

THE ONE, THE MANY, AND THE FEW
The Dynamics of Style in Profound Ecumenism

1. Global conflict was never more intense or pervasive than in the decade of the 1980's. Wars and rumors of war are rampant between and within nations. Terrorism has become a mode to demand and get change. The movie "Blue Thunder" begins with the headline "All the equipment displayed in this movie is now in operation." The movie proceeds to demonstrate, I presume to terrorists, how an electronically equipped helicopter hears all noises in any room in any building day or night and shoots only the terrorists in a mob riot scene. Anger, fear, violence, suspicion, defense systems are side by side with the most advanced technology and the most acutely felt poverty ever known among human beings.

2. With this mood in the air we breathe, world peace has become a moral obligation upon everyone. The terrorists try to get peace by destroying the symbolic leaders among their enemies. They are after peace and well-being for their own people. They are angered by the insensitivity and injustice of the powerful and the well-to-do. They are frustrated over talk about change with no change occurring. Promises and good intentions cannot assuage hunger nor appease ideological disputes. Academically trained young professionals who turn to terrorism are the epitome of this frustration and way of thinking. Violence has become an accepted mode and the only way real change can occur. That this is an illusion and self-destructive is almost beside the point. The phenomenon is real and is shaping our world. Therein lies the urgency of inventing and living a style that embodies and transcends the values held by the many parties and perspectives involved in the conflict.

3. Profound ecumenism is a historical force shaping our world over the long sweep of history. By ecumenical I only mean all inclusive globality, universal humanness as opposed to its particularity and manifold uniquenesses. It is creatively present wherever the one humanness around the world is present in and through the many perspectives also existing in our day. This is made possible by the few people in every community who embrace and live both the oneness of the world and the manyness of the people's diverse gifts. All we humans meet and encounter this force. But the basic ethical question is how and in what way we respond to its presence. The style of living as a profoundly ecumenical person is an urgent necessity if we are going to cope with a world at war. The dynamics of this style embodied in individuals and in groups are the same as in the historical force--the One, the Many and the Few. These foundational tensions are the only ones that are complex enough to contain adequate inclusiveness for the world we are living in: oneness in humanness and the one planet, manyness of cultures and styles and generations and the few who have been able to hold oneness and manyness together in one life style.

4. The methodological approach that itself is profoundly human is to grasp the underlying humanness present in your own tradition. Having grasped it, then the task is to push through it to a presentation of the style demanded in our day. An illustration of this can be seen in a recovery of the ethic of responsibility. When you search into classical Christian heritage in answer to this question, you discover the ethic of right and wrong. Further back in history you find good and evil, prevalent primarily out of Persian culture. These moral metaphors were adequate, let us say, to guide ethical behavior for centuries. However, both were based on worldviews in which there was a universal and eternal standard known to all. In the 20th century we have to ask the question to both of them, "Relative to what?" From that question we proceed to articulate responsibility as being able to respond in all contexts, from the global level to the very personal level of the day by day.

5. As we look into the style required in order to be able to live in a profoundly ecumenical way, we are delving beneath or behind the moral metaphors of the past. We are probing into the ontological foundations behind our traditions. For we Christians these foundations are held by the ontological poetry of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is not a theological system about life. The Trinity is simply the way life is: it is a given, it is radical affirmation of the given and it is a life lived out of through and with that affirmation of the given in glorious, free obedience and obedient freedom. It is a long-necked girl receiving and affirming her longneckedness which she can do nothing about and walking through life as the beautiful person she is.

6. When we embrace the multiple tension of the One, the Few and the Many, we are not dropping or leaving behind the Trinity. We are turning life around and looking at it from another perspective. It is as though life is a triangular gold bar. We have been looking at it for centuries from one end and it looks trinitarian only. When we turn it and look at it from the side, the same gold bar looks like a rectangle. But in this case you only see another more complex polarity: its oneness, its manyness and its embodiment in a few profoundly unique, ecumenical human beings.

