

The life that represents a Christmas message

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IN difficult times we begin to suffer from stress, and we forget who we really are. But if we begin to remember, suffering may cease and stress turn into a creative force.

For this reason I want to recall some great personalities of recent Swiss history in the hope that we may recognise in them something which is precious to us.

I shall begin with Jean Gebser (1905-1973), a personality Switzerland adopted some 30 years ago when he was 46 years of age. This was no "accident" because he represented the characteristics the Swiss have always stood for – a deep concern for human values, freedom, dignity and doing the right thing.

It may be uncommon but his life and work does represent a Christmas message – and for some, perhaps, a Christmas present.

The life that represents a Christmas message

EVERY epoch in human history has men and women who carry a tremendous load of work in persistent and silent study and reflection about the age-old questions of the human mind: Where do I come from? What is my origin? Where do I stand now? Where do I go?

Sometimes it happens that such a person crosses our path. It may be from a glance of his eyes, a smile or a long conversation that there springs such a spark of insight, a vision of such depth and clarity that we are no longer the same. Something has changed.

For an instant, the restless mind seeking the truth is stunned, becomes silent and simply sees the many little stones and pieces of experience and knowledge falling into place to form a mosaic of great beauty.

Despair is forgotten; a firm and strong hope has taken its place. Nothing has changed in our external situation and all superficial evidence may still speak against us, yet what a difference. We have undergone a change of heart and see with new vision. It is a great blessing to meet such people. Such a person was Jean Gebser.

Born in Posen, he went to school in Breslau and Königsberg, studied at the University of Berlin, in Florence (1928-30), in Spain (1931-36) and in Paris (1937-39). Just before the Second World War, in August 1939, he settled in Switzerland. At the Institute for Applied Psychology he became an inspiring lecturer and began to publish the

results of his studies.

His impact was considerable but especially among academics who still consider his research and his insight of outstanding merit. It was his personal warmth that made him attractive to so many friends, and it was to them that he imparted his vision.

He was adopted as a Swiss citizen in 1951. Finally, the University of Berne called on him to be honorary professor of Com-

**By Fr PAUL
BOSSARD**

parative Culture in 1967. For his outstanding literary work he received several distinctions – a share in the Schiller prize in Bonn (1956), the prize for literature of the Esslingen Guild of Artists (1962), the Kogge-Prize of Minden (1964) and the prize for literature in Berne (1965).

His life's work, which never stopped until his death in Burgdorf in 1973, was called "Ursprung und Gegenwart" (Origin and Presence). He began work on it in 1932 and published the first part in 1947 and the second in 1952. It is an attempt to throw light on the 20th century from the background of human history.

He was not the first to attempt this. There was G.B. de Vico (1668-1744) of Naples, the first scientist to begin such research. Oswald Spengler became famous through his "Untergang des Abendlandes" (Munich 1918), which was translated into English

as "Decline of the West" (London 1926-28).

Spengler, from his materialistic outlook, simply sat back and predicted doom. And there was his contemporary, Joseph Arnold Toynbee, with his "Study in History" in 10 volumes (London 1934-54) who as a true Englishman was interested in ideology and in how things worked.

Gebser knew them and could rely on the facts that they had

established, but this was not good enough for him because his main concern was the human person and how he could survive.

The threatening clouds of a world crisis rising on the horizon were plainly visible to him, and he recognised the two world wars as a modest beginning only. Where is the energy for human survival? became his burning question and he began to search for its origin.

With scientific thoroughness, he traced human history back to the deep darkness of the prehistoric past, examined the earliest documents wherever they could be found, and tried to interpret them. He discovered his own soul and then the soul of primitive man.

He rejected the term "primitive" and replaced it with "man in his origin," who had the same potential for human growth and consciousness as man today. From a state of deep sleep it had

begun to awake in single flashes, and this insight is the core of Jean Gebser's "vision" of the origin of man.

From the state of sleep which he called "archaic structure" – of physical consciousness with zero dimensions of which we know nothing – man awoke to the second structure of "biological or magical consciousness" with one dimension.

Magical rituals, taboos and idols helped him to cope with the world and survive. When magic declined into sorcery it became inefficient, and a deep crisis brought about a breakthrough to the third structure of "psychic or mythological consciousness" with two dimensions in the discovery of the soul in dreams and imaginations.

The single flashes of insight were joined by the rhythm of the heart and ordered. So time was discovered, which is a quality of "the heart." (If one says I have no time, he may as well say I have no heart!)

