



# The Princeton Seminary Bulletin



Vol. XLVIII

JANUARY 1955

Number 3

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# THE GLORY AND PERIL OF THE LOCAL

## A FOOTNOTE TO ECUMENICAL DISCUSSION\*

JOHN A. MACKAY

WITH this evening's gathering Princeton Theological Seminary begins the one hundred and forty-third year of its institutional life.

Let me extend a very hearty welcome to all who are here present. I wish to extend a special welcome to Dr. and Mrs. Campbell Wyckoff and to Mr. and Mrs. William Brower, who are new members of our Faculty family, and to Dr. Hans Hofmann and Mr. James Martin, who have been incorporated into the Faculty on a full-time basis. I am happy, also, to welcome back to the campus two of our regular Faculty members, Dr. Kuist and Dr. Fritsch. Dr. Kuist has returned from a six months' absence in India where, under the auspices of the National Christian Council, he rendered remarkably fruitful service in conducting Bible conferences throughout that subcontinent. Dr. Fritsch has come back from a sabbatical leave in the Holy Land where he engaged in important archeological studies.

On behalf of my colleagues of the Faculty, let me also extend a very warm welcome to all of you who are on this campus for the first time. I wish to greet in a special way all students from abroad, of whom we have this year a very considerable number from very diverse and far-flung places. I am not forgetting either our new missionary guests in Payne Hall. To them, and to all

other missionaries, let me say this: all that we have is yours. Feel from the outset that you belong, in the fullest sense, to our Seminary community.

On occasions like this I have sometimes chosen some central Christian truth and have tried to apply it to the contemporary situation. Sometimes I have selected an aspect of the human situation today and have considered it in the light of Christian faith. This year my theme is suggested by the very ecumenical summer through which we have passed.

### *The Three Phases of the Ecumenical Movement*

I feel warranted in calling the summer months of this past year "an ecumenical summer." I do not believe that any summer in human history has witnessed so many representative gatherings of an ecumenical character as did these last months. In fact, each of the three representative phases of the ecumenical movement has had its particular expression.

The *missionary*, or basic phase, of the movement was represented in a significant gathering held in Staten Island early in July. There, under the auspices of the International Missionary Council, which is the parent ecumenical body, about a hundred men and women from around the world came together to con-

\* An address delivered at the opening of the one hundred and forty-third session.

sider "The World Mission of the Church."

The *confessional* phase of the ecumenical movement was also represented. That is the phase which expresses the pursuit of world solidarity on the part of great Christian communions. On this campus, towards the close of July and early in August, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order, popularly known as the World Presbyterian Alliance, held a meeting. The Alliance is made up of some sixty-six different Presbyterian denominations, which among them have a constituency of forty million people. In the city of Minneapolis, the various branches of the great Anglican communion met also in conclave.

This most ecumenical summer had its crowning expression at Evanston, Illinois, during the last fortnight of August, when the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches was constituted. Evanston expressed the *unitive* phase of the ecumenical movement. Many who are here this evening attended that great gathering.

I do not propose, however, to discuss the ecumenical movement in general, or its several phases, although there would be every reason that I should do so. It happens that I am related officially to all three phases of the ecumenical movement: the missionary, the confessional, and the unitive. It has been my privilege, also, to have played some small part in the development of this movement. But this evening I shall not speak about the ecumenical movement as such, but will deal rather with a major problem of that great movement. I will formulate my subject in these words:

"The Glory and Peril of the Local: A Footnote to Ecumenical Discussion." Or, to phrase the topic in other terms, "The Rediscovery of the Local in the Sphere of the Ecumenical."

I am quite convinced that the future of the ecumenical movement is bound up with the rediscovery of the *significance and role of the local*. Why? If the ecumenical movement is to prosper, the churches must become committed to the world mission of the Church. The moment this happens, the local, here and everywhere, will take on new significance. Moreover, if the inner meaning of ecumenical unity is to be concretely expressed, and not remain a stratospheric abstraction, it must become the unity of people who live in different localities around the world. All these people must come to recognize in doctrine and life, and express in missionary action, what it means to be one "in Christ." On the other hand, there is a kind of emphasis upon the local which could destroy the ecumenical. There is in the local, therefore, both peril and glory.

