

# MODERN AGE

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## *Troubles in Ecumenia*

FRANCIS G. WILSON

### I

I SUPPOSE I have accepted the ecumenical idea as much as anyone. The basic teaching has seemed to me to be this: When possible I should engage in conversations with non-Catholics on the fundamentals of religious commitment. It would not be just pleasant conversation, but probing, or perhaps disturbing and enlightening conversation. It would produce understanding and therefore amity. It would close the ranks against the greater enemies, the Communists and their imperialistic advance. On my trip to Europe in 1964 I had three such conversations, probably one should say "encounters," and they all demonstrated the existential weakness of ecumenicism at the level of informed conversation. Or, perhaps we could say that "popular ecumen-

icism" offers considerably more difficulty than after-dinner talk among Catholic and Protestant theologians. Its weakness is simply that it evokes conservative and protective responses of a most vigorous character. Let us keep in mind, however, that the Revivalist Protestants have almost no theology, though obviously they do have a religious tradition of great power. Ecumenical conversation on different religious traditions is possible when it is not profitable in the area of theology.

The first conversation took place on the boat going to Europe. It occurred after a purser's cocktail party and it began innocently enough. A Jewish woman, who turned out to be involved in many Jewish affairs, asked me at what historical point I began my course on the history of political

ideas. I replied: "With the Greeks where most of us do." Then it began. Why didn't I start with Moses or the Old Testament? I said that, in the first place, there was not enough time for the course. I once taught a course on Oriental political theory and there I began with Confucius. But if one begins with Moses the normal thing to do is to compare him, as a lawgiver, with Lycurgus and Solon, leaving out of course the disagreeable Draco. Or, one might note the Renaissance tradition of Hermes Trismegistus and the Hermetic writings which make Moses a kind of understudy of the Thrice Great Egyptian Hermes. And all this, it may be thought, is quite unflattering to Moses and the Judaic tradition.

I cannot recall all of the conversation, as it was long and we were standing in a cold Atlantic wind. But the fundamental point as it emerged seemed to be this: One should begin a religious inquiry of the West from the Jewish and not the Christian point of view. One should treat Christianity as a kind of subdivision of Judaism and the New Testament simply as an extension of the Masoretic Texts. In a general sort of way, I insisted that for the Western mind the Greeks invented the idea of the high-level, sophisticated intellectual culture, the Romans created the world's greatest legal system, and Western religion was Judaic-Christian. The problems seem to be: What position should we take on the origin of civilization? What is the semitic share in it? Does this share extend to more than simply the formulation and transmission of religious truth?

The most serious part of our conversation began when my colloquist remarked that Jews agreed that Jesus was a good man. "But that is hardly the question," I said. "Rather, it is whether he was what he claimed to be, the Son of God, the Logos who had existed from all eternity." Is there any ecumenicism left after this, whether

charitable, traditional, or theological? "Look," I said, "if a Christian says that Christ was merely a good man he might just as well quit. Christianity would be in truth, as you imply, just a subdivision of Judaism. As Christians we must take the truth of the New Testament; we must begin with the Incarnation. From that we can work back. We start with what the New Testament says is the meaning of prophecy. The Old Testament means what the New Testament says it means. Prophecy in the Old Testament is judged by what the New Testament refers so frequently to as its fulfillment. If Isaias refers to a Virgin or to a young woman having a child, the New Testament makes it clear, absolutely clear, that the Mother of this Child Jesus was a Virgin. Translate Isaias as you will, his meaning on this matter springs from the new start of history in the Incarnation and from the most solemn affirmation of the Virginity of Mary, His Mother."

There was much more. Some of it was hostile to the Catholic Church, though there was profound appreciation of Pope John XXIII. But it all ended something like this: It was impossible for us to talk about fundamentals, because if we did the ecumenical spirit soon disappeared.

