

A Faith for One World

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I

The spread of the Modern Western Civilization over the face of the planet has been the most prominent single feature in the history of Mankind during the last four or five centuries.¹

So writes one of the distinguished historians of the twentieth century. But even this strong statement does not do sufficient justice to the process by which, for the first time in human history, the earth is being united in a single civilization.

The expansion of the peoples of western Europe during these five hundred years, their exploration of the seven seas, the islands and continents of the world, and now the first beginnings of their probings into outer space and the great universe itself, must remain, whatever the final outcome, one of the epic achievements of the human spirit. Further, their migration by the millions into many of the comparatively empty spaces of the earth—such as North and South America, Australia and New Zealand—and their slow transformation of these wilderness areas into new forms of western civilization from which there emerges the ideal of a free and democratic society, must stand as one of the high water marks in the long story of the rise and fall of human civilizations. The establishment of colonial empires by the western nations, with their exploitation of subject peoples and of natural resources, is the other, and seamy, side of this coin, and illustrates the problematic, ambiguous nature of all human achievement.

This remarkable phenomenon of exploration, migration and conquest was not due to any inherent virtue or superiority of western man. Nor was it caused by some inherent demonism, such as lust for power, or by the avarice and greed of an economic system, for human nature remains essentially the same in all times and places.

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1. Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 147.

Rather—at the risk of oversimplifying a very complex phenomenon—it can be said to be the result of the scientific and technological revolution which began in western Europe during the fifteenth century and continues even now to transform the ways by which men think and live. In short, this remarkable expansion was made possible by the gift of power which scientific knowledge confers upon those who possess it.²

The age of western colonialism has, however, come to an end. Led by a chain reaction of revolt which began with the American Revolution (1775-1883), spread to Latin America, and continued almost to the present moment, the political and military domination of Europe was thrown off, and a multitude of new nations were brought into being. But just as the United States was able to industrialize and develop its latent resources in the nineteenth century through European (especially English) investment, and through the peace-keeping function of the British navy, so many of these new nations remain in some intellectual and economic dependence upon the West. Again, this is not because of any inherent superiority of western peoples, but because they possess the scientific and technological knowledge and the investment capital which it has created, which these new nations need if they are to become strong and stable. Thus, because it confers power—economic, military, political and social—nations and individuals everywhere seek to learn the ways and secrets of science. Its language has become universal. And thus the world is being united in a single civilization—the scientific, industrial civilization of the West.

The scientific-technological revolution is making the world one in yet another sense. In its “annihilation of time and space” it has made the earth a neighborhood. World-wide television, to take a single example, will soon become a reality, and it is not too fantastic to believe that, in the foreseeable future, people in every part

2. Among the inventions and discoveries which might be mentioned in this connection are the compass, gun-powder, firearms and cannon. Of crucial importance also was the development of the square-rigged, three-masted sailing ship which could stay at sea for long periods of time without putting into port. See Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), IX, 365 ff. Later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the industrial revolution, with its more efficient and productive farming methods made possible by the use of power machinery, created surplus wealth which could be invested to further stimulate the whole process. New scientific medical knowledge contributed to the growth of population in the West, and this in turn led to further pressure for the migration of its peoples. For a good account of these and many other factors to be found in this expansion, see William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), especially Part III, p. 563 ff.

of the globe will be watching some of the same programs and viewing the same sports and news events. With this new physical proximity has come a new interdependence. The rich industrial nations need the raw materials of the poor nations and covet the potential market for finished products which they represent. The poor nations need the investment wealth and the industrial know-how possessed by the affluent nations. The fate of the British pound has consequences in Malaysia. A border conflict in India reverberates throughout the chancelleries of Europe. A shot fired in South Africa or Bogalusa is heard around the world. So great, indeed, is the awesome destructive power of nuclear fission that war and rumors of war unite all the peoples of the earth in a single community of fear.