7. The same long-necked girl beautifully living her life, now finds she is encountered, working with and dealing with people from all over the world who are just like herself. Only the issue is not just her or their longneckedness. The issue now is whether or not they can affirm their common humanity, the many cultural inventions we each live and breathe. And will we dare to find others, join with others who stumbled upon an affirmation of their own longneckedness and are living their lives out by being that affirmation? Can we build a corporate body worldwide with these newly alive human beings? Can we in fact, today, create a global society?

8. This same trinitarian approach gives us a vehicle through which to describe the style called for in profound ecumenism. It has been classically called reconciliation. In the Old Testament reconciliation was always a matter of how one gets reconciled with God. Life has not changed in that regard--that is still the primary relationship we struggle with. The Hebrew made reconciliation by offering a blood sacrifice of bulls and rams without blemish, the best they had, symbols of their total livelihood. It is fascinating to note that reconciliation is something you make, not something you sit back and wait for something to happen. Through this rite of atonement people were reconciled to God--not by magic to be sure, nothing automatic here, but the possibility was created. They let go of that which they knew they could not live without.

9. In the New Testament the rite of atonement was radicalized. Jesus became the unblemished lamb who made reconciliation for the sins of the people. Reconciliation with God issued into reconciliation with other people and with oneself. To make a play on words, this AT-ONE-MENT was a reorientation with being itself. The Final Atonement was made through Jesus the Christ; the only requirement upon us is to appropriate this AT-ONE-MENT--to live in fact with Jesus the Christ as the Lord of our lives.

10. To grasp this classical heritage in all of its radicalness and in all of its once-and-for-all-ness is a journey into the mystery of life itself. What is this act of sacrifice for us? What is this "letting go" of all we depend on? What is this ritual of AT-ONE-MENT for us, and how do we powerfully and unforgetably re-enact this deed in our world today, throughout the whole planet?

11. I don't know. But I do know that in local communities something profound happens when all the perspectives of a village or a neighborhood sit around a table together. And it is more profound yet when all the cards get on the table from the total community. And, of course, it happens only when these issues are dealt with creatively on behalf of everyone.

12. It happened in my life once in a village that had been fraught with violence and factions and great resistance to our presence there. It became clear that it had happened after a full year of doing nothing but regular house meetings in five sections of the village. The Brahmin caste had ruled the village for years and years, but in the elections at the end of that year a new panchayat (village council) and a new sarpanch (village head) was elected. Alongside the traditional panchayat a community association had been formed also headed by the new sarpanch. The association had broad and full representation--the issues got on the table--the village made its own plan and is today rebuilding itself. No utopian society exists there to be sure. It is a human community. Yet it is reconciled to itself, its society and to life itself.

13. This could not have happened without a "blood sacrifice". The project staff over the year gave up all their wishes, all their intents, all their comprehensive models and dealt with the village as it was. The new sarpanch and the new panchayat gave up all their previous social patterns, all their dependencies on the old ways. They risked a deed on behalf of the total community. This was the most painful action anyone could possibly imagine. What symbol system, what life style, what spread of this understanding of life will enable this to happen in every community throughout the globe?

14. The journey toward reconciliation begins when the basic unity present in life is acknowledged. This does not happen easily. No one in my experience ever acknowledged the actual one-ness present in their life as a matter of course. It happens against the grain. When we stumble upon life and face it as it really is, it is anything but united.

15. Take the first few days when you entered a new school -- a grammar school, or a new high school or perchance a university. First of all, you were probably assaulted as I was by the wild diversity of the freshman class -- Chick who played third base, John who did nothing but study and George the girl chaser, to say nothing of Mary, Fiona, Mrs. Das, and the black janitor. There was nothing in common among those people. They were opposites. But they were all freshmen, except the black janitor--he was continuity with the previous class. Perchance the first six were roommates or dated each other, but that did not make them alike or one with each other in some way. They all had different images of why they came to this particular school, but in one way or another they all were seeking an education. The unity was there. At the very least they all, including the janitor, came to the same place at the same time.

