

NEW CHURCHES

RESEARCH GROUP

ARCHITECTURAL

SERIOUSNESS

by

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Others in this series have discussed the Liturgy and the sociology and the Theology of Church building. I am going to say something about the Language of Church building: not so much what is to be said as how it is to be said. I realize that my place in this series is to speak for architecture--the choice of my chairman, after all, is evidence for this--and it certainly is my intention to speak for architecture. But the rather peculiar position which Church architecture now holds prevents me from siting my talk well and truly in the architectural field and from discussing the technical design matters which I think you expect me to discuss.

Instead, I find that I must site it--my talk, I mean--in that uncharted territory, that no-man's-land, where architecture, theology and psychology meet.

Churches, in this post war period present a peculiar problem to the architectural historian. As a group they are remarkably homogeneous. It is really not possible to detect any consistent difference between a Roman Catholic, an Anglican and a Free Church building. They seem inspired by the same motives: by a persistent yearning for modernity coupled with an equally persistent yearning for the past; and all are profoundly unsatisfactory.

This unsatisfactoriness of theirs is not to be explained simply in architectural terms. Clearly we are not up against some technical or design deficiency which is exclusively the fault of architects. We have to deal, I think, with some massive defect in the psychology which originates with those who use and commission Churches and which is so deepseated and powerful that they communicate it to the architects whom they commission.

This defect, as I think, lies in the psychology--or, perhaps, I should say, more simply, in the point of view--of Christians.

If we can overcome this defect, resolve this difficulty, at the client end, then I believe that Church architecture will develop naturally. If we cannot resolve it, then no architectural change can do any good, for no architect can make a living by giving his clients something which they are psychologically incapable of wanting.

My talk, therefore, is not the talk of an architect speaking magistrally, but the talk of an ordinary Christian layman who is himself struggling in the mid-twentieth century sea.

And because I am compelled to site my talk on the fringe of these three formidable disciplines, I must ask for your special sympathy; because those who trespass across those boundaries of the mind which our universities have laid down run the risk of being kicked out of each territory they enter.

It is, I know, unfashionable these days to talk of "architectural style," because to do so suggests the days of the Victorians, when style was a matter of fashion, something stuck on afterwards to give an incurably bad building a certain romantic flavour. But style properly understood is something much more than this, being the outward reflection of a designer's grasp of reality, the final visible outcome of a long series of decisions, reflecting, therefore, the quality and rightness of those decisions.

Because it is this I must inevitably poach on the ground of some of my fellow lecturers, for in talking about the "how" I must inescapably say something about the "what." If, therefore, I go over some of the ground already gone over by earlier lecturers, please forgive me.

From my vantage point in the Architectural Press I survey virtually the whole field of modern building: and one point which has struck me more forcibly than all others is that, in this question of architectural language, the Church is the odd man out. There are, of course, a great many new churches which are considered by their designers and by their congregations to be "very modern." But when you look at them carefully--or, indeed, when you look at them at all--you see that they are not of the same architectural family as other modern building. They have some affinities, of course; but it seems that architects designing a church, even "good" architects, seem obliged to infuse into their design certain overtones which are altogether contrary to the logic of modern architecture, and this produces a curious effect of silliness, of "unseriousness." These fatal overtones arise because designers feel that they must bring in certain associations, usually historical associations, associations in plan, but more often in detailing. Questioned, they say "but a church must look like a church, mustn't it?" But however understandable and worthy the intention, the broad effect is that of a kind of architectural baby talk, analogous to the Gothic script in which "Ye olde tea-shoppe" used to be written.

Needless to say, departures from seriousness are not all historical. There is another opposite and even more fatal departure, prompted by the desire to be "modern" in the fashionable sense. This, God knows, is a menace in its own right; but the other, the historical association, is the more widespread trouble and, if in this talk I concentrate upon it, this does not mean that I am unaware of the other, opposing, defect.

I know that many here may feel that this is a small evil, at the worst, a foible; but I want to put it to you this morning that it is the outward reflection of a very great evil indeed. An evil not merely at the level of taste and culture, but at the level of morals and Christian understanding: one which might be compared with the failure of Christians to respond adequately in the nineteenth century to the terrible social conditions engendered by the Industrial Revolution. It is the reflection of a moral failure, but it is at one and the same time the reflection of a theological failure, a failure to grasp the bearing of Christian belief on the problem of human culture.

