Ecumenical Problems: The Radical Protestant

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IS THE ecumenical impulse spacious enough to encompass all Christians? Or is it simply the contemporary way to include some Christians and to exclude others?

The full force of that question will emerge as we contrast what I think of as the magisterial tradition of Christianity and the radical protestant tradition. The magisterial tradition encompasses the churches of the established order. Radical protestantism, on the other hand, is an expression of protest against what is established; its aim is at the magisterial jugular; its aspiration is to change the establishment. Look more closely at the characteristics of these two traditions, and then ponder with me about the ecumenical question.

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Start with the magisterial type of church. Some Christians have allied themselves with the powers of this world. Their purpose has been to expose whole populations to the Christian gospel. In history they have been linked to the apparatus of territorial governments. They have passed laws and have used police powers and have controlled school systems to bring entire nations to at least a minimal practice of Christianity. John Calvin administered a detailed code for the people of Geneva, including rules such as the one dictating the exact length for the hems of ladies' dresses. Puritan New England legislated and enforced numerous rules, including the proper observance of the Sabbath. Lutherans and Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox and the Church of England have all been alike in their readiness to use the powers of government to enforce their doctrines and to advance their teachings. Monarchs have become "Defenders of the Faith," and clergy have been named "Princes of the Church" By the constant influence of Christian teaching, by the public use of Christian symbols, by systems of law endorsing Christian behavior, Christians of the magesterial traditions have seen entire cultures imbued with some degree of Christianity. And they have noted that some people have always emerged with special qualities of piety and saintliness.

In their organization, the magisterial churches tend to parallel the governments with which they are allied. They have official leaders or rulers, who frequently advance through a structured hierarchy. These churchmen usually begin their careers in parishes, which cover a specific geographical area. The parish church is intended to serve all of the inhabitants in its area, and sometimes the boundaries of local church and local government are identical. In Louisiana, for example, the local government units are still called parishes. And within my own experience, I have found New England towns where Roman Catholics and Jews and nonbelievers were obliged to enroll in the First Congregational Society if they wanted to register their voice on town problems like lighting or sewage or water. Ambitious clergy, in the magisterial system, may be able to advance from weak parishes to strong ones, and from parishes into offices of regional or national significance. A key feature in the magisterial approach is that everyone knows who the leader is at every level of the hierarchy:—Monsignor Antonelli, for example, in the parish and Cardinal Spellman in the larger territory and Pope Paul in the world.

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Radical protestants, on the other hand, appear leaderless to the magisterial types. They control no territory. They have no hierarchy. They speak in a thousand voices. They are vigorously independent. They are unpredictable, and no one can hope to satisfy their multiplying demands. But they are the fastest growing religious community in the world today As movements of renewal and change, they intend to challenge the churches of the magisterium. Paradoxically, because such different methods have to be used of assessing their strength, radical protestants frequently reach the critcal mass required for explosive change before magisteral Christians are ready to take them seriously. Look with me, then, at some of the distinguishing characteristics of radical protestantism, and ask yourself where and how these are appearing in our time.

But first, as background to our understanding of this type of Christian, let me propose several generalizations. For one thing, radical protestantism surfaced as a movement of note during the Reformation of the 16th century, but the essence of it has been present in Christianity from the earliest days. Moreover, the scholarly world became aware of this phenomenon very recently, and much of the rich primary material about it is still being collected. Fourteen years ago Franklin Littell published a landmark article on the subject in the **Ecumenical Review** (April, 1954). His pioneering book **The Free Church** (Beacon) appeared three years later. George Williams' monumental history of the phenomenon as it found expression in the 16th century was published in 1962 under the title of **The Radical Reformation** (Westminster). Other scholars, both in seminaries and on secular faculties, are now digging the same vein of ore. So, when we speak of radical protestantism, we are speaking of a way of Christianity which is as old as the faith, but which is just beginning to be identified for what it is.