16. It is upon this basic unity that reconciliation finally resides. It does not rest upon people's lives being all peaches and cream day by day. It certainly does not mean they all agreed or had common ideas and emotions, but they were all there in one place. And they were all human beings. They might have been from many different countries in the world. But by some channel or another they ended up in the same school.

17. Sometimes that basic unity is itself amorphous and lacking in clear explanations or obviously coherent images. Take for example a work situation like the division of a large corporation. Everyone is working for the same company in the same place but on the surface at least everyone is motivated differently and even in antagonistic opposition to each other. Each supervisor has a different style--some forceful, some weak, some efficient and disciplined, some laxidaisical, some neatly dressed, some casual. It all appears to be a conflict of personalities, styles and ways of operating. In fact, it is quite possible as a new employee to presume the worst--to think that everyday is a battle, every encounter a sparring match between deadly enemies, and every person an adversary who will subdue you to get ahead or be subdued if you prevail.

18. It is amazing what happens in such situations when a person enters that same situation and presumes unity. Even in the face of all evidence to the contrary, some new employee from the country comes to work and simply presumes unity. He ignores all the disunity that has everyone else up tight. All the old timers say the character is naive and doesn't understand what is going on, but somehow . . . the presumed unity becomes real unity and transforms the relationship everyone is taking to their situation. They might even say they are in a new situation although none of them have changed one little bit. In fact, it is a new situation.

19. How does this happen? What is different from before? Absolutely nothing--except basic unity has been ACK - KNOWLEDGED. The fact that it is one division of one company in one place has been acknowledged as such. When this happens, sometimes all those avid adversaries are caught off guard. They are humbled. In fact they are being asked to prostrate themselves before the really real of the actual situation they are in. They are being asked to bow the knee before the way life is. That is acknowledgment before life as it is is the keystone, the first-before-which-there-is-no-other to reconciliation.

20. One may wonder--was unity actually there before or was it created by this character that happened to start working there one day? Maybe or maybe not. All I know is that basic unity is there when it is presumed. However, once this happens to you again and again and again--at work, at play, at family, at age 20 and at age 49, or wherever -- you begin to believe . . . life is just that way. Basic unity is always there if you but have the eyes to see, or the courage to act on what you damn well see. Many people go their whole life long and never see it, or never seem to see it. From situation to situation all they ever see is war. And so they become warriors, fighting life all the way. Such a style can even be embodied in a charismatic hero, a ruler of the world or the dynamic manager of a company. But all the while reconciliation has passed them by. Unity is at hand and they never acknowledged its presence.

21. The amazing truth about life that only a few discover for themselves is that there is faithfulness at the heart of things. Believing it may be exceedingly difficult but it is always possible. Life as it is is loved, sustained in being, stuffed full with meaning at every moment. With Auntie Mame we can say, "Life is a banquet, but most fools starve to death." Few of us finally believe, ALL IS GOOD! Nothing has been left out. No situation exists that cannot be lived and lived fully. In fact, if you do not believe this--that is, let your whole life down upon this as the fact about life--you will either live life chasing one illusion after another or blow your brains out one way or another.

22. This is the whole clue to being spiritually on target in situation after situation. Reading the signs of the times you are living in, grasping the current mood in which people are living, staying on top of the spirit edge--all these depend on acknowledgment of the way life is. You may not approve of the civil rights movement or hippies or the peace movement or the women's movement. You may not believe entropy is the way the world is, constantly running out of soap. You may think it is stupid to send your time trying to protect the environment or becoming a fanatic on ecology. But if these are the movements of our day . . . you begin to read the times you are in by acknowledging that fact.

