

INTRODUCTION

A great deal is being said now-a-days in Europe, in Great Britain, and in the United States about "religionless Christianity". Church people who are aware of present day trends and currents of thought are familiar with this phrase and are coming to grips with its significance for themselves and for their work. I think it would be a good thing if the rank and file of church members generally knew what is meant by this phrase "religionless Christianity" for the issue at stake is not a minor one, but rather it is one that is bound up with the future of Christianity in the modern world.

DEFINITION

What is meant by this phrase is that Christianity may exist independently of the religious activities with which it has always been associated and which for great numbers of church-goers are all that Christianity is understood to be. We need to realize as church-goers that there are many people unattracted by the organized churches and by institutional religion who are, however, seriously challenged by aspects of the Christian Faith, and who sometimes say and say sincerely that they find more essential Christianity outside the churches than in them.

For instance, they make the point that there are crusaders for social justice who may not use religious terminology or quote the words of Christ, but who stand for the things for which Christ stood, who are against all that is dead and conventional as He was, and who are for all that is living, vital and free. These people are apt to be critical of and detached from a religion which sees God only in the Church, in the Bible, in prayers and hymn singing, but is blind to His living presence in the secular world and to the obligation to do His will in the world out there.

PART OF OUR HERITAGE

Now this may seem like a new emphasis, but actually it isn't; it is deeply embedded in the Judea-Christian heritage. Consider, if you will, the case of the Hebrew prophets eight to six centuries before Christ.

Try to take the measure of Hosea's stand when he represented God as saying: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice". Bear in mind that sacrifice signified the whole cultus, the whole Hebrew system of worship.

Try to take the measure of Isaiah's stand when speaking for God, he boldly declared:

"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure iniquity and your solemn assemblies. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."

What the prophets of the Old Testament reiterated, one after another, was that the outward observance of religion was worthless apart from personal and social righteousness. As one takes the measure of the affirmations of Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others, one senses that they were putting their lives in jeopardy by challenging the whole Establishment - Church and State. Yes, they held that a right relationship to God was impossible apart from right personal and social relationships and that religion could be the greatest barrier to both.

When we cross from the Old Testament to the New Testament we find the same emphasis in the case of Christ. As you know, He went by fixed habit to the synagogue every Sabbath, but we know that He did not approve of all that He saw and heard there. There came that day in Jerusalem in the Temple when He could no longer endure the abuse made of the Temple and He overthrew the tables of the money changers and drove out of the Temple those who sold and did business there. Had religion ever a more severe critic? Were ecclesiastics ever so blisteringly condemned. Hear the words of Jesus:

"They preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with a finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by men.....they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogue and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by their fellow men"

But then the charge becomes direct:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law - justice and mercy and faith! These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel".

Mind you it is the institution, the establishment of organized religion that is under His attack. It is the clergy. It is these responsible for the institution. What our Lord is saying is that religion can become faith's worst enemy, that religion's deadliest foes are those of its own household, that it can become so absorbed and pre-occupied by minutiae, by detail, by rites and ritual, by liturgics and ecclesiastical millinery, by organization, rank and status, that the things that really matter and for which it exists - justice, mercy and faith - are in danger of being lost, in danger of ceasing to count.

THE CHURCH OF OUR TIME

Have I said enough to show you why there is so much discussion in our time about "religionless Christianity"? I'm sure you can see why people are applying the touchstone of the prophets and of Christ's words to organized religion today - to our denominations, over 250 of them in the United States, to our numerous church buildings, to our substantial budgets, to the perpetual round of minor social activities which take up so much of our energy, time and money, and why they are asking whether, with all of our activity, we are insulating ourselves from doing our real duty in the real world. and seemingly, so little influence -

We need to be told that there are many outsiders who put a large question mark under institutional religion as a whole. There are people referring to it as the "expendable institution". There are those who have written it off as irrelevant and of little practical account in the world of affairs, comparing it to Noah's Ark - saying that if it were not for the storm outside, they couldn't stand the smell inside.

A Columbia University Professor stated the case in this fashion:

"Neither preachers nor the religious laity matter. What they do and what they say can be readily agreed with and safely ignored. By most of those who do matter, and those who do decide, it is taken as irrelevant Sunday chatter"

(They look at those regions where church life is the strongest, where religious evangelism is making the most progress and winning most recruits for the church and see there the most rigid barriers against brotherhood.)

