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CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LEADERS:  
MEN OF THOUGHT AND ACTION

Presented to  
Mrs. Juanita Sandford  
Quachita Baptist University  
Special Studies  
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By Peggy Woodruff

## OUTLINE

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The evolution of man from savage to sophisticated cosmopolitan, of his society from tribal to technopolitan, and of its institutions from family to highly specialized education systems has required hundreds of thousands of years. During that time man's needs have changed, his society has matured, and its institutions have increased in their number and complexity. Throughout this evolution, however, certain elements have always been present. Among these elements has been religion. From the time man first worshiped some mystical power, he has always looked to a being greater than himself. The embodiment of this power has changed at different times throughout the ages. Each time such a transformation has occurred, there have been men who led the change.

Western man is most familiar with the leaders of the Judaeo-Christian heritage. Abraham led his wife and nephew from the land of Ur to "a land that I will show you" and thus took the first step toward the establishment of the monotheistic Hebrew faith. An enlargement of this faith came with Jesus Christ's three-year ministry on earth. When he left, he charged eleven disciples with the responsibility to lead men to see Christianity as the fulfillment of the Hebrew faith.

Since that time there have been many alterations within the Christian church. Men such as Constantine, Luther, and Wesley were instrumental in these changes. In the twentieth century, there are also religious leaders who are instigating changes within the Christian church which will, they hope, make its mission and ministry more compatible with the industrialized, urban society of the day.

Among these leaders are Harvey Cox, Malcolm Boyd, and William Sloane Coffin. This paper will attempt to deal with the ideas of these men concerning the approach they consider most important to a change within the church.

#### HARVEY COX

Harvey Cox analyzes the condition of today's church and discusses internal alterations the Church is making and must make in order for it to be current with the changes occurring within society. These changes must be made, Cox maintains, because the theological doctrines and religious forms we have inherited from the past have reached the end of their usefulness. Some of the traditional dogmas strike modern Christians as at best misleading, at worst downright superstitious. For them the idea that faith means believing without adequate evidence has lost all appeal.

The main complaint about the church today is not its doctrine but that it fails to live up to its stated ideals. Many people who drop out of church do so not because they cannot understand their church's doctrine but because the church has abandoned its

role as the conscience-troubler and moral avant-garde of society. during the marches in Chicago which Martin Luther King led, one young Catholic admitted to Cox that he ". . . quit attending not because I'm bothered by the Immaculate Conception but because the Cardinal has done nothing to clamp down on those Mass-going Catholics who are clobbering Negroes with rocks and bottles."<sup>1</sup>

According to Cox, the younger generation of Christians is now insisting that the church either live up to its words or get out of business. For these Christians, God can be encountered not only inside a church building but also in the complexities of everyday life. The growing group of young churchmen who are interested in the role the church is playing in society is not limited to Protestants; many Catholics are also interested.

Cox attributes the civil rights movement with giving these people the impetus to enlarge their work and to come up from the "underground." In the civil rights marches, many people who agreed on many of the same issues were brought together for the first time. Previously, they had been kept unaware of their potential power because they had been separated by different denominations and different cities.<sup>2</sup>

The clergy has taken successful first in its efforts to obtain the right to participate fully in social issues; however, it has many more longer and harder steps to make before it can claim full success. In a 1966 issues of Commonweal, the editor listed violations of freedom of conscience that had come to his attention during the preceding two weeks. The article mentioned two Jesuits at St. Peter's College who had been ordered to shut

us after publicly stating that they thought America's position in Viet Nam was immoral. Another case cited was that of St. John's University in New York. The faculty members, some of them priests, had staged a strike against a series of infringements on their academic freedom. Thirty-one were fired. One could easily make a similar list of Protestant clergymen who have been dismissed or demoted for taking unpopular stands or have spent too much time in "nonreligious" activities.<sup>3</sup>

Cox is confidently optimistic that the Roman Catholic Church will follow the lead of the progressives. He points out that while they are not now succeeding in removing conservative archbishops and cardinals, they are not being excommunicated either. He further emphasizes the uncanny flexibility of the Roman Catholic Church and expresses his belief that its capacity to make room for diversity and inner tension will probably pull it through the coming crisis relatively united.

