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AT THE FRONTIER

JOHN A. MACKAY

IT is fitting that my first word should be one of welcome. In the name of the Seminary Board of Trustees I welcome all of you who are here present. I wish particularly to welcome the new members of the Faculty and those students who are with us for the first time. I think most of all of those among you who have come to us from abroad, and would extend to you, our special guests, a very cordial word of welcome on behalf of our whole Seminary family. We feel honored by your presence. We trust you will find our company congenial and that this Seminary will prove to be as hospitable as we want it to be. I trust also that, when your sojourn among us comes to an end, you will feel that your stay has not been unprofitable.

Since last we met here in Miller Chapel two former members of our Seminary family have been removed by death. The Librarian Emeritus, the Reverend W. B. Sheddan, passed away suddenly during the summer at the age of seventy-eight. Mrs. Brown, wife of our beloved former Vice President, Dr. Henry Seymour Brown, passed away a few weeks ago after a long and lingering illness which she endured with Christian patience and fortitude. We cherish with gratitude the memory of these two departed friends and our sympathy goes out to those whom they have left behind, in particular to Mrs. Sheddan and to Dr. Brown.

I

In the first book of Chronicles there is a description of the men of Israel who rallied to the banner of King David at the beginning of his reign. I have been much impressed with the description that is there given of the children of Issachar. About those tribesmen it is said that their

leaders were two hundred in number, and that they were "men that had understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do." What characterized those men of Issachar should characterize those ministers of the Christian Church: a deep insight into the human situation and a supreme sensitiveness to their duty under God in view of that situation. What I propose to do this evening is to make a contribution, humble and inadequate though it may be, to our understanding of the times, and to present what appears to me to be the duty of the Christian Church, as well as of all thoughtful people, in view of the particular state of mankind today.

If I were asked how I could most simply crystallize in a few words where we stand today, the words would be: "Our generation stands at the Frontier." The reality of the frontier, like that of the wilderness, has returned to contemporary life and thought. The term, historically speaking, is an old one. Its reality has played a very signal part in the history of civilization. Speaking of the frontier in terms of history, it might be said that it has had two main meanings, and two principal manifestations. Sometimes it has meant a zone; at other times it has meant a line. The frontier as a zone has been the meaning which has mainly marked the history of the Western World. A great student of the frontier in the development of this country described the American frontier as the "hither side of free land." By that he meant the particular zone between occupied and unoccupied territory. That frontier came to an end back in the eighties of last century. Culturally speaking, the frontier as a zone has been that neutral region between civilization and barbarism,

a region whose life and condition have partaken in part of the marks of civilization and in part of the marks of the primitive life. According to the historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, the frontier in this particular sense is also passing away in our time.

The other historical meaning of the frontier is that of a line, a line which has followed a straight or a wavy course between two fortified areas. That has been the historical meaning of the frontier during a great part of European history; the no-man's land between armed camps. Some would say that this interpretation of the frontier as a line between fortified zones manned by embattled hosts, is the sense in which the frontier is most real in these days. They would, accordingly, define the real frontier of our time as the line between the forces of Communism on the one side and the forces of Democracy on the other. According to this view, the human issue centers in the antagonism between these two forces. To my mind this view is entirely an over-simplification of the human problem today. As I see it, the true frontier in these days is neither zone, nor line, but chasm. So my first point would be this: *The Frontier of life in our time is bounded by a chasm.*

II

In these days the sense of a great emptiness, a colossal void, an abysmal vacuum is felt everywhere; alike among the vanquished and among the victors. The frontier of our time skirts the edge of an eerie abyss. This emptiness on the frontier has primarily a *physical aspect*, a grim material aspect. There is more hunger today, there are more empty stomachs, there are more desolate homes than there have ever been in the history of mankind. In areas where lived formerly, and not so long ago, leaders of religion and culture, there exist today human ghosts whose supreme effort and concern

is to live, barely to hang on to life, to have a sufficient number of calories for pure existence. That situation is due in a major way to the war and its aftermath, but not entirely so by any means. It is due also to providential happenings in nature, to excess of water or to the lack of it, to flooding or to drought, so that, on the one hand, man's work directed towards recovery was handicapped, while, on the other, the earth could not bring forth her fruits in due season.

