

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEM OF PLURALISM

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I SHOULD like to address myself to a theological view of the phenomenon of pluralism, following the simple scheme of a well-known program: "Look, judge, act."

I

The first task involved is to see the phenomenon of pluralism. Here we immediately encounter a difficulty which is implicit in the word and has to be clarified. At least in German idiom, the word *Pluralismus* (pluralism) has a connotation different from that of *Pluralität* (plurality). The latter expresses the simple and indisputable, the universally discernible fact that not only unitariness and unity but also multiplicity and diversity, the multiform and the manifold, pervade our entire enviring reality as well as our human existence itself; alongside the singular is always also the plural. The word "plurality" simply asserts this fact and this structure; it merely states what is the case. There is no need here to ponder this relationship of the one and the many and to reflect upon it in depth. The word "pluralism," by contrast, does not merely designate multiplicity, as the word "plurality" does; it makes multiplicity the very predicate of the one.

It is said that German words which end in *ismus* (ism) tend to isolate that which they designate, tend to make them entirely dependent upon themselves, tend to totalitarianize them. Isms designate a "nothing but." Someone has remarked that isms are the present-day forms of polytheism. Accordingly, pluralism would mean that there is nothing but the plural, the multiple, the motley, the manifold—and that this is the sole reality. No relationship to a one which binds together or coordinates the many can be recognized, and neither therefore is to be looked for or wished for or brought into being. Consequently, what characterizes pluralism, as is often said by those who view it critically, is that it does not really tolerate plurality, that it destroys those combinations, those relationships, which prevent "the many and the mani-

fold from erupting into hostile oppositions. This destruction of relations," says one critic, "we call pluralism."¹

To see pluralism and to speak of it in this form is, of course, a possibility. It is my opinion, however, that the way contemporary usage understands pluralism does not unconditionally intend such an extreme accent upon the "nothing but," although it undoubtedly shows a trend in that direction. Rather the term "pluralism" expresses the fact that in the various areas of human existence multiplicity, plurality, is the dominant factor. Pluralism is the side-by-side-ness of the many. This characteristic is strengthened by the understandable aversions against that sort of oneness which we encounter nowadays in the form of totalitarianism.

Very recently I read an essay in the German weekly *Rheinischer Merkur* entitled "Pluralism—Does It Really Exist? Objections by a Thoughtful Contemporary against a Current OK-Word." The author, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, here expresses the opinion that the trend of our times is by no means pluralistic but rather antipluralistic. By way of proof, the author points to the tendency nowadays toward oneness, toward collectivism, toward conformism—for example, in politics, which reflects a variety of attempts to reduce multiplicity to a minimum and to create gigantic organizations "out of what is alike, what is the same, what is virtually identical." He calls attention to the many forms which begin with the prefix "pan." Part of the same process, according to Kuehnelt-Leddihn, is the type-casting and the standardizing which is found, probably is necessitated, in industry, technology, and administration; also those factors which proliferate an omnipresent sameness by bridging all distances; the reducing of taste, of consumption, of opinion, of civilization to the typical; the conspicuous trend in education toward a uniform, community school; the uneasiness which people are having over the plurality character of precisely this area. All of this, as Kuehnelt-Leddihn sees it, testifies to a fact which he puts in one sentence: "Let us not submit to any illusions; the condition to which the world is tending is a unity by conformism—antipluralistic."

Now these assertions, which question whether our times really can be signed with the word "pluralism," we could hardly adopt without objection and contradiction. In the development of my theme, however, I shall not enter critically or in detail into the problems described here,

¹ W. Stählin, *Pluralismus, Toleranz, Christenheit* (Nürnberg, 1961) p. 146.

although they are in many respects very important. (This much might be said as a general principle, namely, that the mass man and the individual man are related dialectically, that the era of massification entails simultaneously an individualization of the individual man.) I should like rather to draw our attention to a phenomenon which Kuehnelt-Leddihn emphasizes especially. He states that there is undoubtedly one area where the characterization "pluralism" does apply: it is the area of world view, of religion, of faith, of doctrine, of the confessions. Here, he says, the private, the subjective, is made the norm. Here, and here alone, does modern pluralism take place. And this pluralism, which Kuehnelt-Leddihn himself does not contest, the so-called ideological, world-view type of pluralism, is the main object of my reflections here.

This pluralism, moreover, is relevant as world view in a variety of ways. There is here a large and a wide range. On the one hand, it ranges from a plurality which is indifferent about world view, a plurality which is purely scientific and theoretical, which acknowledges that, in view of the differentiation of the sciences and their methods and languages, it is in practice impossible nowadays to find a synthesis which could provide us with a common view, a universal co-ordination or integration of all perspectives. On the other hand, however, pluralism may also be highly relevant as a world view, as a pluralism of values, of those convictions and ideologies which, as already intimated, tend toward the "nothing but." Karl Rahner describes this fact thus:

The real problem of a pluralism of convictions originates where convictions which factually are particular must, on principle, claim universal validity, if they do not want to surrender their own very essence. An example: a Mozart club and a Hindemith society, an association of entomologists and an association of patrons for an aquarium represent a particular conviction; but in no way do they aspire to gain the interest of everyone. On the other hand, Christianity, a Christian denomination, the ideology of the "Humanistic Union," a party of militant dialectical materialists regard themselves, unless they deny their own very essence, as called and equipped with a claim to truth and with a mission which is addressed to everyone, as a basically universal conviction, as a world view. However, the doctrine which says in turn that such world views are in principle impossible, that such universalistic claims must forever and everywhere be a priori false, would itself be just another such conviction with quite practical consequences.²

The problem which all this describes deserves our attention.

