

DIALOGUE WITH THE MODERN WORLD

In the April, 1965 issue of *The Ecumenical Review*, a quarterly journal published by the World Council of Churches, Walter G. Muelder wrote on "The Church in the Modern World: A Critique of Schema XIII." Portions of his article bear directly on concerns expressed elsewhere in this issue of worldview, and they are here reprinted.

The dialogue with the modern world in the sense of communication through listening and responding, through research in the behavioral, natural, and theological sciences cooperating together, has further implications and involvements. It changes the style of "giving the answer." The "natural law" tradition enters a new inter-disciplinary phase. Its language partakes of that of sober men of good will. The symbols of the peaceful uses of atomic energy take on universal significance and cut across ideological barriers both East and West. In the modern world there are "worldly" men of sober morals who are more competent than the traditional voices of the "magisterium" and whose competence is an essential ingredient in speaking the "truth" to the present generation. Some of these persons more competent than the clergy are not baptized members of any Christian church, yet their testimony belongs in the concrete formulation of the answers to questions which plague all of mankind today. . . .

The concrete areas of social concern which are dealt with [in Schema XIII] are the family, population problems, culture, economic and social life, the developing nations, international order, and world peace. Drawing on such excellent resources as *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, as well as other social research and ethics, many perceptive statements are made on these questions. There are the assumptions of the unity of mankind, its interdependence, the sacredness of the person, and social justice. Yet, these assumptions must be related to the theological section and the doctrines of the Church and ecumenism coherently. In the critique which follows we shall note a number of middle axioms which are left dangling in the schema and we shall make a sociological criticism of how these social pronouncements are related to culture and

theology. Historically the Roman Catholic Church has not hesitated to find in the theory of the natural moral law a unifying principle of social ethics. Without some such theory integrally related to systematic and Biblical theology it is difficult to unite the various middle axioms which are appealed to. In the case of the ecumenical movement related to the World Council of Churches the major unifying idea has been "the responsible society." To it, as developed at and since the Amsterdam Assembly, the subordinate middle axioms have readily been assigned. It has served as a kind of lower order natural law doctrine and has been a bridge between theology and applied social ethics. It has also served as a transcendent norm both East and West and has provided a basis for common thought and action between Christians and non-Christians. At the same time it has stated a solidaristic or corporate norm for society embracing such leading ideas as freedom, justice, equality, responsibility, personality, vocation, power, authority, and welfare. Such an inclusive norm is still lacking in Roman Catholic statements at Vatican Council II.

There is no lack of middle axioms in Schema XIII but they need a unifying norm and theological and ethical foundation. Appealing to the dignity of the person are the social nature of personhood, the relation of individual liberty to responsibility, and the right ordering of social and political life as the business of everyone. Then we may mention the question of the place of the family in culture and the nature and function of both family and culture. There is an acknowledgment that genuine love exists among those who do not yet profess the Christian faith. The need is expressed for collaboration of experts in the anthropological, psychological, medical, and sociological sciences with theologians. What is the common ground for such collaboration? May laymen be theologians? In the section on religion and culture their close relationship is affirmed as well as their distinctions. "The purpose of religion *per se* is not culture, but the giving of glory to God and man's eternal salvation; nevertheless, when religion is neglected, human culture too declines and decays." Why is this? Below we shall propose that a sociologically sound conception of religion and culture can illuminate this dilemma. Though Chris-

tianity is not bound to any particular culture, the real issue only arises when this phenomenon is acknowledged. If culture decays when religion is neglected, what is the meaning of religious freedom in the context of the unity of mankind as a cultural issue?

There are other middle axioms which require suitable theoretical foundations. One is the assertion that economic development should not be left entirely to itself. Another is that the Church is bound to no particular economic system. Still a third is that the entire arrangement of the whole process of production and the conditions of labor must be made to correspond with the higher needs of the human person. It is left unclear how these three ethical principles on economic development are to be consistently related to "the poor church," the "church of the poor," and the vocation of man both here and hereafter. A fourth axiom says that in international aid the neighbor society must lend its aid according to the principle of "subsidiarity." Another axiom states that in regard to the number of offspring the final decision rests with the parents. Finally, it is stated that nations should be *sui generis* or independent. An equally interesting idea for a Christian document is that nations should "strive to have their various cultures highly esteemed, so that each of the nations may be able to preserve organically and perfect each its own material and spiritual inheritance, in genuine freedom and mutual friendship and cooperation." It is not clear how this axiom relates to the unity of mankind, to international law, to the world mission of the Church, and to the lordship of Christ over the Church and the world.

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The middle axioms that have been cited here strike a responsive chord in the present writer. However, their presentation lacks a well formulated root-age either in the natural law tradition or to some other unifying axiom such as is found in the idea of the responsible society. It would be a great step in ecumenical social ethics if Vatican Council II would adopt and develop the unifying norm of the responsible society. Such development could profit by relating it to the family, to "subsidiarity," to international relations.

We come now to our second major criticism, the relation of religion to culture. Cultures are whole systems of society held together by unities of meaning and value. They have myth-structures which are self-enforcing. Their laws float on a sea of ethics and ethics draws on the ethos of peoples. Religion

has to do with the ultimate universals, values, meanings that pervade the basic institutions of culture; for, all of the institutions whether of family, education, economic order, political order, etc., draw on and interact with the fundamental myth-structure. Religion is a functional pre-requisite of culture. When the basic values of a society in a complex culture conflict, its coherence and unity are threatened or undermined. It is for this reason that the decay of religion means the decay of culture, unless a more adequate religion takes its place. This leads us to a comment on institutional religion as it functions in culture.

Religion functions not only in the most intimate relation with the self-enforcing myth-structure of culture and constitutes its ultimate dimensions and concerns, but it expresses itself also in institutional form. It operates as a visible society and organization alongside other cultural institutions. Its organized corporate life and purpose are what are referred to in such a phrase as "the presence of the church in the modern world." But its organized life has a profound relation and responsibility for the Christian religion as a functional prerequisite for culture—even when the cultures are alien or hostile. Therein lies the challenge to mission and evangelism. Organizational success is possible without converting the spirit of the culture, but the conversion of a nation's values requires more than organizational success.

Just because religion (or its *quasi*-religious functional substitutes) has the profound relation to culture referred to above, Christianity cannot rightly permit the Church to be introverted. It has a radical revolutionary power. It must not abdicate its obligation to penetrate the spirit of all the culture-shaping meanings and values of all the nations. It is this deep mission that is assumed in the view that the laity are the chief promoters of culture. A too churchly, sacramental, and juridical emphasis on the church in the modern world will confuse this mission with a new *corpus Christianum* or take a dualistic view of this world and the next.

An adequate theological foundation will present a view of God as creator, redeemer, and renewing preserving spirit at work in the world and in the Church so understood as to provide for religious freedom, cultural plurality, the unity of mankind, and the transformation of persons and culture by the power of Christ. It will provide a basis for a responsible society in which mankind is the unit of cooperation and where freedom and justice are undergirded by law and law is sustained by an ethos of respect for persons responsible to God.