But that is not the whole story. As we stand at this frontier and look into the abyss we become aware that this situation, where a famine of bread prevails, is due in part, in very great part, to human selfishness. We have done much as a people and as churches for human succor, but not all that we might do. Let us bless the Marshall Plan, and every other beneficent plan designed to relieve human misery, even should they be dictated merely by political expediency. But let us realize and take to heart, in Church and nation, that a very large part of the present suffering is due to selfishness. For though the frontier skirts the abyss, many of our fellow citizens and of our fellow church members consider that what is called the American standard of living is not only an achievement of American civilization but that it has the authority of a law of nature, as if it were an expression of the cosmic order. The calculation has been made, for example, that our American people eat today some twenty pounds more meat in a year than at any time previously in our history. Therefore, according to some, any question of human beneficence towards others must take as the point of departure the number of pounds of meat that we consume; for that standard is sacred and unalterable. If that view were taken seriously, we would be guilty of the suffering of famishing peoples. Should we be unwilling to discipline ourselves, or to accept controls if self-discipline fails, we

shall be guilty of the human misery that hangs over Europe like a shroud as the coming winter approaches.

But the physical void upon the frontier of our time is nothing in comparison with what might be described as the *metaphysical void*. The lives of millions of our fellow citizens in this generation utterly lack a sense of meaning or significant purpose. They have no light upon the meaning of life, and they have no zest in the practice of living. It is natural that we should think first, in this connection, of the metaphysical void in the spirit of the German and Japanese peoples. In the case of Japan, as a result of great statesmanship, due to the policies of one of the few really great men thrown up by the recent struggle, there is a growing hope, a sense of meaning, a glint of light in the gloom. But in the case of the German people the gloom deepens into hopelessness. Very many Germans recognize their guilt and have said so publicly. But despair grips the nation as a whole, and there are respects in which we contribute to the thickening of this gloom and the deepening of the abyss. Here is an illustration of what I mean:

For more than a year we had the names of two German students who were accepted for enrollment in Princeton Seminary. At the close of a year and some months since we knew they were coming, they have not been able to obtain visas. One would think that their experiences here would be a small contribution towards the re-education of Germany, and the re-incorporation of the Christian youth of that nation into a meaningful life. But so far as one can learn, virtually no Germans of the more than a hundred that were expected by American colleges and universities have been allowed to come over. What considerations, we might ask, of statesmanship or military necessity are responsible for that added contribution to gloom and night?

Let us not think, for a moment, how-

ever, that the sense of nothingness is confined to our late foes. According to the most sensitive spirits in American thought, we are living to a very large extent in a spiritual vacuum, upon a borrowed heritage of faith. "We are the hollow men," says one. We "are full of fancies and empty of meaning." We are "distracted from distraction by distraction." Conscious of the very real nihilism, the negation of ultimates that is invading the American spirit, another exclaims:

"Oh my country,

It is Nothing that we must fear: the thought of Nothing:

The sound of Nothing in our hearts

like the hideous scream

Of fire engines in the streets at midnight:

The belief in Nothing."

In a very real sense there is a growing nihilism in the outlook and attitude of our American people upon the ultimates of thought and life. That is the reason why some of our most prophetic educators speak about the metaphysical anarchy that reigns in the high places of culture. What we lack, in comparison with Russia, aside entirely from the merits of the issue between our two countries, is that they have a world view, unsatisfactory and sinister though it be, and that we have not. Our culture is not inspired by a great luminous idea which gives meaning to the universe and unity and purpose to life, while our political policy is dictated more and more by the purest expediency. Such a situation is extremely perilous in view of the potentiality of atomic power. Our scientists, it is true, tend now to question the probability of any kind of atomic chain reaction that would wipe out all life on this planet; but whole national groups could be wiped out in an atomic war, although some life, both human and organic, might be spared. Is the advance towards

the Frontier of Nothing the last trek in human history? If not, the question arises, whither bound?

III

But this is not all. To the absence of light must be added the absence of a sense of life, of being really alive. Mass man, man in our industrial civilization, is very lonely. Not among the proletariat alone, but in cultured circles also, there is discernible a longing for significant life, a yearning to belong to somebody, to something; to God, to the universe; to a great idea, to a great cause; to commit oneself with abandon to something bigger than oneself, and in the commitment to live in the thrill of devotion to something that is greater than self-centered living.

I know a distinguished professor of English Literature in a great university who is both a poet and a novelist. While a Marine major during the war he wrote, on a lonely island of the Pacific, some poetry which has since been circulated privately among his friends. Listen to some significant lines:

"Can treaties, pacts, and all the rest of it,
Nations' firm vows to marry,
Make any citizen one aching bit
Less solitary?"