Another generalization about this type of Christianity is that Ernst Troelsch's familiar church-sect typology is inadequate to encompass it. In fact it may be that a wide acceptance of Troelsch's analysis blurred the vision of the students of this subject so that they could not perceive radical protestant expressions of Christianity for what they really were. To be sure, there are sectarian aspects in some dimensions of this phenomenon. And some radical protestant communities do become established, after a period of time, as sects. But to think of this kind of Christianity as sectarian is to press it into a container of the wrong shape. It is to miss the living, dynamic of it. It is to fail to see the spiritual vigor and thrust of the phenomenon. Most important, to think of radical protestantism as a sectarian expression is to lose sight of its revolutionary aim at the magisterial c h u r c h But magistrates, whether churchmen or government officers, have a long and distinguished history of being unable to recognize revolutions which are building momentum under their rule.

A better angle of vision, it seems to me, is to consider radical protestantism as a movement with the purpose of changing the established patterns of church life. As a movement of revolutionary intent, it shares many characteristics with other movements for change. In the fierce loyalty it commands, in the peculiar kind of organization it encourages, in the type of leadership it develops, in the ideologies it creates, in the way it recruits and trains its members, in its restless, undulating impact on the established order, in its sublime confidence that the future belongs to it, radical protestantism is blood brother to such other revolutionary movements as Black Power, the Vietcong or certain expressions of communism. It is recognizably Christian, but it is structured and articulated like a movement. One expression of this

movement in our time is Pentecostalism; and I consider it significant that a team of anthropologists at the University of Minnesota, after a three year study of Pentecostalism in many parts of the globe, are calling it a "Movement of Charismatic Renewal." Radical protestantism, as we are considering it, is a wider phenomenon than the contemporary Pentecostal outpouring. It is a broad and broadly important stream in Christianity. And I suggest that we look now at five of its distinguishing characteristics or patterns.

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The basic unit for the radical protestant is cellular. Sometimes you will find him tied in with regional or even national bodies, but the key to his life is in the cell. Here, in the intimacy of the face-to-face relation, he is trained in the radical way and nurtured in it. Here he is corrected or chastized when he slips. Here he is supported and encouraged along the way. A cell may meet for prayer or Bible study or for mutual indoctrination. A cell may be a group of people who live together, or it may meet several times a week. A cell may grow and subdivide; it may dissolve and let its members find other cells. The cell becomes the surrogate family for the radical protestant. It can include relations by blood or by marriage, but the important relation unifying each cellular group is a common experience and a common commitment. Members of this basic unit do not have to be geographical neighbors; they may find each other across a wide territory, and in finding each other they may slip through the nets of a dozen magisterial parishes.

Since one of the purposes of the radical protestant is lives transformed and revealing the benefits of the radical way, the cellular mode of organization is an excellent choice. Less than a dozen people, meeting each other regularly, sharing experiences of high intensity, planning together and plotting together, feeling the power and the rightness of their way, can change each other's lives. Men and women become involved, and their life direction can be formed as decisively by their religious "family" as by their natural family.

Individual cells, of course, in isolation from each other, do not form a movement. The basic units must be linked with other units sharing their purpose. The radical protestant forges his links in a number of different ways. Most of them look haphazard to the magisterial observer, but note how effective they can be. One link is a normal pattern of contact and communication between the members and leaders of groups of cells which work in the same geographical area. The operation works more like the nervous system than like a military line of command. People who belong to the movement know others who also belong. They meet each other either by accident or by intent; they talk with each other; they exchange experiences; they confirm each other in the power and the rightness of their way. Gerlach and his associates have noted with astonishment the speed with which the grapevine of a movement can carry messages to all of the members.

Another kind of link is the regular gathering of groups of cells for assemblies. This may be in a church building for worship and celebration. Members of the movement may gather for regional or national or even world assemblies. At these meetings new friendships are formed; old ones are cemented, and everyone is confirmed in the rightness and the power of the way. I have been interested to note that radical protestants are as spare in using the word 'church" as in the New Testament itself. They prefer to designate their gatherings as an "assembly" or a "meeting" or a "brotherhood." Their picture of themselves is dynamic, a people in motion.

