

THE

PRINCETON

SEMINARY

BULLETIN

The Church and The Secular

John C. Bennett

Sermons:

The Compensations of The Ministry

James W. Clarke

Behold, I Make All Things New

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The Revolutionary Challenge to Church and Theology Richard Shaull

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Joseph Reeb

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Edward J. Jurji, Book Review Editor

THE CHURCH AND THE SECULAR	<i>John C. Bennett</i>	4
SERMONS:		
THE COMPENSATIONS OF THE MINISTRY	<i>James W. Clarke</i>	11
BEHOLD, I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW	<i>James I. McCord</i>	19
THE BIBLE IN THE CONFESSION OF 1967	<i>George S. Hendry</i>	21
THE REVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE TO CHURCH AND THEOLOGY	<i>Richard Shaull</i>	25
A REPRESENTATIVE AMERICAN OF THE SIXTIES: JAMES J. REEB	<i>John A. Mackay</i>	33
PRAYER OF DEDICATION	<i>Richard J. Oman</i>	39
CHURCH VERSUS NON-CHURCH:		
I. THE COMING NON-CHURCH	<i>Ray Billington</i>	40
II. NON-CHURCH IS NONSENSE	<i>Alison Adcock</i>	44
ONE IN A MILLION	<i>D. Campbell Wyckoff</i>	49
IN MEMORIAM:		
Andrew Watterson Blackwood		64
Frederick William Loetscher		65
Ralph Cooper Hutchison		68
Kenneth Sperber Gapp		69
Henry Seymour Brown		71
MEMORIAL PRAYER	<i>E. G. Homrighausen</i>	74
BOOK REVIEWS:		
<i>History and Theology</i>		
Theology for Renewal, by Karl Rahner	<i>James I. McCord</i>	75
The Trouble with the Church, by Helmut Thielicke		75
Scripture and Ecumenism, by L. J. Swidler		76
The Future of Religions, by Paul Tillich	<i>Edward J. Jurji</i>	76
Principles of Christian Theology, by John Macquarrie		77

A REPRESENTATIVE AMERICAN OF THE SIXTIES: JAMES JOSEPH REEB

JOHN A. MACKAY

WE ARE met today on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary to engage in an act of remembrance. We have come to dedicate a plaque to a distinguished alumnus of this institution, James Joseph Reeb, who a year ago lost his life in Selma, Alabama, in a crusade for social justice.

It is natural and, indeed, inevitable, that an occasion like this, and a symbol such as a plaque, should bring back memories. For the present is inspired by the past.

Memories of a very personal kind are stirred within your speaker. How can I ever forget my last encounter with James Reeb, a former and beloved student? In the spring of 1964, after I had spoken to a men's group in All Souls Church in Washington, of which Dr. Duncan Howlett is senior pastor, James Reeb brought me home. Though we had both lived in the Washington area for several years, we did not meet till that day. As we bade each other farewell, we agreed that in the time ahead we would get together for conversation and fellowship. Some months later James went to Boston. I went to South America. Within a year he was dead.

Public memories too are awakened by this occasion. Following the news of his death, a Roman Catholic editor in Boston proposed that James Reeb be made a candidate for sainthood! A year later there came from the pen of a distinguished writer, Duncan How-

lett, a biography of his former associate minister. This book, to which I owe very much of what I am going to say, is entitled *No Greater Love: James Reeb's Life Story*. And here on the wall behind me is a plaque soon to be unveiled. Both book and plaque are related to memory, to memory that stirs a feeling of pride, to memory that awakens a sense of concern.

As I pondered the privilege of speaking this afternoon, I tried to set in perspective the personality and work of James Reeb. There came to my mind the title of Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous tome, *Representative Men*. I reached the conclusion that this man, James Joseph Reeb, might be justly designated a "Representative American of the Sixties." It is in this perspective, and inspired by this designation, that I propose to consider the dual significance and challenge of James Reeb as a representative American in the present decade.

I

James Reeb was a man dedicated to the cause of man. In loyalty to, and expressive of this dedication, *he lived a committed life*. One of the contributions of his life story will be that here was an individual who from early youth was a committed person. He was committed to the idea, first latent and then vocal, that to be truly human, to be a real man, you must be committed to something greater than yourself. It was

on that assumption, implicit or explicit, that his own life was grounded and by which it was inspired.