This cultured, fighting man felt that even though international problems were satisfactorily solved, the personal problem of the ordinary man would not be solved. For the thoughtful human individual, feeling himself lonely and adrift amid the great mystery of things, wants to be related personally and feelingly to what is ultimate, to God.

What does the Christian religion have to say to those who stand on this Frontier? There is a word that needs to be spoken to the emptiness and meaninglessness of our generation. The prophet Jeremiah spoke it to his contemporaries: "You have followed after empty idols and have be-

come empty yourselves." This means: "You have followed hollow gods and have become hollow souls." This is a word for our enemies who were defeated amid their delirious dream of empire; it is also a word for all those among the victors whose spirits have become the abode of Nothing. To follow less than Deity, the finite or the merely human, is, in the end, to experience hollowness at the core of one's being. History teaches us that this happens; Revelation gives us the clue to why it happens. To give one's life to less than Deity means in the end abysmal Nothingness.

The Christian Church, if it is sensitive to the Word of Revelation, knows that God has spoken, that truth exists, that ultimate truth is personal Truth, the Word become flesh in Jesus Christ, who was "full of grace and truth." Over against the emptiness of man stands the fullness of God. There is a Gospel, "good news" about God, fullness of divine grace for human need in man's abysmal emptiness. Jesus said, with piercing insight into the human problem, "What shall it profit a man though he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Moved by a power mysticism, by an insatiable acquisitiveness, the souls of men and nations become in the end "lost," that is, empty and hollow, without God, without goodness, without hope. The cure Jesus prescribed was that man should submit to the lordship of God, to seek God's Kingdom and righteousness, that is, a God-inspired and God-controlled system of relationships. A system of thought that centers in the significance of Jesus Christ for all reality, for life in all its fullness, needs not only to explain to man his predicament, but to lead him from meaninglessness to meaning, from emptiness to fullness of life. It is this fact that makes it so thrilling to pursue a theological education in these days. For nothing is more needed than doctrine, thought made luminous by the

Gospel, by the cosmically significant fact of Jesus Christ, who lights up the abyss. But if Christian doctrine is to fulfill its function in our time, it must be more than a lens through which God and man and life are studied; it must become a torch to illumine the chasm on life's Frontier. It must be no mere badge to guarantee orthodoxy; it must be rather an unfurled banner that summons crusaders to a war on Nothingness. It must proclaim, moreover, and put to the proof, that the Spirit of God can brood over our Emptiness today and bring light and life out of the chasm on the twentieth century Frontier.

IV

But already passionate crusaders are assembled at the Frontier to illumine and organize the chasm. And so I come to my second main point: *The Frontier is aflame with passion*. The frontier that skirts the abyss is a frontier that flames.

When I was a student in Aberdeen my professor of philosophy, a left-wing Hegelian, loved to quote a saying of his revered master, Hegel: "The owl of Minerva takes her flight when the evening shades have fallen." That was a description of the advent of the great philosophical era in the history of Greece. The creative word had been accomplished in the political order. Now the philosophers came to interpret what had happened and to define the meaning of life. But ours is not a time for philosophical detachment. The human situation today is very different from what it was in the great philosophical era in Greek history. The glow in our sky is not the calm splendor of the sunset, but the fierce red of a new dawn. When we do our thinking we cannot idealize an existing order as Plato idealized the Greek City State.

T. S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets* has some prophetic lines which open up to us an innermost fact about our human situation today:

"The only hope or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
.....
We only live only suspire,
Consumed by either fire or fire."

Our pyre will be one whereon all we treasure will be consumed in one blazing holocaust, or a pyre on which human selfishness will be burnt in a purifying flame. It is a question of fire or fire: the fire of the flesh, a purely mundane fire flaming at the selfish hearts of men or nations; or the fire of the Spirit, the fire of the Divine and Eternal, the fire of justice and of love.