There are no corners, no hiding places any more, in which nations may isolate themselves. The world has "... at last become round in fact as well as theory."³ To the religious mind this may seem providential, as if God from the beginning placed mankind on this planet with the ultimate purpose of the unification of the human family. For as the human species increased in numbers and spread outwards through the earth it was inevitable that a point should finally be reached at which they could no longer move away from one another, but would have to turn towards one another and seek to learn to live in peace together.⁴

II

This, then, is the dramatic point at which human history has arrived. The ecumenical age has dawned. But at this point some questions must arise in any thoughtful mind. Can a world civilization be enduringly established, will it hold together, without a common faith at its heart? Is not the acceptance of certain basic ideas about the meaning and purpose of human life, the value and dignity of the human person, and some agreed-upon standards of morality a necessary foundation for world law and order, without which a world civilization will break up into pieces like a ship in a storm? And is it not true that all viable morality, that is, morality which is capable of binding men together in a common culture, of making them into a community, must be rooted and grounded in what may be called a

3. Toynbee, *The Study of History*, IX, 9, 479.

4. Teilhard de Chardin sees great significance in this development. See his *The Phenomenon of Man*, English translation by Bernard Wall, Introduction by Julian Huxley (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961). See especially pp. 205-244.

religious faith, by which we mean certain shared convictions concerning the nature and existence of an Ultimate Reality which underlies, and gives coherence to, the shifting, changing patterns of life?

The answer would seem to be that a universal standard of morality which in turn is the expression of a universal faith, must form the necessary foundation for a stable world civilization. Without it, the new physical unity and proximity into which mankind is entering will be like the compression of molecules of a gas to the point at which a shattering explosion occurs. The world is physically unified and interdependent, but it is not yet a community. Only a common faith, with common goals and purposes, can bring this about. If a true community can be achieved, the optimism of a Teilhard de Chardin may be justified; if not, then the pessimism of a Henry Adams concerning the future of the new world created by science and technology will be confirmed.⁵

Perhaps the most radical threat to this need for a universal faith does not come from Marxists. After all, they have what in many respects is a religious faith, in that they believe that history is being moved irresistibly towards a final utopian goal and, although in theory they are atheistic materialists, in practice they are often possessed by an idealistic devotion to a cause greater than themselves which they believe will bring universal peace and happiness to mankind. Regardless of what one may think of the more calculating and realistic policies pursued by the party leadership in communist states, there are at least many individuals who seek to propagate this faith with missionary fervor, and spend themselves sacrificially in its behalf. Communism is, of course, all the more dangerous for being a quasi-religion.

Yet probably a deeper threat to the hope for a common faith that might unite all races, nations and classes in such a way as to make world order and civilization an enduring possibility is that posed by a nihilism announced in the last century by Nietzsche, and proclaimed in our day by Sartre, that "God is dead." (We do not here refer to the recent movement by that name among some American theologians.) By this is meant, not the death of inadequate and anthropomorphic ideas of God, but that there is no objective order of any kind, either in the universe or in human life. Value or meaning is simply something that the individual arbitrarily imposes on the meaningless and absurd world around him. In short, "nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so." If taken seriously—and it is fortunate that men do not always take their philosophies seriously and may be either

5. See Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), especially pp. 474-505.

better or worse than the creeds they profess—this idea can only lead logically to anarchy, despair, a withdrawal from life, or a tyranny which an individual tries to impose arbitrarily on his fellow human beings. In the words of one astute modern observer, whose own thinking has undergone a marked change in recent years:

If what is good, what is right, what is true, is only what the individual "chooses" to "invent," then we are outside the traditions of civility. We are back in the war of all men against all men.⁶

This loss of faith in any meaning or purpose outside the solitary individual self is surely, no matter how romantic, heroic and defiant it may sound at times, a dead end for mankind. It spells the death, not of God, but of the ancient dream of men for peace, order and justice. Without wishing to minimize the pathos of the modern man who can find no meaning in life, or to deny that all faith may have to struggle sometimes against darkness and doubt, one must regard the philosophy of atheistic existentialism as a tragic blindness to structures of reason and purpose which are to be found universally in human experience, and as the destruction of any basis of hope for a decent, humane and ordered world society.

