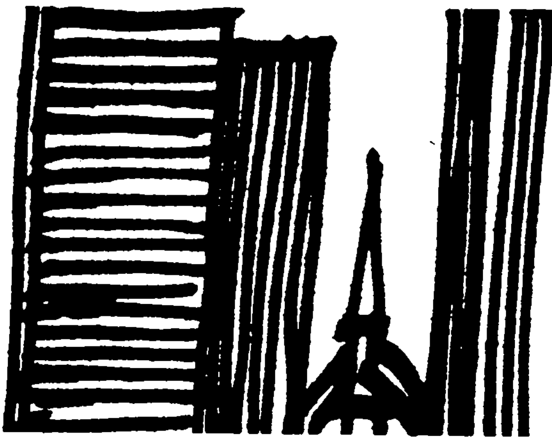

Religion & power in America today

ROBERT N. BELLAH

I WOULD LIKE to suggest that there has been a profound change in the meaning of both religion and power in modern times, that our ideas and images of religion and power are derived largely from pre-modern traditions that are less and less effective today, and that only if we discern the realities that surround us can we begin to see how what is still valid in our religious tradition can speak to current structures of power.

To characterize pre-modern Western society very schematically, we can say that it was centered on religious institutions and political institutions between which there was indeed some tension but also some balance and complementarity. Both shared an organic ethical conception of life common to pre-modern societies generally, but derived in the West from biblical religion and classical philosophy. Both society and soul were conceived of hierarchically, as composed of higher and lower energies. Power in the service of higher energies was conceived of as legitimate, as just authority. Power in the service of lower energies was conceived of as illegitimate, as oppressive, or in religious terms as demonic.

Political and religious roles and character types reflected these conceptions of organic ethical order. There were the ideas of the just king, the statesman, the good citizen, the saint, the priest, the pious layman. There were also conceptions of corrupt and unjust rulers, rebellious citizens; heretical religious teachers, and unfaithful laymen. In modern times all of these conceptions have been subject to ideological critique, have been seen as mere masks for exploitative power; and traditional evaluations have often been reversed. Yet this traditional organic ethic still gives us such ideas as we have of what is noble and what is base, what is virtuous and what is wicked, what is admirable and what deserves reproof. It also still gives us images of the statesman and the citizen, the saint and the faithful laity, that do not quite fit our situation but which we do not seem able to abandon.

Modern society replaces the older ideal of organic hierarchy with a new idea of functional differentiation of spheres of life. In this new society the central institution is no longer religion or even the political order but the economy. But because the economy lacks a *telos* of the sort that religion and politics had (the end of religion is salvation, of politics the common good), the economy does not replace them as a new kind of dominant hierarchical institution. Rather it radically undermines all older conceptions of ethical hierarchy and replaces them with functional or even technical utility instead. In so doing modern society produces a new worldview, one that reverses the traditional conception of higher and lower energies. The modern ideology is radically egalitarian and individualistic and hopes to create a good society through unleashing and manipulating egoistic and selfish desires. The new social philosophy, in the form of classical liberalism, replaces the older conception of ethical, political, practical reason, even in the political sphere. Even as early as Hobbes the problem of political leadership was replaced by the problem of regulation, of the management of human beings conceived as the material to be subjected to technical manipulation.

All of these changes were not without their precursors and accompaniments in the religious sphere, as we know from Max Weber. Yet as we also know from Weber, the increasing dominance of functional rationalization changes the place of religion as it was known in all previous societies. Religion is to be displaced from its role as guardian of the public worldview that gives human life its coherence (a role that it retained in early Protestant communities as well as in Catholic ones). Religion is now relegated to the purely private sphere where it is to be considered merely one of a variety of possible private options.

Accompanying the subjectivization or privatization of reli-

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gion, already well under way in the eighteenth century, is the tendency to depoliticize religion. In traditional societies religion was deeply involved with the public order. It was as inconceivable that politics would operate without religion as that religion could survive outside the political order. But now religion no longer had a public role, because religion was no longer seen as the bearer of a public truth. Religion along with all sorts of superstition and metaphysics could exist as fantasies in individual minds, but the public world was to know only instrumental reason in the service of human progress and this-worldly perfection.

