

OUR RESPONSE TO THE ECUMENICAL REVOLUTION

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THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT has not only had a genesis; it has also had a palingenesis. It has been twice-born. It was born many decades ago within the Protestant community, out of deep Christian faith, hope, and love, which launched the movement towards Christian unity along the twin roads of "faith and order," "life and work." Recalling the fact, one should not lose the opportunity to render tribute to the men of vision and dedication who brought the movement into being. Recently the movement was born again — in 1964, in consequence of the Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. The movement now has a new scope, a new depth, an added seriousness, in consequence of the Roman Catholic commitment to its furtherance. The fullness and depth of the commitment may best be measured, I think, in terms of the acknowledgment, made in the Decree on Ecumenism and also indicated elsewhere, that properly ecclesial realities, forming part of the history of salvation, exist outside the visible boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church. This acknowledgment was something new. Its theological implications — especially for the very concept of Christian unity itself — are extensive. This, however, is not the place to discourse on them.

It was entirely in the logic of the Decree on Ecumenism — in the logic of its doctrine and also in logic of the document itself as a historical event — that it should have raised other issues within the Council. Primary in importance, for obvious reasons, both doctrinal and historical, is the relation between Christian and Jew. Hardly less inescapable is the issue of the relation between the Christian Church and the vast world of the religions of the East. Finally,

there is the altogether formidable issue of the relation between the Christian and the characteristic phenomenon of modernity, the atheist — whether in his classical or in his more recent Promethean form.

SIMPLY BY STATING these issues, I am brought to the proposition that I want to present to you, in the belief that it is of importance to the members of the Religious Education Association. However, I must first state the proximate premise of my proposition.

The *premise* was asserted or suggested time and again in the course of the deliberations of Vatican Council II. It is also explicit in the Encyclical of Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*. It is the affirmation that the proclamation of the Gospel today must be made *from within history, not from above it, and must therefore be made in dialogue* — in dialogue within the Church, among the Christian churches, between the Church and the Synagogue, between the People of God and the world which is increasingly choosing to be without God.

The simple *conclusion* from this premise would seem to be that *theological education*, which is the preparation for the proclamation of the Word of God, must likewise take place in dialogue. The necessity of the conclusion would seem to be obvious. The men of my generation have been converts to ecumenism; we were not brought up as ecumenists. Now we have to see to it that theological students are, as it were, born ecumenists. Moreover, even at the moment, not to speak of the past, ecumenism appears as a dimension added to theology from without. We have to see to it that ecumenism becomes a quality inherent in theology, as it is an impulse intrinsic to Christian faith itself. We have to develop

a new style of theology and a new style of theologian.

Obviously, theological education in the high sense of the word, which lifts it above the level of sheerly academic learning, must take place at the interior of a religious commitment to a tradition of faith, and should seek to strengthen this commitment. However, the tradition itself will become more vital and relevant, and the commitment to it more personal and profound, precisely because it is studied, learned, and lived in dialogue with other traditions and with other men of religious commitment.

It has been argued — most recently and cogently by Mr. Walter Wagoner — that there is no longer any future for the denominational seminary existing in isolation. For the denominational seminary — yes, but not in isolation from a larger center of learning and experience. The future of theological education lies with an ecumenical community of scholars — teachers and students.

IS THAT THE WHOLE of the matter? Hardly. This ecumenical community must somehow become a *presence in the secular university*. The signs of the times call not only for dialogue between Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Jew, but also for dialogue between the Christian and the secular world. This "world" is made up of many worlds. Among them the secular university occupies a place of central significance, whence its influence radiates into all the other worlds. There must therefore be dialogue with the Academy, with the Republic of Letters, from which religion and theology have much to learn, to which they surely have something to communicate. Along the way of this dialogue one might even look forward to the reconstitution of the medieval *Studium* — to a renewal of that ancient institution in a form adapted to our ecumenical age and to the pluralist society in which we live.