In the Protestant churches, the minister's biggest problem is the socially conservative laymen who sit on the boards that rule the churches. Although most denominations are not entirely lay-controlled, it is from this source that most of the powerful opposition to social action comes. Ministers who do not serve in a parish church are more insulated from this lay control and are thus more likely to participate in social action than pastors of local churches. Cox states that of the many clergymen who flew into Selma, a disproportionate number were denominational and interdenominational staff workers, college and

university chaplains, and ministers of missions not directly dependent on a congregation for financial support.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis a minister has to face usually has more to do with what the minister does than with what he says. Southern congregations have been known to take large doses of brotherly love in sermons, but when the minister agrees to serve on a community relations council or a biracial committee, he courts real trouble. The same thing happens to a Northern minister who joins a group protesting de facto segregation or supporting the picketing of a real-estate agent who practices discrimination.

A growing number of people on the national mission staffs have had a formative experience in inner-city slum churches. During the ten years following World War II, many of the most capable and militant young ministers turned down suburban churches and went to the Harlems and Watts of America. They soon learned that a strictly "spiritual" ministry was inadequate and began to deal with institutional politics and structural problems.

These men have now moved into the hierarchies of the Protestant denominations. They are determined to bring the church into a large-scale political struggle which they once faced locally. They are assuming the reins of power in certain parts of the Church. Their influence will probably continue to expand; and since they are inside the structure of the Church, the possibility of a rupture which many have predicted is diminished. These ministers have no intention of pulling out when they have a real chance of taking it over.<sup>5</sup>



There are signs of something new emerging in the Church at the grass-roots level. Groups throughout the country have established "churches" designed to meet the needs of that specific group. Such congregations vary widely from one another, but they have a common desire for experimentation in worship, a zeal for social change in their communities, and an openness to the secular world. One such congregation is the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C. Founded by Newton G. Cosby, a former Southern Baptist Army chaplain, it is famous for its coffeehouse, "The Potter's House," where part of the congregation worships weekly over espresso and muffins, using a give-and-take format.<sup>6</sup>

Cox believes that, in addition to the formation of new congregations whose form fits its members, new forms of worship must be incorporated into the services of traditional congregations. He traces the use of the arts for religious purposes from a 20,000 year-old cave painting, to drama which was used by the ancient Greeks and medieval Christians, to the use of music in the church after the sixteenth century. Music which was contemporary with the times, he avers, was always introduced into the church; however, it tended to cling to the musical modes of the previous century. He reminds those who oppose the use of guitars and drums in the church that the pipe organ was once vigorously fought also.<sup>7</sup>

Concerning the changes occurring within the church, Cox writes:

"The current vigorous movement of Christians out of cultic withdrawal and into energetic participation in the political and intellectual currents of the day will

certainly call for reinterpretations of many traditional doctrines. People still have plenty of questions they would like to ask if they thought they had anywhere to ask them. How and where do men come to terms with what is most important in life? Does the puny human enterprise have any significance in the bewildering vastness of celestial space? Is there anything beyond the sum total of our human strivings for which the name 'God' is applicable?"<sup>10</sup>

The answer to these questions, according to Cox, will not be obtained by those who fearfully cling to traditional formulations, nor will they be discovered by those who call for the dissolution of deity and the extinction of faith. If they are found, those who acquire them will be the ones who take the risk of reconstruction and innovation even in matters that affect the deepest hopes and fears of man.

#### MALCOLM BOYD

In direct contrast to Harvey Cox's emphasis on the entire Church is Malcolm Boyd's stress on the needs of the individual. Boyd's background peculiarly suits him for his work. While in college he became an atheist, but he later changed his mind and entered the Episcopalian ministry in 1956. Before he entered the ministry, he spent ten years in advertising, public relations, and TV writing and production. After he was ordained, Boyd served as chaplain at Colorado State University where his "expresso" nights and his so-called informal confessions brought his forced resignation. Later he served in the same capacity at Wayne State University, in Detroit; he also had to resign there. Boyd has written seven books, among them a book of modern prayers, Are You Remaining with the Jesus?