The great changes I have been describing took place very much in the name of liberation. "Freedom" was the great slogan. The older hierarchical structures of church and state were seen as obscurantist and oppressive, as often they were. The new society was to be based on individual freedom and reason. The power exercised by self-proclaimed legitimate kings, fathers, and priests was cast under suspicion. In its place was to come as much as possible mere technical management that would leave the greatest possible sphere to individual enterprise and freedom. That, in the name of technical management, systems of manipulative power over the individual grew to a degree unknown in pre-modern society is only one of the many ironies of modernization.

ALL of these tendencies went further and faster in America than anywhere else. Philip Rieff has described in fascinating detail how first the older Western character ideals of religious man and political man, both oriented to the public world and the common good, were replaced by the character ideal of economic man, devoted to the pursuit of private self-interest; and then how the ideal of economic man modulated gradually into the ideal of psychological man, interested not only in the acquisition of wealth but also in the acquisition of experiences. Psychological man pushes the logic of economic man one stage further. There is now no longer any inner compulsion toward productivity, though productivity is still valued as a means to other, more personal, ends. What the individual learns from the therapist, according to Rieff, is "to develop the full power and liberty of his emotions without paying the price of fixing them too firmly on any object or idea."

Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* shows us how the character ideals of economic and psychological man fuse in the new pattern which he labels "bureaucratic individualism," the logical consequence of that process of instrumental rationalization that Max Weber analyzed so profoundly. Bureaucratic individualism revolves around two character types which give it concreteness and specificity: the manager and the therapist. Both differ sharply from the older character models of political leader or priest—the latter assume that there are common shared ends and that it is the role of the leader or priest to educate the community in the understanding and pursuit of those good ends. Modern man, economic and psychological alike, does not want to hear about common ends or the Good as such. There is no Good but only private and individual goods. Neither the manager nor the therapist claim to know anything about ends good in themselves. They exercise their power, and they do exercise power, only insofar as they represent the technical constraints of external reality and can provide direction to cope with those constraints. Thus the manager exercises power not through some vision of a shared life together, but because he claims to know the right decisions to make in the face of scarce resources, the laws of the market, and perhaps the number of missiles the Russians have. He claims only to provide the resources and protections which will allow individuals in their "private" lives to pursue their multifarious private ends. Similarly the therapist disavows any knowledge about the good for man. He supplies only the technical assistance for the patient, more recently the client, to discover and pursue his own ends. The manager organizes work; the therapist organizes emotions. But it is an open question whether the result is total liberation or Max Weber's iron cage. In this connection it is worth pondering the fact that the Soviet bloc seems to be converging on the same pattern of manager/therapist control. Of course it is more bureaucratic and less individualist than in the West, but if Hungary is any indication of the shape of things to come, the convergence with the Western model may be growing.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed these tendencies incipient in American society a hundred-and-fifty years ago. He described what he saw with the term "individualism," only then recently coined. "Individualism," he wrote, "is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look out after itself."

In such a society "Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart." This new individualism would be, Tocqueville wrote, remarkably congenial to a new form of despotism, which, unlike traditional tyrannies, "does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it, so that it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies" by keeping the pursuits of individuals purely private ones. This new form of despotism could be accommodated "more easily than is generally supposed, with some of the external forms of freedom," so that it has "a possibility of getting itself established even under the shadow of the sovereignty of the people."

But Tocqueville also observed that older patterns, political and religious, patterns of citizenship and churchmanship, still survived in America and held in check the most destructive potential of our new individualism. The older political ideal of republican statesmanship and citizenship not only survived in some kind of uneasy tension with the newer ideas of liberal individualism, but in certain instances actually flourished. The founding generation was quite extraordinary; Lincoln was one of the few real statesmen that any country produced in the nineteenth century; and even in the twentieth century a Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a teaching president who could educate our citizenry to the common good. And our churches

refused to be entirely privatized and depoliticized. They contributed to all our great movements of social amelioration: the opposition to slavery, the Social Gospel movement and the efforts to make Catholic social teachings effective, and more recently the civil rights movement and the opposition to the Vietnam war. Today the churches are deeply involved in the effort to halt the drift to nuclear annihilation.

AND YET CERTAIN recent tendencies suggest that the pattern of bureaucratic individualism is growing more powerful and less restrained by the social effectiveness of older civic and religious ideals.