² K. Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie* 6 (Einsiedeln, 1965) 47.

To the problem of "seeing," which is still the first part of our reflection, we should add the following facts. The pluralism mentioned here is distinguished, first of all, temporally and spatially—distinguished, namely, from those times and places in which a cosmological, credal unity and homogeneity were implicit in the very circumstance of a single faith, a single church—for example, in the time of the medieval European *christianitas*, the *corpus christianum*. Here the Christian faith was the point of unity which permeated all reality and the whole of personal and social existence, where Church and world coincided, where Church meant Church of the whole people, where membership in the one implied (self-evident) membership in the other, where emperor and pope formed the two arms of the one *corpus christianum* and were engaged by it in a service which transcended and united them both. The conception of the Church's *potestas directa*, modified to a *potestas indirecta* and still more to a *potestas directiva*, gave to that unity an expression which was as familiar as it was normative.

For a long time, Catholics in particular were inclined to see in this situation and this time the *non plus ultra* of Christian existence, of the power of faith and of the Church's sphere of influence, and to view this medieval period, so understood, as the ideal, now unfortunately gone, and in their nostalgic dreams to envision the longed-for return of this time of the Church.

It may be in place, however, to deromanticize a bit and simply to point out the facts uncovered by sociological investigation.

The homogeneity of a previous regionally delimited society was in those previous times very much conditioned indeed by its regional limitations. The great mass of mankind was immediately occupied almost exclusively with eking out physical existence and was, for that reason, subject from the outset to a standardizing of its world view and culture; counterpoised to this mass of men was a relatively small leadership class, which, at least for a limited time and for a no less limited regional community and within those elements which human freedom at that time was helpless to alter, was able to effect a far-reaching homogeneity, so that it was virtually impossible for deviant tendencies to be articulated socially, at least for any extended period of time.³

And if we add to all this that education was almost exclusively the function of the clergy and remained restricted to the clergy, that at

³ K. Rahner, *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* 2/1 (Freiburg, 1966) 213.

that time the feudal system prevailed, and that, in consequence of its own internal structure of dependence, its unity was simply determined, or predetermined, to be a unity of dependence, even in the matter of faith, and that it was determined not so much by personal decision as by social situation and obligation, by milieu, custom, and tradition, then the contours look somewhat different, and then our view of the Middle Ages is determined not only by the admittedly admirable theological *summae* and by the imposing cathedrals, but also by those equally undeniable factors which make us perceive the whole truth about the unity of faith in the framework of that *christianitas* in a somewhat somber light. Such a view will recognize that the price paid for this unity is very high—a price which neither the Christian nor the Church can in any case even wish to see paid. Especially is this true when we consider that the non-Christian, the Jew and the Moham-medan, were viewed and treated as a minority in the *imperium christi-anum*, despite the solemn insistence that accepting the Christian faith is a matter of free will. The fate of the heretic was even worse: he could not be acknowledged to have any good will. To possess the truth of the faith and to preserve it was far more important for individual and community than to possess subjective freedom and decision. We give the floor once more to Karl Rahner:

It is the Christian especially who dare never forget that the homogeneity of society in the Christian West was a regional homogeneity. This homogeneity did not arise only from the victorious power of Christian truth. Rather it is the distinguishing feature of all medieval societies the world over which have a definite sociological structure and an epochal significance in the history of thought. Such homogeneity is found also where the religion within such homogeneity can lay no claim to absolute truth. When such a medieval epoch terminates, so does its homogeneity terminate.⁴

Such a medieval situation we can neither desire nor create. The shape it would take nowadays would be that of a universal ideological totalitarianism with the corresponding forms, methods, and consequences which are only too well known to us. It would be the absolute opposite of that free world which somehow still finds itself to be one and which can still operate as one despite all its persistent internal differences and despite all its inherent problems.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The fact of a pluralistic society continues to be our destiny for today and for the future, for the factors which caused an earlier nonpluralistic society consisted not in the absolute, objective correctness of a system or of a world view but rather in historically conditioned, sociological causes which no longer obtain. And the only way those causes could obtain again in the manner they once did would be for the unity of world history, for the rational and technical society, to disappear and, along with that, for its characteristic freedom and the possibility of objectifying this freedom socially to disappear as well. If (in order to anticipate what follows already at this point) the Christian, for theological reasons and within earthly history, cannot expect Christianity to triumph globally in society, then he can expect as his future only a pluralistic society and can accept this as the corresponding sphere of his existence. Else he would, under the circumstances, be conjuring up a non-Christian, totalitarian society.⁵

The famous words of the so-called Religious Peace of Augsburg, *cuius regio eius religio*, reserved the religious and confessional choice exclusively to the current lord of the respective *regio*. The *regio* itself, that is, the people who lived in that *regio*, simply had to submit to his decision. If they were disinclined to do this, their only alternative, which was simultaneously their right, was to emigrate. The fact that the *ius emigrationis* was not necessarily an act of cynicism, as it was widely understood at the time, but may have been a right and an ultimate point of freedom, we have been able to experience in our own day, especially in the situation in Germany. The regulation *cuius regio eius religio* fashioned those maps, with which we are still acquainted, on which the religious denominations were assigned certain regions and certain colors: the Catholic territory appeared in red, the Protestant in green. On the global maps, moreover, black was the color for the heathen, yellow for the Mohammedans. Today this situation is changed, and the fact is that many religions appear within a single *regio*. For a map today, this would necessitate a maximum number of colors within a tiny space. The designated *regio* is more and more becoming that one world which, as we have already said, is appearing in industry, in technology, in universal education, in new possibilities for communication, in internationalism in research and theory. It is appearing, let us add, in a history which is unitary because it is now the history of the world, the history of mankind. It is appearing in the unity of a common destiny and solidarity from which, for good or ill, no one can withdraw.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