It has been remarked that the modern world looks much like the medieval world turned inside out. In medieval times the world — the small and circumscribed "in-

habited earth" known as the *oikoumene* — was Christian. The secular world existed at the interior of this Christian world, largely in the form of the secular power. Now however the world, grown to vastly greater dimensions, is secular. And the religious thing, in all its forms, exists at the interior of this secular world.

THIS FACT of contemporary life was recognized by Vatican Council II, speaking for the Catholic Church. The fact was not merely accepted as a fact; it was also acknowledged to be in conformity with the right scheme of things. The sacred at the interior of the secular — that is the way things should be. The Christian call is to exist within a world that has "come of age," that is, come to its rightful secularity. This vocation is to be fulfilled by Christian presence in the Secular City — this we all recognize today. But the vocation has a farther reach, toward presence in the secular university.

This presence is becoming a possibility today, as it was not a few years ago. The ecumenical dialogue has caught the attention of the world of secular learning, as it has also caught the attention of the civic community. Obviously, the ecumenical movement is much more than a movement of ideas, but it is also that. Hence it is a valid object of university interest. High talk about religion, not only as a human concern but as a body of knowledge capable of validating itself in its own terms, is becoming a possibility within the Academy. Thus one might hope that the ecumenical movement could serve to give some new quality and substance to the university enterprise, at the same time that the university could serve to sustain and invigorate the ecumenical movement.

IF THIS DEVELOPMENT were to occur, the consequences would be manifold. It might help for instance, to rescue the ecumenical movement from a *cul de sac* into which it might possibly head. I mean the trap of being simply an affair of the churches, or, if you will, an affair of the church and the

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ment must find its springs. "Yet surely," some will say, "the affections are sacred! Their influence as well as their integrity lies in their very spontaneity." It is, most deeply true; and yet. . . . Whose affections have not grown with growing insight, learned through the wisdom of others? Or whose affections have not begun, of themselves, to include in an understanding concern more and more of their fellows, as they have been able to be exposed openly to them?

It is, of course, quite especially urgent that we should be as free as we can of that charge of "conditioning" the reactions of others. No less is it urgent that we should bring those we teach within an ever broader and deeper involvement with men and women of "all sorts and conditions of life." We can only become persons at all, with an identity and life of our own, as we grow in community. There, open to all the differences of character, of mood, of age and of interest, there we grow in awareness, in understanding and in tolerance. The circle goes on widening as we grow more able to respond until we see that it has no limits and in Tchekov's magical phrase, "it would be strange not to forgive."

SO PERSONAL EDUCATION, education of the affections happens only in community, where we respond and are helped to reflect

on the nature of our responses. In ecumenical education it is only the more true that this is the creative environment we must provide. How often we have ourselves found the opportunity simply to be together with those who see, think or act differently from ourselves, not simply as enriching experience, but a truly educational experience. This accepting and being accepted has made it possible for us to hear each other, to be open to each other and, quite simply, to love each other. There is no other way. We must not deny the opportunity of this experience to our peoples.

We shall not achieve their ecumenical education by instruction or explanation or even by new insights into History, though all these have their proper place. We have a prior task and a continuous one. We have to expose them to their fellow-believers and to do so in the environment in which it is possible for real encounter to take place and a response be made by each to the truth the other cherishes and by all to the total hunger of the world. We shall do better than well if we give imaginative concern to how this may be done. For in such an environment, ecumenical men will grow and the *WHY* of our work be fulfilled in their growing capacity in the Ecumenical task to which we each know ourselves called.

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synagogue. The ecumenical movement would be untrue to itself, if it were to fall into this trap. Certainly we Christians are not called simply to witness to one another. The call is to witness to the world — to all the worlds of human life, in the appropriate form which witness should take within each of them. There is a form appropriate to the university, namely, theological scholarship imbued with the ecumenical spirit.

It has nothing to do with propaganda; it is directed to intelligence and it looks simply to create understanding. What is more, this form of scholarly theological witness cannot take place except in dialogue with the university, wherein the *genius loci* is the pursuit of truth.

I suggest that our response to the challenge of ecumenism must include a willingness to move forward into this new area of dialogue.