23. Acknowledgment is one of the greatest acts of selfhood required of human beings. It requires that you have your own life together. It requires being in charge of your own spirit life versus being constantly wafted about by the spirit of other people. It requires setting aside your own most cherished ideals and dreams in order to acknowledge the way life is. Most of us, most of our lives are spiritual victims either to forces from outside us or those within us. This oppression blinds us or numbs our sensitivities. Thus we have a hard time acknowledging the way life is. Few there are among us who have somehow acquired the spirit discipline to consistently acknowledge life as it is and thus to be on target in every encounter, in every conversation, in every act we do. And yet we know that only those moments in which we are in charge of our own spirit life can we possibly hope to be on target in relating to others.

24. The style of reconciliation requires acknowledgment of life as it is. But this is in the face of a second all pervading fact about our lives. The oneness of life exists precisely in the midst of complete, total, irreversible disunity. Both are equally true all at once. Life is fragmented, broken, separated, irretrievably divided -- self from others, self from self, and self from all that sustains life itself, its Ground. Life is separation. It is an ontological givenness. Those who only see brokenness or the hole in the middle of the donut called life are seeing life as it is. Apparent brokenness is actual brokenness. And yet even this givenness about life when related to in faith rather than unfaith allows us to embrace it fully with all our No's and all of our Yes's.

25. How is this possible? What style, what mode of humanness lives out, lives through and thus transforms the contradictory polarities that life is? After acknowledgment comes forgiveness -- not an emotional feeling but an action, a move from one human to another. Life is manyness and different-ness. Nothing can obliterate it or absorb it or homogenize it. Many of us think we have overcome it by smiling, by friendliness, by oohing and aahing over the differences as though we thoroughly approve of each other's habits and unchangeable quirks. But no matter how we try, personal approbation does not transcend life's separatedness. Even in friendship an alien power enters that disapproves, antagonizes, grates, creates disbelief and mistrust or simply delights in the misfortune of the other.

26. Forgiveness is more than kindly feelings. Forgiveness includes the acknowledgment that the other person is different, unique and has a right to an independent existence. It is not a pat on the head, saying, "Well, it is alright if you have wronged. I really don't care." No! Forgiveness is an acknowledgment that an invasion of another's autonomy has happened. Yet, inspite of all, "I forgive you for the wrong you have done. I relinquish all right to retaliation inspite of the injustice done. I acknowledge your perspective and that it has a right to be." This is a superhuman mode. It is not an ordinary response. It is against the grain. It is saying that it is far

more important that the other, the wrong doer exists rather than not exists.

27. But forgiveness is also not giving in or knuckling under to the wrong doer. I allow the wrong doer to exist and exist with honor. But I retain the position that I have been wronged. It is as though you take the enemy, the opposition into yourself and re-examine the whole situation. You swallow the offense. And then you decide what this offense means. What must I do now? I have forgiven the wrong doer. Now . . . shall I do as this one says or shall I go ahead as before. Or shall I, we together, create a third alternative. Nothing is predetermined.

28. In forgiveness it is not a foregone conclusion either that you give into the other perspective or that you go ahead as planned. In forgiveness there is no "giving in" in the sense of complete loss of your own autonomy or identity. There is only full acknowledgment followed by appropriate action. Actually a middle way, a third alternative, is the most likely course of responsible action. It also does not mean you have taken a viper to your chest. If in fact the opponent is enemy, viper, deadly to the whole situation, no forgiveness is possible, only war, only a fight to the death. In gratitude I assert that such all out conflict is seldom, rare and ridiculously unnecessary. I am sure there are people in parts of the world that would not agree, but from an outside perspective the wars around the world appear utterly ridiculous. The peace movement worldwide is also asserting this. I am grateful because if it ever became predominant, human community would no longer be possible.

