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Preaching as Dialogue: Sermons to Men of Other Faiths and Traditions

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Book Reviews

PREACHING AS DIALOGUE

SERMONS TO MEN OF OTHER FAITHS AND TRADITIONS.

Edited by Gerald H. Anderson. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1966. 184 pp.

Two hopeful signs of new vitality in the Church, Dr. Gerald H. Anderson of Union Theological Seminary (Cavite) says in the preface of this book which he has edited, are first, the renewal of mission of other faiths and to men of no faith, and secondly, the movement for Christian unity.

Both these movements, *Christian missions* and *Christian unity*, aim to fulfill the prayer of our Lord "that they may all be one...that the world may believe." The two together.... constitute what Archbishop William Temple spoke of as "the one great ground of hope for the coming days—this world-wide Christian fellowship, this ecumenical movement."

This book gathers together fifteen sermons (all of them, unless I am mistaken, written expressly for this work) by "men who are recognized for their background, experience, and involvement with the groups to which they address themselves." The first nine sermons were written by Christian preachers to men of other faiths or of no faith. The existentialist, the secularist, the Jew, the Black Muslims in America, those living in a communist society, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Muslim and the Shintoist are addressed by a Christian whose initial attitude is a "confidence in God as already at work among those to whom he will preach." The last six sermons are preached "to men of other traditions": a Roman Catholic speaks to the protestant; a Protestant to the Roman Catholic; a Conservative Evangelical preacher to the Ecumenist; an Ecumenist to the Conservative Evangelical; an Eastern Orthodox priest to the Western Church activist; a Protestant to the Eastern Orthodox. The sermons

in the second part of the book seek to meet "the urgent need at this moment for speaking the truth in love to one another and manifesting our oneness in Christ that is a gift of God."

Martin Marty, with the liveliness and interest which usually mark his work, speaks to the existentialist on I Cor. 2:2. "I resolved that while I was with you I would think of nothing but Jesus Christ—Christ nailed to the cross." This text might almost be considered the *leitmotiv* of the first part of the book. Almost every sermon addressed to the non-Christian comes back to what Dr. Marty calls "the Christian center of things": Christ nailed to the cross, Christ who lived and lives our life, at the side of the weak and the suffering, in the reaching hand of love. (The first sermon is one of the best in the whole collection, written with those in mind "who resent glibness or cleverness or evasion...who do not even like quotations from Christian existentialists.")

Walter Muelder's sermon to the secularist on "the world's deeper meaning" is thoughtful, not least for its examination of the guilt of Christians for "the widespread prevalence of the secularist spirit." "The worldliness of the churches sanctions secularism in the world." Jan Milic Lochman, preaching to "those in a communist society", addresses "those who believe", insisting on the relevance of the Christian vocation in a society wherein "the whole problem of secularization is ideologically intensified" and then speaks to the atheists, with moving simplicity, of the death and resurrection of Christ as the one hope for all men.

David G. Moses preaches to the Hindu on the costliness of salvation. "The point of Christian contact with Hinduism is in the faith of the Hindu that 'by grace we are saved', the point of difference is the superficial concept of sin in Hinduism... *There is no cross in Hinduism.* Therefore, to lift up the cross of Jesus Christ, with all of its mystery and meaning, is to proclaim a message of challenging relevancy to the Hindu." To the Muslim, Kenneth Crag writes of seeking God's forgiveness for sin, of the imperative of repentance. "When we repent, this is not, as it were, a meriting of forgiveness. It is not a condition of its being given, but of its being received. Our penitence does not enable God to forgive; it enables us to take his forgiveness, in that it identifies our wills with his righteousness. Only as we admit his verdict upon our evil-doing can we be set free from its guilt and power." (A whole theology of redemption and justification is in that passage, as well as in the fine paragraph on seeking God's forgiveness on p. 100.) Tetsutaro Ariga speaks to the Shintoist of God's *megumi* to *makoto*, two terms used in Shinto, whose meaning approximates that of the Old Testament *hesed* we *emeth*, and of the need of genuine conversion from sin if salvation is to be had from God in Christ. "But in

Jesus Christ we find the true *megumi to makoto* strong enough to forgive and remove our sins and to set our existence on its eternal foundation. This is why I am a Christian, and I am happy indeed to be able, with all humility, to confess this to you."

