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Titulo

NEW FORMS OF COMMUNITY IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

by Dr. Margaret Mead, The American Museum of Natural History, New York, USA,
July 20th, 1966

Factor

It is the way of those who follow the Judaic Christian path to be troubled, to search in the sky and in their own hearts for signs and portents that all is not well. Such exercises of furious and exacting imagination are then often followed by long periods which some call stagnation and apathy, and others call betrayal when the flame of religious witness burns very low, the young men who should be seeing visions go elsewhere and the life of the church gives little light to the world like a light under a basket. We are just emerging from such a period when it has seemed that the churches were powerless to wrestle with the new forces of world wide revolution, instant communication among all the people of the world, forms of warfare that threaten the whole of mankind, and powers from science which seem to give secular man incalculable capacities either to destroy the world or to make it anew. With these earthshaking changes, a new sense of helplessness, of humility, of being strangers in a world too large to love, has fallen upon many of the churches, and from this questioning now comes a new vigour and a new determination. From this sense of weakness, of ignorance and humility, of reaching out for every kind of help, there can come the strength which will make the Christian churches of this world a mighty force to temper and bind the destructiveness of the winds of change, and find a true shelter for man within the storm that has been released, not by wickedness and sin, but by knowledge that we do not know how to use. Millions of people die today where hundreds died before, of hunger, in massacres, of diseases that could be cured, in wars that we have not learned to prevent. The measure of misery and the dangers to man have multiplied a millionfold, but these millions who suffer do not challenge our Christian compassion, do not brand us as sinful, more than the unanswered cry of needless suffering of a single child. What they do challenge is our understanding. The Christian message has slumbered, locked in ancient and loved institutional forms, while the residue of ages of faith has provided secular man with a conscience to question what is happening in the world, but with neither grace nor faith effectively to cope with the new dangers and the new possibilities.

This conference is a momentous stirring of a new form of Christian responsibility, as Christians from every continent, from every kind of old and new society, of every race, many variants of formal faith and practice, men and women, old and young, gather together to ask: what is our place in this new world? It is the more momentous because it is not a conference only of those who have dedicated their whole vocational life to the church, but of laymen of many kinds, and of laymen with the kind of competence that the theologians and the ministries once treated with tolerant love, at best, with disdain, at worst. The fact that I stand here at all -

speaking to this plenary session - is a measure of new forms of participation in a pluralistic and secular world. For I stand here not only as a layman - we are not quite sure of the advisability of the word laywoman! - but as a social scientist, asked to bring what I have learned from the secular study of mankind, of a life time spent studying the lives of people who have been cut off - until very recently - from the great central movements of history, and so can teach us not to confuse that period of history which we value because it is the period of Christian revelation, with the whole history of mankind.

In the two thousand years of Christian history, we have seen a steady stream of discoveries and inventions that have altered the face of the earth and man's life upon it. We have substituted the nation for the tribe, the city state, and the empire, and now we are in the process of trying to invent the structures that will bind the nations safely within a world order of law, through which the love of man for man can be expressed. We have learned to plant and to reap, so effectively that it is possible for one man to feed fifty, even a hundred others, and feed them well. We have invented machines that dehumanized men, in factories and mines, and now we have made new inventions that will make it possible to invest men with a fuller humanity than they ever had before. There were many things which we could only do - during former centuries of the Christian era - on a small, and symbolic scale, washing the feet of a few beggars, binding up the wounds after a battle we did not have the understanding to prevent, feeding a few orphans and closing our eyes of necessity to the thousands just over the mountain and the sea for whom we could do nothing. All of these things men can now do on a world scale .. thanks to the growth of human knowledge.

Science has given to us human ways to make the deaf hear, the lame walk, to feed the hungry, and to make it possible to think of men as brothers - to know that they are brothers, not only to the eye of faith and the heart of love - but because we belong to one species among the creatures of the earth, and because now, in this modern, intercommunicating world, we can see and hear each other, half a world away and also meet together in this room, and know each other for neighbours within the human community and brothers as the children of God.

The significance of this Conference is that it is an attempt by Christians to come to grips with the results of the scientific and technical changes in the world, not only with the will and the spirit, but with our minds. If this conference becomes only a sounding board for expressions of dire need by peoples caught at different periods in the world-wide changes that are going on, and a reciprocal and sentimental expression of sympathy from those who watch political revolutions from arm chairs beside comfortable fires - it will have failed. We need to go out of these meetings newly fired with a sense of what needs to be done in the world, ready to search for understanding of how to do it. The political situations of many of our members call for drastic action: a new value scale of the dignity of each individual and each group, of all nations and all races, of the possibility of treating women as persons, of the new rights of young people in a world in which they are more at home than their elders, is spurring the peoples of the world on. In all of these causes, zeal without knowledge, has become a sin.

The form of sin changes through history, it is fruitless and wanton to accuse the men of the past, without either the opportunities or the knowledge of the men of today, of failure. That they did not wholly fail is testified to by the fact that

we are here today, in new conditions, asking what can we do. The sin today, - which, it is true, the Christian church is in grievous danger of committing -, is the sin of ignorance where knowledge is available, of failing to seek for more knowledge now that we have the means of seeking it, of failing to believe that the truth will make us free.

