

HERETIC AND POPE IN THE THIRD MILLENIUM

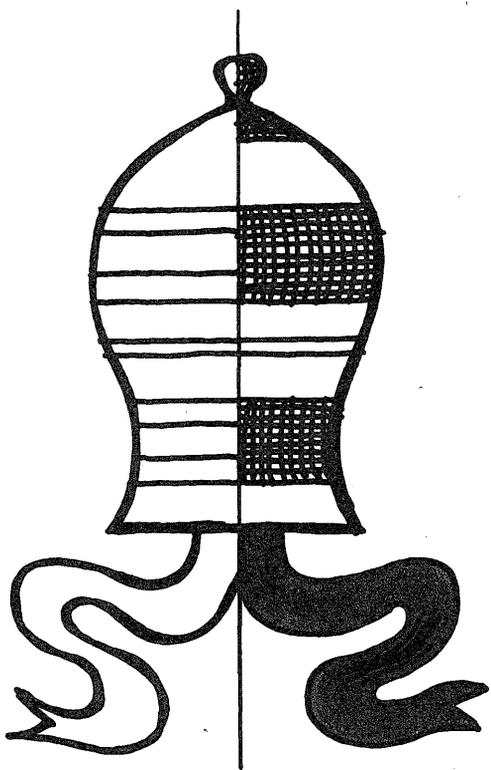
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translated by James Burtness*

At the time that John XXIII was made pope, he wished to express his astonishment at the fact that he had been chosen. So he said to his friends: "If the Archbishop of Bologna had been elected, everyone would have said that it was obviously the work of the Holy Spirit; and if the Archbishop of Milan had been chosen, everyone would have said that he was the most deserving candidate; but with me one can only say: "Creation out of nothing." That was said in jest, but it leads us directly into the question regarding heresy and orthodoxy.

Christendom has from its beginning concerned itself with the notion of "creation out of nothing." In the fourth century there was even a party which called itself "Advocates of the Creation out of Nothing." Its supporters defended the thesis that Jesus was not equal to God, as the Athanasian party said, but that he was created out of nothing. That was a wild party, and a bitter struggle grew out of concern for the deity of the second person of the Trinity. Yet two thousand years later the Pope could joke about a thing which was once deadly serious, for the sake of which peace and many human lives had been destroyed, for the sake of which there was persecution of heretics on both sides. The Arians believed that it would be heresy to say that Jesus was God-man, and the Athanasians understood very well that there could be no Christianity without the deity of Christ. And that has been the question of heresy ever since, where one fixes the line which runs between God and man.

That brings us to a very practical and everyday question. Eight days ago my pastor, who is very young and does not have much experience or knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, laid before me a question which his parishioners had put to him, namely, how it is possible that the Lord, in the famous statements in the Gospel of John, could always say: "I am . . . the way, the truth, and the life . . . I am the resurrection . . ." These "I am" statements have been studied a great deal by the theologians. But my pastor asked quite naively: "How ought I to explain to my parishioners that this is not arrogance, that Jesus was able to speak, and had to speak, in this way? They think of it only as colossal conceit and vanity."

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Advice was difficult to give, for the man had obviously not grasped the distinction between a dying man, who speaks from the other side of death and the other side of the grave, and a living man, who speaks in the full strength of his earthly life. For him, faith in Christ meant that a man lives just as in normal life, i.e., he is modest, good-natured, well-intentioned, yet derives nothing from it. I attempted, in a long hour, to make clear to my good pastor that the Lord had to speak as Christ from the other side of the grave as one who voluntarily assumed and accepted death, and that the dead one, to be sure, must think other than the living, since he had completed his own life.

If we make out our last will and testament, we attempt to keep it sufficiently free from emotion so that it can have validity even when we no longer live, even when we are no longer capable of passionately carrying through our wishes. I do not believe that the pastor understood me. Modern man, caught in the machinery of technology, is scarcely in a position to believe in God, because he does not believe in death. I should like to drop the matter there. But my task, to speak about the end of heresy-hunting, of the persecution of heretics, and of the self-consciousness of heretics, can be carried out only if I proceed from the premise that the deity of Christ has been and will be the crux, the midpoint, the source of all heresy-hunting. The deity of Christ is the cardinal point around which the issue revolves. That there are no gods such as Zeus and Hera is today not at all difficult to grasp and, if one would ask them, most men would say that Poseidon is not a god, even if at one time he may have been one. But the deity of Christ is today neither understood nor contested. As with the parishioners of my poor pastor, it is simply left undecided. But if one leaves it undecided, then one no longer knows how to deal seriously with heretical faith. And so it is that something has happened to heretical faith in the last hundred years.

But before I can say what it is that has happened, I must refer back to still another moment in my own youth, in which this question of heresy or orthodoxy affected me rather decisively. During the World War, a friend arranged for me to meet Carl Muth, the unforgettable editor of the Catholic journal *Hochland*. He had at that time brought this journal to a very high plane, and had just printed *Heiligen*, a work by Fogazaro (1849-1911), which, above all, deals with the heresy question.