## II

My next ecumenical conversation happened in Greece. I was taking a boat trip down the Peloponnesus, stopping at various islands to visit ancient temples, Greek or Byzantine churches, and any other notable historic spots along the way. The guides were superior and well-educated people, speaking French, German, and English at least. Indeed, they had to be people like this because of the level of the tourists to whom they explained the Hellenic and archaeological past. One of the guides I had was a student of theology and an enthusiastic member of the Greek Orthodox

Church. It was my impression that he was seriously considering entering the priesthood of his Church. At one of the stops we were invited to visit an ancient Byzantine-style church.

Our guide explained the significance of the interior of the church and a notable amount on "the liturgy," as the Greeks say, or the Mass as we would say in the Western and Roman Church. I know the Greeks do not use statues in the same way as the Romans, but some of the pictures were surrounded with a frame several inches thick. Such a frame, one made of silver, might just as well be a statue, as it has almost the depth or thickness of one. In America, Protestants use paintings in glass windows or on the wall but they must be one-dimensional, although in some Anglican Churches I have seen small, carved-wood statues. Later I suggested to the Greek guide that there was not much difference between the Western and Eastern Churches in the use of sacred objects, pictures and statues, for example. My remark was received with indignation. I had failed to see the basic differences involved.

However, while I was in the church I noticed again, as I had noticed before, that the guide could not refrain from theological explanations or lectures on Greek religious tradition. He lived and breathed and was within his Church tradition. This was the important element of his life. When asked if he intended to become a priest he did not answer, nor did he explain what had been his theological studies, or anything at all about himself. In the church he spoke of the Dormition of the Virgin and he attacked the Roman doctrine of the Assumption as completely unfounded. Some of the tourists had obviously never in their lives heard a theological discourse and certainly they had never heard anything at all about such competing interpretations of the Virgin.

When we were again on the boat and the two guides were talking, I said to my theologian that I had noticed his criticism of Western doctrine. "If you take such a position," I said, "it will make ecumenical action between East and West much more difficult than it is, and perhaps it might become impossible. From what you said, it would seem that any compromise on the theological and doctrinal views of the Virgin is not acceptable." The second guide was not interested in theology, being, as I had discovered, a rather tough-minded William Jamesian pragmatist about all religion. "Religion is a racket for the priests," she said, but my theological friend ignored the thrust. Instead, he spoke a torrent of words in denunciation of Rome. Almost, one might say, the centuries of controversy between the Eastern and Western Churches were being lived all over again. I wish I could remember all that he said because what he said was new and interesting to me. I hardly interrupted his "lecture" on the truth of the Greek Orthodox position.

"The only ecumenicism possible," he said, "or that has ever been possible is for the West, including the Protestants all over the West, to return to the Greeks. If you want a Christianity that is pure and ancient, one that still drinks the waters of life from Apostolic sources, it is the Greek. What was the language of the early Fathers? It was Greek. What is the language of the New Testament writings that are accepted in the West? It is Greek. What has been the great and creative language of theology? It is Greek. What was the language even of the Jews in the Hellenistic period? It was Greek, and it was Greek-speaking Jews who universalized Hebrew Scriptures by translating them into Greek, the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, which is the one that is always quoted in the New Testament whenever doc-

trine or prophecy are mentioned. It was the Greek-speaking Christians who formulated the doctrine and system of the Christian religion, and it was from the Greeks that it spread to the rest of Europe and on to the lands farther West. To do this, the Greeks had to fight heresies wherever they were found, in the East or the West, though clearly the speculative mind of the Greeks was more fruitful in heresy than the pragmatic Latins and Western Romans. It was the Greeks also who tried and succeeded for centuries in keeping alive the ancient religions and mysteries of the Greek nations. It was the Greeks who spread them to Rome, just as it was the Greeks who carried Greek learning, theology, Christianity to the West.

“Who separated? Who split Christianity?”