James Reeb was a person with a zest for living, with courage to live for something beyond his own selfhood and his own self-interest. He thus became a pattern, a personal, pictorial example, of what it means to be truly free. Men become free when they commit themselves to something bigger than their own ego and mere egotistic concern.

There could be no greater contrast than that existing between James Reeb and a multitude of fellow Americans who live a totally uncommitted life. They are enthralled by their ego; they pursue exclusively the interests of their selfhood. Yet no matter what wealth or power they may possess, or what prestige or status they may enjoy, or what great persons they may think themselves to be, they are really sub-human serfs; and the time has come to tell them so.

The hour has arrived in society, in the Church, and not least within the precincts of academic institutions, both secular and religious, to move beyond what I have recently called, "the cult of the uncommitted." Life to be truly human and creatively thrilling must be committed life, life that *does* the truth, that gives dynamic expression to the idea and the word. It is not produced by hallucinatory media, nor does it express itself in mere emotional rampage. James Reeb, from teenage years to his late thirties, when he died, will continue to be a symbol and pattern of true commitment, that is, commitment to something greater than one self. What was this "some-

thing greater" to which he was committed?

Reeb's life commitment was inspired by *concern for people*. From his earliest years, he was a man for others. He gave expression, symbolically and personally, to the meaning of creative empathy—identification with people, involvement in the lives of people.

This involvement led James in the course of the years to feel an *anguish* for persons. In his Princeton Seminary days, under the inspiration and leadership of another seminary graduate, Harold Faust, he developed an anguish for the mentally troubled, for people who needed psychiatric care. From there he moved to concern for the poor and the delinquent. Later, it was the socially ostracized, and in a special manner, the Negro race, that became Reeb's major concern. While associate pastor in All-Souls Church, Washington, D.C., his interest in the Negro community in the immediate environment became intense. As his anguish grew he moved north to Boston. There, under the auspices of the Society of Friends, he established his home in a "Negro ghetto," as he called it, moved by compassion for black people in the decaying heart of a great city.

It is important to bear in mind that for James Reeb, the problem of racial injustice could not be solved by anything that was merely juridical or dramatic. The solution, in his judgment, involved the incarnation of the concerned person among the people who were the objects of concern. He did feel, however, that there could be no human reconciliation between whites and Negroes until social justice was secured.

Now comes the end of the Reeb pilgrimage. Soon after James' arrival in

Boston, and through the impact on his spirit of a television picture, he went to Selma, Alabama. As he walked down a city street at eventide, he was slugged on the head and died. His corpse became immediately a national and world symbol, which will have abiding remembrance on this campus through the plaque we are here to unveil.

II

Certain reflections are stirred by the commitment and concern of James Reeb. The concern that he manifested for people was in the great Christian tradition. It is an inescapable fact, recognized by Christians and non-Christians alike, that historically, culturally, religiously, it was Christianity that taught men to care. The concern for people, and especially for destitute human individuals, was not born in the cultures of Greece or Rome or the Orient. Nor was it born in the brain or heart of a concerned German philosopher called Karl Marx. Marxists agree that it was on the hills of Galilee, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who crystallized a concern of the great Hebrew prophets, and not in the studies conducted by their own philosophic sire in the Library of the British Museum, that concern for people was creatively awakened. For that reason, many disciples of Marx today are interested in dialogue with the contemporary followers of that Galilean.

I pass on to remark that Reeb's love for Negroes was in the great Princeton tradition. Forgive me if at this point I become lyrical. In my old home in the Scottish Highlands, while I was still in my twelfth year, our greatest weekly thrill as a family was the visit each Sun-

day afternoon of a Negro from South Africa who was studying for the Christian ministry in Inverness.

And how can some of us here present forget those two Africans from the French Cameroun who in the forties were members of the old Benham Club of Princeton Theological Seminary? One of the greatest moments in the life of that Club was to have two African Negroes among its members. Both of those men came later to occupy important positions in the church of their native land.

One of the most thrilling moments in my own life, while President of this Seminary, was to install one of the Seminary's graduates, Irvin W. Underhill, of the class of 1928, as minister of a Presbyterian congregation in Northern New York. Underhill, a former American missionary in the Cameroun, was the first Negro minister ever to be elected pastor of a purely white church in the great denomination to which Princeton Seminary belongs. This beloved man continues to be minister of the United Presbyterian Church of Nuanda. It was no less thrilling when Donald M. Davies, the first person to receive a Doctor of Theology degree from Princeton Seminary, decided to teach in a Negro institution, Lincoln University, where he is a professor to this day.