Currently, the former chaplain is most noted for his work at the hungry i, a nightclub in San Francisco, California. There he rips into a swinging sermon on war, race, sex, poverty, or the church. Samples of some of his statements include: "Obviously, I couldn't relate to the God who was up there because he's not up there--he's here. I hope you're not going to let this building stand between you and God like you've let religion stand between you and God."<sup>9</sup> "I think seminaries are one of the great problems. Instead of making people into polite ministers of the Establishment, I'd try to break down the gulf between ordained clergy and other people."<sup>10</sup> Father Boyd is sometimes criticized because of his ministry in the nightclub. However, he is able to reach many young people who find only irrelevance in the Christianity of their childhood.<sup>11</sup>

In accordance with his belief that the church must find new ways to communicate with people is Boyd's interest in movies. He frequently reviews movies for the Christian Century. In one of these reviews, he discussed the awards issued by the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures and the broadcasting and film committee of the National Council of Churches. In several cases the two groups selected the same film without consulting each other; Boyd suggested that the groups have some meetings together and perhaps even issues some joint awards.

Of more significance in the awards is the fact that both Catholics and Protestants shattered old images and created new ones. They overlooked many of the industry's "religious" efforts and recognized instead, realistic attempts to portray the human

existence in its restlessness and anxiety. This openness can lead to new channels of dialogue between the church and the film industry.

According to Boyd, considerable progress has been made in bridging the gap between "sacred" and "secular" films. This has brought some modification in the church's theological view of "the world." The door for serious confrontation with the best creative men and women of the cinema has barely been opened. Every effort should be made to open the door to further communication with these personages. From this dialogue could come a new criteria for film criticism, badly needed by both the industry and the Church.<sup>12</sup>

In 1964, Boyd was interviewed for Mademoiselle by three students whose views ranged from agnostic to practicing Catholic. In this interview, many of his beliefs and motivations were revealed. Boyd feels that being a Christian means believing that God became man in Jesus Christ. What man cannot understand about himself or about others, God does understand. At the center of Boyd's religion are the sacraments. He has daily communion and believes that he receives the body and blood of Christ. He uses the strength of the sacraments to "work out the implications of a Christian-style life in the world."<sup>13</sup>

Through his work Boyd hopes to bring others into the Christian Church. He sees Christ as Lord of all of life. One of his major concerns is that people relate the sacraments to their own sexuality, their work, their entertainment, and their politics.

According to him, people who divorce the sacraments from the rest of their lives are involved in something demonic.

Although Boyd hopes to bring more people into the Church, he does not consider it part of the Christian ministry to bring Jews into the Church. Instead, he says, Christians should help them become better Jews. Christ died on the cross for all men and not just for Christians. Many non-Christians act more Christian than some nominal Christians, so obviously the answer is not to bring them into some sort of institution. Instead, the problem is an existential one of integrity, of finding our identity.

In his approach to Christianity, Boyd prefers to work in coffeehouses, bars, and his own apartment because they give him flexibility which he cannot find in the traditional methodology of the church. Nominal Christianity, he avers, has to do with credal statements, prayers, and physical attendance in buildings at rituals called services. What Christianity lacks is a style of life. Christianity was not intended to be proper and respectable but radical. He welcomes the racial issue because it forces people to ask themselves, "Do I like, or do I love?"

