

AN APPEAL FOR THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATION

The renewal of Christian witness and mission requires constant examination of the assumptions shaping the Church's life. Today an apparent loss of a sense of the transcendent is undermining the Church's ability to address with clarity and courage the urgent tasks to which God calls it in the world. This loss is manifest in a number of pervasive themes. Many are superficially attractive, but upon closer examination we find these themes false and debilitating to the Church's life and work. Among such themes are:

Theme 1: Modern thought is superior to all past forms of understanding reality, and is therefore normative for Christian faith and life.

In repudiating this theme we are protesting the captivity to the prevailing thought structures not only of the 20th century but of any historical period. We favor using any helpful means of understanding, ancient or modern, and insist that the Christian proclamation must be related to the idiom of the culture. At the same time, we affirm the need for Christian thought to confront and be confronted by other world views, all of which are necessarily provisional.

Theme 2: Religious statements are totally independent of reasonable discourse.

The capitulation to the alleged primacy of modern thought takes two forms: one is the subordination of religious statements to the canons of scientific rationality; the other, equating reason with scientific rationality, would remove religious statements from the realm of reasonable discourse altogether. A religion of pure subjectivity and non-rationality results in treating faith statements as being, at best, statements about the believer. We repudiate both forms of capitulation.

Theme 3: Religious language refers to human experience and nothing else, God being humanity's noblest creation.

Religion is also a set of symbols and even of human projections. We repudiate the assumption that it is nothing but that. What is here at stake is nothing less than the reality of God: We did not invent God; God invented us.

Theme 4: Jesus can only be understood in terms of contemporary models of humanity.

This theme suggests a reversal of "the imitation of Christ"; that is, the image of Jesus is made to reflect cultural and counter-cultural notions of human excellence. We do not deny that all aspects of humanity are illumined by Jesus. Indeed, it is necessary to the universality of the Christ that he be perceived in relation to the particularities of the believers' world. We do repudiate the captivity to such metaphors, which are necessarily inadequate, relative, transitory, and frequently idolatrous. Jesus, together with the Scriptures and the whole of the Christian tradition, cannot be arbitrarily interpreted without reference to the history of which they are part. The danger is in the attempt to exploit the tradition without taking the tradition seriously.

Theme 5: All religions are equally valid; the choice among them is not a matter of conviction about truth but only of personal preference or life-style.

We affirm our common humanity. We affirm the importance of exploring and confronting all manifestations of the religious quest and of learning from the riches of other religions. But we repudiate this theme because it flattens diversities and ignores contradictions. In doing so, it not only obscures the meaning of Christian faith, but also fails to respect the integrity of other faiths. Truth matters; therefore differences among religions are deeply significant.

Theme 6: To realize one's potential and to be true to oneself is the whole meaning of salvation.

Salvation contains a promise of human fulfillment, but to identify salvation with human fulfillment can trivialize the promise. We affirm that salvation cannot be found apart from God.

Theme 7: Since what is human is good, evil can adequately be understood as failure to realize human potential.

This theme invites false understanding of the ambivalence of human existence and underestimates the pervasiveness of sin. Paradoxically, by minimizing the enormity of evil, it undermines serious and sustained attacks on particular social or individual evils.

Theme 8: The sole purpose of worship is to promote individual self-realization and human community.

Worship promotes individual and communal values, but it is above all a response to the reality of God and arises out of the fundamental need and desire to know, love, and adore God. We worship God because God is to be worshiped.

Theme 9: Institutions and historical traditions are oppressive and inimical to our being truly human; liberation from them is required for authentic existence and authentic religion.

Institutions and traditions are often oppressive. For this reason they must be subjected to relentless criticism. But human community inescapably requires institutions and traditions. Without them life would degenerate into chaos and new forms of bondage. The modern pursuit of liberation from all social and historical restraints is finally dehumanizing.

Theme 10: The world must set the agenda for the Church. Social, political and economic programs to improve the quality of life are ultimately normative for the Church's mission in the world.

This theme cuts across the political and ideological spectrum. Its form remains the same, no matter whether the content is defined as upholding the values of the American way of life, promoting socialism, or raising human consciousness. The Church must denounce oppressors, help liberate the oppressed and seek to heal human misery. Sometimes the Church's mission coincides with the world's programs. But the norms for the Church's activity derive from its own perception of God's will for the world.