It follows, therefore, that "the pluralistic powers can no longer divide this one earthly space geographically among themselves, and thus set themselves apart from each other and in that way stabilize a certain balance. If the unity of world history is not to cease, and since no one of these conflicting powers can be expected to carry off an absolute victory, a victory of global proportions, then these powers will now have to exist in one and the same historical space, and thus form a pluralistic society."⁶

We spoke of the fact that the medieval unity of faith, Church, Christendom, and world not only was rooted in a common faith, but in large part was conditioned also sociologically and structurally by the Middle Ages—understood as a structural and sociological concept. But the pluralistic phenomenon which we encounter in the world today does not result from the fact that this medieval form of a sociologically and structurally conditioned unity was somehow merely lost. Rather its loss occurred through the outright decline and fall of the feudal overlordship, through the awakening and coming to power of national states, through the gradual elimination of the Church's monopoly in culture and education, through the discovery of new worlds, new cultures, and religions, through the rise of the middle class and later of the proletariat, through the social and industrial revolution. The unity of the *imperium christianum* was also and primarily lost as a result of intellectual movements. The mere dissolution of the Middle Ages in a structural-sociological sense would not necessarily have resulted in the plurality of world views which we find in the world today. This dissolution could have been, and perhaps should have been, carried out within a unity of faith; for there must be room, and indeed there is room, within the real Christian faith, within Christianity and the Church, for a transition from medieval to modern times, sociologically understood. Perpetuation of the feudal system was not demanded by faith but was rather an ideology which misused faith. It was an ideology which wanted to construe the factual situation, the historically evolved circumstance, as though it were a necessary form of the faith and of faith's materialization. And thus the situation was hallowed with a nimbus to which this system is neither by its nature nor by its origin entitled.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

Reverting to the question about the origin of pluralism: the pluralism of the present is also and above all conditioned by that familiar and sorry problem posed by the division of the Western Church and the plurality of churches which resulted, churches which as separated and mutually conflicting denominations by no means represent that legitimate plurality of churches of which, say, the New Testament speaks when it refers to the Church in the plural. This tendency was strengthened by the further differentiation of the free churches in contradistinction to the state churches, and, beyond that, of the groups, denominations, and sects which arose within Christendom.

The pluralism of the present is furthermore and chiefly conditioned by that process which, though it was a successive process in time, might well be the result not so much of time as of an inherent issue itself, that process, namely, in which Church, Christendom, and world are less and less identified with one another. This process of nonidentification is reflected in the breakup of the Renaissance, in the conflict between modern natural science and philosophy on the one hand, and the Church on the other. Science and Church became alienated, indeed even hostile to each other. The polemics between denominations and the religious wars called for an attitude toward the denominations which was politically neutral. The denominations became untrustworthy. Furthermore, the horizons expanded and opened out upon new continents, cultures, and religions. From these and other sources sprang the modern mentality: that autonomy which rejected the Christian dimension as an alien legalism, that oft-described secularization and profanation of the sacral, above all of the state, the discovery that the world of culture is a law unto itself, the expulsion of the Christian faith from many an area on the ground that these were not its legitimate areas of competence. The application of the philosophical dictum *De omnibus dubitandum*, the maxim of the Enlightenment *Sapere aude*, "Dare to exploit your own reason," produced the modern subjectivity and, along with it, the proclamation of universal human rights. These included the freedom of religion, which entailed in turn the duty of toleration. Modern democracy is the political version of this thinking. However, it must be said that none of these impulses, if they are interpreted on their own terms, were motivated by faith and the Church. Rather they arose without these and often against them. And it does

not require much to remind us that the French Revolution, one of the greatest turning points until now, and later on socialism and Marxism and atheism, did not remain merely the abstract ideas of theoreticians and philosophers, but grew into total world views which engrossed the whole man, as they still do today. Their concern, according to the familiar assertion of Karl Marx, is not only with a new understanding of the world but with changing the world.

This bond between socialism, Marxism, and atheism, despite their internal differences, gives to these three tendencies a special impact and virulence which to the present day not only endure but seem also to mobilize, and indeed have the power to mobilize, constantly new energies.

Furthermore, in our own day there is a humanism which consciously intends to be atheistic humanism. It is a new enlightenment, which in many variations and across the continents lives off its criticism of Christianity (whether of the details of Christianity or of the whole of it), of the Church, and of the faith. In a variety of ways it strives to shatter the Christian position with every possible objection, to make Christianity a laughingstock and to reduce it to absurdity, to sniff out the defects of its believers, and to point out the contradiction of the Christian claim and the Christian reality.

All of this leads to that oft-described picture: the world in which we live is no longer determined by unifying basic concepts and institutions, by a universal tradition and atmosphere, by a milieu occasioned and motivated by the Christian faith. What we find is rather a motley multiplicity, a pluralism of world views: Christian faith and the Church are no longer the one and all, but merely the one among others, the one among the many. And in this situation the one among the many, that one which is still Christianity and faith and Church, is by no means the dominant and overshadowing factor. By dominant factors very different from itself it has been challenged to a many-sided competition, factors which deny to Christianity any status of privilege and exception, which indeed outrank Christianity, which in any event demand equality with it. The pastor of St. Paul's Church in Munich, an imposing Neo-Gothic church with a high steeple, once told me: this church, viewed optically, is a lie. What the Church represents architecturally in this area of Munich does not at all square with the

actual life-situation, with the people who live in the church's neighborhood. Rahner speaks of a structural heresy. What is expressed optically by the situation of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York comes closer to reality. This church, which formerly dominated its environment and towered above it, is today overshadowed in the literal sense of the word and is almost obscured by the surrounding skyscrapers.