It was the Latins, for they deserted us, we who were developing the great deposit of Christian truth. They deserted us and erected their patriarch into the Bishop of Rome as universal pastor of the Church, while we believe that the ancient tradition was the equality of the patriarchs of the Christian Church. It was the Latins who juggled the Creed, the ‘filioque’ was added simply because they could not understand the complexity and the meaning of the arguments involved. It was the Romans who admitted the corruptions of the pagans, who still survived with strength in the West, notably among intellectuals and philosophers. These corrupted doctrines, especially the struggle over the images and the primacy of Rome, were the excuses you used to pull away, thus splitting for centuries the ecumenical spirit of Christianity. You introduced paganism into the Church. When you come back with another ‘Reformation’ then the great ecumenical age will begin. But you must first purify yourselves doctrinally and reshape the organization of the Church into the pattern of the early centuries of Christian life.”

Much of the issue here is, of course, his-

torical. And I could not claim such a knowledge of patristic theology that I felt I could debate with him, but I was held by the sharp, clipped quality of the Greek mind which seemed so much in contrast with the ambiguity and fuzziness of the Anglo-American manner of approaching or “ignoring” Christian truth. I felt that on rather practical grounds the West could not return to the Greeks. It is the question of the liturgy. I had just passed through an Easter Week in Spain, and a few weeks later I was in Athens just in time for the Greek Orthodox Easter. I attended some of the services in Athens, in accordance I believe with the Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism which places the Greek Orthodox Church on a higher level of purity than the English and other Anglo-American Protestant Churches. The Mass in the Roman Church is solemn, and, up to recent times when rather ordinary English has been substituted, it had the grandeur of Ciceronic periods and the beauty of Latin poetry. It was short, noble, and to the point. The thousands upon thousands in Madrid, for example, could attend the Easter Mass and receive communion. But the liturgy of the Greek Church is slow, even if it is beautiful and noble in the great language in which its worship of God is formulated. The Westerner is too impatient for the Greek Easter services. The consecration of the elements in the Roman Church has always been almost in the middle of the people, while in the Greek Church there is the ancient wall of partition behind which the priests celebrate the Eucharist. There are just too many problems. The primacy and the infallibility of the Pope, the Assumption of the Virgin, and the problem of purgatory and the resurrection all stand in the way. Greek and Latin are the great Christian liturgical languages, and they can remain; surely there is no need to insist that Easter be celebrated

at the same time all over the world. I learned much from my guide, about both the Greek Islands and the liturgy and thought of the Greek Church.

### III

I RETURNED to Madrid in a thoughtful mood. It takes a jet plane of the Ethiopian Airlines only a little over three hours to go from Athens to Madrid, nonstop. But it is two worlds away, since the plane passes over Italy before it reaches Spain. In Madrid one is conscious again and suddenly of the conflict between Catholic Spain and liberals and Protestants in the West. In depth, it would seem that the attack on Spain as a Catholic and unified country is not based on love of Protestant theology, but on political liberalism which seems to have hatred of the Catholic Church as one of its pillars of doctrine. If one reads George Borrow's *The Bible in Spain*, written after five years spent in Spain for the British Bible Society during the first Carlist War, one can feel the passionate hatred of Spanish religion, and the inconsistencies and the violence of George Borrow's diatribe. He dislikes Jews, but he praises their hypocrisy in pretending to be Christians. The Spanish know no Bible, he said over and over again, but he used for distribution among the Spaniards a translation of the New Testament made by a Spanish Jesuit who was at one time a chaplain for Ferdinand VII, who died in 1833. The Spanish were superstitious, almost completely so, and Borrow refers on one occasion to a statue of the Virgin as the statue of a strumpet. He was at that time in Tangier, at the end of his labors in Spain. Upon looking inside the mosque there he was moved to exclaim over the theistic purity of the interior. He saw no images lining the walls, and he cried out, referring to his memory of Catholic

Churches with their statues of the Virgin, that ". . . no scarlet strumpet with a crown of false gold sat nursing an ugly changling in a niche. . ." nor was "a piece of rotting wood the Queen of Heaven." (*The Bible in Spain*, Constable Edition, 1923, Vol. II, p. 379.)

No, if there is to be ecumenical progress in the world, our Western Protestants must be converted from their "Borrowism" and from the legends about the world propagated by the British Bible Society. The Spaniards know they are weak, but they want to protect their unity of religion, for with the Carlists they are for God, for King, and for Country; they see no reason why a Protestant proselytizer (who is always, it seems, supported by a Texas oil millionaire) should be permitted or encouraged to rob the people of their religion. It was the Church, they will tell you, that made Spain, and Spain and the Church must walk hand in hand in the future.