In this passionate generation of ours the fire appears in diverse forms. There is the *passion of political imperialism*. I am on dangerous ground I know, but we are clearly entering upon a great imperialistic era in which empire becomes the dream. There is Russian sovietic imperialism and there is American democratic imperialism. We take for granted the imperialistic dream of Russia, but we cannot think of our country as imperialistic. What does it mean, however, to be imperialistic? To my mind it is not necessary that we should dream in terms of more territory. Of land we have enough. But one thing we have in common with Russia: The supreme category of all our political thinking is security. The Russians want to make security and world power their goal, for they believe that this is the age of the messianic Proletariat, and that for capitalistic civilization the cosmic knell is tolling. They are not prepared, therefore, to consider any political solution that would not ultimately spell the doom of those aspects of life and culture which they regard as a menace both to their world-view and to their sovietic organization.

We, too, make security our ultimate. Every new decision must contribute to security. We are prepared to use force

to ensure that no menacing danger rears its head unchallenged in any part of the world; for we must have security at whatever cost. This is pure imperialism.

I am not going to enter here into the complicated aspects of the struggle, but it is actually a lamentable fact that the life of the United Nations is degenerating into a conflict between the United States and Russia. It is not for the Christian Church to offer blueprints to statesmen. It is its function, however, and particularly the function of the tradition to which we belong in this Seminary, to bring rulers face to face with the everlasting righteousness of God. Not security but righteousness must be the ultimate concern of men and nations, for it is righteousness alone that exalteth a nation and guarantees its future. Why? Because righteousness is an order of right relations constituted by God, between Himself and man, and between man and man. Therefore, nations, even empires, must fit into God's order or perish on the wilderness trails of history.

The absolutization of security brings in its train two most sinister consequences. It cultivates a power mysticism making brute force the ultimate arbiter of human affairs. It tends, moreover, towards the death of freedom for all those who serve within the official security structure. I know personally loyal and princely men who serve our government in diplomacy and in scientific research who live in an agony of apprehension. They know that no reasons need ever be given for their dismissal. Their capacity to work is being affected. For what is to hinder their indictment, in the name of security, by unscrupulous or hysterical individuals or groups?

If security and not righteousness continues to be absolutized and the logic of this procedure drawn, we are headed for a literally terrific struggle. Creative genius will be wilted and freedom will die. In

such a case the Christian Church cannot be silent. It must be prepared not only to set forth the everlasting foundations of human relationship, but to defend at whatever cost the great human freedoms.

There are, however, passionate crusaders of a different order. They are the humanistic idealists. Something unusual is happening in intellectual, especially in scientific, circles. The tradition of aloofness, the sin of truancy from the vital problems of life that has marked the intelligentsia of recent times, is breaking down. The academic mind is descending from its Olympic detachment and seeking a place in the arena. I recall the impression made upon me thirty years ago when I read Julian Benda's, "The Treason of the Intellectuals." The French writer bitterly indicted the French and European intellectuals of his time for their failure to play a part in the arena of human conflict where decisive issues, issues with which the very welfare and future of men depended were being dealt with. The reason why Hitler was able to get control of German culture was that the German academic mind refused to take part in human struggles. Because of this failure German culture lost in the end that freedom which is the basis of all culture. The academic life of our country has been infected with the same spirit. It has not been considered good form or in the interests of professional promotion that one holding a Chair in a great institution of learning should become enthusiastic overmuch with a practical issue, identifying himself with abandon with a great idea or with a great cause. But, as I have said, the situation is changing. Philosophy shows signs of leaving its abstractions and becoming concerned with the human conditions which make international understanding possible. Scientists no longer take for granted that the knowledge which they accumulate as the result of their research will inevitably be a contribution to human welfare.

No experience that I have had in recent times has more profoundly impressed me than a long conference I had with a group of atomic scientists. They are brilliant men who live in an agony of concern to let the public know what they can legitimately reveal regarding the tremendous nature of atomic power, and to call upon all men of goodwill to achieve human understanding and to consolidate international relations before it is too late. A large number of those men have banded themselves into an association of passionate crusaders who sacrifice time and money in the fulfillment of a great public mission. Such men deserve not only applause for their efforts, but the support and backing of all citizens. What has happened is this. For the first time, we might say, in the purely secular realm, the reality of love is taking on political, philosophical, and scientific significance, for it is evident that the human stage is being set today in such a way that either men must come to love and trust one another, or perish together.