That is the situation in which we live, in which Christian faith and the churches find themselves.

II

We now approach the second task. After seeing comes judging. The seeing which occupied us till now was not a merely external ascertaining and observing. Similarly, what is here meant by judging is a theological judging, a theological evaluation of that pluralism of ideologies and world views which was just described. However, this judging and adjudging is not very easy, since that which is to be judged, pluralism itself, is extraordinarily multileveled, complex, and differentiated.

One thing, however, is certain (and this we have to state first), namely, that the theological reflections we make and have to make upon this phenomenon are different today from what they used to be. Yesterday's reflections we know. They are still at hand. They were produced, both ecclesiastically and theologically, at a time when the contours and profiles of present-day pluralism were being outlined. The pluralism which is here used as a collective name for the various isms—for subjectivism, rationalism, liberalism, socialism, atheism, democracy, and tolerance—was gathered into the catchword *errores* and in the *Syllabus errorum* of Pius IX was exposed and condemned. No doubt these declarations of the Church's teaching office—certainly not as ex-cathedra decisions—had a great effect and stamped and formed authoritative, influential judgments inside and outside the Church. That means, too, that they determined theological judgment, the judgment of those theologians whose chief task had to be in the area of apologetics—so determinatively, in fact, that where exception was taken to this position and evaluation, in hopes of some encounter between faith and contemporary life, between theology and the modern temper, such exceptions had no possibility of succeeding. On the contrary, such exceptions were suspect as collaboration with the enemy

and were soon silenced. The closing sentence of one of these declarations is well known. Like the blare of the final trumpet, it declares that the Church will never let herself be reconciled to modern progress. As for other such declarations—like the pestilence of the “*immoderata libertas opinionum*” and the one concerning “*deliramentum, asserendam esse ac vindicandam cuilibet libertatem conscientiae*”—we have no wish here to discuss them at length.

The way I have quoted and sketched those declarations of the magisterium and of the theology of the nineteenth century will surely convey the impression that I do not believe that the answer they gave can simply be the answer we give today. By that, however, I do not mean to fall into the current theological fad of judging the nineteenth-century attitude of the Church and her theologians merely negatively. What I do mean to say is that the officially expressed and predominantly negative judgment upon pluralism was one-sided, because it saw only that side which appears first and is most accessible. It was this side of pluralism which stood forth as quite consciously, explicitly, and emphatically critical of faith and Church, as rejection and hostility. The reply of the Church and theology was one of reaction, denunciation, defense against these tendencies, characterizing them as error against which the Church had to speak out. This is understandable, not only in view of those original pressures but in view also of the multifarious attitudes in fact and the concrete measures to which those original theoretical isms often led. For instance, religious freedom became a profession of freedom from any and every religion, and those who invoked liberalism and toleration were in many instances highly intolerant. Consider, for example, Voltaire's *écrasez l'infâme*.

Still, understandable as that earlier theological thinking can surely be—and many contemporary facts and events have to be considered in order to evaluate it, not least the highly questionable attempt which the so-called liberal evangelical theology of the nineteenth century and the so-called *Kultur protestantismus* reflected in their move to assimilate the spirit of the times—still, that theological thinking could be neither the only nor the final nor the entire answer in the sense of a theological judgment; for to qualify pluralism as “error” by no means exhausts everything that is to be said about pluralism. No movement or ideology, no matter how it may originally be defined and devised, can live,

can persist, can so long survive by error alone. All of this is possible only because of the truth, the reality, the undeniable value that inheres in, with, and under the *errores*. If I see the matter correctly, we are today on the threshold of making contact with this core of truth, of discerning it and laying it bare. It had been concealed behind an intrusive, wholly alien aspect. This new situation occasions and prepares the way for a different answer and a different attitude. And this is what we should talk about now. Not that the error of these isms should be denied—that would merely be the opposite extreme—but rather that they should no longer be seen exclusively as error.

In the pluralism which we have described, the reality which over and over again seeks articulation and assertion is man, his individuality, his freedom, his originality, his uniqueness, his power to control his world, his claim to be, as Kant says, not a means to an end but an end himself. This basic structure, summed up in the concept “anthropocentric,” is, as structure and plan and program, not anti-Christian or anti-Church. On the contrary, it is demanded by the very motives, ideas, and intentions of the Christian faith.

In its doctrine of creation, the Christian faith has dedivinized, desorcerized, and demythologized the world, the cosmos, and in so doing has liberated it as a finite, contingent world, to be entrusted and turned over to man. As is often said today, a bit extravagantly, the Christian faith created the worldly world, and thus it provided the first intellectual presuppositions and cosmological conditions for modern natural and technological science. This science, therefore, whether in its ancestry or in its basic make-up, neither opposes nor contradicts the fundamental data of the Christian faith proclaimed by the Church. Rather it is carrying out the command to subdue the earth, to lead the world—a world of becoming, an evolving world—toward its destination and its true form precisely as a finite world, and in that way such science collaborates with God in the work of His creation.

