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## Theological Observer

John Theodore Mueller  
*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

F. J. Blaess  
*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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## THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER

### ETHICAL RELATIVISM AND POPULAR MORALITY

In *Theology Today* (January 1958) Dean W. E. Easton, Jr., of Park College, Missouri, under the given heading, frankly discusses the modern concept of ethical relativism in its relation to popular morality. A few years ago, he writes, right and wrong were assumed to be absolutes and easily discernible. But today we are less sure. We still teach our children that it is wrong to lie, steal, cheat, forge, misrepresent, and murder. But in the underground movement of World War II every one of these vices became necessities at times and were practiced by sincere Christians. Hence what is right and what is wrong is not so easy to determine as we once thought. Nevertheless, the great mass of people who make up society cannot live successfully by a doubtful morality. They want and need some certainties. He therefore suggests the following solution of the problem: "While as intelligent people trying to be honest about the issues of life, we recognize that every moral absolute, in certain situations, can have an exception, yet as Christians we preach and teach moral absolutes." Thus the only real reasons (which are not intellectually rational reasons) why a Christian should remain faithful in marriage are that once he took an oath before Almighty God that he would remain faithful and that the Bible tells him infidelity is wrong. "This kind of absolute morality is what I am coming more and more to think we need to teach and preach today. If this is oversimple, too moralistic and too Puritanical, so be it! One of the characteristics which attracted the ancient Romans to the Christian faith was the rigorous Christian morality, especially regarding sex and the self-discipline of the home. I suggest that Christian intellectuals ponder a little more seriously the words of Paul, 1 Cor. 2:1, 4, 5."

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

### RAUSCHENBUSCH AND NIEBUHR

In view of the fiftieth anniversary of Rauschenbusch's first major book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, *Religion in Life* devotes its spring issue partly to the discussion of "the church's responsibility for society" and under the first leading article points out the close relation between Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr. Speaking of the two men, the writer reaches the conclusion: "If we would appreciate their stature as social prophets, we must know them in their times and circumstances. If we try to appreciate and understand, we may find them



... brothers under the theological skin." While with reference to the "kingdom of God," Rauschenbusch fought to demonstrate that the historical processes are essential to God's plan for creation, and Niebuhr has striven to remind man that the social and historical process is not the only facet of the Christian message, "they have hold of the same message from different ends." Again, while Rauschenbusch has defined sin as selfishness and Niebuhr conceives of sin as pride, these "formal conceptions should not blind one to their basic agreement on the nature and power of sin." While it has become commonplace for neo-orthodox apologists to think that the Social Gospel stream forgot about God, Niebuhr, their most popular spokesman, and Rauschenbusch, their frequent enemy, "hold nearly the same line." The fact that the messages of both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr "are of the same cloth" finds its explanation in their failure to appreciate the central Christian message as set forth by St. Paul in 1 Cor. 2:2.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

#### THE SECULAR PRESS AND THE RELIGIOUS MOVIE

Malcolm Boyd, a former television and radio producer and writer, now an Episcopal rector, analyzes the interpretation of the religious movie by the secular press in a searching article in *Religion in Life* (spring 1958). Two emphases perhaps are of unusual interest. We read: "For years Hollywood has tended in practice to equate . . . Christian with Roman Catholicism—at least in its screen efforts. The Roman cleric is immediately recognizable as a man of the cloth. Roman Catholic services are more recognizably liturgical. . . . It is admitted in the film industry that it is easier to ask technical advice of the Roman Catholic Church because there is a definite answer to questions, such as other denominations or other schools of churchmanship may not be able to state so clearly and authoritatively." Again: "Many millions of persons throughout the world look at globally distributed movies based on religious themes. One realizes how powerful the movie makers are in their ability to mold the way countless men, women, and children regard the church, the Christian life, a pastor's vocation, and even the life of Jesus Christ. The Church itself is influenced, in the way it regards itself, by mass media stereotypes. . . . Religiosity is rooted in mass culture—and the gentlemen and ladies of the press, in reporting and interpreting mass culture, wield a powerful influence." These observations perhaps are nothing new, but nevertheless something which Christian pastors and teachers may constantly view with alerted attention.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER



## BRIEF ITEMS FROM "RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE"

**Damascus, Syria.**—The provisional constitution of the United Arab Republic announced here by President Gamal Abdel Nasser contains no stipulation for a state religion in the new Arab nation uniting Syria and Egypt. It declares that all religions are equal before the law. Previous constitutions of Egypt stated that "Islam is the religion of the state." Syrian constitutions of recent years, while not mentioning a state religion, provided that "the religion of the President of the Republic should be Islam."

**New York.**—Advance orders from publishing houses have been received for all 635,000 copies of the first edition of a new *Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal*. Dr. Edgar S. Brown, Jr., executive director of the Department of Worship of the United Lutheran Church in America, said the 1,024-page volume would be distributed by publishing houses of the eight denominations, members of the National Lutheran Council, which co-operated in the publishing venture.