#### I. THE GLORY OF THE LOCAL

Let me speak first of the *glory* of the local. Let me put it in this way, the ecumenical task must be undertaken with a local emphasis. Why? For this reason: *It is the glory of the local to be the place of birth and of growth*. There is a Spanish proverb which, freely translated, runs thus, "A bird may fly in all directions, but only in a nest can it raise a family." This is as true of the eagle as it is of the sparrow. The mighty pinions of the king of birds, which have carried it on many a spectacular flight, must come to rest in

some quiet aerie among the crags. So, too, the fluttering wings of the sparrow must cease their motion in a hidden nook where eggs, or new life, await the mother bird. What takes place in a nest, in bare cliff or leafy bough, is something slow by nature, something monotonous and totally alien to all that is dramatic and spectacular. But the processes of birth and growth cannot be hastened; they must be inexorably obeyed.

This Spanish proverb is a parable of some of the great truths of the Christian religion, as well as of human life. There is nothing deeper in our Christian faith than the affirmation that "the Word became flesh." God Almighty, whose purpose sweeps through the ages and the eternities and holds them together, ordained a "nest," a manger, where His Son should be born, and a mountain village where He should grow up. It is the central glory of the Christian religion that cosmic meaning took personal Form, and that that personal Form appeared at a focal point, in the fullness of time. Because of that fact, the locality called Bethlehem has cosmic significance, and Nazareth, the scene of thirty years of Messianic growth, is at the heart of all human history. So, too, the shores of the Galilean Sea, and the rugged, lonely hill of Calvary, have been charged with universal meaning and written by God into the very structure of the universe and of His everlasting purpose for mankind.

It has been so, also, down the Christian ages. No one ever expressed more fully the root meaning of the ecumenical than did St. Paul. He literally ranged the *oikumene*, the "inhabited earth," which the Romans identified

with their empire. But the wanderer, the lonely, bludgeoned man, who bore in his body "the marks of the Lord Jesus," lived for whole periods, for as much as three years at a time, in the "nest" of a local community. Only so could the spiritual processes of birth and growth be expressed in the life history of souls. Thus it was that when at last they shut Paul up within the walls of a Roman dungeon, his thought soared and his vision ranged throughout the eternal ages. It was at that time and at that place that he wrote his great ecumenical letter, "The Epistle to the Ephesians." It was then and there, too, that he wrote his "Letter to Philemon," which has well been called "the most perfect letter of the most perfect gentleman who ever lived." In that letter the ecumenical wanderer of yesterday says in effect to his friend and convert in distant Colossae, "Here I became a father—I appeal to you on behalf of my spiritual son, Onesimus (a runaway slave), born while I was in prison—I am sending him back to you, and parting with my very heart." (Moffatt's translation.) In no figure in history do the ecumenical and the local, and an equal commitment to both, find so complete and harmonious an expression as in the great Tarsan who became the Apostle to the Gentiles.

A host of similar instances mark the course of Christian history. That poetic gem in the literature of Christian mysticism, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* by St. John of the Cross, where the Christian knight storms the very citadel of heaven, was written in a dungeon in the city of Toledo in Spain. The poet's body was shut in, but his spirit soared. And let us never forget that the greatest



account ever written of the Christian's pilgrimage, from the dawn of new life to the triumphant crossing of Death's river, was written in a Bedford jail in England, by a local Baptist preacher called John Bunyan, who never roamed far from home.

This last summer I received a letter which deeply moved me. It turned my native ecumenical bent towards a reappraisal of the local. It was a letter from a leading minister in the English Presbyterian Church. "I am writing you on the third Saturday of July," he said. He had been reading a little book called, GOD'S ORDER, where he discovered that the most significant episode in the author's life took place in a glen in the Scottish highlands. On a certain "third Saturday of July" Jesus Christ became real to him for the first time, while Christ's cosmic, ecumenical significance became equally real. Said my friend, "Do you know that some years afterwards, in that same glen and on that same date, I, too, heard the call of Christ?" How could that place and that time fail to have ecumenical, even cosmic significance for two people into whose lives had come such an experience? We both have wandered far afield in the service of the Church Universal, but both look back to a "nest" among the Scottish hills and to an unforgettable day.