Yet another way of linking one cell to the others is through traveling

evangelists. These people, whose livelihood frequently depends upon the personal generosity of their people supplemented by occasional use of a trade (in much the same way as the Apostle Paul did), move from place to place around the country. They carry the story of the movement. Because of their ceaseless work, both as informants and as conveyors of the movement's ideology, the movement gains a recognizable unity from city to city and country to country. These itinerant radicals establish the character and the general direction of the movement.

One of the purposes of radical protestantism is to change the prevailing religious institutions. Its pattern of organization is well-adapted to its purpose. A system of cells, linked by a network of personal relations and by programs of larger meetings, offers a flexible form of organization. It tends to operate more upon the pattern of guerrilla warfare than by conventional military means. Infiltrate, plan carefully, pick off key figures in the system, disappear when the heat is on, reappear at times and places when you are not expected, keep the oppositon off balance until you are ready for the takeover—these are guerrilla tactics, and they are well adapted to any movement with the intent of radical change. There is evidence that many Christians behaved in these ways in the early days of their movement. These earliest Christians knew that a few committed people can alter large social lumps.

Radical protestants frequently engage in symbolic acts which coalesce the true believers and set them off from other people. The symbol itself, thus, serves an organizing function. A wide variety of such symbol systems have been used in Christian history. Some of these impress us as bizarre today, and all of them were probably calculated to puzzle men with the fascination of strangeness. One such symbolic act, which has now grown respectable, occurs to me. It is baptism.

It is hard to escape the impression that baptism in New Testament times was a shocking thing. Surely it was not a polite ritual of happy parents and over-dressed babies. Crowds gathered at the shore of a stream. A few individuals, full of remorse and repentance and wanting a new life, would emerge from the crowd and would present themseleves to the baptizer at a pool in midstream. They would be submerged, symbolically drowned, and then they would be raised out of the water for their new life. There must have been horror and fascination among those who watched. And among those who submitted to the strange rite, powerful bonds of association must have been forged. People who publicly had undergone the indignity of this death and who had risen into the prospects of cleansed lives belonged to each other. And they must have been thrown at each other by those who simply stood at the edge of the stream and watched. The symbol of commitment had such power that it could be acknowledged equally by those within and those outside the movement.

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This baptismal pointer to a new life leads me to a second characteristic of the radical protestant, his patterns of personal behaviour. For centuries his ways of living the Christian life have shocked us, alarmed us. We of the magisterial traditions have spoken of him in terms of epithets. "Sectarian" we have called him. "Fundamentalist" we have dismissed him. "Individualistic and simplistic" we have disdained him. "Given to excesses" we have condemned him. His approach to Christianity—his enthusiasms, his readiness to embrace the impossible ethic of the New Testament, his peculiar capacity to concentrate on some passages of scripture and to ignore others—offend the tidy tastes of magisterial Christians.

And yet, for the radical protestant himself, the key to his self-understanding is that he is a transformed man. He is a man released from the old rules,

freed from earlier bondages and guilts. He is in direct contact with a power which can change lives and keeps them changed. He delights to tell you-to tell anyone who will listen—about the power which changed his life and exactly how it happened.

I do not wish to idealize this character. Radical protestants have included the Dukhobors with their communist practices and their passion for nudity. They have encompassed the Munsterites with their practice of polygamy. Their numbers have contained charlatans and dupes and garden variety fools. Like any other group, they have trouble with backsliders and hypocrites and the emotionally disturbed.

But radical protestantism tends to emphasize personal holiness and to see Jesus Christ as the Great Example. A man in this movement knows how to pray, and an array of devotional pieties are available to strengthen his purpose to follow the Lord. Normally he tries to show the virtues of compassion and hard work, honesty and thrift, thoughtfulness and trust. His speech is rich with the authority of moral concern. He will want to turn the other cheek, to comfort the broken-hearted, to bind up the injured, to care about the dispossessed, to forgive his brothers seventy-times seven. He will understand the peacemaker more easily than the lord of war. He will have had a personal experience of suffering, and a vision of the victory that can come out of defeat. The children of this world will see him as a soft touch, a fall guy, an easy mark. Though they be as wise as serpents, they will not understand him. He is already a citizen of another kingdom; where he belongs the values of this world have been inverted.