This does not mean, of course, that every expression of natural scientific and technological thinking shows or even intends to show this basic Christian structure. Often the intention has been to express an anti-Christian position. Nor does it mean that the representatives of the Church in every historical moment perceived and affirmed this decisive component of the Christian faith. Witness, for instance, the

case of Galileo, the opposition to the Copernican system. But when such liberating insights and redeeming measures did prevail, they prevented many a conflict and alienation.

The anthropocentrism of modern times has been played off, of course, not only against the cosmocentrism of the Greeks but also against the theocentrism of faith. This has been done not only by those neophiles who represent the new in philosophy, art, poetry, politics, and ethics, and in the norms and attitudes which these entail. The same playing-off of anthropocentrism against the theocentrism of faith has been done also by the Christian critics of anthropocentrism. In so doing, these Christian critics did not really do the neophiles any harm. They merely confirmed what the latter themselves had claimed: emancipation from the truths and norms of the Christian faith and the Church. But despite everything, what was never sufficiently observed and asserted was that there need not be any opposition between theocentrism and anthropocentrism, that there can in fact be a theologically conditioned anthropocentrism; for according to the assertions of a theocentrically oriented Christian faith, man is in a special way the image and likeness of God, crown and goal of creation, for whom the world was created and ordered. Man is intended to be a free partner with God and in personal communion with God. The life and the destiny of man enjoy the status of eternal validity. The incarnation of God and the saving acts of redemption which took place for us men and for our salvation bring to light once more, with full clarity, that anthropocentrism which God has willed and created.

All modern pluralisms which move man into the center of things, which make him the subject and conceive of the world as the world of man and of his skill and technology, which speak of freedom and of the unmanipulatable, inviolable human person, of the human dignity and human rights and conscience which then are realized in the form of tolerance and humanitarianism and, institutionally, in the form of democracy—all these are original and legitimate fruits from the tree of Christian faith and of the effects which it evokes. America is far more aware of this than the Continent is. America is not encumbered by the European ideological conflicts.

We repeat: all this is true and remains true even when, in a pluralism of modern beliefs and values and outlooks, this anthropocentrism re-

futes and obliterates itself, even when it expressly defends itself against such a characterization as the Christian one we described above and consciously regards itself as a contradiction of Christianity and Church and often of religion as such, even when it assumes that it needs this contradiction in order to exist at all. God must die that man may live—so says one of the many programs of postulatory atheism. And yet it is true that even runaway sons “who get into conflict with their parents usually remain sons of these parents more than they realize or wish. And amidst all the conflicts of modern philosophy, of modern natural science, and of the modern conceptions in general of the world and of existence, there is no doubt that the modern spirit in its ultimate and basic structure, whether consciously and admittedly or not, derives from the spirit of Christianity.”⁷

What this means for the theological judgment at hand is that the Church dare not be deaf or blind to this genealogy. In face of this knowledge, her appropriate attitude should be, not the complete expulsion of the runaway and ungrateful sons, nor a pride born of wounded vanity and resentment, but rather understanding, patience, waiting, hoping, and loving. Especially must this be the case since—to recur to the figure of parents and sons once more—in the conflicts between them, in their alienation, in the running away from the parental home, both parties are guilty. And this applies in fact to our question as well. However, a larger measure of patience and understanding may be expected of the parents than of the indignant sons. Again we quote Karl Rahner:

The Church has the right and the duty—as axiomatically, at least, as she has to conceive of herself as the subject of the world’s God-inspired, warning, judging conscience—to discover the picture of her own future in the features of the present-day situation. She has this right and duty because these features already reveal by anticipation the working of her own spirit—reveal them, as it were, for her own reflex action. If the Church would pay homage to what finally is a cheap non-conformity, not only would she expose herself to the dangers of a sectarian narrowness, she would furthermore be repudiating a time which basically—also with respect to what is peculiar to herself—Christianity and the Church themselves have generated.⁸

This, in my opinion, is the chief task and possibility of achieving

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 236. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

real theological reflection in our day. For this, Vatican II opened the liberating possibility, especially in the spirit which moved it, desiring as it did not to condemn but to help, intent not upon distance but upon encounter, articulating itself in decisive documents, particularly in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, in the Declaration on Religious Freedom, and in the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. Here the one-sidedness of the Syllabus and of Vatican I is overcome. However, to see and to recognize the truth in pluralism—more than that, to focus upon its basically Christian structure—dare not blind us to this pluralism's accompanying errors. This would be merely to replace one one-sidedness with another. For instance, it is an error when pluralism is transformed from a fact into a norm, a norm for the vague, positionless relativism which is expressed in the thesis that, on questions of faith and world view, everybody is more or less right—with the exception of those who "believe they have found a truth possessing its own objective validity independent of men's recognition thereof. In that case pluralism would produce a race of intellectually spineless beings living in a night in which all cats look gray. Then no one would any longer have to face the ultimate question of life. Such a world would be terribly boring. People would yearn all over again for a serious intellectual discussion. Fortunately we do not live in such a world; we live in a world in which everyone who wants to live responsibly has to choose whether he wants to or not."^{8a}

That means, accordingly, that it is possible to accept pluralism as a form of modern society without lapsing into a religious relativism, without overlooking or sacrificing what is distinctively Christian.

The other error inherent in modern pluralism encourages the quest for one new syncretistic religion out of all the other religions, a type of world religion, a type of Esperanto religion (a mixture of various religious elements). To this we can only say: the attempt has often been made but has never succeeded to date, because it is prefabricated and artificially manipulated, has neither a life of its own nor a life from which it arises.