Under pressure from American and German Bishops at the Vatican Council, the Spanish government seems to be bending with demands of the time. In 1964 the government began to consider a bill which would permit the 30,000 Protestants in Spain (native Protestants are probably less than 15,000, the remainder being foreigners resident in Spain) to have newspapers and schools, for they now have their chapels. But the government has seemed adamant on one point: No proselytizing, that is, organized efforts to convert Catholics to some Protestant persuasion. On the other hand, it would seem clear that whatever action the Council takes, the individual government may determine the amount of relaxation of religious control that is compatible with the public order and tradition of the country. But to the Spaniards the "recta conscientia" of Pope John's *Pacem in Terris* means

a right conscience, and one that is formed with the light of the Catholic Faith.

The liberal Catholics, the "liberalizers" in Spain, and they are numerous among the intellectuals, want to move in the direction of the American and English solution, or toward something analogous. And further along in the liberal spectrum in Spain there are those who from the middle of the eighteenth century have believed that the only way in which Spain can make progress is to destroy the Catholic Church and to teach the liberalism of the French Revolution. These would have another Republic, this time a Third Republic, but those who are Catholics would fight again as in 1936 to preserve the religious heritage of Spain. Catholic liberals of the more moderate variety also say there is no reason why Spain should not have an industrial revolution under Catholic rather than liberal-atheistic or Protestant inspiration. In truth, industrial progress is not a religious matter, for it depends on the willingness to accumulate capital and invest it, and in the human elements a willingness to work and to manage industrial enterprises with efficiency.

There are many arguments the Spaniards uses for the protection of the religious unity of Spain. Again, if ecumenicism is to succeed it must rest on the Protestants' acceptance of a Catholic Spain. The Spaniards might say there is no universal Church theory about the confessional state, that is, the Catholic State, and that there is no universal view on the toleration of those who reject the truth. There is no universal Catholic theory on the relation of the Church and the government. But there is one thing that is universal in the Catholic Church, and that is the affirmation—as Pope Paul VI said in his first encyclical—that the Catholic Church is the Church that was founded by Christ; it is the true Church and its doctrines are

the true doctrines of the Christian Faith. Does error or the theological vagrancy of heretics have the right to be protected by the government? Why should not the government, if it is going to protect doctrine, protect the true and not the false?

I talked to more than one Catholic in Spain who would affirm simply and with conviction: there is only one explanation of Spanish tradition and unity, and that is the Church. If Spain should cease to be Catholic it would no longer be Spain. It would be on the verge of becoming Communist as it was during the Second Republic and during the Civil War against the Red Republic. Carlists would take this view more firmly than others, but those in the government, those who might have some sympathy for the United States, would also insist that in Spain the protection of the Church by the government is the one essential of politics that cannot be surrendered. If there is a restoration of the monarchy it will be a Catholic, social monarchy, which will be guided by the social teachings of the Church. Furthermore, this has been the teaching of the Church itself for centuries. And today to say there must be a toleration of the proselytizing energies of the Protestants means the betrayal of the Church and also the betrayal of Catholic Spain. Spaniards believe that on the basis of doctrine and history the Church cannot turn against Spain, for one needs only to consider the expulsion of Islam from Europe, the missionary work in the New World, the labors of Spanish theologians at the Council of Trent, and the heroic military effort in Europe on behalf of the Church which actually saved much of Europe for Catholicism. Lutheranism and Calvinism were turned back in great areas of Europe.