One interesting personal characteristic of the radical protestant is his willingness to risk. He may tell you how much God risked in order to save him. But you will notice that he, too, is ready to risk his time, his reputation, his money, his life when he is convinced that it is God's will.

On balance, I believe, radical protestantism proportionate to its numbers has produced more noble characters than the other streams of Christianity. The kinds of nobility—some saintly, some peaceable, some trustworthy, some generous, some yearning for righteousness of life, some striving for justice—are in short supply always. In our own desperate age characters with a touch of such nobility are urgently needed. The Vatican Council II spoke in its **decree on Ecumenism** about spiritual ecumenism as the heart issue of the ecumenical enterprise. It recognized the existence of genuinely Christian characters in churches outside its own communion. It called for the interior conversion of men as esential. To me it seems that radical protestantism, filled though it may be with ecclesial puzzles, is producing men and women who are answering that call.

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A third pattern which is characteristic of the radical protestant is his pattern of beliefs. It cannot be doubted that he stands ready to revise almost any conventional Christian doctrine, or that his beliefs often seem simplistic, or that there is such wild variety among different schools that one despairs of finding anything common between them. Several factors, however, begin to emerge as you examine the evidence. For magisterial Christians these factors may be hard to comprehend, because radical protestants do not develop theological systems; they rarely attempt to define dogmas. Rather than subscribing to creeds, which is a meaningless venture for many radicals, they describe what has happened to them. As one person tells of his experience, others will hear resonances of what they have discovered to be true. Thus, out of their living practice of the Christian life, they find unity with one another.

A central belief factor is the pulsing immediacy and urgency of divine

power. God is not dead for the radical protestant, although many of them will remember how he once seemed dead for them, too. God is always near, always leading, always true, always powerful. What a man needs is to be plugged into the divine reality. This cannot be contrived by emotional frenzies; the initiative always belong to God. You know it when he has touched your life. One such Christian described it to me as an electrical force taking over. He could feel the power entering him and charging through him and changing him, and at the same time he could almost stand outside himself and observe without emotion. The imagery of power or force or light is frequently used in relation to the divine.

For many radical protestants there is also a potent counter-force at work. God has his substantial opposition. Personalize it as the devil, or socialize it as the powers of this world, or abstract it as unholiness—the thing is real and potent. A cosmic battle is underway, and no man can expect to be neutral in it.

The radical protestant belongs to a people of The Book. A copy of the scriptures is never far from him. Look over his shoulder, and you will see that his book is marked and thumbed and cherished. He has inwardly digested large parts of it. His Biblical perspective and his easy familiarity with details of the scriptures can be astonishing. This is the source to which he turns again and again when he is perplexed or seeking solace or wishing to confirm a conviction.

The radical protestant is also oriented to the future. In this evil world, he can readily see that there is little hope. He is aware of the massive brutality in Vietnam and of the pervasive injustice of the core cities. He can provide details about how bad things are and how they are getting worse. His vision of the present is enough to drive a rational and sensitive man to despair. But his commitment is to change the present. He belongs to One who has the power to make all things new, and he has seen this power transform his own life. He can work for what is to come, and he can endure repeated defeats, because he knows of the cosmic plan of the only power able to turn apparent defeat into real victory. He is on the side of that power. With the foretaste he has had of the future, he can rejoice and keep up his work and pray expectantly for the day of fulfillment.

