

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO THE CONVOCATION: A THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL LOOKS TO THE SCIENCES

by Malcolm R. Sutherland, Jr.

Meadville, through its Committee on Theology and the Sciences, makes no pretense of initiating a new kind of conversation. Many of you at this conference have systematically participated in this dialogue for years, whether through conferences on science and values as sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, or in the conferences of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, or elsewhere. Indeed, the fruits of your earlier work have largely inspired us to take even more seriously this dialogue.

Meadville believes that the time has come when these conversations and the fruits of research which they inspire must be brought to bear upon the professional preparation of men for the ministry and subsequently upon religious faith generally. Here a student's emerging theological and philosophical formulations will be systematically confronted by relevant concepts from today's sciences—relating religious theory to the insights, conceptions, and models of reality of contemporary science.

This is not to suggest that theology is being replaced at Meadville by physics or biology or psychotherapy or by any other discipline but, rather, that the theological engagement at Meadville is to be undertaken in the context of disciplined familiarity with specific aspects of contemporary knowledge about man and his total environment, as discovered through and interpreted by the various sciences.

Hopefully, the student will be assisted in the development of a theology or religious theoretical structure which, rather than finding itself in conflict with current science and scholarship, is in fact informed by them and derives much of its credibility from them as well as from our heritage of the evolving religious traditions.

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I want to make perfectly clear that this engagement is taking place in a theological school whose central concern is man and man's search for life's meaning and the sources of human significance and fulfilment. We do not seek by this engagement to escape from life. We embark upon this engagement as preparation, preparation to address ourselves more competently to the basic issues of our lives and to the fundamental dimensions of the human enterprise. We seek more adequate tools and richer insights and deeper faith to inform our participation in society. We seek to refine and reform and then formulate and elaborate religious affirmations in a way that gets through to modern man, who senses his meaninglessness but finds traditional formulations wanting.

Meadville is not preoccupying itself with reducing religion to a set of measurements and mere facts; but we sense in the facts, not their "mereness" but their glory, their majesty, and their power—power for understanding and power for responding. Our concern is still as ever with meaning and with values, but not with values unrelated to the increasingly accurate description of man's origin, nature, environment, and destiny now available to us. We can no longer pretend that new appreciations of the human enterprise as gained through the sciences are somehow unrelated to our doctrines about life.

This approach to theological reconstruction reflects the faith that the knowledge coming out of the frontiers of learning today is not basically destructive but, on the contrary, is a rich resource for man's understanding of his destiny and its determinants. It presupposes taking science seriously, not using it simply to prove the truth of an already accepted doctrine or scripture but to help illumine man's understanding of the human enterprise and its environment.

But this engagement also takes theology seriously. We are not abandoning this intellectual enterprise nor ignoring the church and its history, pretending that there is nothing to learn from our rich heritage. Religion has had its superstitions, its naïvetés, and its moments of resistance to newly acquired knowledge that threatened earlier convictions; but the sciences have occasionally had their misconceptions and their own peculiar moments of arrogance, too.

We do not arbitrarily discard the patterns and the myths informing religious institutions of our own or of others but seek, rather, to bring them into significant discourse with the models of reality posited by the various sciences. We do not confuse the task of worship with tests in a laboratory, but we do say that they can no longer remain apart as though one had no message to bring the other.

Our present stress upon the contributions of science for theology

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should not be interpreted as implying our disregard for the contribution of the humanities, especially the arts, for theological inquiry, or as suggesting that theological affirmations as expressed in the monumental patterns of worship and myth have nothing to say to the scientists and their understanding of the human enterprise. Clearly, we seek reciprocity, a genuine dialogue between these disciplines where participants respect and seek to understand one another.

There is a sense in which we are pressed—not panicked, but pressed. We do not have all the time we want. Every day trends are set and patterns are established that seriously limit the future freedom of man's choices and the richness of his alternatives and the creative character of his actions.

Is it not entirely possible that today's churches may be bypassed or ignored as utterly irrelevant within another generation or two if we cannot demonstrate that the substance of the faith which the church has to offer has a fundamental credibility by relating honestly our religious convictions to what is being discovered outside the church at an amazingly increased rate about the nature of human life?

While this is no time to recite the dimensions of man's contemporary situation, it is our conviction that the intensity of the issues he confronts is of such critical nature for his survival and fulfilment that no less substantial a faith will adequately serve.

But presumably few of you would be here if you did not share, to some degree, both the urgency for this engagement and some hope for its fruitfulness. That we may be wrong goes without saying. Do not ask us then for full-blown insights or results today. Do not ask us to say now where we will be three or five years hence. Help us to raise the issues that need examination. It is to this engagement, at this conference, but more especially in the years ahead, that we invite your counsel and your personal participation.