But there is still more glory in the local. *It is the glory of the local to be the place where life's great encounters take place.* Important encounters do take place in ecumenical gatherings. In such gatherings there is always frank speaking, sometimes even violent clashes, yet people remain friends withal. A certain artificiality always at-

taches, however, to an organized conference. The setting is never quite natural. It is quite different where a home is concerned. There one man and one woman have to come to know each other, live together and make mutual adjustments. With the home as their base, they must tread life's road, children and parents together, confronting a whole gamut of problems. But if domestic issues are not solved creatively, the pillars of society are shaken, and the prospects for tomorrow's world are seriously affected. How many of literature's greatest dramas, which have influenced the thought and life of millions throughout the globe, took place within the narrowest of local boundaries.

The same glory attaches to the parish. Let me give a concrete illustration. This morning I had breakfast in New York with one who graduated from Princeton Seminary ten years ago. He is now assistant pastor in a great metropolitan church. A year and a half ago he expected to be married to a lovely young woman from Ardmore, Pennsylvania. On the eve of the wedding, however, it was discovered that she was suffering from cancer. The marriage was postponed. For a year and a half the bridegroom that was to be watched his loved one pine away until she died. "I have entered into a new experience of the Cross," he said to me. "I have been able to preach on the theme 'Made perfect through suffering.'" His harrowing experience made it possible for him to be a true pastor, to have a Shepherd's heart in a new sense. "Now, when I go to the hospital," he said, "when I see thirty-five people a day and they tell me their sorrows, I can tell them what happened to me." Here is a

type of experience which takes on universal, ecumenical significance when the tale is told.

At this point let me allude to a certain glory which belongs, or should belong, to our local situation in this Seminary. We constitute a unique community. In few seminaries is there such a challenge to live ecumenically at the local level. Work is carried on under the auspices of one of the great Communion in the Reformed tradition. But that Communion is never obtrusive; it does not exist merely for its own interests. Fifty denominations are represented in the membership of our campus community. At the orientation outing last Saturday evening down by Carnegie Lake, I happened to look around in the gloaming, just as the bonfire was being lit. A little distance away I saw the representatives of four continents talking together. The encounter was not a piece of stage play arranged for a photograph, but a quite casual meeting. One of the four was from Africa, one from Asia, one from Latin America, and one from Continental Europe; and, before the meeting of the four broke up, I saw an Australian approaching. Among the many American students who stood around was a sprinkling of men and women of still other nationalities.

Here in our local campus community we have international as well as ecumenical reality. The question therefore arises, shall we be able, in this local community, to live as Christians should live, so that our life relations here shall be truly Christian and all our thinking be in complete accord with the mind of Christ? If we succeed in this, something of incalculable significance will happen.

When at length we shall bid one another farewell, and set out in all directions, some to diverse regions of this country, and some to the ends of the earth, the whole wide globe shall come to know the "salvation of our God," because in a small historic town in New Jersey, Christian community had been realized.

It is just at this point that Marxist Communism breaks down and offers no true solution of the human problem. The reason is that it makes no provision for true community, for a community of friends who have the fullest confidence in one another. This basic defect in Communism goes back to Karl Marx, himself. Marx was a man obsessed with concepts. His absolutes, the objects of his supreme love and devotion, were all ideas. Read that great biography of the father of Communism written by his Marxist follower, Otto Ruhle. What do you find? Ruhle says that Marx was insufferably arrogant, that he had no use for people as persons. He could never keep a friend. The only man personally acquainted with Marx who refused to allow himself to be completely alienated from him, despite all sorts of provocation, was Engels. These are, textually, Ruhle's words: "The man who was a master of unsociability and incapable of friendship issued as a watchword that all men should be brothers."

