouraged to enter into full bodily, sacramental communion with our Lord Jesus Christ and with the saints and the departed and with each other every Sunday? Is that not our true reality? Is that not the reality we have to

live in the Resurrection and therefore today? I hope again that the youth of the Orthodox Churches would show the way for the rest of the Church. We need of course to help our bishops and priests see the need for such regular communion. Perhaps it may be possible to start with regular group communion of some young people once every month with the preparation and then move on to regularly weekly communion. Just as Protestant youth is clamouring for indiscriminate inter-communion, which I think is justified among Protestants, our Orthodox youth must show the way forward by practising regularly communion with adequate preparation.

b. Re-examination of Confession

Many of the Orthodox Churches seem to insist on auricular Confession and Absolution before Communion. We need to have a historical-theological study of the origins of this practice. Clearly this was not the case in the early centuries when everyone took communion every Sunday. The general confession and general absolution were regarded as adequate in those days. Special auricular confession was used very rarely, and then only in the case of graver sins like apostasy, murder and adultery. My own limited knowledge of the tradition has convinced me that the practice of regular auricular confession came into the Orthodox Churches only around the 12th century or later as a result of Latin influence. But I am not arguing for the abolition of auricular confession. I am convinced that this is a pastoral necessity for believers living in a sinful world to have the possibility of a periodic personal confession to a priest of the Church and receiving personal absolution. But this should not be made obligatory every time before receiving communion. What is even more important is to give proper training to our priests to hear confession in a way that is genuinely helpful to the believer. Today quite often confession is perfunctory and therefore a parody of true confession. Spiritual counselling is related to personal confession, but such counselling can be done independently of auricular confession and absolution and can be done in the home or in the study by a competent priest, or even by unordained but spiritually mature and psychologically trained laymen. This whole matter of spiritual counselling and auricular confession should be thoroughly studied by the Orthodox Churches together and new patterns evolved to make them really serve the purpose of spiritual growth for all believers. This is vital to the renewal of worship and renewal of the life of the Church.

c. Congregational Participation

I am a great believer in the magnificent contribution that well-trained choirs can make to the spiritual beauty and orderliness of Eastern worship. But I do not think that the choir has any right to usurp completely the role of the congregation in responding to the prayers of the priest and the deacon in the liturgy. The Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the hymns and the responses should be said by the whole congregation and the role of the choir must be to lead the congregation in these responses, prayers and hymns, and not to replace them. The congregation is the worshipping community and they should not be reduced to the level of mere spectators. I feel

that this needs proper examination and the formulation of necessary reforms by the authorities of the Church.

d. The Language of Worship

I do believe that the normal language of the people should be the language used in worship. I think this has always been the practice of the Eastern Churches. Problems are raised for immigrant communities where the older generation places more emphasis on ethnic identity, while the younger members ask for the possibility of more understanding participation. I think the principle of using the normal language of the people should be strongly emphasized, and I doubt the validity of the ethnic identity in the Christian Church. I would however be in favour of retaining certain expressions in the traditional liturgical language of the particular Church, because our ordinary language is inadequate to express our deeper emotions, and certain old expressions for praising God like Halleluyah, Amen, Kyrie Eleison and even the Gloria and its response can still be used in an ancient language to bring more emotional depth into our prayers. But the basic principle should be the use of the ordinary language, without total elimination of some of the expressions in the ancient liturgical language. There are moments in the worship of God when intelligibility has to give place to a kind of speaking in tongues - in ardent exaltation in an unusual language which speaks to more than the mind.

e. Preparation of the Congregation for Worship

Our most significant form of religious education may be in enabling believers to understand the true meaning of worship, especially of the Eucharist and the other sacramental mysteries of the Church. The structure, the symbolism and the theology of Eucharistic worship have to be taught again and again to our people, and we have to train them to participate much more consciously and actively in the worship of the Church. Our people have to be taught why they worship and that worship is an act of the whole Church and not just the priest and the choir. They should not be tempted to evaluate the worship of the Church by the measure of what they get out of it. They have to be trained to see that worship is the great saving act which results from the Incarnation, and therefore to engage in it with joy and readiness, not looking for selfish personal benefits or private edification. A more intelligent rationale for worship and a more profound theology of worship have to be taught to our people, than what they now have. Here is also the place to teach them the relation between worship and daily life.

f. Architecture and Symbolic Art in the Church

Our Churches are beginning to be led astray by certain contemporary trends in Church art and architecture, where modernity becomes a higher priority than symbolic meaning, and functional utility more than the spiritual atmosphere. The church building is the presence of heaven on earth, an earthly experience in time of the kingdom that transcends time and space. The space inside the Church should therefore be so organised as to transcend ordinary space. The art and the symbolism must certainly point beyond the ordinary concerns of functional utility.