This remark about errors is made merely to point out that it is important and necessary for theological judgment to see both sides. Here

^{8a} W. A. Visser 't Hooft, in *Ökumenische Rundschau*, 1966, p. 232.

too the proposition applies: only the whole is the truth. But I believe it is more appropriate and more effective for theological reflection to diagnose error against the background of an acknowledged truth than to discern a few traces and elements of truth against the background of a condemned error.

Something else may be said about the theological judgment on pluralism. Viewed theologically, pluralism is a sign of the finite and conditioned character of man. It is an index of the fact that man (including the Christian) is not beholden only to himself and that he cannot alone take care of himself in living out his existence. He is dependent upon others, upon the many, upon the community, upon the We and Thou.

That reality is through and through and in its concreteness an absolute unity is, for man, a metaphysical postulate and a hope. But this unity is not some magnitude which he can control. Only in God is everything one. In the realm of the creaturely and the finite, however, the pluralism and antagonism of reality cannot be synthesized away.⁹

It follows, therefore, that there cannot and dare not be a single instance—only God Himself is this instance—“which directs all processes simultaneously and thus through them all fulfils its own nature.” In this universal power of His, “God has no vicar, neither in state nor in Church.” These have to play as a team, dependent upon mutual exchange, communication, acceptance, and encounter.

Pluralism—an index of human finitude and with that a sign of truth, particularly of that truth which the faith expresses about man—reveals, we said, the difference between Church and world, their nonidentity, and the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the world and many sectors within it. Pluralism signifies the dissolution of the unity of the *christianitas*. But this does not indicate merely a loss. This phenomenon articulates the world as the epitome of that *for* which the Church exists. This phenomenon confronts the Church with her standing assignment, her assignment to exist for others, to bear witness, to serve as the representative she is. Her temptation to egotistical self-edification or even self-glorification, conceived not merely as her way and means but as her goal, is thus again and again exposed and in this way

⁹ Cf. J. Splett, “Ideologie und Toleranz,” in J. B. Metz (ed.), *Weltverständnis im Glauben* (Mainz, 1965) pp. 269–87.

already partially removed—likewise the confusing of the Church with the kingdom of God, the illegitimate anticipation of the future “God is all in all” (cf. 1 Cor 15:28).

Pluralism exposes the true situation of the Church, as the Church in the world which needs the world, so different and set apart from her, in order to recognize herself and her own peculiar task; moreover, as the Church in the Diaspora, as a little flock; finally, as participation and representation of Him of whom it is said that He is “set for a sign that is spoken against” (Lk 2:34). This phenomenon, too, appears nowadays not in regions somehow separated from the unity of Christendom, but in that “everywhere” which is tending toward unity. The Church—again borrowing from Karl Rahner—is everywhere, and those powers in society which “speak against” the faith must likewise be everywhere. But this means that in society there must be a pluralism not only of cultures but also of religions and world views, striving, with *heilsgeschichtlich* necessity, to “speak against” Christianity always and unto the end of time. Consequently, not only does Christianity establish such a pluralism as a regrettable fact; at the same time it rather expects this pluralism on the basis of its own theology of history, and calmly reckons with it. Inasmuch as the Church must constantly be striving to win as many men as possible, and always new men, for the message of Christ, she is thereby also working to overcome this religious pluralism. This intention she can never abandon. But since the Church, on the basis of her own self-understanding, simultaneously reckons and must reckon with a constant continuation of this religious pluralism, her fight to overcome it may be waged quite prudently and dispassionately. There is no good reason why this fight should assume the character of sectarian fanaticism, nourished on the assumption that one possesses the truth only if his truth triumphs overnight, and that one has the right to contend for the victory of this truth with every imaginable weapon, even if victory means not the free, personal assent of the other side, but only a socio-political and institutional “victory,” which is never the authentic victory of faith.

The fact that the Christian Church figures as one among others, as one among many, within our present-day pluralism, need not and dare not be interpreted to mean that the Church now conceives of herself merely as one alongside the others, as if her claim and her mission were

in question. There is in the Church a singular which may never be dissolved into a plural, but always remains unique, definitive, unsurpassable, exclusive. In the final analysis, this singularity is rooted in the once-for-all character of Christ, of His person, His history, and His achievement.

In contrast to a sect, the singularity and exclusiveness inherent in the Church always stay open, directed toward others, toward the many, toward the world. What is the most exclusive is—as I have said elsewhere¹⁰—also the most universal and the most tolerant, precisely because it maintains this universal dimension for the sake of catholicity and in order to integrate without absorbing. The Church enters into the movement of Jesus Christ—that Only One who is simultaneously the One for the many, the One for all—“for” in the sense of the biblical “in place of” and “in favor of.”

All this is fundamentally different from the universal claim of every kind of totalitarianism, for the pre-eminent reason that this existing-for-all is characterized not by domination and coercion but by service (*diakonia*), by the offer of truth and of love, by that invitation which relays to the world and to each new moment of history the invitation from God. This openness toward the world does not seek (what would hardly succeed today anyway) the worship of slaves, but the love of free men.

It is to this end that the Church has been liberated in a special way by modern pluralism—and this is the final step in our theological judging. In many areas where entanglements, obligations, involvements, and claims had accumulated around her historically, the Church has become free—at first, of course, not happily so. Much of what belonged and belongs to the world has in modern times been returned to the world. This liberation from many other secular interests has, in the best sense of the word, desecularized the Church and has thereby provided the world fresh access to her in a new and unsuspected way.