Theme 11: An emphasis on God's transcendence is at least a hindrance to, and perhaps incompatible with, Christian social concern and action.

This supposition leads some to denigrate God's transcendence. Others, holding to a false transcendence, withdraw into religious privatism or individualism and neglect the personal and communal responsibility of Christians for the earthly city. From a biblical perspective, it is precisely because of confidence in God's reign over all aspects of life that Christians must participate fully in the struggle against oppressive and dehumanizing structures and their manifestations in racism, war, and economic exploitation.

Theme 12: The struggle for a better humanity will bring about the Kingdom of God.

The struggle for a better humanity is essential to Christian faith and can be informed and inspired by the biblical promise of the Kingdom of God. But imperfect human beings cannot create a perfect society. The Kingdom of God surpasses any conceivable utopia. God has his own designs which confront ours, surprising us with judgment and redemption.

Theme 13: The question of hope beyond death is irrelevant or at best marginal to the Christian understanding of human fulfillment.

This is the final capitulation to modern thought. If death is the last word, then Christianity has nothing to say to the final questions of life. We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and are "...convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or in the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths--nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38 f.).

"THE HARTFORD HERESIES," Jan/75 (instigation of Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus)

served to help him score a major victory. The Congregation not only resented the interference with internal Jesuit issues, but feared a growth in curial influence over the order if Arrupe were weakened. It therefore rallied round the Superior General, who is now strongly entrenched in his post. Arrupe showed great confidence and diplomacy last month in a speech in which he admitted the Pope's anguish over the Jesuits. He becomingly confessed that his failings as an administrator were partly to blame, but added that any faults come from facing "very difficult problems" and "do not mean that the Society is unfaithful in its vocation."

The General Congregation must come to decisions on many other issues, including whether to pare down members' life-styles and draw institutional assets into separate funds so that the order can better reflect the spirit of poverty. But last week's vote alone makes the meeting a turning point for the Society of Jesus, and it presents Pope Paul with a delicate political problem. He has the power to reject any action of the General Congregation, including its decision on the fourth vow. But that would produce dangerous new tension between the Pope and the Jesuits who are sworn to serve him.

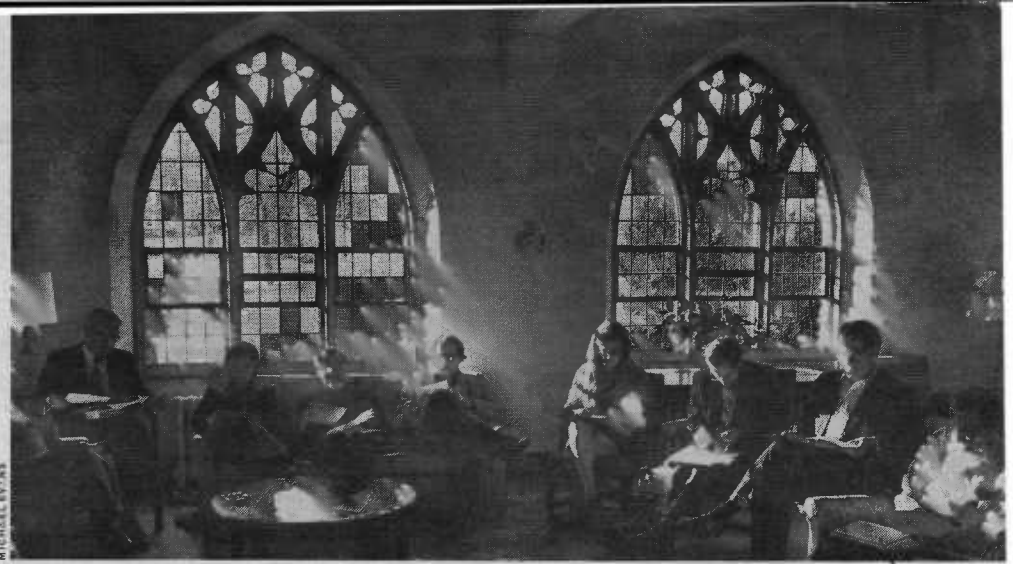
The Hartford Heresies

Christian history is replete with bone-rattling documents of theological protest that capsuled the pressing issues of the day: Martin Luther's 95 Theses, which sparked the Reformation, Pope Pius IX's 19th century Syllabus of Errors, and the German Confessing Christians' Barmen Declaration against Nazism. The technique has fallen into disuse, but it was dusted off last week by a group of 18 Christian thinkers of nine denominations. After a weekend war council at the Hartford Seminary Foundation in Connecticut, they joined in a dramatic warning that American theology has strayed dangerously far afield.

