

RELIGION

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PROTESTANTISM and the ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT*

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In dealing with Protestantism and the Ecumenical Movement I shall deal briefly with the causes of separation, the occasions of intersection and the promise of interpenetration.

I. The Causes of Separation

It is important, I think, to stress the achievement of a perspective of sufficient distance and complexity as one talks about the separation in the body of Western Christendom. The specification of the causes in the break in the unity of the church, and the just balance in our estimation of these causes is a very complex historical problem. One of the first benefits of the Ecumenical Movement among the churches has been a disposition to see this, and out of that has come a more objective and a more just evaluation of how that separation came about, particularly the separation of the 16th century, and the consequent emergence from that of a much more responsible historiography of the unity and the break in the church. For a long time our separate histories were confessionally dominated in such a way that the persons and events who were known as having played important roles in the 16th century, were described in quite polemical, confessionally dominated ways. But that kind of the writing of history even from within the separated bodies of the Roman Catholic and the non-Roman Catholic churches has now been largely replaced by cooler and profounder studies.

I should like to point to several foci of thought and life which may serve not as a catalogue of causes but simply as indicators of the depth and complexity of the separation. It is important to do this because if we do not, we misunderstand the problem by over-simplification, we are tempted to think of issues in non-historical terms, and we also run the risk of the peril of "emotional ecumenism" that inflates hopes by immature reflections. The historical, as such, is a kind of a booby trap or a landmine; these things must be found and exploded in the rear before any real advances can be made. I proceed then to carry through the effort to

specify certain of these powerful causations for the separations in Christ's church.

1. The theological

One of the results of historical scholarship has been to destroy clichés here. Certain former specifications of the 16th century theological break are now seen as having a "slogan-character" that does not really do justice to fact and that may actually conceal fact. Two of these may be pointed out as illustrations. First, the relation between faith and works and redemption. That relation was never as corrupted as Protestantism has supposed; and it was never as innocent of error as Catholicism has supposed. Second, the role of Scripture in the formation of teaching was never as simple or single or pure as Protestantism has supposed, it was never as powerful and continuous in relation to tradition as Roman Catholicism has supposed. In support of both those propositions one could adduce enormous amounts of evidence from Faith and Order studies on the one side, and from the documentation of Vatican Council II on the other.

I would suggest that down under is a very old problem. That problem of the relation of faith and man's work and the reality of redemption was not given a final settlement in either the Reformation Confessions of the Non-Roman churches, or at the Council of Trent. It confronts us now in a quite new way for which neither Trent nor the several Protestant formulations are any longer adequate. The formulation, if I may attempt one is this: How is the power and the freedom of God in his Grace to be related to Church, to History, and to Nature? There is the theological issue that can be indeed illuminated by the past but cannot be solved by solutions from the past. Different ways of understanding that issue constitute, in my opinion, the deepest difference.

2. The political

The various children of the 16th century break in the church were not thereafter wandering around in a political vacuum, each cherishing his own confessional or devotional substance and that of his fellows. Both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants in the 16th century existed in very close relationship to existing and emerging forms of political or-

* An address at the Ecumenical Institute, sponsored by K.U. and K.S.R. on May 1, 2 and 3, 1966. Dr. Sittler is professor of theology in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

der—in Italy, in the German states, in France, in the Low countries, and elsewhere. And theological differences became so identified with the political realities of power and of conflict, and theological positions were so regularly made the devout masks for less elevated purposes, that one's faith in God has to be very strong to prevent utter cynicism as one historically goes back over the events of those days. Nor, to be quite candid, is this a fusion of faith and interest whose fateful form was exhausted in the past encounters of the church. Neither cardinals at Rome discussing 20th century issues, nor Protestant church officials in international gatherings ever vote for the truth completely unalloyed by place and political system out of which they come and of which they are children, and national interest with which they are identified.

3. The cultural

I want to speak of the cultural foci of the thought and life of the church—then and now. How a religious community thinks of grace will profoundly affect how it thinks of and deals with and has transactions with the culture of this or that place in the world. A German Lutheran, a Swiss Reformed, a British Anglican, a Free-churchman from the Puritan tradition will work out his positive, or his negative, or his neutral relationship to the energies and the forms of culture in a way that is deeply correlative with how his faith puts him in the world.

