

worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

THE SEARCH FOR UNITY

This century is an age of hatreds and factionalisms. Old orders have been shattered, and the new ones are not yet born. The moral certainties and political securities by which men have lived are everywhere threatened. The world is divided into hostile camps and the human race faces the possibility of nuclear disaster.

But in the face of this—probably because of this—some hopeful beginnings are being made. In Europe, during the past decade, small but historic steps towards unity have been taken. The structures of an autonomous, fratricidal nationalism are disappearing. And, perhaps most hopeful of all, the forces of religion are seeking new ways to understand and cooperate with each other.

Religion—specifically, the Judeo-Christian tradition—is the ground of the West's culture and aspirations. It is one of history's more profound ironies that in the West religion has also been a major cause of conflict and divisions. But in our time civilization is threatened more than ever before by the advance of a militant, monolithic secularism, and religious men everywhere feel the need for unity, if only for defense against a common enemy. Like the nation-states, they have discovered that in the twentieth century the price of isolation is, at best, irrelevance to the world that is emerging and, at worst, self-destruction.

Religion's secular history has been filled with scandal. There has been the scandal of Christian divisions, of the distrust and animosity between Protestants and Catholics and their refusal, often, to talk with each other. There has been the scandal of Christian injustice towards the Jews—the crime of anti-semitism in which Christians have had such a shameful part. And there has been, in every age, the failure of religious men to apply their own ethic in the social order, the sin of their connivance in the injustices of this world.

One of the better signs of our times is the new effort of religion to remedy these things. *Worldview* is concerned with the implications of religion for the international order. In this sense it is greatly interested in the new dialogue that is developing between Protestants and Catholics

both in this country and abroad. It is interested in the work of the World Council of Churches and it is interested in the Ecumenical Council which has been announced by Pope John XXIII. All of these things promise to heal ancient misunderstandings and antipathies, and thus make easier religion's role in the preservation of civilization's values—in a future which surely threatens them all.

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The Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church, which the new Pope plans for 1961, is, of course, an event of historic importance. By reason of its convictions about its own nature and its exclusive claims, the Church of Rome is not easily given to familiar cooperation with other religious bodies. It feels a tendency towards isolation—and it has memories which die very hard. A few centuries are not long in its sight and in some of its attitudes it has seemed still to regard the Churches of the Reformation as mere upstarts, for whose safe "return" the ancient Church could patiently and confidently wait.

The action of John XXIII in summoning a Council to deal with the tragedy of Christian disunity will probably change much of this. The Pope, without sacrificing any principle, has made possible a new climate of opinion within Roman Catholicism. It is a climate in which the cooperation of Catholics with other religions will be much easier than it has been in the past.

"The natural tendency of your new Pope," John told an audience of clergy shortly after his election, "is to emphasize things that unite us rather than to dwell on things that divide us." It was in this spirit, undoubtedly, that he announced his Council. No one expects that it will miraculously heal the historic theological divisions within Christianity. But it may (and, hopefully, will) usher in a new era of encounter and mutual help among men whose ultimate concerns for human dignity and international justice are shared.

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