God is Real. Their "Appeal for Theological Affirmation" condemns 13 pervasive ideas, all of which undermine "transcendence," the essential concept that God and his kingdom have a real, autonomous existence apart from the thoughts and efforts of humanity.

Among the signers, who were able to agree on the protest with surprising alacrity, were Catholic Theologian Avery Dulles, Eastern Orthodox Seminary Dean Alexander Schmemmann, Lutheran Theologians George Forell and George Lindbeck, Yale Chaplain William Sloane Coffin Jr., a Presbyterian, and Evangelical Theologian Lewis Smedes of Fuller Seminary.

In 1,150 words, their statement takes issue with some of the most popular liberal fashions of the past decade, including secular Christianity, political eschatology and the human potential



HARTFORD CONFERENCE DISCUSSING THE 13 "FALSE & DEBILITATING" THESES Exasperated at a church sellout to man-made ideologies.

movement. The specific theses that the churchmen condemned as "false and debilitating":

1. Modern thought is superior to all past forms of understanding reality, and is therefore normative for Christian faith and life.

2. Religious statements are totally independent of reasonable discourse.

3. Religious language refers to human experience and nothing else, God being humanity's noblest creation.

4. Jesus can only be understood in terms of contemporary models of humanity.

5. All religions are equally valid; the choice among them is not a matter of conviction about truth but only of personal preference or life-style.

6. To realize one's potential and to be true to oneself is the whole meaning of salvation.

7. Since what is human is good, evil can adequately be understood as failure to realize human potential.

8. The sole purpose of worship is to promote individual self-realization and human community.

9. Institutions and historical traditions are oppressive and inimical to our being truly human; liberation from them is required for authentic existence and authentic religion.

10. The world must set the agenda for the Church. Social, political and economic programs to improve the quality of life are ultimately normative for the Church's mission in the world.

11. An emphasis on God's transcendence is at least a hindrance to, and perhaps incompatible with, Christian social concern and action.

12. The struggle for a better humanity will bring about the Kingdom of God.

13. The question of hope beyond death is irrelevant or at best marginal to the Christian understanding of human fulfillment.

After each of these assertions, the statement adds a qualifying paragraph explaining why the idea is wrong, even though it might sound beguiling and contain an element of truth. The statement nowhere mentions the people who

have promulgated the false theses, but the discussions at Hartford included references to Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*), Situation Ethicist Joseph Fletcher and Britain's Bishop John Robinson (*Honest to God*). As for the pervasiveness of the thinking exemplified in the theses, Jesuit Dulles thinks that the ideas are widespread in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly among popularizers of the late Teilhard de Chardin and "liberation theologians," who give the Bible a Marxist reinterpretation. A professor from Manhattan's Union Theological Seminary, an influential Protestant school, said that the theses summarize the general belief there.

Gargantuan Exercise. Even the World Council of Churches is "a gargantuan exercise in such cultural capitulation," said the Rev. Richard Neuhaus, an antiwar activist and pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Brooklyn. Neuhaus and Fellow Lutheran Peter Berger, iconoclastic author and sociologist at Rutgers, were the originators of the protest. Exasperated by what they consider a church sellout to such man-made ideologies as scientific rationalism and socialism, they wrote the original draft of the statement a year ago, mailed it to 50 churchmen for their reactions and summoned the Hartford meeting to prepare the final declaration.

Though the Hartford discussions brought out many theological differences, conservatives and liberals alike agreed on the necessity of Christian social involvement. However, a paradox was noted. The declaration insists that politically based theologies, which were created to foster social impact, have done just the opposite. Even Political Activist Coffin joined the group in condemning an idea on which he has often preached, that "the world must set the agenda for the Church." The view from Hartford is that Christianity will be too weak for sustained attack on social evils—or for anything else—unless it first seeks the transcendence, power and will of God. After all, the Hartford Eighteen declare, "We did not invent God; God invented us."