I am thinking, to begin with, of the growth of what is called, incorrectly I believe, conservatism in our politics over the last decade, culminating in the stunning political victory of Ronald Reagan and his allies in 1980, but also of certain deep-going changes in the moral beliefs and practices of our great middle class. Reaganism seems to me a form not of conservatism, in any traditional meaning of the term, but of classic liberalism—unrestrained free-market capitalism and radical individualism. Explicitly it appeals to economic man, even in the older form that requires some degree of repressive self-discipline, but its tacit appeal is to psychological man; and this accounts for much of its electoral success.

Let us consider some of the recent changes in our society that weaken still further the older civic and religious ideals and strengthen the ever growing dominance of bureaucratic individualism. One of the things that has happened in the last twenty years is a shift in American elites, in part a change in the ruling groups within corporate capitalism, in part a change in the political elites associated with them. In the media this change is expressed too superficially but not entirely erroneously as a shift from the Frost Belt to the Sun Belt. Certainly the power of American industry has shifted from the old heavy industries concentrated in the Northeast and upper Midwest to the newer more technologically innovative industries of the South and West.

Another way to express the shift is to speak of the decline of the old Eastern establishment and its replacement by the Sunbelt capitalists—sometimes called cowboy capitalists — of Texas and California. Again this is too simple but contains a germ of truth. The Eastern establishment, at least in some of its members, still had a remnant of older civic and religious conceptions of American life. Its most representative figures came from families with long-standing traditions of public service; were educated in long-established universities, largely in the Northeast, with traditions of respect for the humanities; and had religious commitments to congregations or denominations that had a historic sense of social responsibility. Their Sunbelt successors often lacked all of these traits: they came from upwardly mobile middle-class backgrounds, were educated in technical universities, and when they were religious tended toward a private pietism with no public implications at all. They and the politicians they supported were, in a word, managers. We got to know the mentality in the Nixon years, and we are getting even better acquainted with it today. The manager, as we have said, is not a leader. He adjusts and manipulates in terms of what he takes to be the realities of the situation. If he fails he is abruptly fired and somebody new is hired in his stead. We have seen how this tendency common in corporate life has spilled over into political life and left us without vision or direction.

Even more distressing is the fact that this change in leadership is reflected in a change of ethos in a large portion of the middle class. What is significant here is not the Moral Majority, of whom my liberal colleagues are so frightened, but something that comes closer to being amoral and is in fact a majority. This new middle class believes in the gospel of success 1980 style. It is an ethic of how to get ahead in the corporate bureaucratic world while maximizing one's private goodies. In the world of the zero-sum society it is important to get to the well first before it dries up, to look out for number one, to take responsibility for your own life and keep it, while continuing to play the corporate game. That will probably also require a bit of therapy.

To some extent this new middle class replaces an older middle class, just as the new elite replaces an older one. Partly this new middle class differs from the older one in the same regional pattern involved in the shift in elites. Population as well as power has been moving from the Northeast to the Southwest. But partly the shift is generational. The younger generations of the old middle class that provided the center of American culture, the strength of civic commitment, and the support of the old mainline churches, look rather different from their elders. It is in these younger generations that the triumph of psychological man is most evident.

I AM PRESENTLY directing a research project on American values in which my research team is interviewing well-educated, middle-class Americans in several parts of the country, many of them managers and therapists or the clients of therapists. The theme that we find dominant again and again in our interviews is the freedom, autonomy, and fulfillment of the individual. One young woman therapist in Atlanta sums up what we heard from many: "In the end you're really alone," she said, "and you really have to answer to yourself. You're responsible for yourself and no one else."

This attitude, so clearly descended from Tocqueville's individualism with its danger of being shut up in the solitude of one's own heart, undermines, at least potentially, every human commitment. If I am responsible for myself alone and for no one else then my feelings, wishes, and desires are the only ultimate criterion, standard, or norm for my action. If any other person or group or institution "doesn't meet my needs"; if "I don't feel good about them"; or "I don't feel comfortable with them" (phrases we hear all the time in our interviews), then there is no reason I shouldn't leave—or if *they* should feel that way, there is no claim I have on them. Thus marriage, friendship, job, community, church are all dispensable—if these don't meet my needs I can always find others who will, or if I don't it is no one's fault but my own.