III

This brings me to the third point of my reflection. It pertains to the action, the “doing,” of the Church in the face of and in the midst of

¹⁰ Cf. H. Fries, “Kirche, Toleranz, Religionsfreiheit,” in *Wir und die andern* (Stuttgart, 1966).

that pluralism we have just described. The presuppositions for this task have for the most part already been itemized and elaborated.

Let us say a word, first, about what the Church ought *not* do.

The Church ought not wail over the pluralism in whose realm she now has to live and work. Nor ought she, irritably and peevishly, merely tolerate it as a hypothesis. Instead she ought to accept it as the *kairos* assigned to her today, as the hour in which she is to work, as the world in which she must live and prove herself. The Church must not simply condemn pluralism because of the errors it contains. Enough of that has happened already, making all too clear that neither as a word nor as an answer nor as an attitude does such an approach suffice. The unforgettable Pope John XXIII resolved, as a demand of faith, not to be numbered among the professional pessimists, the critics who are full of resentment, who appraise the present as the worst of all times and, in contrast to it, glorify the beautiful past, who see everything of the past in the brightest light and, for better or for worse, want to be tied to it. The Church is not to play the prophet Jonah, who lamented that contrary to his threat of judgment and his dire preaching the city of Nineveh had not been destroyed after all. This does not mean, of course, that the prophetic word must not always be present in the Church.

The Church or, more distinctly, Christians—this is an additional, derivative point—should not reply to the provocation posed by pluralism with parrying, defensive tactics, burrowing into the ground, “trench warfare.” She is not to plaster up every little chink and crack and throw up her battlements as if her motto were:

A grand and glorious house
Surveys afar the world around.
Against its walls the tempests pound.
All this the house will weather,
Unmoved, on solid ground.^{10a}

Instead the Church must venture out into the open fields and seas and expose herself to storm and waves, knowing *fluctuat, non mergitur*. She must not at the sound of every critical remark step on the apologetic pedal and defend everything, every situation and event, at whatever price.

^{10a} A well-known Catholic hymn in Germany from an earlier period.

The Church must not—this too is related to the foregoing—be re-priming and anachronistic. She should not try to re-establish the supposed old glory of an *imperium christianum* or try to carry this out regionally in areas where she possesses the external means to do so. That does not mean that there should be no organizations, societies, and institutions in the Church. However, these should not constitute some type of lobby or special-interest group or pressure group. They should not try to forge ahead of others inconsiderately. What is clear and self-evident to Christians is not by any means clear and self-evident to others. It must not be imposed on them like a tax. It must be made understandable and evident to them. Otherwise there can be neither conviction nor credibility but only conflict and distrust. The time of the Church's claim to a *potestas directa* or *indirecta* is past. This being so, the Church no longer may or need claim anyone else than herself to represent and carry out her intentions. Here is the fulfilment of Pascal's familiar statement: "What a glorious situation in the Church, since she builds on nothing other than herself!" It must also be said that it is unwise of the Church to confine herself to making demands, to sue for the recovery of her rights in the sense of "This is my due," and to do that by appeal to vested rights and privileges. At the *Katholikentag* in Bamberg this year, Professor Hans Maier said: "The Church cannot demand of today's state, which embodies a pluralistic democracy, what she was once able to demand in the medieval *corpus christianum*."

It is valid simply on principle that the Church and Christians should look less to the institutional dimension and far more to the personal, to the individual. Not unknown in Catholic thinking is a notion which seems almost tinged with Marxism, because it expects salvation from the maintenance or the alteration of external conditions. This becomes a hazard when behind the towering, imposing façade of institutions there are no longer any persons who undergird these institutions, sustain them, animate them, and make them express credibly what they do in actuality.

In the situation of pluralism the Church cannot be concerned to set herself apart from the world, to flee the world, to lead an isolated religious or cultural existence, perhaps to create a specifically Christian culture. What is demanded is that she turn to the world with faith, hope, and love; what is demanded is the *engagement* of the Church for

the sake of human beings, the will to universal solidarity, the readiness to co-operate in making the world a world for mankind, more human, that peace may reign upon earth: *Pacem in terris*, as the Encyclical of Pope John is entitled. The Church must be the ardent advocate of man. Therefore, faith must be so interpreted that it finds repeated verification in human existence, in human events, encounters, words, deeds, and situations. This is what gives the truth to those words so dear to Romano Guardini: "Only he who knows God knows man."

In view of today's pluralism and the situation it creates, the Church must remember specifically not to reduce Christological statements forthwith into ecclesiological ones. This applies, for instance, to that great statement in the Epistle to the Ephesians, that it has pleased God to gather together all things under the one Head, Christ (cf. 1:10). This statement is reserved solely to Christ. It is not a privilege or a claim of the Church. To pretend that it is leads to a triumphalism which is less becoming to the Church today than ever before. In the light of this, even statements about Christianizing the world or taking the world home have to be clarified and defined. Far more helpful, here and now, is that role of which the Church must take special note, her role as representative. This is mentioned by Vatican II: "In order to be the salvation of all, the Church need not in an external way coincide with all; what makes her what she is is that, in her discipleship of the One, she represents the little flock of those few through whom God wills to save many. Her service is rendered not by all but for all."

What great opportunities pluralism has to offer the Church she recognizes especially in face of the totalitarianism which today is threatening her and all mankind.

The foregoing statements, which have emphasized especially what the Church in relation to pluralism should *not* do, have already said much or even most of what she *should* do positively. I should now like to summarize this briefly.