Why do I mention these facts? For this reason. What is being done on this campus today by the commemorative act in which we are engaged is in the great tradition of Princeton Seminary as regards relations with the Negro race. James Joseph Reeb represented America at its best, and Princeton Seminary at its best, on the crucial racial issue.

III

But I must now move into another dimension of the life of James Reeb in which he stands out in a quite different context as a "Representative American of the Sixties." At this point we confront a tragic, ironic fact. This graduate of Princeton Seminary became skeptical of the reality of God. Speaking becomes intensely difficult as I seek to fulfill the most delicate assignment ever given me. James Reeb became an agnostic, and later, to all intents, an atheist. In the words of that much admired man, Duncan Howlett, who has written Reeb's biography, *No Greater Love*, the young man who became his associate pastor in the All Souls Unitarian Church "virtually ceased to believe in God." Deity was no longer a reality in James' thinking and living. How could this have happened?

Here were the stages on his life road: As a young teenager in his home in Casper, Wyoming, James Reeb developed an insatiable thirst for ideas. He was inspired by his beloved and dedicated parents, who are here with us today, to be devoted to the Truth. His original commitment in the realm of ideas was to what is known, theologically and historically, as *Fundamentalism*. He accepted that tradition in thought and in life, both its doctrinal affirmations and its standards of living.

In a very subtle way loyalty to ideas about the Bible became a substitute for listening to the Bible, while ideas about God and Christ took the place of a personal, meaningful experience of God through Christ. During all the years from Casper to Princeton, God never became for Reeb more than Idea. He was not a living Presence, luminous

and dynamic, in his life. The youth came to identify religion with dogmatism and legalism, irrelevant to life and insensitive to life's real issues. Did we fail him as a Seminary and as a Church in the hour of his need?

For religious confessions, ideas and traditions, young Reeb substituted a "light within." There was no consciousness of a Voice that spoke, no awareness of a Hand that guided and controlled. His exclusive interest was the goals and objectives he desired to pursue, with no concern for the ultimate Source from which light and power came.

It is one of the glories of Reeb's life that the goal he set before him was not selfish in character; his master passion was the welfare of people. But it is part of his life's tragedy, that he felt he had to pursue this goal alone, without the companionship of One who as the "Wholly Other," and more than the "Ground of Being," could be, and does become, as other crusaders for human welfare have found, a living Companion. Thus in personal loneliness and solitude, James Reeb sought to be true to himself, to live and to get others to live noble and courageous lives, and to keep faith with the best that was in him.

And so the moment came in the career of this young minister when he felt that his seminary training was irrelevant to his passion for people and their problems. He put psychiatry before theology. He became a devotee of Psychoanalysis—that "new religion whose God is the Analytical"—to use the words of the great Harvard psychologist, D. C. McClelland. For Reeb religion came to mean plumbing the depths of his own being, interesting his inner selfhood and its every move-

ment in the cause of humanity, both solitarily and in conjunction with others.

In consequence of this mood, preaching came to signify for this Princeton Seminary alumnus, not the proclamation of a message involving God and God's involvement in human history and life. To preach was to share with others an account of his own inner struggle to be the man he felt he ought to be. Nothing in his message could be described as "Good News." There was no affirmation of what God had done *for* man, or of what God could do *in* man, or of what "God's man," under the leadership of God, must do for his fellow men.

Here is the irony, the tragic irony. This beloved, sincere and courageous man came to ignore and brush aside the commandment to love God, which is both the Christian pivot of human obligation and the inspiration of creative concern for others. The love of one's neighbor, which is the Second Commandment, became for him a substitute for the First Commandment, which is "to love God, with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind"—and in the light and strength of that devotion—"to love one's neighbor as one's self." James Reeb made concern for others the one ultimate source, norm and objective of human behavior. These two commandments, however, belong together. When they are separated in such a way that either one becomes the sole absolute, or a substitute for the other, tragedy ensues.

IV

Because of what I have just said, the dedication of this plaque to the mem-

ory of the beloved James Reeb poses an agonizing question. It has nothing whatever to do with the human concern to which he dedicated his life and which cost him his life. I am with him in the most unqualified way in what he did, and in what he suffered for others. For I too have known the meaning of suffering, when one takes a stand for causes that are unpopular. Pardon me if once again I become personal. But the issue at stake demands it.