Ponder that sentence and you will discover one of the great aberrations of human nature. It is perfectly possible to be interested in men as a class, whether they belong to the bourgeoisie, to the working class, to the student class, or to any other, and yet have no

capacity whatever for treating human beings as persons with whom friendship is established. I know people who are tremendously concerned about the problem of this or that social class or racial group. Yet they have no interest in warm, personal encounter with individual workmen, or members of another race. They get their whole satisfaction from propagating abstract ideas of race or class. Some of them live everlastingly in a whirl, in contact with great masses of people. They hate to be left alone with persons; they are never at home with individual members of the very class whose interests they promote. In other words, we humans have a colossal capacity for self-deception. Despite our protestations of being interested in humanity, we may have no real human passion or compassion so far as individual human beings are concerned. We are interested in abstractions. We are native Marxists though we do not know it. The true meaning of a classless society in Christian terms is never to allow ourselves to cherish a prejudice or resentment against any human being, rich or poor, friend or foe. That was the way with our Lord. You find no prejudices in Him. But the exclusive preference for any one class or group may be no more than a form of escapism. To have the mind of Christ is to love people, not to love everything they do or many of the things to which they are committed. It does mean, however, to form such contacts with them as may enable us to transmit to them something of the love and mercy of God.

But now I come to the *peril* of the local. In things human there never is glory without peril.

## II. THE PERIL OF THE LOCAL

*It is the peril of the local to become parochial.* The members of a local community can become ingrown. They can live totally uninterested in, and even disdain, those who live outside community boundaries. They incline to look at the world from the belfry of the parish church or town house. Lacking a vision of what is beyond, they become complacent and sterile. In physical nature that is the parable of the Dead Sea.

"I looked upon a sea and, lo, 'twas dead,  
Although from Hermon's snows  
and Jordan fed."

Parochialism is not infrequently the result of ideas which people hold. They consider their ideas to be the true and only ideas. They refuse utterly to have anything to do with those who fail to accept or share their concepts or categories, which become, to all intents and purposes, substitutes for God. They do not really worship God, but ideas about Him.

The great Spanish writer, Unamuno, tells of a visit he once paid to some lonely, rugged mountains in old Castile. He found living there a dwarfed folk, low of stature, who suffered from rickets and other ailments which stunted their growth. All sorts of theories had been advanced to explain the small stature and the many ailments of those mountaineers. Some held that their condition was due to lack of sunshine, for the sun shone down only a few hours each day into the deep ravines where they lived. Others held that the water was tainted. Unamuno's solution of the problem was that it was due, not to any taint in the water, nor to the absence



of the sun's rays, but rather because the water was unduly pure. The unhappy denizens of those uplands drank water which never had a chance of picking up salts from the earth, especially iodine, that indispensable constituent of good health-giving water. Paradoxically speaking, it was because of the excessive purity of the water that those people were dwarfs. Unamuno turned this tragedy into a parable. "The person," he says, "who tries to live by pure categories becomes a stunted dwarf." That is all too true. A man may be a Marxist or an orthodox Christian, but if he lives merely by ideas, concepts which become idols, the objects of his ultimate devotion, his humanity will shrivel up. He will become a pale ghost or a raving maniac. All the traits of rich, robust humanity will disappear. This dire fate has come about in both Protestant and Roman circles, just as it happened in some of the ancient Christian churches.

Let me become lyrical for a moment. It is very difficult to teach me anything I do not know about sectarian Protestantism. I was brought up in the Scottish Highlands as a member of a religious group to which I owe more than tongue can tell. It was in that fellowship that Christ first spoke to me. It was instilled into me, however, that our ideas and practices were so much purer than the ideas and practices of others that we were not on any account to mingle with them in religious fellowship. One day an old saint, called Richard Cameron, made the remark, "It is true that we may be a despised people today, but when the Millennium comes, all Christendom will rally around our church!" The local had become proudly and completely parochial.