Be this as it may, it is important to recognize from the beginning how weighty are the reasons which are often urged for preserving some measure of historical reminiscence in Church building. I imagine that Peter Hammond has already gone over these reasons to you and I hope that you and he will forgive me if I go over some of them again. My object in rehearsing them is not to knock them down, still less ridicule them, but to provide a realistic starting point to our enquiry. I will merely state them now and will return to them again later in my talk.

First then is the strong feeling for tradition among Christian peoples. Christianity is itself traditional, being handed down from one generation to another, even though its truths are verifiable by each. Ought not this fact to be instantly visible in Church building? Allied to this sense of tradition is the sense of unity with past generations. All Christians are gathered together into a unity which is expressed for those in the Catholic Communion by the doctrine of the mystical Body of Christ. This unity is constantly being added to as each new generation is born so that--to change the metaphor--

the Christian community is like a net which is continually being woven at one end and as it is woven is let down into the water--the water of death. We who belong to the little fringe which has not yet dipped below the surface are linked to the furthest members, to St. Augustine, to the early martyrs and to the Apostles themselves, by links which are even more strong and more certain than those which link us to our own parents. A Christian generation therefore is not alone but is one with all the others. In this perspective anything which looks like novelty seems out of place.

Again, there is a sort of functional traditionalism which points out that an evident continuity in the appearance of the church is as much a part of its material function as good planning and good hearing conditions, drawing people into a right frame of mind: 'A church must look like a church'.

Next comes that strong sense that a Church is different from all other buildings, because what goes on inside it is different. It is, as it were, a sort of hiatus in environment: all else is secular, but within the four walls of the church only eternity matters. If this is so, then it is not merely to be surprised at that the Church is 'odd man out' in the architectural scene, but it is wholly proper that it should be so.

Those who take this view go on to question the ability of the language of modern architecture to express the kind of thoughts that the Church must express. There are two lines here. There are those who say that our architecture is immature and incapable of expressing any thoughts properly: and there are those who say that it is designed only to express secular thoughts. Rejection of the monumental and severance from the visual tradition of the past, these go on to say, together make it impossible to express that time dimension which is so essential a part of Christian perception. Comfort, convenience, even that kind of exaltation which comes from certain applications of modern architecture, all of these are very well in their place but are irrelevant in the business of Church building.

As I have said, I will return to these points later. It is sufficient now to say that I believe that all are of weight.

We are all conscious, I think, of living in a period of profound cultural change. This change has been maturing for a long time, if we read time in the human scale. People living 100, 150 years ago were also conscious of this change, though as their relation to it was different from ours, it struck them rather differently.

We are always told to beware of generalisations, but they have their uses nonetheless and as a generalisation we may say that, whereas the last great age, that of the Renaissance, was characterised by the discovery of Man, of Man as a free, moral person living within a Creation made for him, the succeeding age is characterised by the discovery of Matter. I do not wish to defend this generalisation now, but I think it is unexceptionable: in all that has to do with the Renaissance Man is so central a figure: the protection of his freedom of action, of his personality, of his liberty is the aim of all the period's arrangements and institutions. From that golden discovery we have passed to a second discovery which has proved even more momentous in its practical results, though less flattering: we have discovered the stuff of the created universe; and in discovering this we have discovered how intimate is the bond between Man and the

matter of which he is made, how close is the link between spirit and matter, even in so human a prerogative as the exercise of the will.

As you would expect, this discovery of matter has had a great effect on Christian thought and practice. Christian truth has often been likened to a statue part buried in the sand. All is there from the beginning: but all is not equally evident: it needs the accidents of time--wind to blow the sand away and man's own exertions in excavation--to bring the statue fully to light. We have all experienced, I think, how some change in human circumstances has given added point to some passage in the Scriptures which hitherto meant very little to us.

This discovery of matter, of the intimacy and continuity between mind and matter, has already had a great effect on Christian belief and practice. This effect has been to throw into relief an aspect of our religion which we have always known, but which we have perhaps slurred over, given insufficient attention to. I mean the fact that God Himself, in the Person of His Son chose to enter His material creation. This gives to matter a dignity and importance which it would not otherwise possess and which religions which know no incarnation could not for a moment recognise. This means that the world of matter is not something completely external to man, an inanimate lump on which he exerts his will and which is of no intrinsic account: but it is continuous with him: his destiny and its are intimately joined.

I think that this truth has always meant something to Christians, for in a sense the mere fact of Western civilization is a testimony to it; but for the present generation it means something very much more precise than it did for earlier generations. For us, human institutions, human arrangements, the human arts and sciences are seen to be far more relevant in the work of Redemption than earlier generations had ever supposed.