Such a dark philosophy illustrates the vacuum created by a scientific culture devoid of religious faith. It can perhaps best be understood as a terrible, twisted, yet also prophetic warning, a danger signal, raised against the emptiness, the impersonality, of a purely scientific age. It also points up the desperate need of men, even in an affluent, technological society, a veritable electronics paradise, for that which the Gospel offers. Man cannot live by mechanics and electronics alone. Because it is necessarily concerned with the "how" of things rather than the "why,"⁷ with "what is" rather than "what ought to be," with means rather than ends, with descriptive generalizations rather than values, the world of science by itself cannot create an adequate home for the human spirit.

A world civilization, created by the science and technology of the West, but without the Biblical faith which formed its original generating power, is an empty shell, a husk, a civilization without a heart, without a soul. This is not to say that science and technology are evil; they are potentially a great boon to mankind. Nor is there any reason to believe that the Christian faith is in any permanent or necessary conflict with scientific technology. Each, in

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6. Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy* (New York: Mentor Books, 1963), p. 134.
 7. In Aristotelian terms with material and efficient, rather than formal or final, causes.

fact, complements the other. Each needs the other if a better life for the human family is to be achieved. If they can be successfully integrated the possibility exists that mankind, by the grace of God, might move into this new world civilization that is being born with hope and a sense of adventure. Man may dare to believe that an enduring order of peace and community may be established in the world. If this prospect is too utopian for the Christian realist, then at least one can say, with Christopher Dawson, that "the recovery of moral control and the return to spiritual order have now become the indispensable conditions of human survival."⁸

Now it is true that the Christian faith is not primarily concerned with the establishment of a better social order, or even with the world as such, but with man's relation to God and eternity. But the very nature of this faith in God, which is a mysterious gift of His grace, drives man back to the world of humanity which God loves and in Christ seeks to save. It is significant that in the Bible every encounter with the living God, from Moses to Paul, leads the individual to lose himself in the continuing redemptive activity of God among men. Christian mysticism, if such it may be called, when it is true to its Biblical source, is never a "flight of the alone to the alone," but inspires a ministry to men. From Christ, supremely, we learn that this is a ministry to the total life of man—physical, mental, moral and spiritual. Nothing that affects the well-being and happiness of the human person is alien to Christian concern. To put this another way, the Church is called primarily to serve the Kingdom of Christ, which "is not of this world." Its fulfillment lies beyond history. It cannot therefore be identified with any particular social order. The Church and its Gospel is not simply a tool or means by which a world community may be realized. And it is certain that no world order of any kind will endure forever. Here we have no continuing city. Even an enduring world civilization would not be a static achievement, but would have to be continuously renewed and reformed; it would always have to struggle against the demonic forces of disintegration and evil which are always and everywhere a part of human life on this earth.

But even so, the Christian believes that the Kingdom of God moves even now in and through human history. While his final hope is not in anything that this world offers, but in the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth, he cannot but believe that if the Christian faith could become the faith of the great mass of mankind, thereby a more stable and lasting foundation could be laid for a better world than anything yet known. No one who believes in the reality of human

8. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 218.

responsibility and freedom, and in the miracle of divine grace, should set narrow limits to what might be accomplished for the future of humanity in this world which God loves.

The Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* closes with this prayer of the Apostle Paul, in which all Christians can join—

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.⁹

III

In response to this challenge of the new ecumenical age of mankind, the ecumenical movement among the churches came into being. In the face of malevolent forces which threaten humanity with misery and destruction, many quarrels and animosities which divided Christians in the past seem increasingly unimportant and irrelevant. Oneness with Christ, as He was one with God, "so that *the world* may believe" (John 17:21), has never been more urgent.

