

## TOWARD A SECULAR ECUMENISM

"What then of the man who hears these words of mine and acts upon them? He is like a man who had the sense to build his house on rock. . . But what of the man who hears these words of mine and does not act upon them? He is like a man who was foolish enough to build his house on sand," (Mt. 7:24, 26; NEB)

### I

Any serious endeavor in human life must correspond to the shape and nature of life itself, as God has established it and as he explains and exposes it to us in his words. God has given life a definite shape; and the practical man will find out what it is and proceed in agreement with it, rather than futilely resist it. In this regard then, the structure and character of an ecumenical movement is no different from that of a house, to which its name is related. Both must rest on a solid footing in reality, or else the structure will and should be washed away.

The first ecumenical question, then, is never an ecclesial question, but a prior question about the nature of life itself. Jesus is saying above, at the end of his great teaching discourse, that the theologian and ecumenist must ask the same intensely practical first question as the carpenter: what has God really done? how has he really made us? And then he must ask the corollary question: does my present way correspond to reality as God has eternally constructed it, or foolishly try to contradict it? The problem is that the theologian can hide both his unbelief and his errors far more easily than the carpenter! This perhaps explains something about Jesus, as well as about those of us who are theologically trained.

### II

The biblical word about the nature of life stresses at all points its interconnectedness, its inherent oneness. At every point that a man touches human life as it exposed in the Bible, he discovers its wonderful and complex and painful mutuality. He discovers that he is inescapably bound to all men; and that he must call them "brothers," not to create a more harmonious relationship or a better image, but simply because this is what they are regardless of the relationship or the image. And his being organically bound in this way does not diminish his individuality,

but rather constitutes the only possibility for individual fulfillment; for the man who recognizes that he is already bound to all men is freed from all the frightened violence with which we build walls against our brothers.

This is why the resurrected Jesus, when he twice visited his frightened disciples in their room with the locked doors, made such a point of the affirmation, "Peace be with you," which he spoke three times. He was saying to them that if they really perceived his significance, they would know that doors locked "for fear of the Jews" or anybody else were unnecessary; they frustrated rather than protected life. (John 20:19 ff) This same incident illuminates one reason why Christianity has so often lost its sense of solidarity with all men and tried to live the triumphalist, imperialist life of Christendom throughout so much of its history; for hidden within our ancient rupture with the Jews, symbolized in those same locked doors, is the repressed memory of the organic character of the life that supports their covenanted existence.

To the extent that a man violates this unity, this initial peace, this solidarity with all men, and participates in the ghettoization of life, to this extent he diminishes the possibilities for human fulfillment for himself and his brothers, because he is suppressing the very fabric of existence. Similarly, to the extent that he idealizes the unity or sees it as a distant goal rather than a present and determinative reality, he also curtails and emasculates the fruitfulness of life. Sin and death arise from all our useless and faithless attempts to do just this; to dissolve or postpone this initial peace. Sin and death originate not so much in the doing of a particular act, as in not trusting that it is not necessary. But the divine humor is such that even in sin and death a man discovers that he still can't escape his brother; for then, although not living for his brothers benefit, he is still forced to live at his expense.

Both the Jewish and Christian scriptures rest on this accomplished fact of human solidarity. Much more appears in God's word; but without perceiving this central affirmation, it is unlikely that we will perceive much else.

The Jewish scripture is initially and primarily a celebration of God's breaking a non-people out of cruel servitude and establishing them in freedom as a people among other peoples. And this rescue from slavery and planting in the land of a people who were no people is precisely God's most specific confirmation of the fact that life is a network of mutuality; for it is slavery above all other violence, in all its forms, past and present that is the cruelest and most brazen denial of our God-given life together, because it asserts that in the very nature of things some men are brothers,

but others are not. Above all other misshapen forms of existence-- as distinguished from life--it asserts that it is possible to describe life in divisive terms; to use polarities and separations as the determinative descriptions, and shape life accordingly. Therefore, it had to be through the passover of a slave people that God should show his most expressive repudiation of all our divisive ways; just as, incidentally, it had to be through a Mary, one of the poor and dispossessed people of an occupied country, that Christ's incarnation was accomplished.

Therefore the Law of Jewish scripture and Torah, which Christians habitually demean as antithetical to the fulfillment of life, is not this at all. It is not a burden, but a grace, because it rests on the sure knowledge that there is an accomplished peace, a corporateness among the people which makes it both necessary and possible to live in a mutual way. The Law becomes a burden only when it imposes an impossible, idealistic or heroic standard upon human life; which is exactly what it doesn't do, since it merely says: this is what life is really like; this how you can be what you already are; this is how you can correspond to and live within the basic ecology of human life under God.

Christian scripture substantiates and reaffirms this. Its passover also signifies that man is not in slavery to the sin and death that originate out of every cruel attempt to avoid or exterminate life together. It also proclaims that man is free to affirm and build upon the peace that exists within the human community body. And Christian "law," such as the teaching of Christ in the three chapters preceding the warning about building upon only what is real and substantial, this is not an impossibly heroic ideal or a cruel burden; these are not "hard saying," as we commonly call them, but the practical, natural and easy ways to be what we already are. They are just as much a description of life as it actually is, as indices for behavior in this life. This is why it's as easy to "hear" these things and "act upon them," as it is to build a house on rock rather than sand.

### III

For the ecumenical enterprise, it is extremely important that we have this pre-ecumenical solidarity clear in our minds, in order that we may raise the right questions and avoid the easy answers. The early ecumenical Councils raised the question of the unity of the Godhead; we must raise the question of the unity of mankind. It is not any longer a question of the unity of "Persons," but the unity of "persons."

We constantly talk about "starting where people are"; but mostly this admonition has a derogatory and disruptive quality, since it generally means that some people, a self-established elite, will lower themselves temporarily in order to lift others to their level. Our meaning here,

however, is inclusive and non-judgmental; it is that we all start where all men equally and actually already are, whether we like to believe it or not; and that we use this as the most practical point of reference for all questions.

From this beginning, the first and most obvious question about the ecumenical movement is that of limits and boundaries: what and whom does it encompass? The easy and normal answer to this is to mark the boundaries with Christian and ecclesiological limits; with the added reservation that possibly, someday, it may be broadened to include all believing people, such as the Jews, the Moslems, and even those of non-Abrahamic origin.

But this is a very dangerous definition of scope, since it seeks to constrict the organic and fraternal way that God has structured life. There is a proper Christian and ecclesial ecumenism which we can pursue in consultations on Church union; but such ventures should properly be seen only as a small part of the total search for the implementation of our unity in all of life. In other words, while it is functionally necessary to isolate certain churchly segments of disunity in order to focus the issue in a manageable way, the fact that we do this only defines the depth and seriousness of our sickness, rather than the aim and scope of the enterprise.

The test of whether we see it in this way, or have our minds set merely on ecclesiological ghettos that are broader than the ones we presently occupy, is the vigor with which we concurrently attack the violence of other enforced separations in life. So then, one very practical way to judge the progress of such endeavors as the Consultation on Church Union is to look for the degree to which questions of other divisions penetrate and determine the conversation. It is likely, for example, that when the delegates first meet, their informal conversation is filled with references to Vietnam: the ecumenically critical point is the degree to which this preliminary conversation does or does not find a proper and determinative place within the formal conversation.

In order that you may see that I'm not imposing an unmanageable, doctrinaire ideology rather than a theological necessity on the search for ecclesial unity, let's get at the question of boundaries from a slightly different direction.

When we look closely at church separations, we always perceive other separations inseparably intertwined with them. We should expect this, because we have the biblical knowledge that life is built this way. But it is not helpful to remove these other separations from the agenda by describing them as "non-theological" or "sociological" causes of disunity. It may be functionally necessary to apply such discrete termin-

ology, in order to probe the seriousness of such factors; but it is the ultimate and most escapist heresy to attempt to proceed as though they had no theological relevance or content.

If, for example, you raise the question of Protestant-Catholic separation in the New England context, there is no way of avoiding the Yankee-Irish issue. You can say it's a cultural and ethnic phenomenon and try to exclude it as "another issue"; but this totally ignores the ecclesiological significance of people of faith embracing for so many years in their community life a vicious and segregating way toward each other. It also ignores the fact that in our common, local language, which is often more inclusive and accurate than the language of our theological and social disciplines because it's more incarnate, when we say "Yankee" we also mean "Protestant," or when we say "Roman Catholic", we also chiefly mean "Irish."

Similarly, you can attempt to deal with the racial issue in Boston under supposedly non-theological categories, such as the economic, political and psychological factors. But if you're a man of faith, and if you're honestly seeking remedies, you won't get far before you see, for example, that in Boston it's in some way also all bound up with a predominantly white Roman Catholic electorate and public school system confronting a predominantly Protestant Negro community; and that suburban avenues of escape from the black ghetto, and economic avenues of escape from unemployment and underemployment, are chiefly blocked by white Protestants, who exist in church structures that are separated from the Negro church structures, either de jure or de facto. In short, it's the issue itself that must determine the boundaries of discussion and action; and it's plain that ostensibly church issues always embarrassingly break out of our careful boundaries and intersect with other repressions of human life.

Mrs. Ruth Batson, a member of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, tells a story that illustrates this very well. Some years ago, a Negro mother complained to the local NAACP that her Protestant daughter, who went to a Catholic parochial school, had been denied a role as an angel in the annual Christmas play because of color. When Mrs. Batson questioned the nun involved, she answered, "I never said there were no Negro angels in heaven; I only said that there were no Protestant angels!" The point is, of course, that for both sides of the dispute such a distinction was meaningless.

Although we generally recognize this interdependence of separations, we still resist allowing the ecumenical search to assume its true boundaries; we still attempt to avoid the implications of the primary unity God has given us. There are reasons for this.

For one, a purely or predominantly ecclesial ecumenism allows us to proceed without the pain of renewing a very sick theological language. We can continue to use habitual and well-domesticated words as though they really represented what we really believe and really act out in our lives. However, this will only frustrate real renewal and union. The function of language is to effectively symbolize and facilitate the emergence of the deep unity in which God has bound the human community; but an unexamined, unrenewed and latently separatist language makes this impossible. It is only by radically juxtaposing our habitual ecclesiastical language with our habitual non-ecclesiastical life--that is, by extending our boundaries--that we will see the dangerous disparities. We must submit ourselves to the same painful, gracious illumination as that coming from a statement of Malcolm X, when he juxtaposed America's official ideology with her actual life: "I don't see an American dream; I see an American nightmare!"

There is for example, a nightmare hidden in a favorite word of Episcopalians, which we use when speaking with Roman Catholics or Protestants--the word "catholic." It's a word we're very defensive about; and we go to great lengths to claim and use it as a language symbol that truly represents our churchly life. But without footnotes and extensive commentary, this is a dishonest, disruptive and unity-blocking word. We define it, in part, in the Second Office of Instruction, as describing a church life that is "for all people." But it doesn't take much imagination or honesty to perceive that this is precisely what we're not. We have only to touch just the racial issue to remember that we once elected a Negro Bishop to serve Negro congregations, and that we exist institutionally today as perhaps the cleverest practitioners of de facto segregation.

If there were no deep unity extant within the human communitybody, then we could perhaps excuse this disparity by saying that the word "catholic" pertains to what we hope and strive for. But actually, the word is not eschatological and proleptic; it is a symbolic representation of what already is in the character of human life, and therefore of what can now, easily and practically, be lived out in church life. After all, for Negroes and Caucasians to be in all things equally members of the Episcopal Church is no great burden or problem since this membership in and with each other is already irrevocably established in the order of things. It is merely a matter of being what we already are; of exposing and making manifest the life that is already latent. In this light, the indiscriminate and unmodified use of the word "catholic" is not only dishonest and meaningless for ecumenical conversation; it also serves to continue our disobedience, since it prevents a realistic perception of the way our church life is a denial of our official language.

This question of language is far more significant than can be indicated here. Rolf Hochhuth, author of The Deputy--a play which raises issues closely related to those of this paper--when questioned about his use of free verse in the play, rather than prose, said, "Anyone who talks . . . to high church dignitaries, will find that they do not speak in an ordinary, everyday, language but that they express themselves, as a matter of course, in a more ceremonial manner . . ." (Eric Bentley, ed., The Storm Over The Deputy (N. Y.: Grove Press, 1964, p. 53). This is not only a condition of hierarchs, it applies to all of us. We all have a ceremonial language that is often out of touch, not only with so-called "life in the world," but also, more significantly, with our own actual life.

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to find simple, non-ceremonial words that express our solidarity in sin? For a white person to express his corporate responsibility in the present racial illness, he has to say the clumsy "we white people" or "we white Christians." It is so much simpler to adopt the traditional, white liberal ceremonial language; then you can just say "they" and point the finger at others. This, in part, explains the anti-Communism always latent in purely ecclesial ecumenism; it's linguistically easier to locate the guilt for a world in turmoil in "communists," than in "we Christians" or "me and all my brothers in Christ."

The absence of an easy and extensive language that expresses the claims of our collective existence is not a chance occurrence. It illustrates not only our poverty, but also how sternly we resist God's way. It helps us to accept without a quiver the regular radio enumerations of Vietcong casualties; they're simply called "125 Communists." I've had the experience of making a makeshift word, "communitybody," to emphasize the deep corporateness of human existence, only to have editors dismember it. We all commonly use the term "intermarriage" to designate a union of Protestant and Roman Catholic, and in so doing elevate the demands of ecclesial disunity over the unity of mankind, of which sexual and marital love is the most specific and gracious embodiment. It would illuminate the true situation far more if we called all marriages in which the partners had never envisaged the possibility of breaking artificial church boundaries as "intramarriages," and reserve the normative term "marriage" for the really normative course, in which two people only respond to human love, without any canonical adulteration.

Illustrations could be multiplied endlessly. Secular juxtapositions will constantly reveal how our words are far more adequate for separated life, out of which they have either grown or fallen victim to, than for any movement that seeks to create new forms of more mutual existence. And because they are so well fertilized by a polemic and separatist history, they become barriers rather than facilitators. Our only recourse, then,

is to drop the ceremonial posture and use the sickest terms with quotation marks and commentary; to develop new word symbols that are unitive; and to realistically recognize that in the ecumenical movement all of us must live easily with very ambiguous speech forms.

In addition to preserving a glib and painless language, another reason for avoiding an extension of the perimeter of ecumenical concern and conversation to its true, human and secular dimension, is to preserve a gradualist time-schedule for the resolution of church separation.

As it stands now, we acknowledge that our divisions are "unhappy" and destructive, and that a new form of church life must develop. But we must also acknowledge that we feel no real and pressing imperative about this. It is only by seeing the issues in such a way that we see how church separations cause and sanctify other violent disturbances in the community-body that we will begin talking about "freedom now" from ecclesiastical bondage.

If ecumenical conversation concerns primarily church issues, having to do mostly with the survival and well-being of the churches, we will continue to move according to a time schedule dominated by non-suffering time. It is only by a radical intersection of non-ecclesiastical and ecclesiastical divisions that we will begin to bear a more appropriate share of the pain of all the unfulfilled life, and then begin to move more rapidly.

Actually, the enlargement of ecumenical boundaries is already under way. I speak not only of places like Packard Manse, where the term "ecumenical" is operationally defined in the most inclusive way. Far more significant is the new action consensus shaping up around such issues as war, poverty, race and technology; a consensus of concern and imperative that bridges-or better-discards so many of the barriers we perpetuate through painless language and painless time-schedules.

It is to be seen in the student movement, as it functions within loose bodies like SNCC and SDS, and as it presses the free university issue. It's to be seen in pressure to have poor people represented in poverty programs, and the whole yearning for a more participatory democracy. It's there in the new left that is emerging, which de-fuses the old cold-war polarities; and in the remarkable vigor of the present peace movement. You can see it in the new shapes of urban ministry struggling to be born, which no longer posit inter-church cooperation as the major shape for action, but look for far broader alliances with anybody willing to face the most pressing issues.

Common to all is the concern not to let the old compartments, now recognized to be themselves major parts of the problematic situation, determine the shape of the response: but rather, to find new collaborations that are not afraid of suffering time, suffering space, and, for that matter, suffering theology.

Fr. Daniel Berrigan, SJ, recently and temporarily exiled for peace activities, has identified this constellation as an alignment of "those who believe in the possibility of man's survival." I would describe it as those who believe that there are great treasures of new life waiting to be discovered by and for all men. However you describe it, it is there, bringing together the most unlikely comrades-in-arms; and it is a sign of where the official ecumenical movement must go. It is also a judgment on any ecumenism that avoids this dimension, even for the purpose of gaining church unity in order that these other things may someday be done. It says, in effect, that to perpetuate ecclesial, introverted ecumenism is to perpetuate racism, anti-Semitism, poverty and war. It says, in effect, that the only hope is to disestablish, unchurch, and secularize the ecumenical process.

This is why, incidentally, the current concern that there is not sufficient "grass-roots" ecumenical action is so inaccurate. It's already there, actually, in this new consensus. The point is that we don't recognize its ecumenical significance because it doesn't correspond to our constricted definitions. The real force of the "grass roots" question, therefore, is not so much who and where are the grass-roots people, but who and where are we--the theologians, hierarchs, and delegates to ecumenical consultations?

#### IV

When we realize that the theological fulcrum for ecumenism is the unity we already possess, this not only unavoidably broadens the external boundaries of the movement, it also unavoidably changes the character of many of the internal, institutional church questions we raise. A little of this has already been expressed in the discussion of boundaries. Now, let's draw it out more explicitly.

To begin with, there's the constant question today: How can Christians do more things together? This seems like a legitimate and helpful question, especially in contrast to our still recent polemical and competitive style.

Actually, however, it serves to hide a deeper and much more helpful question, which is: how can we really do anything apart? Forgetting the way our life is already constituted as a life together, we easily come to assume that we can do real and life-giving things in isolation; and until we question this, the accelerating plea for more cooperative and joint enterprises only serves to obscure the real seriousness of our predicament.

One might say, for example, that all the seminaries in the Boston area should find ways to cooperate more fully in the work of educating seminarians. However, this would be abortive from the very beginning if we assumed that already, in our present encampments, we are actually carrying on a basically valid and fruitful education and training; which is certainly what our promotional literature seems to imply.

But the important omission in our present system is not other "traditions" or other seminarians and faculty, but other people as a whole. To acknowledge that man, and especially man at his intellectual level, is inescapably interconnected with all men, is to see the impossibility of life-giving education occurring when the major portion of one's self-consciousness, though readily available and contiguous, is prevented by a closed system from even establishing contact, much less communication and communion. Our seminaries, like our de facto segregated public and private schools, are heirs and victims of that persistent tradition within Western culture which constitutes man chiefly in terms of autonomous rational capabilities, rather than membership in the human race. And this unnatural abridgment of the human situation is constantly reinforced by perverse mottoes, such as "the Seminary community" or "the Seminary family." God has already decided the scope of our community, our family; and in terms of Boston it corresponds, at least minimally, to the metropolitan area.

From this perspective we might then sense that the problem of seminary education is not a matter of bringing men and women from various seminaries together, but of allowing all seminarians and faculty to return to their natural, diaspora life within the total community and its intellectual processes. Only then can the theological discipline maintain a constant, fruitful interaction with all the currents of the Holy Spirit striving for expression in human life.

This same issue emerges very clearly in the question of worship or sacraments or communicatio in sacris, according to which tradition you stand in. This is the point at which all Christians tend to get most tender, especially those of us within the more "catholic" traditions--to use this unrenewed word in its sicker sense. Battles have been fought in the Episcopal Church over the preservation of the Confirmation rubric as a defense against some sort of contamination or reduction of the liturgy. Lest some too quickly identify this with a particular wing of the Church, let us recall that liturgical movement people, while not so adamant about the rubric, are even more emphatic about the centrality of the Eucharist. So then, of the first we can legitimately ask: what exactly are you protecting?; and of the second: what exactly is it that's so central?

The basic question here, and it applies across the board to all sacramental actions, is very simple: in churches that continue in disobedient separation, is it not true that the very act of Eucharist is itself distorted and diminished? Paul says, of a congregation that is wracked with dissension, that because it does not "discern the Body"--that is, recognize and act out the essentially corporate nature of its life--those who celebrate the Eucharist are actually inviting a judgment on themselves, a judgment as extreme as physical death! (I Cor. 11:29, NEB) There is nothing to prevent us from extending congregational division to ecclesiological division and applying the same judgment; indeed, it would seem to be even more rigorously applicable.

Two questions rise that demand theological clarification. In a divided church, is it not useless to dialog about the true mode of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist; shouldn't we really be asking in what way he is there at all? And secondly: even if we conclude that he is fully present, if only in judgment against us, shouldn't we then ask in what degree, if at all, it is possible for us to receive him--in word, in species or in the brother?

It all becomes even more problematic when we recall that Christ's presence and reception in the Eucharist is somehow all bound up with our perception of his presence in the world outside churchly actions; that the Eucharist is not merely an ecclesial action, but one that is infra-, para-, and supra-ecclesial, in the sense of always unavoidably intersecting with all issues and life in God's total world.

Merely on the basis of church separation, however--omitting the question of the church-world dichotomy--all the easy excommunication we Episcopalians have pontificated in the past will surely come to haunt us. Moreover, one wonders what would happen to the pace of ecclesial ecumenism if one day our Bishops and theologians suddenly discovered and taught that all of our sacramental actions were invalid and dis-graceful! Even though this is unlikely to happen, the point being made should have sufficient force to evaporate what can be called the "Three Kings" syndrome. This is a mentality which sees the process of church unity as one in which each "communion" (there's an ambiguous word!) offers its best as rich and precious gifts to the new, infant church. In actual fact, we have no gifts to bring, only failures and liabilities. Or, to return to the original question, "what more can we do together?" we might with brutal honesty reply, "everything, because apart we can do nothing!"

This may sound far too extreme. However, there's a simple juxtaposition of typical church-institution questions with the cries of pain coming from our world which reveals a forceful confirmation: in spite of our disunity in matters of doctrine and church order, and in spite of our de jure separation, we have a remarkable de facto unity in our deficiencies. Though we seriously discuss our different sacramental views,

positions on church order, the place of episcopacy in the church, etc., it is an unavoidable fact that the end product of different disciplines and theological systems is equally as impoverished when it comes to responding to the major issues of mankind. It is doubtful if anybody can show that among major church bodies, the fact of being episcopal, synodical or congregational means anything when it comes to the question of war and peace; or that there is any different response to the question of race as between churches that see the Eucharist as central and those that place it more peripherally; and is it not true that all churches have an excessive affluence of power, prestige and money, and we are all therefore equally unable to respond to glaring poverty, regardless of divergent theological emphases?

Where are our unique gifts? They aren't--at least, they aren't visible within these institutional issues as they are conventionally shaped. Certainly as all the dispossessed of the world see us, we stand together, remarkably united, in opposition or indifference to their legitimate yearnings.

We can't leave this whole question about the true nature of internal questions without submitting ourselves to the most revealing irony of all. "Three Kings" is not quite accurate as a descriptive for our tendency to see our divided churches as possessing particular gifts. Even here de facto segregation is operative, since the gifts have been expected to come from the traditionally white Kings, and not the black King. And yet, the one great gift that has emerged in our era from the divided church is the gift of non-violence; and this gift has come largely from the Negro churches.

The possibility of anything significant emerging from Negro Christianity has been totally ignored by the major white church powers. Indeed, we couldn't even consider the possibility, because we've spent so much energy suppressing the memory of our history of violence toward the Negro Christian. And the point is that this gift could come from this segment of Christianity, even in its divided state, because here alone has been preserved an awareness of the way life is basically life together, integrated life, since the Negro has had to bear the chief burden of all the unfaithful attempts to wrench this unity apart. He really knows what dis-integrated, violent existence is all about; in a perverse sense, this is his great gift.

## V

The difficulty with what is being said would appear to be that it completely frustrates and immobilizes the ecumenical venture by drawing it too large and too deep. You can only talk about churchly questions if you tie them in with and submit them to secular issues, because this is the agenda or boundary our life together gives us. On the other hand, when you press churchly questions in depth, like the Eucharist, you may discover that they are almost non-questions, because estranged existence only permits the accumulation of liabilities and not assets. Our starting point, then, not only appears too rigorous, but also self-defeating; and therefore theologically suspect.

Perhaps, however, it is not really self-defeating, but rather, presses us on to a final question, one that has been implied throughout, that of priority. The problems that seem to be raised by this approach only rise insofar as we feel that ecclesial ecumenism comprises in and of itself a primary and initial goal, and we therefore feel constrained to give it a peculiar priority. This priority, in turn, forces us to consider it before, or above, or out of phase with other issues of separation. Moreover, ecumenism becomes more opaque, diffused, and--let's be honest--less exciting when it loses this preeminence.

Yet it may be that in God's plan ecclesial ecumenism alone, as a special object of concern and imperative, is now a matter of history, a lost opportunity; most bluntly, an extravagant anachronism. To put it more hopefully and accurately, it may be that ecclesial unity will be the by-product of what we might call a total secular ecumenism; that it will only emerge as a by-product from within the resolution of deeper and far more pressing issues. Another way of saying this is that the chief significance of examining churchly issues is not their usefulness in achieving church unity, but in illuminating other, more devastating suppressions that foreclose human life.

All that has gone before indicates that this is so; that this issue is so inextricably bound up with a multitude of other issues that the only way to get at it is to consider it only as it intersects with allied issues. But we can't even deal with this possibility freely and candidly until we deal with the question of Baptism, which, in a way, is the most significant of all churchly issues. For aside from a bitter, institutional arrogance that insists on the priority of "our" illness, because this is where our life is chiefly invested, it is the question of Baptism that poses the greatest hurdle to the establishment of a free and secular ecumenism.

Christians as a whole have no real difficulty in accepting the starting point of this paper, a basic fraternity among human beings. The problem arises in differentiating this unity with and among all men from that achieved with a particular--and statistically diminishing--segment of humanity in Baptism. For Baptism is almost always seen, not as a particular sign of human oneness that merely and wonderfully illustrates the general condition of mankind, but as a unique and special sign that sets some men apart from the rest of mankind. The effect of Baptism is not seen as exposing most graphically and graciously the essential unity men share by reason of their Creator's intention and design, but of establishing an essential, an ontological separation between those baptized and those not. It is this imbalance which has supported in our history an imperialist and violent way toward the non-baptized, all the way from the anti-Semitism of the Church Fathers, through the Crusades, the enslavement of Africans and other people of color, the extermination camps that arose within the most theologically productive nation of the West, to the present paranoid anti-communism.

The fact that we affirm such a peculiar and superior unity for those baptized is in no way affected by the hard facts of our persistent church separations, and the basic illogic of saying "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism" in the midst of such radical and disobedient dismemberment. We escape this paradox somewhat by standing against one another on grounds other than Baptism; by preserving, as we haven't with the Eucharist, a way for mutual recognition of the validity of Baptism done by estranged brothers.

I'm not concerned here to define precisely the distinction we habitually preserve between the unity we possess with brothers in Christ and that with all men. My only concern is to point out that in our minds and lives it is substantial and real; and that it is chiefly this which prevents us from demoting the priority of ecclesial ecumenism, since the scandal of division among the baptized, those seen as specially and uniquely together, seems more alarming and disobedient than divisions among humankind as a whole.

In order that we may consider more freely the possibility of changing priorities without negating the first sacrament of the churches, let me reiterate, far too briefly, a solution already implied above. We should come to see Baptism as a primarily secular sign; a graceful sign which says something about the world before it can say anything about the churches; and that it is basically far more than an initiatory rite for and into the churches, but a sign of the prior initiation of all men into union with one another, of which union in the body of the church is a particular expression--just as, in a lesser sense, union in the body through marriage is also a particular expression.

Moreover, it is supremely important for the churches to baptize in this way and under this meaning, because it is crucial--that is, within the meaning of the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of Golgotha--that men know who they are, otherwise they remain in slavery to sin and death. Therefore this in no way reduces the sacramental character of the action since such knowledge, at least as it is defined in scripture, has a thoroughly ontological and sacramental character to it.

Finally, it should be plain that a lowering of the priority of ecclesial ecumenism does not either decrease its significance or diminish its possibilities. Quite to the contrary, the reverse is true. Only by placing it within the right order of things can we give it its proper honor and facilitate its accomplishment. The alternative is to achieve a union or unions which will be no achievement at all, since they won't free the church from its present bondage to itself. And for this, men will despise us, or more likely, ignore us--and rightly so. We will have built a larger house but it will be built on sand.

The Reverend John J. Harmon, an Episcopalian priest and associate director of Packard Manse, is already well known to CROSS CURRENTS readers (see Spring 1963, Fall 1964, and Fall 1965). The present article was given this year as one of the Kellogg Lectures at the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.