My friend showed Muth one of my manuscripts, entitled *Europe and Christendom*, which dealt with Christianity and the World War. Muth was enthused, printed it, and induced the Kösel Publishing House—an orthodox Catholic publisher, although more so at that time than today—to bring it out as a separate piece. And so I—a heretic, a Protestant—appeared with a scandalously offensive writing at the end of the World War in the arch-Catholic Kösel Publishing House. That gave me immense pleasure, as did the entire friendship with Carl Muth. He has always supported me, even later in difficult situations, and I have been able to enjoy to the full the exultation of being recognized as orthodox, not in formal agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, of course, yet respected as a believer, an orthodox believer, and orthodox writer. And I do not want to be deprived of this joy, even if I admit to myself how much water has flowed down the Oder since then. (At that time I lived on the Oder and the Oder was still in Germany.)

Ten years later there was the Wittig case. Joseph Wittig was a Church History scholar and priest in Breslau and was condemned by the Roman Curia as a heretic on the basis of a trumped-up charge. His appeal was rejected. When the Pope himself intervened and demanded Wittig's restitution in a telegram, his bishop, the Cardinal of Breslau, let this telegram lie in his drawer for two years, until he himself was dead and Wittig was on his deathbed. The Polish cardinal Hlond was able to correct this misuse of office by the Cardinal of Breslau, and just before his death, Wittig discovered that he was at peace with his church.

At that time, therefore, the painful side of the contrast between orthodoxy and heresy broke into my own life. The University of Breslau and the Prussian government, which at that time wanted to make a concordat with Rome, left Wittig in the lurch. The Curia, in the person of the remarkably cynical Cardinal Ottaviani, attempted to silence him, to destroy him.

Now Wittig's name is exonerated. But I had to pay for the great joy of orthodox faith in my own life. We attempted in our common venture in the three volumes of the *Ages of the Church* to discover how it is that heresy-hunting and persecution have arisen among people, every one of whom could say that the deity of Christ and his omnipresence were and are a daily source of life to him. Perhaps one can learn from my experience, why I have been led through joy and pain to recognize that a change is developing today in the treatment of heresy. The heretics have helped one another in this last century. They were not burned in vain.

Consider Hus in Constance. When he cried out "O Holy Innocence" to the little woman who brought the twigs for his fire, he could not know that Luther's life would be saved by his death. Kaiser Sigismund, who was at the same time King of Bohemia, refused, maliciously and unashamedly, to provide safe conduct in Constance for his subject, Hus. In so doing, he set an example—a counterexample, happily—for Karl V, who said in 1521 at the Imperial Diet of Worms: "I do not want to blush as did Sigismund of old." That means that at that time he set aside the temptation to seize Luther and to allow him to be burned as a heretic. In that the Kaiser cited this example of unjust persecution, the death of Hus has borne fruit. So it goes in the world, that one breach of safe conduct procures freedom for another.

On the whole, however, the history of heresy is today related to a turn of events which I should like to compare to the great corrective of Kaiser V over against Sigismund. We are all today Luther and we are all the Pope; each of us is required to have the courage of heresy and the joy of orthodoxy. Why is that so? Allow me to spell that out a bit, because the main point of this lecture is that I am attempting to understand once again that which all individual heretics have suffered, in the light of a purely historical development or necessity.

Islam has evaded the age of heresy-hunting. In the Islamic book on the *Scharia*, which concerns the religious laws, it is stated that the truths of God are so incomprehensible that one is not able to reflect on them at all. In Islam, therefore, there is no heresy-hunting because the truths of God are so hidden that we cannot understand them. The significant thing in Islam—which is still very much with us—is the unfaithfulness of the spirit which results from such a view. In that one has nothing to do with either the death of Jesus or the working of the Holy Spirit, but only repeats that God is God, one simply abandons this long march through the centuries to discover the truth, and to discover new ways into the truth. But we cannot abandon that long march. We are commissioned to pursue the painful path of seeking and finding. Yet the list of heretics has today become so immense that one can even joke about the heretics, that Pope John XXIII could say: "But with me one can only say 'creation out of nothing,'" and those words were his protection against our acknowledging it. John XXIII has borne in himself the spark of God, and is certainly not "creation out of nothing," but a participant in the divine spirit and the soul of God.

It has been this way over the millenia, and I can illustrate that most simply if I relate a story about my friend, Nathan Söderblom, the archbishop of Uppsala and one-time professor in Leipzig. An old farmer came to him and said: "Archbishop, tell me about the history of salvation." The Archbishop said: "What do you mean by that, my friend?" The farmer replied: "I mean that the world is said to be divided up into three world-ages, and that we stand between the second and third world-age. The Archbishop became curious, because the statement obviously involved him. That there are three world-ages is an old idea. Joachim of Flora designated the year 1260 as the dawn of the third world-age—without the church and without the clergy. The old farmer continued now and said: "My opinion is that the age of the priests came first. You are archbishop, and consequently, that was your world-age as soon as you became archbishop. And then came the world-age of the Levites, for you were professor at Leipzig. Levites teach and expound; they are the theologians. And for that reason I should like to propose for discussion, to see whether you can agree, since you have now become archbishop and are no longer a professor, that the age of the professors is also over. And what remains?—The age of the Good Samaritan."