It has led--to quote one example--to the great concern for sociology. Where Christians of an earlier generation were content that their social duties should stop short at doing good to their immediate neighbour, today's Christians see that it is really much more difficult than this, that they must find the technical solution to social problems which will reflect Our Lord's teaching. For this it is not enough to have a good heart, you must have a good head also. If the intelligence is lacking, Christian activity is inclined to be rather disappointing, particularly when viewed from without. The comfortable Victorian gives sixpence to the ragged crossing sweeper. It did not occur to him that the only sufficient act of charity would have been to devise a society in which crossing sweepers, if there had to be such, were no longer ragged. Because he did not see this he had had a bad press ever since and his act of charity has been interpreted by the world as hypocrisy (which it almost certainly wasn't). This insufficient religious attitude of his has been stigmatised for our generation by a phrase (which I think is fairly general among all communions) 'a disincarnate Christianity'.

A Disincarnate Christianity, as I take it, is one in which, though the intentions are right, these intentions are not allied to a proper grasp of the actual human situation. Insufficiently alert to the present, people go on performing the practices and viewing life in the perspective of earlier times.

Let us be fair and admit that, to achieve a Christianity

which is fully 'incarnate' requires an immense effort of the intelligence. Christians brought up in the religious traditions of the Renaissance--whether Protestant or Catholic--have never been really accustomed to use their intellect on matters to do with religion. There is little doubt I think that the flight of the intelligentsia from the Church in the late XIXth and the XXth centuries is due to their rejection of this 'disincarnate Christianity' which is in itself so immensely unattractive, alike in its fruits and in the futile claims which it makes on its practitioners.

We have then a concept of Christianity which is not confined to Faith and Morals but which is constantly pressing outwards, animating and forming the structures of the temporal order. The spirit of Christ, working through all believers, penetrates the world of matter, creating as it does so an environment which reflects the Redeemer. Needless to say, this concept has its dangers. If a disincarnate Christianity is a consequence of unawareness of it, clericalism is the consequence of being aware that Christianity must affect the temporal order but of not understanding the mode in which it must do so. We think of clericalism as a political evil because it has occurred most evidently in relation to political structures. But in truth it is an intellectual evil and can affect any sphere. Also, despite its name, it is not by any means confined to the clergy. It arises because of an inability to see or an unwillingness to respect the natural intrinsic values which reside in the material creation. In his desire to 'win all things for Christ' the cleric seeks to impose forms borrowed from the Christian past. Thus in the field of politics he will seek to impose political forms--XVIIIth century paternalism, for instance--which no longer apply. In fact the Christian can never foretell what will be the final visible result of Christ's action in any sphere. For him, for the Christian, it is an unconscious action, for he is the tool, though the intelligent tool, in the hand of another. He goes on in faith, doing his best according to his lights. He is all the time 'open' as we say, prepared to receive truth from the most unlikely sources. 'I do not ask to see' wrote Newman in that superb hymn of his Anglican days 'I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step is enough for me.'

If we are agreed on the importance of this action in the temporal structures and if this is the mode of action, where then does architecture come in?

Few Christians today would deny the significance of sociology in the recreation of a Christian society. But equally few accept the importance of architecture in such a recreation. The reason for this of course is that architecture is still thought of in terms of style, as something stuck on to environment to please a few well educated but not very nice people. It is not yet seen--though it is fast beginning to be seen--as a significant field of human betterment. It is not yet realised--though once more it is beginning to be realised--how much the quality of life stands to gain or lose by it. And of course such awareness as there is, is still only an awareness of the grosser defects of our everyday surroundings. Architecture has hit society mainly in the realisation that there is not enough of it--there is not enough housing for instance; or in the aspect of physical inconvenience as in the disorder of our streets or the grotesque nuisance of the wireless next door. Until these nuisances have been overcome the

man in the street must be forgiven if he cannot look beyond the problems of material deficiency to the problems of visual quality, of architecture as satisfying, not the senses only but also and particularly the mind.

But as this stage has not yet been reached the architect urging the importance of architectural language is always at a disadvantage. Yet in the end the formation of a full and coherent architectural language is even more important to well being than the sorting out of our physical problems of heat, light and sound and space planning. For only such a language can give us an environment which will reflect all that we Christians know about man and his destiny and will use to the full all that we are discussing about matter.