As previously stated, Boyd is concerned with how the individual is able to relate his entire life to Christianity. He speaks of the nominal Christian student whose concept of God is white, middle-class American, and Protestant. To the student, morality has largely to do with Puritan ethics; religion is a department of his life which one does not relate to sex or

politics. Boyd tries to shatter these false presuppositions. After one of his expresso nights where the students read poetry, sing folk songs, and relate to the arts, several atheist students come to see Boyd the following morning and ask, "Who is Jesus Christ? What is sin? Do you do religion for a living or do you believe in it?"<sup>14</sup> Because he participated in a freedom ride in September, 1961, Boyd reports that Negro students have, also, come to him. "The majority aren't religious explicitly. But religious dimension isn't an explicit thing."<sup>15</sup>

At one time the Episcopalian minister stated that he would be interested in taking a Negro parish. When questioned concerning this statement, Boyd indicated that he had considered such a position because he increasingly saw the need to integrate.

"... By staying at Wayne and working with students, maybe I can do more good, because here at least we have whites and Negroes who may relate together. The hour in church on Sunday isn't awfully related to the basic life of a man. It could be very meaningful if the priest was there in the business area, doing the work, just trying to live out the implications of his faith."<sup>16</sup>

A key word in Boyd's idea of Christianity is involvement. He does not offer answers to questions, nor does he offer comfort. Instead, he says, "Come here to find out the identity of God and your own identity and that of your brother. Come here to be involved in the basic creative and redeeming force of the universe."<sup>17</sup>

#### WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN

Like Boyd, William Sloane Coffin, chaplain at Yale University, has chosen to do his work among students. He feels very strongly the need for social reform, especially in the field of desegrega-

tion. Thus, much of his work is in this area. Integration, which he says "gets to the heart of the matter, the heart of every man, and thus refers to something personal and subjective,"<sup>18</sup> is not feasible now because of world insecurity. This world insecurity increases individual insecurities--the root of discrimination.

Desegregation, however, refers to "something impersonal and objective, a state of affairs in which rights and opportunities are guaranteed to all citizens despite the objections of some."<sup>19</sup> This, Coffin contends, is obtainable. The chaplain acknowledges that even this goal is not easily attainable, and he discusses the problems of and arguments against desegregation. Many people feel that "time will take care of everything." But Coffin points to what the extremists in the South have done with time since 1954.

Other groups want to "let the Southerners work out their own problems." Coffin attacks the argument by relating a situation in one Southern state. Being an antisegregationist in Alabama is equal to committing social, economic, and political suicide. He maintains that such a situation calls for outside intervention and support.

The idea that "Negroes don't want civil rights" is stretched--advocates of the view claim more numbers than there actually are, and the role of intimidation is minimized. This idea produces men who are willing to remain second-class citizens, and, thus, this becomes a good argument against segregation.

Southerners most often object to desegregation on grounds that it will lower the standards of the schools and that it will produce mixed marriages. Coffin deals with these arguments

briefly and effectively. He acknowledges that desegregation does lower standards; but, he avers, when teaching provides an incentive to the Negro to study, then they quickly rise again. That the Negro is not inherently less intelligent than whites was shown by the results of army IQ tests that were administered during World War II. On these tests Northern Negroes averaged higher scores than Southern whites.<sup>20</sup>

Concerning mixed marriages, Coffin observes that they should present no problem to the religious person since from the church's point of view no such thing exists, all marriages being strictly interpersonal. The history of the North indicates that few interracial marriages will occur until there are fewer objections to them.<sup>21</sup>

Coffin asserts that in a world whose population is two-thirds Negro, it is no longer the place of the Negro to adapt himself to the pace of the white, but instead, it is the duty of the white to adapt himself to the world as it is.<sup>22</sup>

In an article in Mademoiselle in April, 1965, Coffin explored the root cause of desegregation--prejudice. There is no easy answer to prejudice, for its roots are deep. Coffin writes that there are two schools of thought which account for prejudice. The first says that it all comes from the environment. If education were improved, jobs, housing, art, music, and literature available to all, then prejudice would disappear. This school holds that prejudice is not innate.



The second school sees man as a flawed creature, beset with cares and fears. The environment needs to be improved, for the environment conditions. However, it conditions only; it does not finally determine.

Innate in man's character is pride. Pride is prompted more by self-doubt than by self-admiration. It is essentially competitive. An individual cannot be prejudiced in his own favor without inevitably being prejudiced against someone else. We want not only to be smart but to be smarter. Not rich, but richer, not talented, but more talented.