The second part of this collection opens with a sermon by Bishop John J. Wright to Protestants and one by Dr. Robert McAfee Brown to Roman Catholics.

Bishop Wright touches "on some points where I think we have tended to think of one another as separated by differences which closer scrutiny may reveal have not been so great as generally supposed; where, indeed, we have a common tie on the level of values and a common task on the level of vocation." He speaks of the "church-state bogeyman that has been rather successfully unloaded on" Catholics, and the "seeming compromise with the spirit of secularism which [Protestants] have often justified, so it seems, as a necessary alternative to undue comity between church and state." He urges that "we are both—better, are as one—in peril of seeing the witness we bear as Christians and the work we owe Christ paralyzed by secularism in our century rather than by any likely alliance of church and state whether in Catholic or protestant terms" and that thus the most pressing duty is a common guard "against the encroachments among us, singly or in our Christian community, of that spirit of secularism which contradicts the spirit of Christ that we seek to nurture."

Dr. McAfee Brown's sermon, "Unity—Dream or Demand?" is surely one of the finest things in the book, a sort of primer on ecumenical 'conversation' which has the clarity, strength, warmth and felicity of phrase we have come to expect from its author.

As I get to know a Roman Catholic, or a group of Roman Catholics, I discover how very deeply we are brothers together because we revere the same Christ.... And I become surer and surer that the estrangement between us must cease—not by ignoring the remaining differences, and not by minimizing them, but by recognizing their wrongness and seeking to explore them. The purpose of the exploration cannot be to score points in a theological debate, but to seek ways of understanding where and how we have both somehow failed to give full expression to the gospel that should unite us and yet divides us. Anyone who has been in this situation will realize that it cannot be the will of God that we, who share so much, should finally fail to share all things.

I have no illusion that the differences will be overcome in the near future or in my own lifetime. Indeed, from a strictly human

point of view, I do not see how they are going to be overcome. There is no meeting ground, for example, between believing that the pope is infallible and believing that he is not infallible, for there is no such thing as being "a little bit infallible." Nor will "compromise" ever be the path to unity, in which I promise to give up this conviction if you will give up that one. Unity can never come by the sacrifice of convictions we gradually believe to be the truth. It can only come as we expose our most cherished convictions to one another, as I seek to explain mine and understand yours, and vice versa, and then leave it up to God to do something with what we have attempted. We can never enter into this honest exchange with an assurance of how the exchange will end or with the covert assumption that you will, of course, finally surrender to me. We can only be sure that as the discussion proceeds, each one of us will be changed by the other, and that the Holy Spirit can do more with our attempt than we can ask or think.

To be sure, this means risk, and it means risk on both sides. But the one who is afraid of risk had better not try to enter the ecumenical door. Indeed, the one who fears risk had better not even try to be a Christian.

Carl F. H. Henry addresses a warning to the ecumenist whose temptation is "to proclaim the unfulfilled opportunities of ecumenical cooperation above the wonderful works of God," and who "although sure that the divisions of Christendom constitute the main obstacle to the church's witness to the world...is nonetheless unsure of the central features of Christ's victory over the world, the flesh and the devil." "If the Christian community is to speak decisively to men of other faiths and traditions, it will succeed in the apostolic sense only by [the] awareness that Jesus Christ alone is the source of the church's life...[and] only by keeping the great redemptive deeds of God—and not the church—at the center." Eugene L. Smith, speaking as an ecumenist to the conservative evangelical, insists that "Christian truth is the only possible basis for Christian unity," and urges above all the really urgent need of Christians speaking the truth to each other in love and in deed.