For sixteen years I have had to endure being called a "communist," or a "pro-communist." Why? Because, after returning from Asia in 1949, I pled publicly, and continue to plead, that this country, in the interest of international relations and world peace, give a place to Communist China in the family of nations.

In the national situation I am linked to the cause of the indigent migrant workers, whose woes have been so shamefully exploited in our country. It has been an exciting experience to be associated for more than a decade with Frank Graham, Phillip Randolph, and Norman Thomas in the "National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor." That committee has striven to secure from our government and the farming community justice for those social outcasts. I mention these two facts for but one reason: Touching James Reeb's human concern and the cause for which he died, I find myself at one with him.

But what about God in the context of this concern? Is he real? Is he relevant to the problems of man and society? The beloved alumnus whose memory we celebrate today came to affirm God's non-existence and irrelevance. As one who loved and admired James Reeb,

and one concerned like he was for human relations and social justice, I must affirm from personal experience the reality of God as a luminous, transforming, and sensitizing Presence.

V

"Someone came to my soul," said one of the characters in that famous Russian novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is a fact, confirmed by history, and luminously and dynamically attested by experience, that God is not "dead," that there *can* be felt the grip of a Hand, that there *can* sound a Voice, that words *can* be heard in poetic cadence which become a prelude to spiritual change:

"I am He Whom thou seekest!

Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."

The affirmation must also be made that it is not enough for Christians and churchmen to emphasize the fact, as do Arend Van Leeuwen and Harvey Cox, "representative men of the sixties," that today God is involved in a major way in the secular order. It must be proclaimed to contemporary Protestantism that God's presence is by no means limited to the purely secular.

That eminent poet-philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, who was the first writer in the Twentieth Century to be concerned about the *Tragic*, which today has become a world issue, makes the following avowal in his great classic, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, "I believe in God as I believe in my friends, because I feel the breath of his love, and his invisible and intangible Hand, which draws me and leads me

and presses me, because I have an intimate consciousness of a personal Providence and a universal Mind, which maps me out my destiny."

Why should a person be regarded as a mere old timer when he affirms, as Unamuno does, and as your speaker does, that God *can* be vital, that God *is* vital, in one's own thinking and living? We have reached a moment in the history of classical Protestantism, when the idea must be crusadingly challenged, that to be relevant to the problems of the secular order, a man must abstain from any claim to have a personal relationship with Deity as his Light and his Companion in struggle.

The reality of God's presence in day-by-day living, as well as in mission, must be experienced and proclaimed more than is now being done in the main line Protestant churches. Otherwise, despite the New Secularism which many churches patronize, and the organizational oneness which they pursue, tragedy confronts us, unless a dimension now being lost or disdained is restored to status. In such a case, purely secular forces could temporarily prevail and provide leadership in seeking a solution of the problem of man and society.

In this tragic hour in our national life and our international relations, when it is possible, as in the case of James Reeb, to be a "representative American" and yet lose faith in God, let us listen to the words of the poet-prophet who said:

"Tell them ye grieve for your hearts
know Today,
Tell them ye smile for your eyes
know Tomorrow."

This is the Christian hope. Tomorrow, God as revealed in Jesus Christ will prevail, not romantically or rhetorically, but actually. Through a luminous and dynamic confrontation of the secular order and a radical transformation of man's life and relations, Christ shall prevail through those who take Him seriously in a society that will be worthy of man and of God.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

(at unveiling of the Reeb Memorial plaque)

Eternal God, who art the Creator and Lover of all men, by whom all souls do live: We dedicate this plaque to Thee. We dedicate it as a memorial to the Reverend James Reeb, one of Thy servants, whose vision of service to humanity would not let him go, but led him to lay down his life for his friends. May it ever remind us who remain of the great cost of true love. May it remind us of the work to which we have been commissioned even before we would dare to pray, "Thy Kingdom come." May it serve to disturb our complacency, to stab awake our moral conscience, to steel our resolve, and to give purpose and direction to our days.

Fill our hearts with compassion to love even as we have been loved. Let Thy Holy Spirit have its way in and through us, that we may follow in the steps of the Master who worked the works of Him who sent Him, while it was yet day. Enable our high resolves to become incarnate in relevant acts of service.

O Lord, receive this plaque, the monument of men's hand—but even more, receive Thou the gifts of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(by the Reverend Richard J. Oman, President of Class of 1953)