I cannot, of course, expound here at any length any of the ramifications of this fact, but only affirm that in our discussions, it ought to play its proper role with what might be called an "historical sense of humor." If that does not happen, that is, if we do not have an historical sense of humor about the relationship of theological confession, devotion, cult, etc. to the national culture in which this confession, church and community unfolds itself, we will become quite unable to make the kind of clear distinctions needed. I have seen Swedish Lutherans who do not make sufficiently clear connection between their adherence to the Augsburg Confession and the practice of smorgasbord and I have seen Italian Roman Catholics who cannot conceive of the forms of the Catholic faith existing in some other cultural formation than those that characterize the formation of the common life of the church in that place. Let us use but one illustration of what is involved. If one were to study the indigenous hymnody for instance of the separated Christian communities he would become aware of how profoundly this literature is both a lyrical and devotional expression of its confessional adhesion and also a transparency to its cultural character and how formative is this culture in shaping and steeping the language and the notions of devotion. I think, for instance of the cultural formation and the cultural penetration of the libretto for the German chorale with its richly episodic Passion accent, and the attendant Christ-mysticism which was a pietist Lutheran event of the 17th century or of the Anglican hymn which is utterly suffused with the same English national sentiment that one finds in the lyric and heroic poetry of the same period that produced the hymns.

4. The emotional

By this I mean the feeling of self-consciousness as a member of this or that community—the kind of warm feeling of belongingness which constitutes membership in the community and which enshrines the confessional statements, the devotional and liturgical practices of that community. This may be illustrated from our common life in these United States. From the very beginning the Catholic and the Jew were a strange element in the American amalgam—although

both were here very early. The enormous momentum of the 17th and 18th century English parliamentary experience combined with the energy and the sheer dominance of the New England fact set the ethos for this place and our people in such a way in religious, social and political life that the Catholic and the Jew remained for a long time strangers to that. We must face the fact that 19th century Catholic immigration—from Poland, the Baltic states, from Italy, Ireland, Spain—was for a long time regarded as the entering of an esoteric people. These were strange people and the fact that their own traditions predated English experience by many centuries, did not exercise due force in virtue of their strangeness in language, in customs, and in the force of their corporate recollections which drew them closely together as a group. And this is true of the Jewish community. Humanly, historically, culturally, religiously, the Jew was an old man when he came to this place, and this was so clearly the place of the new man in a new Eden that a century or more had to elapse before that fact could be acknowledged and he be accorded something like due place.

And the Roman Catholic: how strange was his religious life—his churches silent, sombre, candle-lit, a liturgical movement in gesture and mood and language so far away from Calvin, Luther, Wesley or any of the indigenous American religious communities. This was indeed less so for Lutherans and Episcopalians—but neither of these groups was centrally formed by the American experience. Nor was either of them to become a dominant national group.

I grew up, for instance, in Southern Ohio and I remember still the sense of strangeness and of the unknown that came to me when as a small boy I had the chance to attend with a friend of mine, another small boy, the annual Roman Catholic parish parade on the feast of the assumption of the blessed virgin. The banners, the figure of the blessed virgin carried by white-robed children, the richly vested priest from the parish church, the haunting songs so unlike what I had learned as being proper to religious worship, the visible gestures of devotion—this was a new, but somehow a reminder of an old world. And something stirred deep down in my genetic system which was rooted in Alsatian Catholicism so that that strangeness was both frightening and alluring. The unkind things we children said before that assumption spectacle were abundantly repaid when the Lutheran Gemeinde had its parade on the Festival of the Reformation on October 31. For a long time in our national history here the data of the particular concealed from us the presence of the common, and this went on for too long a time.

II. The Occasions of Intersection

1. In scholarly and academic life

I think, for instance, of how in Germany and in the Low Countries the Evangelical and the Roman Catholic communities have lived a long and a numerically quite evenly balanced and on the whole a quite open relationship to one another for three or four hundred years, and both of these communities in Germany and the Low Countries have powerful intellectual traditions which were articulated in strong theological faculties, and their common output was very great. Here, given such a situation, the occasions of intersection were many, and these were supported by the trans-confessional mores of the academic communities on the European continent. There were great faculties at Tuebingen, Berlin, Heidelberg, Leipzig. There were also great Roman Catholic faculties at Freiberg, Munich, Vienna and other places and these faculties for a long time have, if I may put it so, taken in one another's washing.

For instance, the magnificent Protestant labors in biblical research had a profound, if largely silent hearing, in Roman Catholic schools for at least a hundred and fifty years before this century.

In all areas of scholarly work, Protestant and Roman Catholic, there was much done very self-consciously in the presence of the other. Now this is very important. No Evangelical theologian for two hundred years in Germany or in Europe generally has written except self-consciously in the presence of his Roman Catholic colleagues if for no other reason than he knew very well that the works would be critically handled in the learned journals coming from the other community, so the kind of blithe sailing along in our own tradition, using our own language and acting as if we could ignore the other simply has not existed there as it has among us. This accounts in no small degree for the power, the depth, and the clarity of understanding that characterized the Dutch, the German, and the Austrian prelates and theologians at the 2nd Vatican Council.