Take this other example from a very different ecclesiastical realm. A few years ago, at an ecumenical gathering in Cambridge, England, an Eastern Orthodox friend of mine said in the course of the discussion, "We Eastern Orthodox Christians have the truth." I ventured to ask, "Isn't Christ's mandate to evangelize the world a part of the Christian truth? Can a church really claim to possess the truth if it has failed to obey a truth so vital?" He was clearly embarrassed, and rightly so, for the Russian Church ceased to be missionary when the Slavs became converted to Christianity.

In the light of Christ's missionary mandate, it is blasphemous for any Church to say, "We *possess* the truth," or "the Church *cannot sin*," and very especially if it has flagrantly neglected to fulfill the missionary obligation of the Church. No, Christian truth is *personal* truth, it is commitment to a Person, loyalty to a Person who is the Sovereign Lord. And that Person, the Living Christ, is ever moving beyond the frontiers of today. His truth cannot be contained within rigid dogmatism, nor His Kingdom within narrow ecclesiastical boundaries. No Church can be "of the truth" if all it claims to have is true ideas, or a rightly ordained clergy.

But, secondly, *it is the peril of the local to become the total*. Just as the local can become ingrown and parochial, it can also become inflated, projecting itself imperialistically around the globe. That is what happened in the case of German Nazism. A particular race, localized within clearly defined geographical and historical frontiers, presumed to become the master race for world

domination, the race predestined by some inexorable decree to establish a millennial kingdom for one thousand years.

This is a development which some fear might take place in this "beloved country." The fear is, I believe, quite groundless, but the very possibility of such a development must be forestalled. That great journalist, John Finley, one-time editor of *The New York Times*, used to tell this story of an American diplomat who attended a banquet in Paris. This is the toast he offered. "I give you America," he said, "bounded on the north by the Aurora Borealis, on the south by the procession of the equinoxes, on the east by the primeval chaos, and on the west by the Day of Judgment!" If ever we should commit ourselves to a policy of settling by sheer force our ultimate differences with governments which we abhor, instead of trying to live in the same world with them, we would be taking vengeance into our own hands; and the Judge would be already standing at the door. In this evil world it has always been necessary to live with people whose outlook and ways we do not like. The supreme task of statesmen is to find a way for a face-to-face encounter, in the most favorable atmosphere, with the enemies of their country. The moment, however, that any nation should presume to settle its international problems in terms of pure power alone, and not in terms of unstable coexistence with all the risks involved, the crack of doom would re-echo in the corridors of time for that nation as it did for Nineveh and Tyre.

The same peril exists in the *ecclesiastical realm*. Whenever any one eccle-

siastical body presumes to be the total church or to possess global authority, when the Bishop of Rome, for example, claims to be the one and only viceregent of Jesus Christ, then, too, the local becomes the total. The same is also true when any non-Roman Communion makes an exclusive claim to be the one true Church of Christ. Such a Communion, by this very pretension, becomes transformed into a sect and even into an idol. An identical principle operates when any centralized administrative structure, secular or religious, seeks global powers. As regards the organizational form which ecumenical unity might one day assume, that can be left to the Holy Spirit, who has not yet exhausted structural possibilities for the Church of Christ. The important thing is that the Churches move forward together in loyal commitment to the Church's mission. It is on the road of obedience that truth shines and unity is achieved.

If, therefore, we are to blend together the ecumenical and the local, doing full justice to both, two things are needed. First, *the Churches must be committed to the world mission of the Church*. They must move forward under the leadership of the Living Lord Jesus Christ to make Him known to all mankind. When that becomes the absorbing passion of Christians, a new comradeship will emerge, as they take the road together, moving through the highways and byways of the world. Secondly, this, too, must be done. *The inner life of the Churches must be deepened*. In every congregation and parish, in every denomination and throughout the Church Universal, Christians must come to know and experience all that it means

to be "in Christ Jesus," and to enjoy that spiritual communion which is the joint fruit of love and obedience. These two must be done together: to witness to Christ and to abide "in Christ," and to do both as members of Christ's Body, the Church, which is both local and ecumenical.

And so, as we live together on this unique campus, may this be our goal: Let us undertake each local task with an ecumenical vision; let us pursue the ecumenical task with a local emphasis. And may the Great Head of the Church both illumine and empower us.