A fourth characteristic pattern of the radical protestant has always puzzled the magisterial Christian. This has to do with the problem of leadership. Again consider the figure of guerrilla warfare as against a conventional military machine. The conventional military has stylized and made official its leadership system. Its men are trained over many years. They go to war colleges. They study battle plans and troop deployment and the difference between tactics and strategy. They are the acknowledged experts in the arts of war. In the conventional army every man has an official title and a clear place in the hierarchy of command and supposedly understands both the extent and the limits of his authority. Leadership for the guerrillas, however, works from a completely different set of assumptions. Leadership is charismatic rather than official. Who has the gifts which are needed? Who can plan the attack and the retreat? Who can show the art of keeping the enemy off balance? Who, when small bands are forming in the hills, can gain the loyalty of a dozen people and weld them into a fighting unit? Who can deliver the troops? Among guerrillas leadership goes to those who can capture it and prove themselves in it. Centralized authority is limited. The major power is spread among the leaders of the various guerrilla bands. And among them a restless competition for power prevails;

so that the leadership status of everyone is in a constant state of dynamic flux. In this kind of situation an over-all hero of the moment may emerge, a Mao or a Castro; but even he is unable to designate his successor. Orderly succesion does not mix easily with necessities of charismatic leadership.

You will see the analogy to the situation of the radical protestant. He does not have, in fact he would be hampered by, a carefully trained clergy. He could not use an official priesthood. He does not care about validiy of succession or about charisms which are presumed to have been transmitted in an orderly way from the time of the apostles. He looks for the apostolic charisms in his own time. He tends to see the gifts of the Spirit as they are distributed among people he knows. Whoever has the right charismatic combination will be the leader, and frequently it will be a layman or laywoman.

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A fifth characteristic of the radical protestant might be called a predictable pattern of rejection. You will have realized that we are considering here the great tradition of the martyrs. In the year 1527 in the City of Augsburg a group of radical protestants who had found each other during the early upheavals of the Reformation gathered to consider their situation, to make plans for the future of their movement and to offer each other nourishment in the things of the Spirit. "The Synod of Martyrs" that meeting is now called, because so many of the participants met torture and death as soon as they dispersed. The magisterial Christians who slew them were Lutherans and the forerunners of Presbyterians and Roman Catholics. The radicals had to be rejected. They were a threat to the established order.

Four hundred and forty years later, I had the privilege of gathering with about 100 Christians at the Southern Baptist Seminary of Louisville, Kentucky, for a conference on "The Concept of the Believer's Church." The participants were lineal and spiritual descendants of those 16th century radicals. Baptists of various types, Mennonites, Quakers, Brethern, Pentecostals, Methodist of the Free Church stream, Congregationalists with memories of the covenantal tradition. Many of the groups which were represented there are still outside our formal ecumenical institutions. Some of these groups have been forgetting their radical protestant heritage and are acting like sects on the American religious scene. But all of them could invoke the reality of the martyrs. I remember vividly the moment when the most venerable participant, a retired Mennonite professor of history, rose to address the conference. He spoke of the three baptisms which the radical must receive: first, he said, is the baptism of the Spirit when you are made regenerate; second is the baptism by water when you are received into the community of believers; third, he concluded, is the baptism by blood which is inevitable when you live in obedience to the gospel.

The radical protestant is in the same moment dangerous and in danger. His existence is a threat to the established order. He is a determined opponent of things as they are now. He is out to purify, to convert those who run the system. He is dangerous. And he knows himself to be in danger. Although the changes for which he stands are going to take place, he himself will be a hunted man. He cannot be tolerated. He will have to be rejected. He is glad to enter the pattern of rejection. He knows that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. He will welcome threats and imprisonment and torture and death. Suffering will demonstrate him as in the succession of the One who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

The radicals of 16th century Christianity anticipated a series of profound changes. In an age when church and

state were hopelessly intertwined, they were for the separation of church and state. In a time when the religion of the ruler could be imposed as the religion of the people, they were for freedom of conscience and voluntary association. In a priest-ridden world, they were for the ministry of the laity. In a day when women were treated like property, they were for equality of the sexes. If it appears that many of their goals have been reached and if all of us are in some way their beneficiaries, let no man forget the blood with which the prize was purchased, nor underestimate the suffering with which the radical will be visited in our own time.