The Church's basic mode of "doing" must be the dialogue, the courage to enter, always faithfully to herself, into conversation with the pluralistically constituted world. The Church need not shy away from the competition of values and norms, especially not from the dialogue which today revolves about the theme of all themes: man, his world, his future. Where man and his world and his future are at stake,

there no one has a more decisive and helpful word to say than the Church. What the dialogue of the Church signifies today may be stated in the words of Karl Rahner:

The presupposition is that the other participant in the conversation also stands under God's effective will of salvation and therefore does not, in all that concerns truth and salvation, simply represent and much less live the mere false opposite of the Church's message. Therefore, in this situation it is not a matter of the Church's being the only one who has something to give, some sort of professorial Church lecturing on the truth, whose only interest in speaking is that the "pupil" may understand. Rather the dialogue must be one which is not settled in advance, one which need not end in victory for the Church, one which can have meaning for the Church herself and from which she may gain something. But this implies that the Church in this dialogue is always also the learner who is herself led ever more deeply into her own truths by the dialogue, who is always prepared, even though painfully, to give new thought to the old truth, to liberate it from any tag-along prejudices, to see that truth under new perspectives, to translate it as far as possible into the world of the partner's concepts and experiences.

This reflex recognition of how dialogical the Church's proclamation is in a pluralistic world implies also new moral demands upon the Church which were not present before: the courage to place herself into question, the trusting confidence that all such transactions are carried on within the enduring truth of Christ, the humility to assume that one needs to discover one's own truth better so long as the partner in the dialogue is unable to recognize it as his own, since one surely has no right to attribute this nonunderstanding to the greater stupidity or malice of the partner. In the new situation of the pluralistic society the Church must in this sense be the Church of the open dialogue.¹¹

Furthermore, in the pluralism of today, where faith and Church are no longer sustained by the milieu, by the tradition, by the institution, by the all-pervading atmosphere, where the Church is no longer, as she was for a long time, the unquestioned and self-evident Church of the whole people, but now the congregation of believers, it is decisive that *faith* should be awakened—a faith which not only assents to the truth of propositions but is a man's personal and total decision, rooting him in God in a way which embraces his whole existence, rooting him in God's mystery, in His Word, and in His love.

But this faith—and that is a new point—must expose itself to the situation and questioning which pluralism brings. Faith must be aware of those problems and difficulties in understanding which arise from

¹¹ Rahner, *Handbuch*, pp. 266–67.

pluralism, and must in a new way carry out the *credo ut intelligam*, the *spero ut intelligam*.¹² What awaits theology at this point is that immense and difficult task of interpretation, of advancing the credibility of the faith in face of myriad questions and challenges.

Theology, therefore, cannot be simply a theology of the encyclicals and Denzinger. It must be open to its own norm-giving source for the sake of those problems which the present and the future present. This makes theology dialogical. Therefore, it must not merely *reflect* but *pre-reflect*—not merely afterthoughts but prior thoughts. And in a certain sense theology has within and for the Church a critical function too.

To return to the matter of faith, we could say—and this is at the same time a great opportunity and a great task—that this has implications for the Church as the congregation of believers: faith becomes credible through love. If faith means being rooted totally in God, entering completely into His Word and mystery, then this becomes most concretely visible in one's love for man. Wherever love for one's neighbor appears in its own uncorrupted form, where man in the realities of life devotes and dedicates himself unselfishly to the welfare of his neighbor, unreservedly and ready if necessary to sacrifice himself for the other, there and only there does it become credible in the concreteness of life to believe in God as the basis of such a love. Only love is credible.¹³ No proof of God is possible today except as a proof of man. And if the congregation of believers in this form is also the congregation of the living, of the serving, of the unselfishly helping, then amid the present pluralism the Church today achieves that presence which is proper to her today, that power which shows itself as the power of love.

It is because faith and love in this sense are universal that the presence of the Church can be universal. Then faith and love will also enter upon what Rahner has called the *tutiorismus* of that greatest of all ventures, the greatest possible openness and approachableness, the surest maxim of Christian conduct which the present demands. In such a light the attitude of tolerance not only is integrated, it is far and positively transcended.

Our answer to the question about “doing” requires something more. Pluralism as a phenomenon of the contemporary world should evoke

¹² Cf. J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Munich, 1964).

¹³ Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* (Einsiedeln, 1963).

a legitimate pluralism within the Church herself, a demand which is appropriate to the Church as a world Church. Since the Church's main striving and willing has until now been directed toward the realization of unity, she now faces a genuine need to recover something in articulating the plural. There is now room, and the hour has come, for a pluralism in the Church as a genuine plurality of her many ministries, functions, charisms, gifts, members, languages, initiatives, extending the vertical by means of the horizontal, enlarging principles by means of imperatives, enlarging obedience by means of personal responsibility, by fitting it into the format of a plurality which transcends the European, the western, the medieval, which is not in opposition to unity but an expression of it, the reflection of catholicity and ecumenicity.

I should like to conclude with a thought which Dr. Visser 't Hooft has expressed in an extraordinarily important essay entitled "Pluralism—Temptation or Opportunity?" He asserts: "The pluralistic world-society is too strong for a divided church."

A Christianity [he continues] which devotes so much of its time to internal conflicts has no proper sense of proportion and is therefore incapable of assuming its role in the give-and-take which is at hand. On the other hand, the very realities of the pluralistic world will bring the churches closer together. The pluralistic world casts all of us back upon the original bases of our faith and forces us to take a new look at the world about us. So pluralism may offer an opportunity for a new, united testimony by the entire church of Jesus Christ in the world and to the world.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Ökumenische Rundschau*, 1966, p. 241.