But this work could by itself not have cracked open the several communities to one another, had the second kind of occasion, of which I now want to speak, not occurred. We must now speak of these more public kinds of intersections that have taken place and I shall list what I think to be the most important.

2. The missionary situation

I think it fair to say that after Trent and Augsburg and Westminster and Heidelberg and the Belgic confession and the Scottish confession and the great confessions of the Reformation time—after this confessional period for 300 years the enormous missionary outreach of the Roman Catholic community on one side and the various non-Roman Catholic missionaries on the other side went their vigorous but quite separate ways. But in the beginning of our present century Roman Catholic missionary conferences, particularly among the missionary orders, were matched by the non-Roman Edinburgh Conference on Missions in 1910 among the Protestants, and the problems presented to the mission effort of both churches or all the churches at that time were virtually identical. I just read the report of the 1902 conference of a Roman Catholic Missionary Order and studied the address made by the superior of that order, and then I read cheek by jowl with it the address of John R. Mott to the Edinburgh Missionary conference and each man could have made the other speech from the standpoint of the substance of the crisis which he presented to his colleagues. The substance was as follows. That the problem of proposing the Christian faith in its Western form to a people not formed by Western culture had at long last to be faced, and this was to create deep theological, liturgical, devotional revolutions within all the churches.

Related to the above is the problem of disengaging church missions from the admittedly waning but still strong colonial period of western expansion. This was an intersecting occasion for both churches.

Due weight must be given to the problem of a fragmented Christendom confronting a people bewildered by a fact they could not be expected to comprehend, and instruction in which was certainly not germane to the preaching of Christ's Gospel. I saw an evidence of this in New Delhi some years ago when I was out wandering around the town. I saw a little chapel on one corner—the American Baptist Church. Now that was a fairly comprehensible sign and I think the Indians understood it. But exactly on the other corner was the Southern Baptist Church. We could not quite expect, you know, that the Indians should recapitulate the history of the American civil war and the internecine difficulties of

our fundamentalist period as a precondition to preaching the Gospel to them. This kind of problem magnified many times and in all places has been a powerful force in the ecumenical movement.

3. Christian service

After the gigantic devastations of World War I throughout the European continent, there was a large, enthusiastic, transconfessional Christian response—sheer works of mercy, going out to meet a sheer human need. This uncorked, as it were, a common tradition, not in terms of its intellectual, theological, canonical or ecclesiastical formation but in terms of human tragedy and divine charity. And out of the intersection that was called forth and which actually took place following World War I was engendered one of the early ecumenical conferences among non-Roman Christians called the Conference on Life and Work. The title is exactly descriptive. It was an effort to ask after what possibilities are there to do practical and humanly needed life and work together after so many years, indeed centuries, of separation. And on the Catholic side the same war called forth from the world Catholic community this same kind of response and these responders intersected at the front where the work was being done. One can put it this way. Separated hands that came together over powdered milk, clothing, pharmaceutical and medical supplies, could not very long keep their minds and traditions apart where their hands met. And thus out of life and work was engendered the suggestion that we should now put our brains where our hands were and there was called in 1927 the first world Conference on Faith and Order, which was assembled at Lausanne in Switzerland. It is interesting to think back over the Roman Catholic response to the first invitation to the Faith and Order Conference. The invitation to all Christian churches to send representatives to Lausanne to talk about the faith, the substance of what is believed, and the order, that is, the organized life of the church, went to all Christian churches and one went, of course, to the Vatican. In 1927 this invitation received there a crisp rejection. In 1934 at the meeting in Oxford, a modulated rejection. In 1954 at Evanston, an unofficial presence. In 1961 at New Delhi, official observers and participants. In 1963 at the 2nd Vatican Council there were official observers from the non-Roman Catholic ecclesial communities. The course of these intersections and the nature of them is a very complex thing.

III. The Promise of Interpenetration

1. A fresh arising of good will in these days

This fresh arising of good-will, charity, the suspension of suspicion and a sensitive understanding between the communities is a reality but I would remind you that this mood of openness, this eagerness to listen to one another, may be a very febrile thing. It must be assiduously cultivated. We must learn to rise above personal abrasiveness as these things occur and official idiosyncrasies on the part of our church bodies. We must value and cherish what has already taken place, but we must not depend upon it.