The altar must remain a place of mystery into which priests and deacons enter only with fear and trembling and not in the casual manner in which many priests and laymen enter it today. If we become too casual in the Church, we will soon lose all our sense of the transcendent and be reduced to the secular. This applies to the vestments, the iconostasis, and paintings inside the Church, all of which must be conducive to experiencing the sense of the transcendent.

Conclusion

The Secular Age, however tautological an expression that might be, is a reality--a dangerous reality. The eclipse of God is about the worst thing that can happen to man. It is only by the grace of God that there happen to be some redeeming features in the fact of this secular age. Orthodox Churches have to become aware of both the peril and the opportunity in the crisis. Both the dangerous and the positive aspects call for two related reactions on the part of the Orthodox Church.

The danger lies in the fact that the secular world is a world separated from God. All that is separated from God must perish, for there is no being that can have any being apart or separated from Him who is the source and ground of all being. The world is in peril of being destroyed, for the wrath of God destroys everything that is evil. This means that we in the Orthodox Churches have a special role to play. It is perhaps a role for a creative minority in the Orthodox Church. We are to become like Abraham praying for Sodom and Gomorrah: "Lord if there be 50, nay 10, nay 5 righteous men in these cities, destroy them not, O Lord". The role of the Church, the Body of Him who is the Priest of Creation is to continue incessantly in prayer for our world. Thus alone the Church becomes the saving link between God and the world, even when the world does not recognize God. It is not theology that links God and the world, but the life of the Church united in prayer with the Great Intercessor, who became part of our world in order to link it to God.

The task of vicarious worship and priestly intercession is being increasingly neglected by our secularised western Christian brethren. As in Pechora, there are Catholic monks in Carthusian and Trappist monasteries who continue to engage in this ministry of intercession. But in general, Catholic monasticism is in danger of becoming a secular activist group, while our own monks are not adequately sensitive to the needs and problems of the world of today. The one thing which can revitalize our worship is to have a new kind of monastic movement, fully at home in the modern world and in the world of the great mystery of worship and prayer. I do not think the way to renewal of worship in our Churches is either through a new theology or more active participation in social and political questions, but by developing a genuine, God-centred, loving, vicarious interiority of the Spirit through the disciplined community of worship, work, study and service. Such monastic communities must spring out of the new situations in the secular world -- whether in America, Greece, Russia, the Middle East or India. Now I personally wish I could leave aside my globe-trotting and my administrative and other activism, and become a part of such a genuinely Eucharistic praying, loving community!

The positive aspect of the secular crisis is that the Orthodox are called upon to re-interpret, re-appropriate and re-live their own Christian heritage in the context of a world that poses new questions to us in the new social setting in which God has placed us. We must not be bullied to inertia by the admiration and praise that we hear from the non-Orthodox or even from the Orthodox about the superiority of our worship forms.

We must also listen to the **criticisms leveled against us** by our fellow-Christians of the West. These are mainly three:

I. First about our ethnic insularity. The Church cannot belong to anyone nation, whether that nation be Hebrew or Greek, Slavic or Indian. The Church is a Sacrament of the unity of all mankind, of all nations, and peoples, and unless we break open the ethnic barriers, our worship will remain inadequate as a witness to the Kingdom of God in time and space. Here I expect our youth to show us the way in overcoming our petty parochialism, so that a genuinely multi-ethnic Church becomes formed, especially in America and the Middle East, but also in Greece and Russia.

II. The second criticism was recently phrased by a sympathetic Protestant friend who said: "The Orthodox are in communion with each other, but how they hate each other, after having given the embrace of love and taken communion together!" This is a terrible insult to our worship, and unless we do something to overcome this mutual hatred between our Churches, our worship in a secular age would become a parody of true Christian worship. Here again Orthodox youth must break through and show us the way. How my heart grieves to see the great Orthodox Church divided by human pettiness, personality cult and power-seeking!

III. The third criticism is about our insensitivity and lack of concern about the problems of the world in which we live. We may be justified in accusing our western brethren of activism and lack of interiority. But are we not in danger today of having neither time nor interiority nor any love for mankind? The Antonine monks of the ancient Egyptian desert were men who burned with genuine love for mankind and linked that love to the love of God in true prayer. We should stop boasting about the quality of our worship and realize with horror that often what draws us to our Churches is sheer ethnic pride without the love of God or the love of man. The great vocation of the Orthodox Church today is to demonstrate a new way of authentically relating the two poles of the Christian life, the love of God and the love of man. We are not equipped to do that now. We have to learn prayer again. We have to be released from our personal, group, and ethnic egoism through a deeper experience of the love of God in faith and worship. And we must develop a new awareness of and sensitivity to the fears and aspirations of mankind, identifying ourselves with the victims of misery and oppression of injustice and inhumanity. This love of God and this love for the whole of mankind must be intensely relived, in order that the Church may be purged of the heresy of divisive struggles for power and be purified to fulfill its ministry of being the Priest of Creation and its Good Shepherd who cares for it, nourishes it, and dies for it.