

# Change

MARTIN HENRY

ONE OF the most obvious features of life is that it changes. It is not simply that people and things come and go, that they are transitory. It is, rather, that they don't remain the same even during their brief life-span. The celebrated German philosopher, Hegel, is frequently cited as the modern thinker who thematized the reality of change and made it the basis, indeed the substance, of a whole philosophical system. Closer to the Catholic world is the figure of John Henry Newman, who claimed uncontroversially that to live is to change, and that to live well is to have changed many times.

Yet change seems to have at least two quite different faces, in human affairs at any rate. There is the inevitable, automatic change that occurs biologically, as bodies age and eventually disintegrate. Presumably this wasn't the goal that was uppermost in Cardinal Newman's mind when he made his comments on life and change. Then there is, at another level, the change human beings can themselves effect by giving their lives a new direction. The final words of Rilke's poem 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' ('You must change your life') assume the possibility and desirability of such change.

History is full of examples of dramatic changes in direction by figures whose trajectories changed the way the world subsequently lived and thought: the Old Testament prophets of Israel, Zoroaster [Zarathustra] in Persia, the pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece, Confucius in China, or Buddha in India – to name some of the most conspicuous figures of the so-called 'axial age' – are just a few of the best-known examples from the ancient world. The Western tradition, it hardly needs to be emphasized, still moves in the religious and cul-

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**Martin Henry** lectures in dogmatic theology at Patrick's College, Maynooth. His books include *On Not Understanding God* and *Tangents: Essays and Reflections*.

tural shadow of great 'converts' like St Paul, St Augustine, or Martin Luther. And one of the principal themes, if not the principal theme, of modern thought and modern literature is the way in which the past – or tradition – is widely and increasingly experienced as no longer capable of nourishing the spiritual needs, or answering the deepest questions, of modern people. As the nineteenth-century French thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville, put it:

Since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.

The modern age is thus often experienced as being at a crossroads, unsure of how to proceed.

## NEW STARTS

De Tocqueville was describing an already long familiar state of affairs, which had begun much earlier and had been intensified by the Enlightenment. Descartes may be taken as the paradigmatic case for modern thought. Realizing that the old answers, which he had inherited from his scholastic forebears, were no longer adequate to his needs, he sought new ones.

Since Descartes's day, many new starts have been suggested by thinkers of various hues. Unlike the early Christians of late antiquity, however, in modern times no new way has yet won any definitive victory over its rivals. Hegel's own system for explaining the world, despite its enduring strengths, would find few whole-hearted advocates today. Similarly, the practical attempts undertaken by Marxists to remake the world in the light of a materialistic interpretation of Hegel's thought, have created so far no new earth.

Nevertheless, a viscerally felt need for an existential change of direction is still present and is now virtually a given in contemporary culture. It is as if the world were experiencing a new 'axial age,' to borrow the term given currency, as mentioned earlier, by Karl Jaspers.

## LOOKING TO JESUS

The most long-lasting and most obvious change in history, in West-

ern history at any rate, a change reflected in the actual dating of history itself, is the one marked by the life of Jesus.

And yet Jesus himself does not seem to fit into the pattern just outlined of someone whose own life was dramatically changed by some transcendently significant experience that divided it into two different parts. Even the 'temptations' in the desert can hardly be interpreted as a watershed in the life of Jesus. They read rather as exemplary illuminations or implications of beliefs he already held. As the great 'changer' of others, Jesus didn't seem to undergo any dramatic life change himself.

#### THE TRANSCENDENT IN HISTORY

Could this mean that change, even great change, even the seismic change of an 'axial age,' is not in fact the most important feature of human existence? That the only ultimately lasting truth of human existence comes not from any created source, not from any human conversion or change, however profound and far-reaching, but only from God, the transcendent, unchanging creator of the world who, Christianity teaches, was incarnate in Jesus?

Human conversions and changes are always responses to circumstances not of our making. To that extent they are passive or reactive, though they are also the glory of the creature.

#### CHANGING THE WORLD BY BEING HIMSELF

But Christianity's message of redemption seems to go even beyond the human desirability and possibility of change. Jesus changed the world. He did so, however, not by changing himself but by being himself, by being divine. What, though, it might well be asked at this point, of the resurrection? Is that not 'change,' if ever there was? The change, however, enacted by Jesus' resurrection, does not appear to represent change in any of the normal historical senses evoked earlier. Hence, while historical change can clearly be significant for humanity, the goal of human existence is, for Christianity, even more significant, since it entails, beyond death and beyond history, a participation in the unending, unchanging life of God.

## Ministering with Vision

DAVID N. POWER, O.M.I.

**T**HE MARKING of the Year for Priests will, no doubt, have encouraged many a priest and served to renew their dedication to their ministry. As ministry is renewed, however, pastoral theological reflection has to move forward apace and it is clear that all ministry is affected in this renewal. Some theological reflection provides motivation for a renewed ordained ministry by resort to the standing image of a bishop or priest who acts in the person of Christ. But what is needed more fundamentally is reflection on the mission to which the Church and its ministers are called in a global world. Unless Christian communities have a vision of what they are as Christ's Body and of their apostolic and missionary presence in the world, it is hard to realize much deepening of ministerial action.

#### ORDAINED AMONG THE BAPTIZED

In calling for a celebration of a Year for Priests for 2009/2010, Pope Benedict XVI expressed a desire for an authentic recovery of the role of the ordained in the Church.<sup>1</sup> What was augured was the development of a ministerial spirituality which joins the priest intimately with Jesus Christ through his ministry in the service of the baptized and of the Church's evangelizing mission in the world.

While one of the chief concerns of the Pope was priestly spirituality and a reform of priestly life exacted by the various scandals which have

1. For this letter, see [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), accessed November 9, 2009.

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**David Power** was born in Dublin in 1932 and joined the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1949. Having studied in Rome, he taught in Ireland, in Rome, and at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, where he is now professor emeritus. Since becoming emeritus, he has provided courses at theological institutes in French Polynesia, South Africa and San Antonio, Texas. He is the author of several books and articles, principally on sacraments and liturgy.



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Editor: Bernard Treacy, O.P., Dominican Publications, 42 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Email: editor.doctrineandlife@dominicanpublications.com (for editorial enquiries, typescripts, etc.).

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