V

But while we should be thankful for the new ideas and ideals that are emerging and the new imperatives to moral action that are sounding, we should realize that more is needed. A society, a community, is called for in which those ideas and ideals and imperatives shall be incarnate. With all its imperfections and the stains that attach to many aspects of its life, the Christian Church as a world community is the most significant and hopeful reality upon the frontier of our time. A community of love exists around the world to bear witness to the possibility of human understanding. Some months ago in Ontario, Canada, I attended a gathering of the Christian Church where 42 nationalities were represented. I thrilled at the sight of men from the Orient, from Africa, and from different lands of Europe and of

the Western World who were outstanding in their intellectual caliber and passionate in their devotion to all that is highest. Representatives from former enemy countries were there. In the spirit of intimate comradeship we took counsel together on all matters that concern the chasm that confronts us and regarding the passionate crusaders of different types who strive to illumine the abyss and to organize its anarchy.

Yes, the Christian community is a reality, a reality that offers the most hope in the world of our time. One of your own number, a veteran of the Pacific struggle, who entered Seminary this year, told me how in the Philippine campaign from Leyte onward he and his fellow soldiers found in different parts of the islands groups of Christian believers among the indigenous population who spoke joyfully of their "brothers in Christ." What was more tragic, he said, was that they found from time to time New Testaments in the uniforms of dead Japanese soldiers.

Passionate Christian realists are our greatest need, people who know man but do not despair of man, because they know God and have experienced the grace and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Never was the Christian Church, if it is ready to be truly the Church, more relevant to the human situation than it is today.

But if the Church is to perform the role which it is called by God in these days to perform, it must fulfill two conditions:

First, the Christian Church must cultivate a sense of the Frontier. Ministers of the Christian Church must be frontiersmen ready to adjust themselves to whatever the human situation calls for. This revolutionary time is not a time for the Church to rear great structures which it does not really require for campaign needs. It is a time not for cathedrals, but for tents. We must beware of creating things which in the present revolutionary situation might prove to be no more than

monuments to the memory of God instead of instruments of His glory. For the times are such that floods and fires, subterranean forces and hurricane storm, may foredoom whatever the Church erects on the ever shifting sands of the present. But whatever the Church does to illumine the chasm of the present with spiritual meaning, and to organize, through new men and women in Christ, the anarchy which prevails in human life today, will be a contribution on the bleak frontier of our time.

There is also a second thing which the Church must do. The Christian Church must remember that it is the Church of Jesus Christ. As the Living Lord, He is above all else the Christ of the Frontier. He inhabits the wilderness trails. Where the issues are acutest and the fray is thickest, and the stakes are greatest, there is He. Let the Christ of the Frontier be the Christ we follow.

In his great book, *The Study of History*, Arnold J. Toynbee, after surveying the twenty-one civilizations of mankind, describes the savior-gods one by one, to consider what hope each offers in our generation's time of troubles, and takes his stand on the great frontier along which flows the river of death. Into that river the savior-gods took their plunge, one by one, some willingly, some less willingly. Where does human hope lie? Says Toynbee, "As we stand and gaze with our eyes fixed upon the farther shore, a single figure rises from the flood and straightway fills the whole horizon. There is the Saviour; 'and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand; He shall see of the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied.'"

Colleagues of the Faculty, members of the student body, through the gloom, out of the midst of Nothingness, Christ's words sound: "Follow me." Let us advance with Him to the Frontier.

COMING EVENTS

February 17	2:00 p.m.	Meeting of the Board of Trustees	April 20	7:30 p.m.	Worship Service with sermon by Dr. Robert J. McCracken
February 19	8:00 p.m.	Dr. Arne Fjellbu, Bishop of Trondheim, Norway	April 27	2:00 p.m.	Meeting of the Board of Trustees
February 24	7:30 p.m.	Dr. George E. Sweazey will speak on the New Life Movement	May 18	7:45 p.m.	Spring Musical
March 2	7:30 p.m.	Dr. Anders Nygren, of Lund, Sweden	June 6	4:00 p.m.	Baccalaureate Service and Communion
March 9	7:45 p.m.	Easter Music by the Seminary Choirs	June 7	12:30 p.m.	Class and Club Reunion Luncheons
March 19	5:00 p.m.	Spring Vacation begins		3:00 p.m.	Memorial Service for Dr. Robert E. Speer
March 29	1:40 p.m.	Spring Vacation ends		4:00 p.m.	President's Reception. "Springdale"
March 30	7:30 p.m.	Hymn Festival		6:30 p.m.	Alumni Banquet, Whiteley Gymnasium
April 6	7:30 p.m.	Address by Professor Listen Pope	June 8	10:30 a.m.	Annual Commencement
April 12-15		Lectures on the L. P. Stone Foundation. Dr. William F. Albright			