In "On choosing the good portion," Paul Verghese, a priest of the Orthodox Syrian Church, discusses the 'activism' of Western Christianity and the 'idleness' of the Eastern Churches: "We are all distracted, the Western Church with much serving, the Eastern church with lesser concerns." He recalls the truth that activism springs from a blend of desperate pessimism and a naive optimism, and that both these things are in effect an expression of basic unbelief. He urges a renewal of a deep inner life of prayer and worship, warns that much action and service can be an escape from

the emptiness of the inner self. "Actions in order to be Christian and creative have to come from the being of man rooted and established in Christ. Doing changes being, it is true. But doing alone cannot create being."

In the last sermon, addressed to the Eastern Orthodox, Stephen Neill goes over the ground of the separation of the Christian East from the Christian West, touches on the special qualities in the life of the Orthodox churches which are singularly impressive to the Western Christian, asks certain questions on whose answers relations between East and West depend, and voices the hope of the restoration of unity. His "Eastern Lights and Western Reflections" is beautifully written, and forms a fitting conclusion to this fine volume.

We have spent much space on this book of sermons; we will be pardoned, I hope, for calling it so lengthily to our readers' attention. But seen in the light of the great texts of Vatican II on Ecumenism, on the Eastern Churches, on non-Christian Religions, and on Religious Freedom, in the light of passages from *Gaudium et Spes*, the sermons in this collection deserve to be, and will be read with renewed attention and deeper interest. Vatican II has recalled to all Christians the need of speaking the truth to each other in love, the need too to bring the word of salvation and redeeming love which is the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world so desperately in need of it. But if the gospel is to be preached, it must be preached—for men of today—as "dialogue".

Preaching traditionally runs the danger of becoming a monologue or, worse, a harangue. However, a sermon should, now more than ever be a conversation. It can be the best sort of dialogue, even though only one of us is talking, if only it seeks to increase the celestial harmony of spirit which should prevail.... Such celestial harmony will assuredly characterize our conversations when we speak of common treasures; it can do so even when we must talk with one another across the fences of our differences.

These words from Bishop Wright's sermon describe the sort of preaching which these pages, for the most part, bring us: the sermon where preaching is truly a form of dialogue, wherein one listens as much as one speaks, where the loving courtesy of grace is mirrored.

We are grateful to Dr. Anderson for this beautiful book. May it help all of us as "we reach out to one another with renewed eagerness and strive to listen to one another with fresh desire to grow in mutual knowledge and love," as we "offer ourselves as instruments in

God's hands for the breaking down of barriers that at present seem insurmountable," but which God's mercy, in its own time, will surmount for us.

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THE FAITH OF THE ADOLESCENT

FAITH AND THE ADOLESCENT. By Pierre Babin. Translated by David Gibson. New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. 128 pp.

Anyone who has encountered the "couldn't care less" expressions common in a high-school religion or college theology class will appreciate the need for studies like Father Babin's. This work, based on the responses of 1800 adolescents to the question: "For you, what is God?" is (the author tells us) an attempt to cast some light on questions like, What are the major characteristics of adolescent faith and what causes them? How does the adolescent's faith evolve?—It is not an attempt to "go in their door and come out through ours"; rather, it is a careful synthesis of psychological, theological and catechetical analyses, and is designed to meet the needs of those charged with passing on the Christian message to young people. Fr. Babin's surveys show what is in fact the image of God characteristic of the mind of the French adolescent; furthermore he points out its roots in his particular level of religious and sociological maturity.

Condescension is avoided: it is made clear that since the experience of faith is a human experience, each "age of man" is more fittingly attuned to a different aspect of the rich mystery of Godhood.

The faith of the adolescent is found to be distinguished by the marks of naturation, egomorphism, and emphasis on the moral sense. *Naturation* is the tendency to form a concept of God which responds to the dictates of reason rather than to those of historical revelation. The term *egomorphism* is used to describe the adolescent's concern with those qualities of God he particularly feels the need of: simplicity and tranquil self-possession. Finally unlike the child or the adult, the adolescent heavily emphasizes the establishment of the *moral order* through creation. The teacher's task is to understand this idea and its roots that he may better relate religion to the present and future life of his students.

Father Babin's specific conclusions and recommendations can only be applied to the Philippine setting after an intensive preliminary survey has been made here.

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