Faced, too, by a unique *opportunity*, Christians of all traditions have been drawn together, for one of the remarkable results of the ecumenical age has been the emergence of an ecumenical religion. For the first time in history there has appeared on the earth not only a world-embracing civilization, but a world-embracing faith which reaches into well-nigh every nation.¹⁰ While Christians are still very much a minority in the world, and are in fact becoming more so each day as the non-Christian population increases more rapidly than the Christian, Christianity is still the first and only faith to become so widely spread among the peoples of the earth, and to have the opportunity to become truly universal. In the light of this situation, Christians have come to be aware of themselves as a world community of faith which transcends the barriers of nation, race, and class. This great reality, made possible by the missionary endeavor of the past two centuries, is "the great new fact of our time."

At this point we may pause to recognize that the ecumenical age is itself in part the expression of the world-embracing spirit of Christianity. During the expansion of western peoples, the missionary did not simply accompany or follow the explorer, the soldier and the trader; not infrequently he preceded them, as in the exploration

9. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, December 7, 1965 (Washington, D. C., National Catholic Welfare Conference), p. 100. This quotation, Ephesians 3:20, 21, has been given here in the Revised Standard Version of the *Holy Bible*.

10. Tibet and Afghanistan are possible exceptions.

of the interior of North America and central Africa. One of the motivations which inspired the nations of western Europe to undertake settlements and establish colonies in distant lands was the desire to "convert the heathen." The peoples of the West had been taught through the Bible to see the world as one world under God, and to believe that Christ was its one Saviour, although it must be admitted that the full implications of this universal vision did not make their impact on Protestant Christianity until the early nineteenth century.

It might well be argued also that the scientific and technological revolution owes more than is commonly supposed to the world-view, the spirit, and the work-ethic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. While many discoveries emerging from this revolution can be traced, as we have said, to other cultures, they were put to practical use and fully exploited only in the context of the Christian culture of the West. Indeed, for this reason it may be fairly asked of those who object to the world missionary endeavor of Christianity as an act of disruptive arrogance, if the inevitable process whereby the non-Christian societies of the earth are being transformed into urban, industrial societies can be successfully carried out without eventually destroying their traditional religious ways, and at the same time inculcating some of the attitudes and disciplines of the Judaeo-Christian way of life. The upheaval through which China is now going may be taken as an example of what happens when the traditional patterns of a people are broken up under the impact of western science and technology, but without the context of religious faith in which that science and technology was born. But this complex subject—the historical relation between the Christian faith and the scientific revolution—is too large for us here, and can only be mentioned in passing.¹¹

To return to our main thesis—the ecumenical religious movement as a response to the challenge of the ecumenical age—we should remember that the impulse towards unity which now sweeps like an irresistible tide through the churches has always drawn much of its leadership and inspiration from those most concerned with the Church's mission to evangelize humanity. It goes without saying that most of the pace-setting achievements of union and cooperation among Christians are to be found on the strategic mission fields of the world, where the magnitude of the task facing the churches tends to dwarf into relative insignificance the things that divide them.¹²

11. See Arend Th. Van Leeuwen, *Christianity In World History*, tr. by H. H. Hoskins (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964), p. 324 ff.

12. See Stephen Neill, "The Missionary Movement and the Ecumenical Movement," in *History's Lessons For Tomorrow's Mission* (Geneva: World's Student Christian Federation), pp. 242-251.

In the nineteenth century the United States, with its vast numbers of unevangelized people on the frontier and its millions of immigrants pouring into the country, was one of these strategic mission fields. In this situation, from the Cane Ridge camp meeting in 1801 to the Ecumenical Missionary Conference held in New York in 1900 (when the word "ecumenical" was first re-introduced into Christian thought),¹³ Christians were increasingly drawn together in their common task of evangelizing and Christianizing this new nation.