**St. Louis, Mo.**—Dr. Ernest G. Schwiebert, historian for the Air Research and Development Command of the U. S. Air Force, Baltimore, has been appointed executive director of the Foundation for Reformation Research. Organized and incorporated last year, the foundation has headquarters on the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary, a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod school, here. It collects materials connected with the Reformation in Europe.

**Berlin.**—Prominent Protestant churchmen were among the signers of a declaration opposing atomic armament issued by a new committee set up by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to arouse public sentiment against nuclear weapons. The churchmen included Pastor Martin Niemoeller, newly re-elected president of the Evangelical Church of Hesse and Nassau; Dr. Gustav Heinemann, member of the Council of the Evangelical Church of Germany; Dr. Heinz Kloppenburg, senior official of the Council of the Evangelical Church of Oldenburg; and Dr. Hans Iwand and Professor Helmut Gollwitzer, both of the University of Bonn.

**Jerusalem.**—An archaeological school being built in Jerusalem by American Reform Jews will be opened in the fall of 1959, it was announced here by Dr. Nelson Glueck, president of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio, sponsors of the project.

**Washington, D. C.**—The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod paid tribute here to the National Park Service for co-operating with a Chris-



tian ministry to its employees and visitors in national parks. Joining in honoring the Federal agency were leaders of other Protestant denominations and Government officials. The Synod's Concordia Publishing House of St. Louis, Mo., presented a plaque in the shape of an arrowhead—symbol of service—to Conrad L. Wirth, director of the National Park Service, at a dinner. It was accepted for Mr. Wirth, who was ill, by John E. Doerr, the Service's chief naturalist.

Since 1952 the parks ministry has been a program of the National Council of Churches' joint department of evangelism. The Missouri Synod is not a member of the council, but co-operates in the parks ministry through its publishing house, which supplies bulletins and materials for the services.

*Minneapolis, Minn.*—About one family in every eight in Minnesota (12 per cent) practices tithing—that is, contributes one tenth of their income to church and charity, according to a statewide survey by the Minnesota Poll.

*Philadelphia.*—The new \$2,500,000 Philadelphia headquarters of the United Lutheran Church in America was dedicated here by Dr. F. Eppling Reinartz, the denomination's secretary. Known as the Muhlenberg Building, the three-story structure on a 16-acre tract has four wings or spokes stemming from the main arc-shaped unit. It replaces an older and smaller building with the same name in downtown Philadelphia, which is no longer adequate for the church's expanding work.

Denominational agencies occupying the center include the Board of Publication and its Muhlenberg Press, Lutheran League of America, United Lutheran Church Women, Ministerium of Pennsylvania, and the *Lutheran*, weekly news magazine. Departments include parish education, pensions, deaconess, and college and university work.

*Washington, D. C.*—The Hand of God creating man, as depicted by Michelangelo in a great masterpiece in the Vatican, will appear on a United States postage stamp commemorating the International Geophysical Year. The three-cent stamp will be issued May 31 at Chicago to mark the international co-operation in scientific research in which the United States is participating.

*Minneapolis, Minn.*—Some 60 million dollars was spent by 388 agencies of eight Lutheran bodies in their health and welfare work in 1957, it was reported here at the annual meeting of the National Lutheran Council's welfare division, which co-ordinates their activities. A report disclosed that the agencies aided 285,000 hospital patients, 14,000 aged persons, 10,000 children, and 1,600 unwed mothers.



*New York.*—Rev. William A. Dudde, journalism professor at Hislop Christian College, University of Nagpur, India, was named English news editor of the Lutheran World Federation's Department of Information in Geneva, it was announced here. A minister of the United Lutheran Church in America, Mr. Dudde will provide the press and radio of America and other English-speaking countries with news and features about activities of the LWF and its member churches throughout the world. He will serve for three years, beginning September 1.

*New York.*—Dr. George S. Schultz of Columbus, Ohio, was elected chairman of the National Lutheran Council's Division of Public Relations at a meeting here. Meanwhile the council's Division of Welfare, at a meeting in Minneapolis, Minn., elected as its chairman Rev. Luthard O. Gjerde, executive secretary of the Minnesota Lutheran Welfare Society.

#### BRIEF ITEMS FROM THE NATIONAL LUTHERAN COUNCIL

*Minneapolis.*—More than 250 changes in basic union documents are being recommended to this year's conventions of the three church bodies uniting to form "The American Lutheran Church." Most of the additions, deletions, and amendments in the constitution, bylaws, and articles of union for the new church are considered of a minor nature, serving to clarify and improve the documents. While a few of the changes may be debated by convention delegates, it is expected that favorable action on the documents will be taken by the negotiating bodies—The Evangelical, American, and United Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

*New York.*—Shipments of relief supplies to overseas needy by Lutheran World Relief during February totaled 17,502,736 pounds, valued at \$1,716,782.

*Helsinki.*—Five Swedish-speaking congregations here and the Swedes in three bilingual parishes in the suburbs carried out the first extensive evangelization campaign in Finland on the pattern of similar drives in the United States, Germany, and Norway. During a week in late February, several hundred lay volunteers visited homes in the respective communities and invited families to attend church. The campaign was planned by some 140 persons, divided into six committees on prayer, preaching, house visitations, meetings, advertising, and finances.