The roots of prejudice lie in the emotions and, thus, they are so hard to eradicate. Education alone is not the solution, "for what is emotionally rooted is not intellectually soluble."<sup>23</sup> Prejudice can never be eliminated because our need for security will always be greater than our means to provide it.

The truly religious person, however, has an asset. He knows that his security and worth are not his to achieve but only to receive. Coffin describes this gift as Christian freedom. This freedom is from the fears of insecurity; it is

"a freedom made possible by 'conversion,' which is conversion not from life to something more than life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself--to the possibility of living freely and joyously and selflessly, no longer by one's actions seeking to prove oneself, but only vigorously and responsibly to express oneself. The difference, obviously, is crucial."<sup>24</sup>

In short, courage is needed if prejudice is to be contained. This courage may be bred of religious conviction or simply of the conviction that to assert one's superiority over another is very wrong.  
25

Although Coffin is specifically interested in social reform, as chaplain at Yale he is also concerned with the activities of college students. In an article in Life in 1965, he discussed the activism of the sixties. He credits the Southern Negro with much of the activism. During the first part of the decade, they participated in sit-ins, stand-ins, wade-ins, and in the process they gained the support of many whites who joined them and made the struggle not one of blacks against whites but of black and white against injustice.

As the movement has progressed, many new groups have, of course, been formed. Coffin stated that the New Radicals would probably be the group that would most upset the American public. He urged that they not be referred to as "kooks" since their leaders have great insight. They should not be labeled communist, either, since their solutions are too tentative to warrant any neat ideological label.

Their most constructive action thus far has been their work in both urban and rural slums. Their efforts have been focused not so much on getting the people out of the slums but on getting the slums out of the people. Coffin acknowledges that the New Radicals appear to be destructive at times; but, he says, this is because they have become disenchanted with the normal democratic procedures that seem to lead to hypocrisy.<sup>26</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Every area of society is presently involved in some sort of revolution. During such times in history when the basic assump-

tions of society are changing, all institutions are forced to change with that society, or they will no longer be a part of the society. Thus, the church will find it imperative to make alterations.

The impact that Cox, Boyd, and Coffin will have on the Church and the changes that take place in it cannot be predicted. In many respects church leaders and historians will be unable to measure their influence for some years. Yet Cox's insistence that the church must alter its approach to meet the demands of a highly mobile, industrialized society with a changing orientation, Boyd's interest in the individual's needs at a time when the individual frequently is ignored in favor of the masses, and Coffin's interest in social reform will surely have an effect that will be felt for some time.

NOTES

129. 1 Harvey Cox, "Revolt in the Church," Playboy, (January, 1967),  
2 Ibid., p. 148.  
3 Ibid.  
4 Ibid., p. 209.  
5 Ibid., p. 210.  
6 Ibid., p. 210-11.  
7 Harvey Cox, "Age-Old Conflict," Life, LXI, (October 21,  
1966), 70-71.  
8 op. cit., p. 211.  
68. 9 "Two for the Show" Newsweek, LXVIII, (October 3, 1966),  
10 "Beyond the New Orthodoxy" Time, LXXXVIII (October 1,  
1966), 86.  
11 op. cit., "Two for the Show," 68.  
12 Malcolm Boyd, "The Church's Word to the Film Industry,"  
Christian Century, LXXXIII, (March 9, 1966), 305-06.  
152. 13 "Disturber of the Peace," Mademoiselle, LX, (August, 1962),  
14 Ibid., p. 150.  
15 Ibid.  
16 Ibid., p. 164.  
17 Ibid., p. 166.  
18 William Sloane Coffin, "Desegregation: Will It Work,"  
Saturday Review, XLIV, (November 11, 1964), 20.  
19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., p. 77.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 76.

23 William Gloagno Loffin, "On the Roots of Prejudice," Mademoiselle, LX, (April, 1965), p. 197.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

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