It is my contention that the pursuit of architecture, like the pursuit of social justice, of which it is an aspect, is something which is enjoined upon us by our own religious attitude. This of itself deserves to give a new turn to church architecture, for to persevere with a separate language for church building as we now seem to be doing must abort totally the Christian effort in this field, for it prevents Christ from entering into this field, from exerting His influence upon it. Apart from this, it is a nice point whether the continuance of historical reminiscence in church-building is the hangover from the disincarnate Christianity of the XIXth century which we so strongly repudiate-- if it arises from the attitude that architecture doesn't matter anyway and therefore precedent is more important than life: or whether it arises from clericalism, from the desire to impose Christian memories on the face of secular architecture. In all probability it is an obscure and varying mixture of the two.

We are now in a position to return to the arguments which I stated at the beginning of my talk in favour of continuity in church design, of the retention of historical associations and of the inability of secular architecture to fill the bill.

First there is the question of tradition. The first point that must be made on this head is that there is no formal architectural tradition in Christianity. This was proved, beyond all question, by what happened at the Renaissance. If ever it could be claimed that an architectural style was hallowed by Christian use, this could be claimed for Gothic. Yet when secular architecture changed from the late fifteenth century, Gothic was shed without any difficulty at all. Though it would have been very easy to think up very worthy Christian objections to the revival of pagan architecture, it is striking that, so far as I know, there is no record of arguments of this kind having been put forward in ecclesiastical circles, and if they were put forward, they certainly were not listened to. It is also interesting to notice that in the use of classical architecture for churchbuilding there was no gothicising distortion: if you used the corinthian order for the nave of a church it was the same corinthian order which you used for the market hall. Deliberate archaism, the desire to infuse an ecclesiastical flavour into church building is not therefore a part of the Christian tradition, but is something quite peculiar to ourselves. This does not mean, I think, that there is no tradition in church building, but that it is a tradition of a kind which is not to be conveyed by the retention of externals. It is the kind of tradition which was so well expressed by Jean Jaures when he said in the French Parliament

'It is in flowing down to the sea that the river is true to its source.' Each generation of Christians is imbued with the same thoughts, the same feelings, begotten by the same eternal truths. But human society changes and it is the Christian instinct to encourage, not to resist this change and in any case to share in it, because it is only by so doing that they can influence society to the good. For this reason the same instincts, the same truths beget in the Christian totally different expressions at different times. So that when it comes to architectural form, the tradition is likely to be one of change, not of immobility. If therefore there is a tradition of Christian architecture it is a tradition of the acceptance of the current vernacular.

This does not quite answer the point of those who call for visual continuity in Church architecture. I think that for nine-tenths of history this condition will be fulfilled, but that, when the reasons for it are grave enough, Christian communities will accept an abrupt change. The Liturgical revival, for instance, evidently presents a sufficiently grave reason for changing the plan shape and it is my contention that the change in our ideas of the scope of Christianity which I have been outlining is a sufficiently grave reason for a change in architectural language. Some practical evidence for this is afforded by wartime experience when services had often to be held in ex tempore, secular surroundings. The effect of this, as most of you will remember was not to destroy, but to heighten the impact and meaning of the liturgy. This must not, of course, be taken as an argument in favour of the particular architectural qualities of the Nissen hut and the Naafi canteen. But it does show that for today's people the Christian rites become more impressive and full of meaning when they are shorn of a specifically ecclesiastical atmosphere.

A word must be said here of that very strong body of opinion which says that a Church must be different from secular buildings because what goes on inside is different. This argument seems to go back to the old Renaissance and classical antithesis between sacred and profane. Because the ancient world did not know the Incarnation, they made so much more of this antithesis than the Christian view can really justify. But this antithesis was carried on into Renaissance religion, reaching a sort of paroxysm in XIXth century France, when the Church of France took such a remarkable and misconceived stand against secular society. But for Christians of our epoch the distinction, though real enough, is no longer of critical importance. For us, it is not the distinction between sacred and profane which matters, but their continuity. For our generation has come to realize in a special way that the material universe and all that man does, is capable of what P. Teilhard de Chardin calls divinization. Therefore the driving motive for this visible distinction between the Church and the rest of environment has disappeared.

We now come to the point of those who say that our architecture is insufficiently formed to be used for the Church and of those who take the more radical view that it is inherently unsuitable. The second of these two objections is the more important. I am convinced that when this charge is made the real point at issue is that of monumentality. Up to now the church--in common with almost all secular building--

has always been thought of as a monument, as something that is going to last "for ever." Though modern buildings, if they are maintained, are probably no less durable than ancient buildings, this ideal of indefinite longevity is no longer held and this fact has had a profound influence on architectural form. A good modern building has an undeniable sense of impermanence and transience, and it is this, I think, that is felt to be war with the fundamental aims of Church building. You often meet with this, as it were, in reverse. Time and again I have found myself in a new Church which the designer evidently meant to be a "modern Church." And, asking myself why is this church outside the family of modern buildings. What is it that grates? I have reached the conclusion that the trouble all along has been that the architect, in response to the known requirements of his clients, has tried to build monumentality in: planes are less clear than they ought to be, mouldings abound where they ought not. Architectural style is a unity, however much it may vary in its personal expression. To break this unity by inserting overtones from an earlier age produces a result which is ugly in itself and--what matters most--fails absolutely to touch the heart.

