

## Opening Remarks

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It is a personal honor and joy to welcome you to what we are confident will be a unique and challenging conversation on a century of Christian social thought. The close of this century behooves us to reflect upon the concrete circumstances and human experiences of the past one hundred years, an era that has left an indelible mark upon the conscience of mankind. This has been a century with two variant streams.

On the one hand, it is a century of unprecedented human accomplishment and productivity. We have witnessed the relative amelioration of poverty on a global scale unlike that at any other point in human history, largely due to an internationalized market economy. That is the good news.

Now for the bad news: This has also been the century of the most brutal forms of oppression, institutionalized violence, and terror heretofore known to the human race. The technology that makes human progress and well-being more and more normative, as we have seen, can also be employed in disregard to human dignity and in violation of human rights.

This schizophrenic reality is what gives rise to our commemoration in the sense that we must at least examine the extent to which divisions within historic Christianity permitted the erections of such structures of evil as communism and Nazism without a united voice of opposition. We must also ask the extent to which the development of a materialistic culture that asserts technological or economic progress without a vibrant moral culture to safeguard it, has developed due to these same divisions.

I am aware that in some Protestant circles the word *ecumenical* has the connotation of the heterodox talking to the heterodox. For some, “ecumenical dialogue” has come to characterize the effort to diminish all differences, as though formal ecclesiastical unity was its own end. It is true that some contemporary attempts at ecumenism have placed greater importance on the political than the theological aspects of unity. Certainly, the Vatican has expressed the concern that some variants of liberation theology have replaced theology with sociological and political analysis.<sup>1</sup>

To be preferred is a more robust, indeed authentic exchange, which rejects as “foreign to the spirit of ecumenism ... a false conciliatory approach”<sup>2</sup> and which places Jesus Christ, who is the Truth of God fully and finally revealed to the world, at the center of its endeavor. Union of the Body of Christ, which is the explicit will of our Lord Himself (cf. John 17:21), is the result of the action on the part of all scandalously separated brethren, individually and in their communities, to move closer to Him.

The religious milieu in which Abraham Kuyper first delivered his Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary was, at least to the popular mind, a vastly different one than our contemporary setting. A century ago today the religious world saw itself as sharply divided; Christians of various traditions talked much more about each other than they did with each other. And yet, there were even then, underneath the real and imagined differences, some profoundly shared premises that formed the basis of the promise of cooperation, especially in the social sphere.

One is reminded of these shared premises in reading J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*, a book which, for some odd reason, fell into the hands of a Catholic teenager in Brooklyn and helped to form in him a certain affinity for orthodoxy and an appreciation for serious theological reflection. (That boy, of course, is me). Note Machen’s primordial ecumenism: After outlining the differences between Arminians and Calvinists, Machen, who writes from within the orthodox Presbyterian tradition, turns his attention toward Rome:

Far more serious still is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage that unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference that divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss that stands between us and many min-

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isters of our own Church. The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all.<sup>3</sup>

We can, perhaps, return to the topic of “perversion” at another conference.

From the Catholic side, we discover a similar approach in an article published one hundred years ago this month by a leader of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in New York. Mr. Thomas Mulry sought to outline “a few reasons why Catholics should cooperate more actively with people of other religious denominations in doing charitable work....” He identified what he called the “strange spectacle ... of charitable societies working, each in its own way, for the good of the poor, and yet violating every principle of charity and religion in their intercourse with each other.”<sup>4</sup>

And so we come to this conference, which is held to commemorate over a century of Christian meditation on the social question. Its timing is deliberate: one hundred years following the Stone Lectures; one hundred years following (almost to the day, October 26, 1898) Abraham Kuyper’s visit to Grand Rapids; and one hundred and seven years since Leo XIII promulgated *Rerum Novarum*, a document with which Kuyper was very familiar. The speakers constitute a distinguished amalgam of serious Christians, with differing theological and political perspectives. We hope, however, that each in his own way will reflect the effort to construct a social vision from within Christology, exegeting as it were, the mysteries of the Divinity of God’s Son, drawing out the social, moral, political, and economic implications of the Incarnation. In this way, and only in this way, will we be able to discover the way to authentic anthropology—if Christology is anthropology. “In Christ,” the present pontiff has repeatedly said, “God reveals man to himself.”

If I may be so bold as to suggest that we, as a body of believers, accept as our goal at this conference, the charge to the Church issued by Leo XIII at the end of *Rerum Novarum*:

Let this be understood in particular by those whose duty it is to promote the public welfare: Let the members of the sacred ministry exert all their strength of mind and all their diligence, and Venerable Brethren, under the guidance of your authority and example, let us not cease to impress upon men of all ranks the principles of Christian living as found in the Gospel.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. Cf. the document “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’ (*Libertatis Conscientia*),” released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, August 6, 1984.
2. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n.11.
3. *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 52.
4. “Catholic Co-operation in Charity,” *Charities Review* 8 (October 1898): 383–86, as cited in Aaron I. Abell, *American Catholic Thought on Social Questions* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 177–78.
5. Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), n. 63.