29. There is also the option of repentance on your part, and on the part of the other party. You may in fact discover when your way is opposed that you were wrong. By "wrong" I mean, the humanness of the other person and of the situation has been violated. You may discover that you have incorrectly perceived the situation. You have acted in an unbecoming way. If so, repentance is called for. You may in fact be required to turn your back on your previous course of action and go in an entirely different direction. The different direction may not in fact be the course advocated by the opponent. But it may look more like the opponent's direction than yours. It may be the third alternative. In any case it comes to you as complete, total, irrevokable humiliation, loss of face, embarrassment, and cause for agonizing soul searching within yourself. Repentance is not pleasant. It is a complete reorientation, painful alteration of your interior and external being.

30. In that mode of being it is then possible to enter a situation that is fractured and polarized and call for repentance and . . . perhaps reconciliation will occur. It is not automatic or guaranteed. But when you enter a situation of all out war, the first act required is to pass over to each and all of the perspectives present. It is required during the time involved to stand first in this position and then in that position until all contending parties are represented within your own being. This is a racking experience. It may even destroy you. But perchance you survive, it is standing in all the perspectives at once that sometimes allows you to see the basic unity present in the situation. Once you see it then all that is required is courage, creativity, and, of course, an act.

31. In our day the task of reconciliation between contradictory polarities has taken three or four forms. First of all there is the opposition between those who have the world's benefits and those who do not. Until now this conflict has been resolved by personal or bureaucratic systems of welfare--handouts, those who have money giving money to those who do not have it. In principle it is a sane, and workable solution. In fact it has not

worked. On the one hand the have's only give a little they can spare out of generosity. Or they give huge quantities but only to support their own vested interests. On the other hand the recipients have frequently decided this is a great arrangement. It is much easier than working for it. "Let's keep receiving. Why worry about developing our own autonomy or self-sufficiency." Hence, dependency increases, and inhumanness takes an even more perverse form. The have's have more. The gap widens. Injustice increases. The world remains divided by guilt, by resentment, by injustice, by brutality, by arrogance--finally by inhumanity between peoples. As a result, welfarism has died. Governments and individuals are increasingly realizing that this approach must come to an end. What replaces it in terms of human beings caring for each other is not yet clear.

32. Similarly, the confrontational mode has come to an end. Short term effectiveness is still possible. Garbage dumped on the lawns of landowners sometimes gets buildings upgraded, heated and repaired. But how many absentee landowners are there? And what happens the day after tomorrow? Terrorists may get a prisoner released but what about the 1,000's of other political prisoners unreleased. Confrontation without the possibility of repentance on the part of all involved is a futile gesture.

33. Nor has the planned society succeeded. Putting power into the hands of a well-informed elite who will design society in an equitable fashion, also has not worked. Or more correctly, it has only worked in pockets, here and there. Usually these models, however adequately they have demonstrated units of a more human society, are simply viewed as oddities or they have been absorbed into the same old society that is not adequately caring for 85% of the people who are excluded or disadvantaged. Being a social architect requires far more than well-balanced models. It also requires getting participation from all the people involved, those in the local communities and those serving them. The people themselves do not fit neatly into anyone's model. They are human. They will create their own models, some of which are just and equitable and some of which are not.

34. Also something is happening as a challenge to methods that enables local people to do their own planning. A few years ago people had to be drawn out to participate. You had to see to it that everyone participated. A new participatory mode has gotten launched in history. People not only know they can participate in deciding their own destiny. They are demanding that they participate in everything including a decision-making role in determining their own participatory methods. Local people want a voice. And when they get a voice, it may not be all we want it to be. It may be far more intuitive and emotional than rational, for instance. Something more is now being required of us.

35. In summary, reconciliation includes a transcendent activity. The basic unity may be acknowledged. The contradictory polarity may be brought into creative tension through forgiveness and repentance. But all of this leaves the situation as it is unless there is action by all those involved. Reconciliation is not a subjective attitude toward life. It is nations working together who had set out to destroy each other. It is a company, a school, or a hospital dealing creatively with its mission in society and with its own people and job relations. It is a family reunited and creatively caring for all its members. It is a world society caring for all its peoples as each new situation arises.