I have suggested that there are some deeply disintegrative

tendencies in this ever more dominant pattern of American individualism. But I want to emphasize that what I have called, following MacIntyre, bureaucratic individualism is not only disintegrative—it is also a system of power. Its power to manipulate depends in part on its power to individualize, promote freedom of private choice, and heighten individual subjectivity. Its power operates under the banner of liberation and freedom of the individual. Thus our conceptions of power based on more traditional systems of hierarchical domination do not apply well. (These traditional conceptions, of course, apply in much of the less developed world and to pockets of deprivation in our own society.) This new system of power—we need Michael Foucault, as well as Weber, to help us understand it—cannot simply be fought in terms of slogans of liberation and freedom, for these are slogans of its own, even if we would doubt that it has a deep understanding of spiritual or even civic freedom. Perhaps to oppose effectively the power of bureaucratic individualism we need to reappropriate under contemporary conditions older religious and ethical models of human existence.

IN PART religion in America has contributed to the triumph of bureaucratic individualism, and in part it has provided a framework to restrain it. With the help of Ernst Troeltsch's three great types of Christian religious institutionalization, we can analyze how this has occurred.

The three types are, of course, church, sect, and mysticism. "Mysticism" is perhaps a bit problematic as the term for the third type, but it becomes clearer when we remember that Troeltsch sometimes used the phrase "religious individualism" as synonomous with it. The church type we may briefly characterize as an organic conception of the religious institution for which the defining metaphor is the Pauline image of the body of Christ. The church is seen as the living presence of Christ on earth; as, in Karl Rahner's term, itself the fundamental sacrament from which all the sacraments are derived. The church has a certain temporal and even ontological priority over the individual. It is in and through the church that the individual believer comes to be what he or she is. There is a certain givenness, a certain reality, in the church which allows the individual to count on it, to take it for granted in a positive sense. Through the sacraments and the word the church takes all individuals wherever they are and nurtures, educates, and supports them in whatever degree of Christian life they are capable of attaining. The church is inevitably in one sense hierarchical, even elitist, for some are recognized as more learned or more spiritually advanced than others. The church puts forth role models—saints, those in religious orders, priests, teachers—from whom others have much to learn. All are one in Christ, but the organic metaphor allows a hierarchical differentiation of function. Along with this organic model goes a partial willingness to accept the world as it is, to compromise with the world in the service of Christian pedagogy, to stay close to power in hopes of Christianizing it to some degree. The church tends to be comprehensive and flexible with respect to society and culture, accepting and attempting to transform social forms and also art, science, and philosophy. The characteristic form of distortion of the church (each of the types has its particular form of distortion) is a temptation to authoritarianism, even coercion, on the one hand, and too easy compromise with the powers of this world or even cooptation by them, on the other. But when the church sets itself against worldly powers it can mobilize tremendous resources of resistance.

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The church type has been present in America from the beginning of European settlement, but it has never been dominant in pure form. Early New England Puritanism embodied much of the church type but with a strong admixture of the spirit of the sect. More purely sectarian forms of Protestantism emerged in the seventeenth century and particularly in the eighteenth century and strongly colored all of American culture ever since. The Roman Catholic church, even after massive immigration made it a significant force in America, remained a minority church. As it absorbed ever more of American culture it too was affected by sect ideals, a tendency that has grown stronger since Vatican II. Indeed in America the church type has grown harder and harder to understand. Our individualism—what we might call our ontological individualism, because it is more than a value, it is a fundamental way of grasping reality—cannot even comprehend the social ontology of the church. Nonetheless, the church is still among us and may prove to be one of our most valuable resources.

THE SECT TYPE has been present in America virtually from the beginning; includes the Protestant denominations with the largest numbers; and has been in many ways the dominant mode of American Christianity. The sect views the church primarily as a voluntary association of believers. The individual believer has a certain priority over the church in that the experience of grace has been seen as tempo[illegible]ior to admission to membership, even though, once [illegible] collective discipline in the sect can be quite stron[illegible]ian church sees itself primarily as the gathered ele[illegible]on the purity of those within as opposed to the si[illegible]se without. Whereas, as Octavio Paz has point[illegible]ng about the U.S. and Mexico, the church type, [illegible] of communion, includes everybody at some leve[illegible] its hierarchical organic structure, the sect with its [illegible]urity draws a sharp line between the essentially equa[illegible]nts and