The Spanish "confessional position" was stated in 1963 in the following words: "Catholic theology, Christian public law,

and the Pontifical Encyclicals unanimously teach that the state must profess and protect the true Church of Jesus Christ, without admitting the competition of foreign cults. And this teaching is obligatory for all of the faithful. Further, one may not argue that the teachings of the Encyclicals do not demand the assent of the faithful, because in them the Roman Pontiffs do not exercise their magisterium with Supreme Power. On the contrary, the teachings of the ordinary magistracy of the Church may be judged by these words 'He whom you hear, hears me.' Furthermore, on the greater part of the occasions the teachings inculcated by the Encyclicals pertain already to Catholic Doctrine." (Pius XII: *Humani Generis*.) And further, with Leo XIII, in analogy with the ideas he used in *Immortale Dei*, we must be on guard lest the extended liberty of toleration should deceive some of those who are incautious, and should defeat the intentions of those who propose any radical change in the Christian public law of Spain.

#### IV

AMERICANS seem almost born to the ecumenical spirit. Many of us, indeed, have believed that if only we could talk over our difficulties with our enemies, there would be neither problems nor enemies! *Noblesse oblige*. Discussion has been the sovereign road to understanding and to reconciliation. But reconciliation has not applied simply to superficial questions, for it has applied to the fundamental questions which have separated us one from another. Moreover, the depth of agreement that has been dreamed of in the American community extends outward; it goes beyond the limiting boundary toward universal understanding. It is no doubt some such relic of the days of enthusiasm for the

"American dream" that has made of nearly all of us dedicated ecumenicists. A mighty age of religious and political understanding is just beyond us, and it is to be the capstone of our material and mechanical progress. It is to be as well the moral progress of the new age.

It is under some such inspiration, no doubt, that American Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, have welcomed the new design in the ancient Catholic Church. For a moment Pope John XXIII became the symbol, if ambiguous at that, of the new age of agreement and love between all men of good will. The critic might say that the Catholic cannot refuse to affirm that his is the true Church, as Pope Paul has recently done. Must not the Catholic affirm in the end that agreement can only go a little distance? Agreement must rest on prudential considerations for all men, for none can fail to adhere to the truth embodied in his conscience. The ecumenical spirit seems to affirm—as with Jean Jacques Rousseau—that all men are good and only institutions are evil. But at the same time the evil men are the crushing burden of the age. We may affirm with Dostoevsky that evil men may have a purpose anchored in God, though one needs in this age to look but here and there to observe the wickedness of the world. Wherever our purpose may be anchored, wickedness is not to be talked away in friendly discussion. War and the murder of men in the twentieth century seems categorically to deny the possibility of successful ecumenical action. The behavior of man declares that there is much trouble in the land of Ecumenia. In an age of revolution and cruelty one of the American casualties seems to be the belief that there are no fundamental disagreements; or if there are, they can be exorcised by discussion around the flowing bowl or even the campfire. In our so-



cial life it seems we are more and more driven away from discussion and into conflict. More and more we denounce ourselves and praise our mocking enemies, in trying to be perversely ecumenical.

We thus struggle toward the expansion of fundamental discussion, on the one hand; and on the other we shrink from it as useless or possibly disastrous. In the American tradition, then, we are passing through a schizophrenic time, for the outcome of which we have no sure prediction. Catholics express their dismay at a lack of love between them and their Protestant fellow citizens, but can the Catholic affirm to them that the Reformation was not one of the great modern disasters? Or can the Protestant persuade the Catholic that now is the time for the Catholic Church to join the Reformation? Hardly. Conversation at the existential level is often just not possible; which means that ecumenical conversation is often not possible. Religious peace may rest as much on avoidance as on attempted dis-

cussion of fundamentals. Actually, the Decree of the Vatican Council in 1964 on ecumenism recognizes the difficulties. Catholics are to converse with Protestants, but theological inquiry is to take place between those who are competent to engage in it, that is, ecumenical talk is to occur between theologians. Clearly, there can be inter-faith cooperation between all religionists in opposition to the enemies of religion, the dialectical materialists of the Communist world. Conversation on theology is, of course, no new thing. One may recall medieval debates between Christians and Jews, and one hears much of discourse between Catholics and Lutherans in Germany and in the United States. And perhaps there have been occurrences like that recorded by John Locke in one of his *Letters on Toleration* of two gentlemen who converted each other so that they completely reversed their religious positions. But much ecumenicism seems to be based on the deliberate cultivation of ambiguity.