Remember the background against which the professor, the late C. Wright Mills, wrote that charge - the horror of nuclear missiles and the underlying political pessimism, frustration and with it a realization that there ought to be a strong sense of urgency in any organization dedicated to the welfare of mankind, and the peace of the world, a disillusionment with party politics and international power politics that had struck paralytically deep, and no confidence in institutional religion or in what it can do to bind up the hurts of the world and bring it back to health and sanity.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

This was the situation that so stirred Pope John. Think of what that eighty year old man got going in the Roman Catholic Church and in so short a space of time. When other people, rightly, would have told themselves to take it easy, he, knowing that death was not far off, shouldered a great task - the reform and the renewal of a religious institution that he knew and publicly acknowledged stood in immediate need of both.

How our Lord must have loved that wonderful man visiting in prisons, shaking hands with Communists, cutting through red tape, striking an anti-Semitic phrase out of the liturgy, devoted to His Church and its beliefs, but keenly aware of its doctrinal rigidity, its unadventurous conservatism, its need of relating religion to life and bringing the Church up to date! Consider the social emphasis of the Encyclicals he issued - the old prophetic emphasis back again; the Church the champion of justice, freedom and peace. Consider the man behind the Encyclicals, not merely spinning theories but bending every energy to reduce theory to practice. The New York Times on Thursday of this week carried an editorial entitled "Pacem In Terris". Perhaps you saw this line as I did: "It was because he sought answers on the highest plan of religion, reason and social organization that Pope John's encyclical, Pacem In Terris, has become one of the truly great documents of our century. Pacem in Terris was the voice of reason. When will it be heeded?"

The Roman Catholic Church throughout the world is engaged in an updating such as it has not known in centuries. And don't suppose that all the faithful are elated by it or are welcoming it. The Herald Tribune carried a series of articles last summer by Barrett McGurn on Roman Catholicism. Some of you may have followed these articles. McGurn wrote about a priest who served as an expert in theology at the Vatican Council who was explaining to a group of priests in upstate New York some recent changes in Catholic ritual and how an aging priest raised his hand and asked, "Do I have to do all this?" "I'm so old. Can't I just go on the way I have been going. I don't have much longer." The answer he received was, "Remember this Father. Pope John was over eighty. He could change. All of us can, too."

THE PROTESTANT CHURCH

There is something in all of this that ought to be stirring and reusing Protestants about their own church and its traditions. Have we among us anybody to do for Protestants what Pope John did for Roman Catholics? Is there an updating going on in Protestantism? Are we, too, (to borrow a phrase from Pope John) stressing reform and renewal and the necessity of restoring the simple and pure lines that the face of the Church of Jesus had at its birth?

I think our own denomination is deeply concerned and deeply aware of the urgency for new life - for reform and renewal - within the church. Our Bishops, our leaders through the General Conference held last spring are calling upon each local church, each local congregation in Methodism across this land to undertake a study along the lines of renewal. We begin this study today. Between now and June each local congregation in Methodism will confront basic questions dealing with the mission of the church.

I think all of us sense the urgency for an updating, for reform and renewal within the life of the church we love so well. Churches have a tendency to become ingrown. As one of our own laymen reminded us on the night of our Annual Church meeting in speaking of the doctor who recovered from a very serious illness. He was so busy taking his own pulse and feeling his own heart beat that he was unaware of the human suffering around him that he might have alleviated. We in this church have no cause for complacency. We have still to find ways as a church of doing God's will in the everyday world. We need to take a stand - not broadly and generally and vaguely - but on specific issues.

The Church of Jesus Christ does not exist to perpetuate itself. It does not exist to be an organization for the respectable. Its charter is to go into all the world and to be servant to the world. It has to look at the world with open eyes; it has to become more deeply involved in the life of the world correcting oppression and seeking justice, remembering all the while what Christ and the prophets of old were teaching - that God is not to be found in a religion made an end in itself, but in a faith bound up with human relationships, with all those spheres of association and activity in which people live their lives.

These are exciting days in which to live, days filled with challenge and opportunity. It is a great time to be a Christian. Those haunting words written by George McCleod, one of Scotland's great prophetic voices, come to mind:

"I simple argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place....as well as on the steeple of the Church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves on the town garbage heap, at a cross roads so cosmopolitan that they had to write this title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek.....at the kind of place where cynics talk and thieves curse and soldiers gambled because that is where he died and that is what he died about and that is where the church should be and what churchmanship should be about".