reprobates without. The strong sectarian emphasis on voluntarism and the equality of believers—the sect is anti-elitist and insists on the priesthood of all believers—is congenial to democratic forms of organization and congregational autonomy. There is a tendency for grace to be overshadowed by "the law of Christ" and for the sacraments to be less central than a moralism that verges on legalism. As Troeltsch pointed out, the sectarian group is often, especially in its beginnings, found primarily among lower income groups and the less educated. It is tempted toward a radical withdrawal from the environing society and a rejection of secular art, culture, and science. "The sect," Troeltsch said, "which belongs essentially to the lower classes, and which therefore does not need to come to terms with thought in general, goes back to the pre-church and pre-scientific standpoint, and has no theology at all; it possesses only a strict ethic, a living Mythos, and passionate hope for the future." Of course, Troeltsch also points out, that is very reflective of the New Testament and especially close to the spirit of the synoptic gospels, although all three types are rooted in the New Testament and so validly Christian. Christianity began as a lower-class religion of men of no great education.

In looking at the potentialities for distortion in the sect type, we may note the extreme fragility of the sect organization. Society, particularly religious society, is secondary to individuals and depends on their continued purity and constant effort to maintain it. The emphasis on purity leads to constant splits with those felt to be impure, whereas the stress on the objectivity of the sacraments in the church type can operate to maintain the unity of the more pure and less pure in a united body.

Even though in their early stages and potentially thereafter the sects have sometimes been radically critical of the world and have sometimes experimented with utopian alternatives to it—one thinks of the Anabaptists and their many successors—they have their own form of compromise with the world. Moderate sectarianism, remaining aloof from the world, has nevertheless been highly congenial to capitalism, liberalism, and democracy. The tightly structured sect has released the energy of autonomous enterprise in the secular world. Though highly intolerant within and quick to expel deviants, sectarians have often collaborated with secular liberals in support of civil liberties as against the pressures of a coercive church. Perhaps unintentionally the sects have played into the liberal drive to privatize and depoliticize religion.

In any case the influence of the sects on American society generally has been enormous. They have supplied one source for our individualism and of the pervasive idea that all social groups are fragile and in need of constant energetic effort (management? managers?) to maintain them. There is a deep, though also ironic, relationship between the spirit of the sects and the economic man who has been so important in the American past.

The mystical type is also not new in America—one can think of Anne Hutchinson already in the seventeenth century, and of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman in the nineteenth century, but it has certainly burgeoned as a major form in the late twentieth century. Troeltsch's mystical type is not necessarily mystical in the technical sense of the word, though Americans of this type have been open to a wide variety of influences from genuine mystics both Eastern and Western. Contemporary religious individualists of this type often speak of themselves as "spiritual" rather than "religious," as in "I'm not religious but I'm very spiritual," where "religious" means organized religion seen as oppressive and authoritarian as well as hypocritical. It is worth remembering that Troeltsch sees mysticism too, at least in its moderate forms, as rooted in the New Testament, particularly the Johannine writings which are closest to but do not actually become gnostic.

Mysticism has a social appeal almost opposite to sectarianism, though it shares the latter's individualism, indeed radicalizes and absolutizes it. For mysticism is found most often in affluent, well-educated classes, perhaps one reason why it flourishes in our affluent society. As Troeltsch describes it:

> [Mysticism] seeks the free spirituality and adaptability of the church, without the binding guarantees of ecclesiasticism; while on the other hand, in spite of its position based on subjective conviction and a voluntary theory and vital ethical verification, it still cannot tolerate the radical lack of culture, the "conventicle-like" narrowness which is bound up with the social reform of the sect, and its literal interpretation of the Gospel.
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> It is neither church nor sect, and has neither the concrete sanctity of the institution nor the radical connection with the Bible. Combining Christian ideas with a wealth of modern views, deducing social institutions, not from the Fall but from a process of natural development, it has not the fixed limit for consciousness and the social power which the church possesses, but also it does not possess the radicalism and the exclusiveness with which the sect can set aside the state and economics, art and science.
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> Full of the sense that today it still does represent the highest ethical ideals of humanity, it is still unable easily to formulate for itself the unwritten social program which the Gospel contains, nor to apply it clearly to the conditions which oppose it. Gradually, in the modern world of educated people, the third type has come to predominate. This means, then, that all that is left is

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voluntary association with like-minded people, which is equally remote both from church and sect.

