Seminary as Community

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IT is one of the occupational hazards of sociologists to spend more time observing life than living it. I have been intrigued to notice what faculty members choose as topics for chapel talks. I have heard a philosopher of religion talk about how to rear children and a religious educator speak on a philosophy of life; a New Testament professor goes to the Old Testament for his text, while an Old Testament man goes to the New; biblical scholars speak on burning social issues, and church historians give out with analyses of contemporary affairs. On occasions I have made like an expert in Christology. Perhaps all this is an effort to keep the chapel service from being an extension of our remarks in class and to work out some hobbies which do not rightly belong at each of our own word-benches.

In view of this tradition, I feel apologetic about speaking on a topic within my own field, and I hope that I will not be thought of as trying to change the delightful custom of choosing chapel topics on a cross-disciplinary basis. At any rate, I am speaking today on the seminary as community.

Community is related to communion, communication, holding things in common. Community, in its broadest meaning, refers to any group of persons holding anything in common within some form and measure of communication or social interaction. There could be a commounity of interest, community of nations, intellectual community, and so on. Looked at from the perspective of the actor or communicator, one's individual community is composed of the range of social interactions and interests shared with other human beings. Thus, one's community might begin with the home and the social interactions in the area immediately amound it, but it could extend to the uttermost parts of the earth, depending upon one's range of interests and effective communication.

The elemental building block of community and society is a meaningful relationship between two persons, an I-You dyad. This dual nucleated "social atom," as Moreno calls it, may be analyzed in terms of three elementary component parts: (1) the two persons, (2) the associative-dissociative binding power; and (3) the symbolic or cultural meanings involved. The community is a huge compound of these social atoms and as such enters significantly into the whole complex of socio-cultural phenomena.

If we were dealing with a so-called "secular" school, as a liberal arts college, medical school, law school, school of social work, etc., it would be possible to pose questions within this "nature of community" framework in order to paint a picture of the seminary as community. We could devise a maximum-minimum scale and score the position of the school along various dimensions or continuua of "communityness." Indeed, a great deal of insight and interest might result from such an exercise. Yet it would leave out of consideration one important fact about seminaries not necessarily characteristic of other schools. A seminary, in a sense, is a "sacred" school and is to be evaluated in terms of the nature of the Church as well as the nature of the community.

Perhaps it is significant that the first volume reporting the Niebuhr study of theological education dealt with the nature of the church and its ministry. Cer-

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tainly any creative critique of the seminary as community must view it from the perspective of Christian community. This leads us to consider briefly the nature of the Church.

We pointed out that the dyadic relationship of P(1) and P(2) in the social atom constituted the elementary building block of community and society. For those who believe in the reality and the availability of God as Person (that is, as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit) the building block of the church would be triadic in character. It would have a triangular nucleus composed of P(1)-G-P(2). In this case P(1) would be related to P(2) through God. God would become a constituent part of the interactive situation. The power of God would be added to the power of persons to convert the social atom into a spiritual atom. For those with a somewhat less immediate understanding and experience of God and who would treat supernatural entities in terms of beliefs, concepts, orientations, meanings, etc., the building block of the church would remain dyadic but would be quickened and transformed by faith in sacred and supernatural forces. Whichever socio-spiritual atomic model one chooses, it seems that here lies the elementary dynamic center of the church. These socio-spiritual atoms are combined and compounded variously into the structure of the local church. They differ in their internal characteristics as well as in their relationships to other aspects of the community.

Before turning to a consideration of the seminary as a Christian community, it should be noted that there are at least two ways of looking at the nature of the church and the community. Suppose we focus upon the church.

These views might be called the organizational and the organismic. In the first approach the church is viewed primarily as an organization. Persons belong to the organization or to some subpart of it. The organization is subdivided into a wide variety of specialized, segmental, and secondary groups. Each of such groups has partial purposes and common limited loyalties from its members. The fullness of the church hardly comes to play in any of these subgroups. Persons are only marginally involved in such groups. They are rarely confronted with the wholeness and holiness of the total church. The fellowship and togetherness of this organization-type of church tend to be shallow and superficial. The church is seen as so much organizational machinery, often interlocking, overlapping, and duplicating. The deadening demands of such an organization often minimize creative charisma and maximize mediocre conformity.

Insofar as the modern church and seminary can be characterized by this organizational approach, it is a measure of their accommodation to dominant characteristics of contemporary community and society. Our highly specialized and technological "organizational man" type of society, with its emphasis on banal belongingness and tangential togetherness, has tended to create the church and the seminary in its own image. The diversity of talents and division of labor are stressed to the point that unity and oneness, singleness of purpose, and centrality of meaning appear lost in the amorphous and amoral mass of modern man.