To me, this evidence substantiates the fact that our current vernacular cannot produce monumentality, at least in the sense that it still seems to be required by religious people. Does this mean that it is, in fact, unsuitable for church building?

I have at home a copy of the Douai Old Testament of 1609: and this concludes, like so many bibles of the day, with a chronological table. This table concludes with that confidence which only an exclusive pre-occupation with theology can beget--that there were exactly 4,034 years between the Creation and the birth of our Lord. We are inclined to forget, I think, that it is in this cosy, human-scale time perspective that our inborn desire for monumentality has been begotten and nurtured. For, if this is the order of the world's duration, then it is not altogether illusory to think of a building as lasting to the world's end. It was an ideal well worth striving for. We know now, of course, that the world's time scale is not like that at all--and, if we are now millions of years from the beginning, why should we not be millions of years from the end? This violent change in the time perspective has begun to exert and will continue to exert a profound effect on our religious psychology. Some people find it infinitely distressing. I must admit that I don't. For, if it leaves man poised between vast abysses at both ends, it also has the effect of making the birth of Our Lord relatively so much closer. We have been taught to think of the Incarnation as something which happened a very long time ago and of ourselves as the latter day survivors of something very old. In fact, of course, the Incarnation was only yesterday and we would be wise--and justified--in thinking of Christianity as something only in its beginnings.

I hope you will forgive this digression, but we must never forget that the sources of architectural form lie deep in human psychology and are not to be understood by reference only to design. For me, this hankering for monumentality is a wholly understandable atavism which must not be allowed to spoil our new church architecture. That our vernacular cannot produce this effect with conviction is really a sign of strength not of weakness.

This brings me near my conclusion. If the practical lesson of all that I have been saying is that we must use the pure vernacular in church building, that architects designing a church must not choose forms which they would not choose if they were not designing a church--my argument for this has not been based on what the French call "fear of missing the bus-ism," but on the argument that there must be a concordance between our architectural approach and our religious psychology and that since the latter has changed quite startlingly during the last half generation--and is certain to change still more startlingly during the next--we must expect our church architecture to change quite startlingly too.

For we are, of course, living in an exceptionally privileged age. New knowledge about matter has created a new religious situation, enabling us, as I believe, to roll up the ghastly religious controversies of the XVIIth century. I was greatly relieved to find, in preparing this paper, that it was really no longer necessary to think in terms of religious difference--to keep interspersing my remarks with "I as a Roman Catholic think this," "you as Wesleyans or Anglicans will think that..." Though the theologians have still to take their time, at the level of culture and society, Christian unity is already achieved. And that is something for a start.

Again, we Christians are so aware of the unity of Christian doctrine over the years that we forget sometimes how greatly our response to this doctrine changes. Take, for instance, our idea of the apostolate, of Christ's action in the world of men. When the great missionaries of the XVIIIth century landed on the coasts of America, Asia or Africa, a man-of-war commonly stood out in the bay and they surged ashore to the crackle of small arms. It seemed natural and proper in those days that Christ should come accompanied by that sort of visible power, for was not the theocracy of the Middle Ages only just behind? Looking back from the vantage point of three centuries later, we see that, if their mission was only imperfectly successful, this may have been because their approach lacked something. It is easy for us to think this, rather priggyishly, but we are right; for experience has taught us to see the action of Christ in the world as essentially unseen action--the leaven in the dough is the simile which exactly expresses this: the externals of things are not greatly changed by His coming, but their core and inner reality are transformed.

So it is with architecture. We often incline to think--certainly our clients think--that the building of a church is an end in itself. You take all that is best and make a masterpiece. Certainly a church is an important object in its own right. But there is another aspect to this. For the building of a church also offers a point of entry for Christian perceptiveness into architecture itself. We have all seen how modern architecture arose as a way of building utilitarian structures chiefly and how greatly it was enriched and humanized by the mere fact of its being used after the war for schools. How greatly architecture would be enriched again if it were used on a large scale, straightforwardly, for building churches. For we must never forget that the ultimate object of a Christian community in building a church is not merely to make a holy place for their own use, but to transform environment.