Mythologies, Polytheism, sacrifices and ceremonies were essential to cope with the outside world and bring the experience of the inner life into harmony with the outside. And again an even greater crisis, when the "gods died", shook the people with wars and uncertainty.

The next structure began to break through – "rational consciousness" with three dimensions and the rise of Monotheism. It began around the year 500 BC, which marked the birth of Western civilisation and finally led



to the discovery of space in the perspective through Leonardo da Vinci.

Philosophy and science began to rise, based on logical thought and not on the insight of the "heart", as before. And here Gebser discovered that something had gone basically wrong in Western civilisation. It was one sided – male orientated from its very start. It lacked the balance of the female qualities.

The mythologist Heraclit had written a work of which only one little fragment was known. It said: "War is Father of all things . . .". This became the foundation of all inventions and progress, and it shaped the entire civilisation with all its inhuman aspects.

Gebser tried to discover the second part of this fragment and used the logic of mythology which always has a balance of the male-female aspect. He succeeded to do it convincingly: "... and Peace is the Mother of all things!"

This became the key to his understanding of the times, of the grave crisis and its great dangers for human survival. Rational, one sided logic and male dominance is at the "end of the road." A new consciousness of four dimensions must break through or it is the end.

And that this is actually

happening, Gebser proved with detailed studies of all aspects in human life and in all disciplines of science and technology. He showed the parallels and all possible corresponding lines, beginning with Einstein's theory of the relativity of time and space and the discovery of nuclear energy (which is an energy of the fourth dimension), to the structure of language, to the arts and all other aspects of civilisation.

All fall into place like a huge jigsaw puzzle. Thus, "Divine Reality" becomes transparent in his great work of scientific research. The great plan of the world as macro-cosmos becomes evident in the human person as micro-cosmos – or with a word of the bible (Genesis 1,27): "Man created in the image of God, as male and female – side by side with equal rights!"

This is nothing new, we might say. And nobody would agree more than Jean Gebser. But to prove it with such elaborate precision and careful thought, and to present it to us in such a convincing way, is the work of a genius, a workload of superhuman strength and persistence, and for that he spent his whole life.

It is not surprising that it needs some strength and endurance to follow his thoughts through the three volumes of "Ursprung und

Gegenwart" and to be rewarded by his insight. But to be touched by his personality, as was the privilege of his friends and disciples, is even more rewarding. It is inspiration.

A remark made at random on the fringe of a discussion – accidentally, it was caught by a tape recorder – gives an illustration of him, his humility, his deep respect for man, his warmth of understanding: "What does it mean, after all, to be human if not the attempt of being a humble collaborator of God?" He quickly added – as if he were frightened of his own words: "C'est une façon de dire, naturellement (This is, of course, a figure of speech), may each one understand this word in his own way!"

He was no theologian and never wanted to be one. He did not believe in a God of philosophers. He was too much of a scientist in the field of human history and culture to know how much the word "God" had been abused in search of power over other people. But he did make divine reality transparent in his work and in his life. And this is more than "theo-logy" – talking about God!

Next year will be the 10th anniversary of Gebser's death. May his message and his life be an inspiration and become a sign

of strong confidence and hope.

"War", Gebser has shown very clearly, "is not brought about by people but through a mentality people are obsessed with, be they big or small. It is not always possible to change such a dangerous mentality, but it can be opposed by a stronger and more vital one, and it will defeat it!"

● Jean Gebser's collected work in seven volumes has been newly edited by Novalis Verlag AG, Schaffhausen, Switzerland, 1975.

Vol. I – Rilke in Spanien; Lorca und das Reich der Mütter; Der grammatikalische Spiegel; Abendländische Wandlung.

Vol. II – Ursprung und Gegenwart (1. Teil).

Vol. III – Ursprung und Gegenwart (2. Teil).

Vol. IV – Ursprung und Gegenwart (Anmerkungen und Kommentar).

Vol. Va – Vorlesungen zu Ursprung und Gegenwart.

Vol. Vb – Vorlesungen zu Ursprung und Gegenwart.

Vol. VI – Asien lächelt anders.

Vol. VII – Verschiedene Arbeiten und Vorträge.

His work is being translated into English at the Universities of Ohio and Memphis in America under the leadership of Prof Dr Algis Mikunas, Center for Jean Gebser Studies, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio 45701, USA.

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