There is, however, another way of thinking of the church and the seminary. This might be called the Pentecost point of view. The church is conceived as primary groups, households of faith, spiritual cells, class meetings, religious societies, the family of God, the body of Christ. There is room for varieties of gifts, but the stress is on oneness and unity in Christ. While we must not expect too much of Pauls' organic analogy, or of any other analogy, for that matter, the "many members—one body" or the "variety—unity" theme is significant. There can be here, even in the subparts, a sense of wholeness and holiness, a full commitment of

the total person in faith. Here can be the belongingness of the blessed with total togetherness of man under God. In such complete commitment to spiritual community, man may become fully free as an individual human being. As he partakes of the holy in God, as he enters more completely into the group, he becomes more whole and wholesome as a person. Thus, the redemptive community may move to responsible society, the authority of God to the autonomy of group. In such a therapeutic community the "organizational man" type of other-directed persons and the neurotically selfish inner-directed persons may move into the full freedom of spirit-directed saints. This could happen in the church, in the seminary.

It seems clear that there are values in both the organizational and the organismic view of the church. Purposeful planning of the first needs to be joined with the Pentecostal power of the second, conventional rationalism of the former with charismatic creativity of the latter. Overstress of the organizational approach may lead to deadness and dullness, loss of identity and integrity, while concentration on the second may involve pietistic retreatism, individual idiosyncrasies, and group hallucinations.

Now to look briefly at the seminary as a spiritual community. Someone has said that any community is composed of a goal, a group, and a game. The goal becomes the purpose or purposes, which hold the persons together; the group or groups of people are those who share those goals; and the game constitutes the agreed upon rules and regulations, mechanimsm and machinery through which the people engage in competitive and cooperative goal-oriented behavious. In connection with the seminary, we might ask: "What are the goals?". "What are the groups-", and "What is the game we're playing?"

Doubtless the most significant facts about any community relate to its own tradition, its values, its core culture. Patterns of attitude and authority, sense or responsibility and solidarity, conceptions of time and history—these rationalize community and provide reasons for existence. Meaning and morale, image and identity—these are reflective of community. When we raise such questions about the seminary, what answers de we get and how satisfying are they to us?

Do we get a picture of the seminary as an intellectual center where mind meets mind in quest for meaning? Is this picture big enough to include the notion that we are struggling for ultimate meaning, spiritual truths? Are we always sensitive to the fact that instead of studying the simple causal relationships of sticks and stones we are trying to fathom the encounter of spirit with spirit? De we measure our goals by man's grades or God's glory?

Is it our goal to combine intellectual mastery with integrity of method, sensitive understandings with spiritual unction? What, indeed, are our goals in the seminary and how are they related to God's goals for us?

Without goals, a seminary would be headless; without groups structureless. Community is subdivisible into groups, and the solidarity of these groups is a measure of the singleness of community. The seminary is a group of groups. Some of these might be called inside groups, comprising the group structure of the seminary. Others are outside groups, relating the seminary to various aspects of society.

The continuing inside group is the faculty. This is the council of elders, maintaining the traditions, exercising authority, passing on the wisdom, setting the moral tone and morale level for the school. Ideally, the faculty is a company of scholars and saints, devoted to study and service. The seminary faculty is composed of specialists but follow the same Spirit. The faculty, as a body, does not consist of one member but of many. Some are specialists in Bible, history, theology; others in

social science, homiletics, Christian education, pastoral care; others in additional specialties; yet all are members of one body. If speech should say, "because I am not history, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the Bible should say "because I am not theology, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were pastoral care, where would be sacred music? If the whole body were homiletics, where would be social science? Theology cannot say to Christian education, "I have no need of you," nor again, history to Bible, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensible, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable, we invest with a greater honor, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care one for another. If one department suffers, all suffer together. If one department is honored, all rejoice together.

This paraphrasing and quoting from the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians may not be a picture of the faculty of a "secular" school but certainly points to the goals of a faculty group in a seminary.

The second major group in the seminary is composed of students. If the faculty is characterized by relative permanence, students constitute a transitory group. They must catch on to a moving train, be shifted from one place to another, partially here, partially there, and all too quickly move out of the school into the open community, stationed at first parishes. Student groups are divided into three classes: seniors, second year, first year. They may also be subdivided into small congeniality groupings, prayer groups, roommates, family groupings, study teams, car pools, and so on. Through this range of informal and cynamic groups the older students may be quite helpful in the education of the younger ones. Bull sessions are important adjuncts to class sessions, and peer groupings of students may be more powerful in the learning process than the faculty likes to credit.