The words God bade Moses speak to the people of Israel are surely his message for us here and now: "Why do you call to me? Speak to the people that they go foward".

LET US PRAY We are thankful, O God, for the church which has continued the ministry of Jesus Christ through the ages. May we never forget what the church has done for our world and for us. Keep us ever mindful of the fact that we are the church, and that if we cease to grow, if we stand stiff in our pride, if we let the flames die, the church dies with us. Help us to dedicate ourselves so completely to the ministry of the church that we may go out into the world not to condemn it but to save it, and to reclaim it for a life that is good and true and beautiful. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

Pacem in Terris?

Distinguished world leaders are in New York for a convocation centered on Pope John XXIII's great encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. As they began their search for peace and order, they read headlines like these which appeared on the front page of yesterday's Times:

"4, Held in Plot to Blast Statue of Liberty," "40 Brooklyn Youths Fight in IND Station," "Bomb Blast Rocks Vatican City Gate," "Uganda Mob Shreds U. S. Flag." And, of course, there was fighting in Vietnam and the Congo, and a new alert about Peking's atomic arsenal.

It is a frightening but inescapable thought that the world has drifted apart and become more fragmented since April 1963, when Pope John made his notable appeal for "a community of peoples based on truth, justice, love and freedom!" This is a time that would have tried even his wonderful gift of optimism and his faith in humankind.

Throughout history different elements operated at different times to provide an anchor, an amalgam, a source of unity for societies. There were family bonds, great monarchs, great empires, the world's great religions and, in modern times, political ideologies. Today none of these factors seems strong enough to hold societies in check or to unite nations and peoples in peace.

This is an era that has lost its bearings, that wanders in a wilderness crying with rage and striking out in its pain. It was no accident that the distinctive philosophy of our time became existentialism which was, essentially, a rebellion against the failures of society, economics, politics and the church, and which is, in itself, an unsystematic, undogmatic, undoctrinal philosophy.

The transition from the rootless, formless, irrational, rebellious mood of youth everywhere, and of young nations, to the events described in our daily newspapers is clear enough. The gangs in the subway, the young terrorists who want to blow things up, the mobs who in so many places are attacking United States embassies and libraries, the anti-clericals who explode a bomb at the entrance to Vatican City—none of them has an answer except the most primitive one of violence.

It was because he sought answers on the highest plane of religion, reason and social organization that Pope John's encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, has become one of the truly great documents of our century. He reminded the faithful that error is not to be confused with the person who errs, nor historical movements to be condemned *in toto*. *Pacem in Terris* was the voice of reason. When will it be heeded?

In a major step toward Christian unity, Cardinal Bea, head of Vatican efforts toward ecumenism, announced in Geneva that the Roman Catholic Church "greeted with joy and fully accepts" an invitation from the World Council of Churches to explore the possibilities of collaboration. [1:2-3.]
A professor of ancient antiquities at Rome University
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Vatican Accepts Protestant Call For Parley to Seek Paths to Unity

Special to The New York Times

GENEVA, Feb. 18—The Roman Catholic Church took a major step today toward cooperation with other Christian faiths in the search for unity.

Augustin Cardinal Bea, head of the Vatican's Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, announced that the Holy See greets with joy and fully accepts "an invitation from the World Council of Churches "to explore together the possibilities of dialogue and collaboration."

The announcement was given added weight by the fact that it was made at the headquarters here of the World Council, which groups 214 Protestant and Orthodox churches.

It was the first visit to the council's headquarters by a Roman Catholic prelate of the German-born Jesuit's rank and stature. For this reason alone Cardinal Bea was able to de-

scribe it as having "truly historic significance."

Replying, Dr. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, general secretary of the council, also described the visit as "historic."

"Now the work can begin," he said after expressing his thanks to the 83-year-old Cardinal for having made the journey from Rome.

Later Dr. Visser 't Hooft, a Dutchman, said at a news conference that the announcement was the most important step taken by the Vatican since the Reformation in its relations with the non-Roman Catholic Christian churches.

The Vatican stand permits the establishment of a joint committee to examine what Cardinal Bea termed the "principles and methods" on which collaboration could be based.

He stressed the fact that the

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