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I have called these people "radical protestants", although no name does them justice. They came into greatest visibility during the Protestant Reformation of 16th century. The classical Protestants of that age found them dangerous and heretical, seeing in them a disease as serious as that of Rome and perhaps even more to be dreaded. Roman Catholic and Protestant magistrates could vie with each other in trying to stamp out the pestilence of Anabaptists and Mennonites and Brethren and Huguenots and Waldensians. These hunted Christians could claim twin spirits in every age of Christian history, right back into the era of the primitive church. And yet they errupted into full view, as a distinctive expression of Christianity, at the time of the Reformation.

Their spiritual descendants in our epoch are emerging in all of the great traditions of Christianity, and they are having trouble with magisterial Christians wherever they appear. Some are Pentecostals, some are shaping religious orders, some are in underground churches, some are still hidden within the structures of the establishment, some are in the great traditions of the earlier radicals (Baptists and Mennonites and Brethren and Quakers). In our time, it seems to me that a radical movement is forming within Roman Catholicism; but among contemporary radicals some are Protestant, and many elude our conventional categories.

If the word "Protestant" fits uneasily on these Christians, the word "radical" seems to have been coined for them. They go to work on root issues. Not content with gradual improvement in the Christian community, they seek complete change, total commitment, utter transformation. Others may be willing to patch the fabric here and there, others may be willing to work patiently for reform, others may be ready for compromise and adjustment; but not these Christians. Their sense of the coming kingdom is too vivid to let them wait. They dream either of the restitution of the Church in its earliest and least corrupted form, or else of a Christian community which is entirely new. They see themselves as signs pointing to the new age. Standing firmly against the wickedness and cruelty and lovelessness of both the world and the church, they have had a foretaste of the perfect world which is to come. They are the Christian revolutionaries, the real radicals.

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And so we return to the original question with which we began. Is the ecumenical impulse spacious enough to encompass all Christians? Or is it simply the contemporary way to include some Christians and to exclude others?

One can answer categorically that our present ecumenical agencies are not equipped to put magisterial and radical Christians in systemmatic and abrasive contact with each other. These agencies, such as Councils of Churches, were formed by denominations which work in a magisterial way. As we have already seen, the needs and the motivations, the organizing principles and the leadership features of a magisterium and a radical movement for change operate along different kinds of axes. It seems to me largely a mechanical problem to devise ecumenical agencies

which will permit and encourage the magesterium and the radical movement to meet each other regularly and usefully. The fact is that the mechanics of our present ecumenical apparatus exclude the radical Christian movement.

But underneath the question of how to construct a genuinely ecumenical institution is a question more grave. It is a question of will. Does either the magisterial tradition or the radical movement want to extend what has been called "the great conversation" to include all Christians? Some evidence can be seen on both sides that there is a desire to know and to understand each other. A few Christians hope that it will be possible to work together. The signs we can see, however, may be built on romantic fantasies. So I suggest that we ask some hard questions. How serious can be the intention of the magisterial and the radical Christian to deal with each other as ecumenical equals?

If our analysis has been on target, the purpose of the radical is to overthrow the magistrate. His organization, his ideology, his methods are aimed at achieving an almost total change. If you have sat at conference tables with as many magisterial Christians as I have sat with, the same question is likely to occur to both of us. How eager will the present rulers be to meet regularly and as equals, with their most dangerous challengers?

Or look at it from the other side. If you have been ready to risk everything for the sake of your movement, how ready are you to risk the movement itself? Established organizations are like immense pilows. They can be thumped and pummelled. They can accomodate to many different kinds of influence. But always they return to their original shape. If the radical Christian becomes too ecumenical, isn't he in danger of disappearing into the cotton padding?

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This it seems to me is the ecumenical problem which is posed by the radical protestant. I am unable to see any resolution to it. Of course, if we are romantics, we will expect to see all Christians live in easy brotherhood. But I am not sure that the romantic solution will control our actual behavior. Our own self interest, on both sides of the great division, will continue to keep us apart.

The hope, as I see it, lies in a source of power—and let me emphasize that word of the radicals, "power"—more vast than either side can invoke by itself. I am ready to believe that the Spirit has been working to remove divisions which seemed insuperable in the past. Yes, I also believe that the power of the Spirit can operate, against our deepest human intransigencies, to help us overcome this division in the future.