2. Responding to world-change

Pressure toward renewal and reform is being exerted by world-change, and is exerted upon all of us together. An inner obedience to the unity to which we are called must be more than matched by a renewing response to the revolution in which we mutually stand. That is, if the Roman church now, as some fear, takes 5 or 10 years out to chew the intellectual cud of Vatican II and withdraws herself to retail what is there wholesale set down, as it were, and does not keep herself ever more open in a way that the past five years

have notably characterized her as being—open to the revolutionary character of this time—then much will be lost. And we, too, if because of the fresh openness of the churches and the obvious joy we get in greeting formerly separated brethren as indeed brethren, if this joy begins to intoxicate us with its own substance and is not understood, properly related to that which calls it forth—the hope and the promise of the unity of Christ's church—then we shall have lost the immeasurable gains of recent years.

3. Common worship

In introducing the realm of worship as a third area of interpenetration, I shall use two lines from a lovely poem by the late Theodore Roethke: "I wake from sleep and take my waking slow; I learn from walking where I have to go." *I learn by walking where I have to go.* I would suggest that quite aside from the formal continuities in theological education, from the canonical interchanges or ecclesiological interchanges of top brass and from all the little interchanges that occur in ecumenical "dialogue," it's really here where the unity of Christ's church will be given as a gift to the church. It is when we learn in worship the difference between the central and the peripheral, when we learn to separate between the enduring and the historical accretions and dearly beloved peculiarities.

First, the erosion of the Christian ecumenical reality in time and space that has occurred in forms of Protestant worship is simply appalling. The sheer erosion from availability to the ordinary Protestant worshiper in virtue of our liturgical shrinkage, reduction, distortion and the introduction of idiosyncrasies is appalling. The great transmitter of the Christian tradition over the centuries has been the common worship of the church, and Protestantism has a heavy weight of guilt to bear for the rough and sometimes stupid hands it has laid upon the great tradition in worship over the centuries.

Second, there has got to be a Catholic movement in common worship whereby certain of the riches of devotional life which Protestants, for all of their reductions and stupidities and distortions, have nevertheless produced in great abundance will be introduced for the edification and for the broadening of the ecumenical experience of the non-Protestant Christians. I conclude with an illustration of how this happens in practical life. In 1952 I was a representative of my church at the World Conference on Faith and Order at Lund in Sweden, and there the Orthodox were present in the persons of three men from the Greek church, who were in the sub-section on worship in which I sat. None of these men could speak English very well and they had great trouble trying to explicate and articulate the peculiarity that they affirmed to be the rich and ancient Catholicity of Orthodox worship as over against the Protestants of one kind or another. After a frustrating effort to do this, they took me aside and said, "Look, suppose we spend the whole evening with you and we will tell you what we want to say. You can talk English. You make our speech for us." So these

three men spent most of that night with me loading me with the kind of use of images, the liturgical recollection of episodes, certain of the liturgical language of which I did not know at that time a great deal. So the next morning I made their speech for them. What I learned was the beginning of my education in Orthodoxy. I shall never forget old Athenagoras when he leaned across the table after midnight and said, "When we include in our prayers our fathers, our grandfathers, our ancestors, the blessed virgin and the saints and all these people, don't you see what's going on here? It says in the New Testament that the church is like the people sitting around in a stadium, around an athletic field, a mighty cloud of witnesses, and the living generation are those who are down there carrying out the battle in this present moment. But," he said, "does anyone ever die in Christ's church? Are they not all alive and are they not all sitting around looking on? And when I'm doing my fighting, is my grandfather not up there looking down and wishing me well? And when I say my prayers is not prayer the circulation of the blood in the body of the church?" *You know, the man was quite right!* If I have an understanding of the church as the body of Christ, as the communion of believers, the *communio sanctorum*, Paul is coterminous with my membership in this church. Paul and Peter and John and Francis and John Calvin and my fathers in the Evangelical faith are all in the mighty cloud of witnesses, and an adequate prayer of the church will be ecumenical in time as well as in space. It seems to me it is exactly this kind of insight which has got to break through into the often too flat-footed practicalities of our Protestant worship.

Another Conference on Medicine and Religion

The conference, co-sponsored by K.S.R. last October, was so successful that another like it will be held at the K.U. Medical Center on October 25 and 26, 1966. Again an outstanding team of visiting specialists in the two fields of medicine and religion will be on hand. Again registrations will be limited to doctors and clergymen. The complete program and a registration form may be procured from our office or from the K.U. School of Medicine, Kansas City, Kansas 66103.

A Graduate Degree in Religion

On June 1, 1966 K.U.'s Graduate Council approved a proposal by the K.S.R. faculty to establish a M.A. program in religion. It will be started probably in February, 1967.

A Course in the Dialogue

In the fall semester K.S.R. will offer to juniors and seniors a course entitled "Protestant-Catholic-Jewish Dialogue" taught by a Protestant, a Catholic and a Jew in a dialogue situation—Professor Hasvold, Father Downey and Rabbi Meyer.

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