Thus mysticism, unlike in the sect, lacks any effective social discipline. Contemporary mysticism is the logical descendant of Thomas Paine's "My mind is my church," or Jefferson's "I am a sect myself." If pursued with thoroughness it would produce over two hundred million churches, one for each American. It is the commonest form of religion among those my research group has been interviewing, and many who sit in the pews of the churches and the sects are really religious individualists, though many more never go to church at all.

Just as radical religious individualism has played a role in the life of the Christian peoples from the beginning, it still has much to contribute today. Much of the freshness and vitality of American religion can be found in forms of "new consciousness," and they are not without their social contributions. The cultural revolution of the 1960s was essentially an upwelling of mystical religiosity; and the issues to which it made us sensitive—ecology, peace, opposition to nuclear weapons, internationalism, feminism—are still very high on our agenda. Yet the particular form of distortion to which the mystical type is prone is also more than evident—its inner volatility and incoherence, its extreme weakness in social and political organization, and above all its particular form of compromise with the world, namely its closeness to psychological man in his pursuit of self-centered experiences in preference to any form of social loyalty or commitment.

ALL THREE TYPES have their virtues as well as their characteristic potentialities for distortion. All are biblical and legitimate Christian alternatives. We can certainly see how modern sectarianism and mysticism were responses to the distortions of traditional church religion. And yet can we not say that today the future not only of the Christian faith but of anything like a decent society depends on the survival and viability of the church type in Troeltsch's sense? It may seem odd, even arrogant, for a Protestant sociologist to address the readers of a Catholic journal on the virtues of the church. But I suspect that it is not wholly inappropriate. The valid self-criticism following Vatican II may have obscured the importance of the church model for some Catholics. The recent emphasis on small, egalitarian base communities centering on the Eucharist has its value; but as an exclusive emphasis these base communities could easily repeat the errors of Protestant sectarianism—they would end by reinforcing privatization and depoliticization rather than combating them. I think only the church type has a chance to combat effectively the self-destructive tendencies of modern society, and I would say that to fellow Protestants, who have never completely abandoned the church model, as well as to Catholics. Let us remember that Troeltsch does not put the three models on the same level:

> So far as the form of this organization is concerned, it has become evident that the church-type is obviously superior to the sect-type and to mysticism. The church-type preserves inviolate the religious elements of grace and redemption; it makes it possible to differentiate between divine grace and human effort; it is able to include the most varied degrees of Christian attainment and maturity, and therefore it alone is capable of fostering a popular religion which inevitably involves a great variety in its membership. In this respect the church-type is superior to the sect-type and also to mysticism. This is why the main current of historical Christianity becomes the "History of the Church," and this is why the first result of the missionary work of the early church was "the universal Christian church."

I am not arguing for a reassertion of the medieval or Tridentine church model. The church, like the sect and mysticism, must find the right form for the historical moment. But I am saying that only the church as a type of Christian social organization can effectively combat the radical individualism and the managerial manipulativeness of modern society. Only the church can resist the cooptation into nothing more than a form of therapy that the privatization and depoliticization of modern religion implies. It cannot do this alone. It must be complemented by a new understanding of citizenship and the common good in political life. The problem is illustrated by the issue of nuclear war. The danger cannot be dispelled by managers and therapists. It is they who have brought us to the brink and lulled us into acquiescence. The church as the body of Christ can remind us that we will survive only insofar as we care for one another. As Christians and as citizens we might just possibly recover an idea of the common good, of that which is good in itself and not just the good of private desire. The task of making the church viable and effective in today's world is one that demands our intelligence and our strength and our prayers. There is nothing else today of greater importance.

Screen

HERZOG OF THE JUNGLE

ANOTHER RAIDER OF THE LOST ART

THE OPENING IMAGE of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* is the Cayahuari Yacu in South America, a mist-shrouded jungle to which the Indians refer as "the land where God didn't finish Creation." Despite the strangeness of the place, the image has déjà vu quality, for it's very like the opening of an earlier Herzog movie, *Hearts of Glass,* where the mists are those of high, icy mountains. In my previous column I was talking about the misfortune of great filmmakers who are doomed by their own originality. Their initial success with the medium makes their subsequent work look self-derivative. The example I was discussing last time was Michelangelo Antonioni, whose new film, *Identification of a Woman,* has been made too much in the shadow of his classic *L'Avventura*. In *Fitzcarraldo,* Werner Herzog's career takes a similar turn. Part of the reason the film is even worth talking