The Archbishop not only smiled; he also took the words of the farmer to heart. Söderblom founded the ecumenical movement, and if the ecumenical movement has accomplished anything, it is that it has modified the seriousness of heresy-hunting. Within the different confessions, the heretics who were judged by the individual churches appear concretely in persons, in institutions, in churches. Negatively, the farmer has therefore already conquered, and that is still evident today. Through the ecumenical movement the possibility of good-hearted, good-intentioned, even necessary heresies is already recognized. That is the meaning of this return of the Pope into the ranks of the apostles at the Second Vatican Council, that the Pope is only one bishop among others. He has the primacy, but the primacy is not tyranny. And even a Cardinal Ottaviani, much to his regret, can do nothing to change this. He has said that even today he would still gladly burn the heretics. That's a matter of taste. It is perhaps essential that there are such people, but we shall be inclined to regard Ottaviani as a mischievous heretic.

The story of the Good Samaritan has, at first glance, nothing at all to do with heresy. The Good Samaritan goes and finds someone in need, picks him up, binds his wounds, and pays his bill at the inn. Now, where is there anything about heresy and where is there a change in the attitude to heretics? I must first ask the reader to disregard the well-known exposition of the story of the Good Samaritan. People who call themselves good samaritans, who think of themselves as doing "samaritan-service," are not good samaritans, but routine employees in department 27. The Good Samaritan is Good Samaritan when he who has fallen among thieves is suddenly compelled to recognize a cursed samaritan, a deadly enemy of the Jews, to be a brother. The decisive factor in the solution of the opposition of church and heretic lies, therefore, in our ability, in our necessity, to reformulate a label into its opposite: the enemy becomes a brother—that is the history of the heretic and the love of heretics in our salvation-history. Wherever that happens, there one may pursue heresy; for love covers all sins, creates forgiveness for all errors. And the fact that a man is designated yesterday by me as an arch-heretic, as at that time the Samaritans by the Jews, and that they see themselves today as brothers, is the real process of salvation, of healing, of redemption.

The criterion for the genuineness of the transformation is that the same man spoke in such a way yesterday, but today, overwhelmed by the act of love, is persuaded to change his own nomenclature, his own name-calling. Baptism is the first act in which a man changes from a small nationalistic brute to a member of the Kingdom of God. Of course, the resistance which the child offers—in spite of his screaming at the time of baptism—is negligible. So we have forgotten that it is a miracle that the same little howling child suddenly receives a holy and redemptive name. But with baptism, exactly the same thing happens as in the history of the Good Samaritan, since the Jew suddenly must say: "But you are my brother." We are not enemies at all. It is entirely the opposite.

In this moment, thinking reverses itself. The entire history of the faith and of the attitude of men to their creator rests on this, that it can come to them, as scales falling from the eyes, that they know more one day than they knew yesterday, that they never are at the end of their expressions of love, but that yesterday's expressions of love drive on incessantly to ever-wider expressions of love. For this reason we can expect today a real transformation in the attitude of the world and of the church to the heretics. Only a change in our speech, in our thought and in our manner of address can establish authentic relations among men so that we can keep peace with one another.

It does not depend on all men being good to all men, as my good pastor thought when he visited me. That is a pious dream and not even a very attractive one. In any case, it is impractical. The mass of men is foreign to us. Good intentions will not do it. It is impossible to love five billion men or even only five million. However one expresses this gigantic number, they are nothing to us. They can be nothing to us. Such a burden would be too much for us. But, indeed, it does concern us—everyone in his place—today to love where we have yesterday hated or despised or complained. This transformation is the constant source of conversion for the Christian faith. But it doesn't help to be converted in general—neither to the five million nor to some abstract faith in all men, nor to god-in-general, whether triune or not. No, every man must, step by step, call his enemy his brother. Where that happens, faith spreads itself out and the Kingdom of God grows.

That is, therefore, the new situation, that the inquisitors are decreasing. They have nothing more to look for where it is a question of a single man summoning up the courage to address his enemy as his brother. As I already said, where that happens concretely, the Kingdom of God grows. And I should like to see the pope, the bishop, or the cardinal who dares thwart that officially. Consequently, heretic-hunting today is uninteresting, because we all are constrained to give our enemies the right name. Whoever, therefore, now admits that the devil himself accompanies men to a good end—as the poets have often phrased it—will think precious little of his heretic's court or his inquisitor's role.

It does not depend on whether we can point to someone who uses an expression incorrectly, but that we keep in mind the using of all our expressions provisionally, until we fall in love. Then everything looks different, everything takes on a different meaning, the world becomes new, because suddenly the opponent has become a brother, the shrew a bride and the deadly enemy an ally.

With that, I believe, it is in accordance with the truth to say (if one grasps truth temporally, that is, laid upon us at a specific hour) that in the third millenium the heresy question moves into a new phase. Goethe, who accompanies our life as the muse, as the one illuminating the eternal in a natural way, has expressed it in this way:

Why is truth so deep and vast,
Hiding itself down in deepest depths?
To him who could properly understand the
moment,
Would truth be near and broad
And sweet and mild.