Twentieth century American Christianity, in turn, has provided much of the money, motivation, and administration—although not so much of the scholarship and theological acumen—of this great centrifugal force in the life of the Church.

This more intense phase of the ecumenical movement is usually said to have begun with the world missionary conference held at Edinburgh in 1910. From it emerged the Faith and Order movement (which seeks unity in truth and belief), the Life and Work movement (which seeks unity in social action), and the International Missionary Council (which seeks unity and coordination in a common witness to the world). At Amsterdam in 1948 the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements combined to form the World Council of Churches and then, at the Third Assembly of this World Council in New Delhi, India, in 1961, the International Missionary Council was integrated into this organization as its "Division of World Mission and Evangelism."

At this point we should make clear that the ecumenical movement is not to be identified with any of its institutional expressions. It is a free movement of the Spirit, and cannot be confined within the structure of any organization. It is larger and more inclusive than the World Council of Churches. There are, in fact, many evangelicals and some inter-church councils in various countries which share in the compulsion towards unity and mission but which explicitly reject any affiliation with the World Council.

Indeed, since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has entered dramatically and genuinely into the ecumenical movement, and has now assumed much of its initiative and leadership. As a result, the ecumenical ship will probably tack and move out in new directions. It may now also list slightly to starboard.

13. The word "ecumenical" did not come into wide usage until after the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State in 1937, where it came to mean the dream of the united mission of the whole church to all the world—in Greek the *oikoumene*—the inhabited earth. See John A. Mackay, *Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 6.

The presence together in one craft of Evangelical, Anglican, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, all seeking to find unity in truth as well as in charity, must undoubtedly present tensions and problems of awesome proportions. Even so, the search for Christian unity in the future is going to be much more inclusive, a great deal different, and far more exciting, than it ever was in the past.

This is not to deny that there are dangers in the ecumenical movement, not the least of which come from those enthusiasts who believe that it can do no evil. There is danger, for example, that an external unity based on organizational structure may be confused with a genuine unity of heart and mind, or that conformity may be identified with unity, and at the price of freedom and diversity in Christ. There is even danger that the sense of world mission might become peripheral to a burgeoning, pyramidal ecclesiastical bureaucracy which could emerge from the ecumenical movement as an end in itself, preoccupied with its own status, dogma, and liturgy, rather than being the servant of the Kingdom of God. Or, again, a "backlash" of reaction might arise which would seek to exalt some non-church, "religionless" form of Christianity. One could go on and on.

But nothing good is without its price and its dangers. Everything which we have cited here—institutionalism, externalism, conformism and reaction—and much else besides which might have been mentioned, can be found in some form or other in every local congregation. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." No achievement in the life of the Church, including anything that may be accomplished in or out of the ecumenical movement, will be fixed and final or beyond the need of reformation and renewal.

But there are good reasons for believing that the ecumenical movement in all its forms—mutual study and conversation, cooperation, federation, and organic union—is one of the most dramatic and impelling developments in the history of the Church, and one that is worthy of the concern, prayer, devotion—and loyal criticism—of every Christian. Among these reasons, two may be mentioned.

First, there is the realization, which has come to us with the force of revelation, that the truth and grace and power of God are greater than any degrees of these qualities possessed by any one of our churches. We are beginning to recognize, and be thankful for, the riches of God's manifold blessings. We are learning to appreciate John Wesley's revulsion against ". . . a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal. . . that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves."¹⁴ We

14. "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *The Works of John Wesley*, third ed., Vol. VIII (London: John Mason, 1830), p. 257.

are being led to accept a unity already ours, which we have not created, but which is a gift of God.

Finally, we are responding, in the ecumenical movement, to the groping, desperate struggle of mankind to find its way to some fundamental unity, which we believe can only be truly realized through a rich diversity which yet finds its center in the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ.