Edinburgh and Oxford in the Summer of 1937

The greatest concentration of Christian thought and action in the history of the Church since the Reformation

In the summer of 1937, representatives of churches from around the world gathered for two conferences. During July, they met at Oxford for the Conference on Life and Work, focusing on the theme “Church, Community, and State.” In August, representatives met in Edinburgh for the Conference on Faith and Order, which dealt with “the dogmatic and ecclesial questions confronting the churches and more specifically with the problem of church unity on the basis of creed and doctrine.” A year later, Swiss theologian Adolph Keller wrote that “together they represented the greatest concentration of Christian thought and action in the history of the Church since the Reformation” (8).

An American journalist, Charles Clayton Morrison, analyzed the conferences in a sociological manner, in sharp contrast to Keller’s spiritual-theological approach. His analysis focused upon the impact of these conferences on American participants. Oxford and Edinburgh, and the plethora of publications they engendered, helped set the stage for the unity movements that led to the launching of the Consultation on Church Union twenty-five years later.

A New Pentecost

Early in his book, Keller declares that the old world is ending and we can’t see what the new one will be. “What we can see with cer_____________

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tainty is the end of institutions, values, and formulae of an economic and social system; of ideals and ideas which we cherished and for which we stood. A rift appears to be cleaving our whole civilization and we cannot foresee whether or not this rift will not penetrate our own churches, our lives, and our hearts.” Scientists, statesmen, politicians, and philosophers all seem helpless. “A new and sinister personalism is becoming a characteristic feature of our public and private life and corroborates again the vision described in the Bible of a demonic world surrounding us” (35).

Keller then discusses “three great world powers [that] are promising us salvation, a new world order, and reconstruction on the basis of peace and mutual co-operation: Communism, Fascism, and that constructive idealism of which the League of Nations may be called the most conspicuous exponent” (37). He shows how each of these solutions falls short. Does the Church have an answer, he asks, and then notes quickly that the answer won’t come from a new theology or a better way of administration. Only a new Pentecost, a new descent of the Holy Spirit will provide a solution to the problems facing the world.

Keller develops this idea under three headings, which he derives from his spiritual experience at the two conferences. 1) “The living Christ rises above the conferences.” He speaks of the “realistic personalism of the Bible.” It was not Christology that came to the fore, but the living Christ. “The Christ who rose above the conferences was not the Good Man, the Moral Hero, the Social Reformer, the Great Proletarian, the Best Councilor, the Religious Philosopher, the Skillful Educator, the Idealistic Pacifist, but the Son and Revealer of God, the Saviour of mankind, the Redeemer and Sovereign of our lives, the kyrios [in Greek letters], the Lord of the Kingdom to come” (70). He notes with approbation that Americans were largely quiet about their social gospel and pacifism and that European theology was distinctly felt.

2) “The wind bloweth where it listeth.” The power of the Spirit brought people together even though theoretical discussion often failed. 3) “The vision of a new church.” Keller notes the death of the ancient churches of Augustine, Cyprian, of Ephesus and Smyrna and Iconium, of the Nestorian church of China. In the conferences, these churches “were not present in our minds as mere historic recollections. We seemed to have in our nostrils the reek of decay emanating from so much that has died in the Christian Church not only in times past
but in the present.” He describes the terrible suffering of the churches of Russia, Poland, Germany, Spain, Italy, Austria, Belgium, and China (96,7). The conferees could see that around the world, even in America, churches were dying, and they perceived the diseases from which the churches were dying: Protestantism individualism, religious idealism, which believed in ideals, started with ideals, adored ideals, forgot the terrible reality of evil, and believed in optimistic naïveté (100).

Harsh Critique of the Churches

Keller’s critique of the churches is harsh. “The Church of power, of wealth, of national or class limitation, of success and security, has come to an end.” He quotes “a well-known Christian leader” who stated that “certain churches were indeed doomed to die if the Church of Christ were to be brought to life.” This belief “springs from a feeling that God’s wrath and judgment is on any Church built on the narrow basis of a self-confident denominationalism, or of humanistic ethics, or of a rigid formula, or on shallow idealism, and not on the One Rock which is Christ, and Christ alone” (101).

At this late moment—five minutes to twelve—“one might well ask whether Protestantism can become a Church at all. Is Protestantism really a ‘church-builder’ or will it remain a spiritual atmosphere, a refuge for the individual soul, a movement for freedom with a larger authoritarian church?...Does Protestantism really prefer to remain a diffused, vague, troubled, spiritual current mingling with worldly currents and flowing in diverse directions?” (103). The ecumenical movement cannot be content with the idea that “melting together of our provisional churches...would bring about the united Church,” which already exists in so far as Christ “is our common Head, our invisible center of faith, in so far as our faith is this unity in Him” (104).

This kind of catholicity, Keller declares, has been preserved in the “non-Roman Church world” and was learned “in our fraternal evangelical contacts and experiences with the Anglican and Orthodox churches, in our spiritual discovery that our catholicity consists in a relation of faith with Christ and with our separated brethren and not in a cleverly drafted union-formula or a council of churches” (105).

In his final pages, Keller voices his deep sense of dread at the state of the world, a world in which powerful forces were building up behind a dam that was soon to break unless new religious life came to
the rescue of humanity. The new battle that was coming was not between Protestantism and Catholicism, "but between Christendom and paganism, between Christ and Antichrist. And Europe will be the battlefield" (118). Christians must take the gospel seriously. "We need a force we have not and which the world has not. God gives it through Christ. This is the final and urgent message of the conference—five minutes before twelve—and of such subsequent movements as the National Preaching Mission in America, which has been bringing this message down to the people, to discouraged ministers, to state officials, to business men, to workers, to women, to students“ (119).

Profound Cleavages

Early in his essay, Morrison writes that "World Christianity consists of a multiplicity of traditions which have developed in isolation from one another and have hardened by theological inbreeding, or by adjustment to the prevailing secular culture, or by the inertia of vested interests, into rationalized systems, each of which thinks of itself as the whole of the Christian faith. The problem of Christian unity is primarily the problem of getting the Christian people of the world to recognize this fact” (582).

Morrison identifies three “profound cleavages in Christendom.” 1) Between evangelical Protestantism and churches that identify themselves as catholic; 2) Between Continental Protestantism and Anglo-Saxon Protestantism (quietism versus activism); and 3) Between historicism and empiricism. “The term ‘historicism’ is meant to apply to those traditions which seek for the norms of Christianity in history. The term ‘empiricism’ is meant to apply to those who hold history lightly and seek for the norms of Christianity in the realities which have concrete meaning in the contemporary situation” (584). For the one, history is normative; for the other, ancillary. The difference can also be described as the difference between dogma and interpretation. Or, the historical reality is the judge of our interpretations versus the point of view that Christianity has to be “personalized in individual experience, and both church and theology are external and subordinate to this subjective essence.”

Morrison notes that empiricism has three geographical varieties. On the continent empiricism is based on the inner experience of faith alone, but it has not set aside the historical orientation, or the history
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since the Reformation. In Great Britain and America, philosophical empiricism has taken hold, more in the latter than the former. “The entire body of American Protestantism, conservative and liberal alike, reflects it, though liberalism alone is conscious of what it is doing and makes a virtue of it. The American mind is an empirical mind” (588). Morrison, who studied with John Dewey, acknowledges that he stands in this tradition. The result includes the intense focus upon the local situation, and congregationalism is one evidence of that focus. American empiricism also focuses upon the ethical or humanitarian aspects of Christianity. “The Harnackian conception of the moral character of Jesus as constituting the essence of the gospel, coupled with the Ritschlian conception that, as supremely moral, Jesus therefore has for us the value of God, lifted ethics into the place previously held by theology and metaphysics, and provided an apologetic for moralism as the essence of Christianity” (590).

Historicism versus Empiricism

Morrison interprets the Edinburgh and Oxford conferences as largely dominated by historicism rather than empiricism, and the language was more metaphysical than moralistic. Americans encountered the catholic conception of the church. Morrison’s assumption is that American delegates were challenged by these conferences but that they were also likely to discount them because they were so focused on the past rather than on the needs and conditions of our time.

As another way of understanding the conferences, Morrison proposes that contemporary ideologies do not have the power to create a civilization. “Left to themselves these ideologies all work toward the disintegration of such ecumenical cohesions as mankind had attained before the modern era.” Morrison’s conclusion:

“What, specifically, is lacking in our culture? The apologist for the ecumenical movement answers that our culture lacks Christianity. He does not say religion, he specifically says Christianity. And the ecumenical movement conceives Christianity in a way with which modern Christians are not familiar. It says in effect, that the secular culture of the West can be saved from chaos only by the presence within it of a culture that is not secular! Christianity is such a culture. It is a culture with a divine orientation, as secularism is a culture with an empirical
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orientation...What I see through all the detail of doctrine and tradition which found expression at Edinburgh, is the effort of the Christian tradition itself to come to life no longer as a mere tradition but as a living culture” (595; italics added).

We need something other than institution or experience as the defining element of the church; Edinburgh and Oxford, Morrison proposes, supplied that category: “For the first time in the long story of Christian controversy, the conception of Christianity and the Christian church as community came to the fore at these conferences” (595).

“The distinguishing cultural mark of the Christian community is in its orientation. In the midst of a society whose communities are oriented toward the relativities of empirical existence, it lives as a society oriented toward God. It is therefore a sacramental community, its cultural structure is a sacramental structure, and all it’s functioning, inner and outer, partakes of this sacramental character. In this view, the whole sweep of Christianity’s history—including the categories in which its faith found initial expression—become relevant to the maintenance and growth of its organic life. And the church carries no less a burden and mission than that of regenerating the whole secular community and assimilating it to itself. As a community with a Godward orientation, its mission is to create a civilization which also is oriented toward God” (597).

Concluding Comment

Although Morrison’s analysis is analytical and detached, some of his other writings during this period show some of the characteristics of Keller’s book: the dread of impending crisis, anticipations of the collapse of civilization, a conviction that the churches were failing in their work of saving civilization in a form that would be faithful to God and healthful for all of its people, and the urgency of Christian unity in order for the one church of Christ to be capable of doing what God intended it to do.