As important as is the faculty with its own inner fellowship and the students with their rich campus culture, these two, in separation from each other, would not comprise a school or seminary. The significant groupings in any school are those composed of faculty and students. Indeed, the whole design of school is to bring student and scholar together. The classroom and library make up the formal intellectual workshop. The class period in which faculty and students are separated from the world and dedicated to an intellectual task is the highest point of any school. Here the goals are clarified, the groups are carefully structured, the intellectual game is dynamically played.

If this is to be a "sacred" school, then the class period can be its most sacred hour. Here the scholars deal with words and the Word, and students express their serious quest for truth through sharp questions. The altar of the seminary is not only in its chapel but also in its classroom, not only in its prayer rooms but also in its practice rooms, not only in spiritual cells but also in study carrells, not only in retreats but also in research. It is when we can bring the integrity of worship to the intellectual workshop, whether in classroom or library, office or study table, that we can gain a view of the faculty-student game as being played out not only in the company of wise ones, both past and present, but also in communion with the wisdom of God Himself.

In addition to the central workshop of faculty-student relationships, there is the office for informal visits and pastoral care, the chapel for formal worship, the spiritual group for informal questing, games and family groupings for social and recreational opportunities. These and others are significant accessories, but the centrality of the intellectual task and the importance of

practice and performance in becoming priests and prophets of God should never be lost.

In addition to such in-groups, there are out-group relationships which are always important and take on added significance in the case of seminaries. They partake of the character of the relationship of the church and community, of the "sacred" and the "secular." The problem is to cultivate in-group solidarity and spirituality, integrity and identity, without letting these become barriers to out-group relationships but rather bridges to larger friendships and fellowships, to wider socialization and study. It is possible to maximize the bridges connecting the in-groups and out-groups so that the world pours into the seminary, restructuring it along "secular" lines. Of course, over these same bridges the seminarians may move out into the world, recreating it nearer the heart's desire. It is, also, possible to maximize the barriers between the seminary and the world, so that indeed, a cloistered, holy place is protected from profane things. Such pietistic retreatism may be attractive to some nervous victims of a technological amoral order. Such barriers, however, may make the seminary irrelevant to our times, becoming obstacles to rendering in the world the very service for which theoretically seminarians retreat to be prepared. Sanctuary and ivory tower are significant, but perhaps primarily as training for service in the world. Yet whether connected by bridges or barriers or both, the church and community, the seminary and society are not identical and interchangeable but discrete and distinct, in dynamic tension, in holy opposition with interpenetrative independence.

There is time only to mention the most important of these ingroup, outgroup relations. There are the relationships between the seminary faculty and the university faculty. In a modern university setting, these inter-school and interdepartmental relationships provide two-way intellectual traffic in which "sacred" and "secular" wisdom can come to fruitful interplay and encounter. No less important are the seminary-university student relationships. These opportunities for seminary students to be involved in groups with students from other professional schools, and other phases of the university provide intellectual stimulation and fuller specialization than could possibly be achieved without such relationships.

In a seminary faculty, as in any professional school, members are related to numerous off-campus groups. In our case, these are church groups for the most part. While there are dangers here of over-involvement with the commitment of too much time to off-campus groups, there is nevertheless the opportunity to be of service to various phases of church life and to keep atuned to the changing and changeless aspects of contemporary religion and society.

In like manner, students are related to many off-campus groups. These may be jobs in churches of other occupational situations. They may involve voluntary service in churches or a variety of situations of human need. The values of well-structured field experiences are widely known. The dangers here are that so much of the student's time may be taken in service to churches or in make a living that he does violence to his seminary years by not being able to commit enough of himself, his time and talent to the seminary community, its classrooms, library, chapel, and other groups.

We have outlined broadly some of the considerations involved in thinking of the seminary as community, as a group of groups composed of persons of diverse talents and interests, seeking different goals and perhaps playing the game of life by different rules. Yet, amid all the diversity of gifts, there is one Spirit, and to each is given the manifestation of this Spirit for the common good.

We are now living members or parts

of this seminary community. Through socio-spiritual imagination and industry, we can help to make it a place where, through the Power of God, unfriendly faces in the lonely crowd, whether of the seminary faculty or students, whether of the university or of the world, may be transformed into friendly and familiar faces of the loving community. Perhaps the extent to which we can achieve this in the here and now of campus and seminary will be a measure of its accomplishment in the then and there of church and society.