One task of the Church, the task of stewardship, is, as it has always been, to cherish and protect the lives of men and the life of the world. Today, it is possible to do this, as never before, and it is possible to fail altogether, not just for a decade or a century, but for all life on this earth forever. The scope of our responsibility has broadened to include a world of billions, a physical world which we have the power to devastate and render uninhabitable, and moral and ethical problems of personal life, of new and terrible proportions. If we cringe before these immense new powers of man, if we escape into our churches and chapels and comfort ourselves with our own private faith, we will indeed have betrayed the Lord who said: Feed my lambs.

It is now the task of the churches to know, to know with precision and passion, what is known; about the organization of nations and the growth of international institutions that can insure peace and order, about the need and the ways in which the population explosion can be curbed before it plunges mankind into famine; about the economics of the modern world and the limitations involved in different kinds of markets which make either poor people, poorer, under private capitalism, or poor nations, poorer, under state monopolies. It is the task of the churches to know that the forms of family life, appropriate for scattered agricultural and pastoral peoples with a high infant death rate, are out of date and terribly dangerous. It is the task of the churches to know the difference between the industrial revolution based on limited power and brutalizing work, and the new scientific revolution, which can free men from being slaves, but involves new risks for men as individual persons. It is the task of the churches to know that our land and air and water are being polluted, wasted, and irreversibly damaged, and that this need not be. All over the world, people are suffering, starving, bruised in body and spirit and it is no longer necessary that this should be so. In the past, the Christian could pray for peace, he could die at the stake for his beliefs, he could sell all of his goods and give to the poor. With such acts earlier Christian built a climate of opinion in which today we can organize for peace, create a world of law in which men are free to think and to choose, and work towards the knowledge of how to feed all the hungry.

A secular world means a world in which the pursuit of knowledge and the application of knowledge are both specialized tasks. A secular world means a world of organized political authority. A secular world means a world in which there is never only one answer to any problem, but diffusion of vocation and responsibility creates openness and the possibility of change. We have that world. The question is what are we, the Christian churches of the world, going to do to cherish it. So God loved the world..... Can we choose to love it less.

This conference is only a beginning. It has many old uncompleted tasks such as the reaffirmation that we are the keepers of those who live nearby, of the young, of the poor, and the deprived at our very doorstep, such as the abolition of any denigration of another because his skin is dark - or light, such as learning to

treat women as people - with not only souls, but minds. But the circumstance that the old tasks are incomplete is no excuse for not undertaking the new. We cannot stop at underlining those things that we could have done and did not, long ago, or even a quarter of a century ago. The uncompleted business of yesterday must be absorbed into the business of today and tomorrow.

New Forms of community

As we look at the changed and changing world in which we live, and realize that the whole of mankind is now one community, the life of each individual and each group given meaning by that realization, we realize also that the church must change as the world around it changes. In the past, we have had three principal forms of Christian community: the all embracing church which contained the wise and the foolish, the devout and the frivolous, old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, the frightened and the brave. By its all-inclusiveness, the church became also almost identical with the society within which it existed, sharing the virtues and vices, the prejudices and biases, the injustices and the cruelties of that society, even while carrying forward the continuing message of the Christian Gospel. And within this church which became coextensive with whole communities, there have been two forms of special dedication, the monastic religious order, self selected from each generation, drawing its strength from its separation from the world, and the sect, in which a group of people originally aflame with a new vision, drew apart and imprisoned their children within narrow walls in a vain attempt to keep the original vision. These old patterns are no longer enough. The churches must be shaken loose from their imprisonment within the archaic forms of a vanishing society, and establish new forms of face to face community, within which children can be reared in an experience of faith, and men may learn neighbourliness in the world close to them, so that their imaginations can extend it to the four corners of the earth. And we need wholly new forms also, in which men and women of every calling can form new kinds of association within which they can strengthen each other against the temptations that the new knowledge give. As we learn to know what is known and demand that what has not yet been discovered, there will be great temptations to use the power given by knowledge, both of natural science and of the sciences of human behaviour, irresponsibly untempered by humility. Given freedom and individuality within the Christian faith in an open ended secular society, there is need also of the discipline of new structures within which to exercise the new knowledge.

There have been ages and places where Christian witness meant to withdraw from the world, there have been other ages and places where witness meant suffering and dying, there have been others when deeds of helpfulness, caring for the orphan and the widow, the sick and the stranger, were principal tasks. Today, above all else the task of the church is to understand what is happening, to use with wisdom and dedication all that is known, and to demand that all that is not known, but can be known, that is needed for the safety and well being of man, be pursued until it is known. It is only very recently that we have been asked, in fact as well as in the vision, to include all men as those to whom we become neighbours. Only by recognizing how hard it is to do this so suddenly and how urgent it is just because

of the suddenness, can we hope to build a world in which the people of each nation are the keepers of the people of each other nation. With knowledge and no faith, we may well see a world destroyed. With faith and no knowledge, we may still see a world destroyed. With faith and knowledge bound together, we can hope to cherish and protect the lives of men and the life of the world.

In particular we need immediately to support the application of all existing knowledge to: the cause of world order, international law and world-wide institutions: the establishment of food banks around the world to guard against famine: application of known methods and continued research on methods of conception control to bring the population of the earth into balance; interim measures to bridge the gap between the richest and the poorest countries; the equalization of opportunity for racially and socially deprived peoples within all nations: purposeful controlled planning of our growing cities: opportunities for youth to participate responsibly in the modern world.

And, as a conference we need to say:

We know that we do not know.

We know that much that we need to know, is or can be known,
In the name of our belief that man relates to God through
his fellow-men

We humbly declare that we will seek the knowledge that
will make it possible for us to become, in fact, as
well as in aspiration, our brothers' keepers.

