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DUKE UNIVERSITY DIVINITY SCHOOL

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A Word About This Issue

This Winter issue of the *Review* is concerned primarily with the contemporary meaning and task of parish ministry, is contributed largely by working ministers convinced of the cruciality of their calling, and is offered in response to requests of many ministers who heard these addresses in the Divinity School Convocation and North Carolina Pastors' School in October and the Divinity School Seminars in South Carolina and Virginia in November, 1970.

Dr. Wallace M. Alston, Jr. of First Presbyterian Church, Durham, lectured in the Seminars on "Possibilities of Ministry in a Divided Church," and "The Minister as Theologian." His second address is printed here. Four addresses given in the Convocation and Pastors' School follow. Dr. Claude R. Collins (B.D. '39), Program Director of the West Virginia United Methodist Conference, gave the Eleventh Annual Alumni Lecture, on "Good Managers of God's Gifts." Dean Robert E. Cushman's address to the Alumni Association focussed especially on the partnership of the Divinity School and the Church in the education of ministers. As the Franklin Simpson Hickman Lecturer on Ministry, Dr. Richard W. Cain of First United Methodist Church, Phoenix, lectured twice in the Convocation on "The Misery and Majesty of Ministry," and continued such themes in Divinity School classes, services of worship, and informal meetings during the week following. Both lectures, with oral style retained so far as feasible, are recorded here. The book reviews also include three recent publications by teaching ministers who earned divinity and doctoral degrees at Duke University—Dr. Harmon L. Smith and Dr. Thor Hall of our faculty, and Dr. Louis W. Hodges of Washington and Lee University.

M.S.R.

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The Minister as Theologian

WALLACE M. ALSTON, JR.

Numerous attempts have been made in recent months to explain the lethargy, apathy, and outright apostasy of the Church in response to the great human issues which are before us as a society.¹ It is my contention that the locus of the crisis in the Church is not to be found in the committees, boards and agencies of the denomination, but in the faith of its membership. The real issue before the Christian Church in our time is the crisis of belief in the churches and, until that is recognized and dealt with effectively, there will be little cause for hope that the Church will institutionalize a ministry of integrity in the world. The Church does what it believes, just as the individual finally makes his definitive confession of faith in and through his manner of living in the world. The response made by the institutional Church to the issues of war, poverty, racism, and other forms of social injustice, is the direct expression of its apprehension, or lack of apprehension, of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for theology and ethics are one. To deal with the crisis in the Church as though it were of an organizational or institutional nature would be to miss the point. The Church never acts prophetically in the world unless there is in its life a prophetic faith that motivates it so to act. The real crisis of the Church, therefore, is the crisis of belief in the churches and the inevitable conclusion is that the ministry has failed in its function as teacher and theologian.

Something happened in the churches in the last decade. We were told after the second World War that there was a revival of religion in America. The ranks of the churches were swelled almost beyond capacity; the plates rang with offerings from the faithful; established churches divided and subdivided to keep up with their expanding population. Then something happened and the Church lost credibility for the man in the pew. In early 1963, the Student Christian Movement press in London published a book by the Bishop

Dr. Alston is Minister at First Presbyterian Church, Durham, N. C. This is the second of his two addresses in the Duke Divinity School Seminars in Columbia, South Carolina and Richmond, Virginia in November, 1970.

1. The best recent summary is Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969).

of Woolwich, John A. T. Robinson, entitled *Honest to God*,² and in a matter of weeks it became a best seller in Britain and in the United States. Bishop Robinson's message was not original. He simply said that our old images of God must go. He did not deny God. He repudiated the traditional images of God that had been taken for granted by large segments of the Christian world. The real significance of the book lies in the fact that Bishop Robinson dared to synthesize and to translate for the layman the works of three contemporary theologians previously unknown to the man in the pew. He opened the theological debate to an audience that was unaccustomed to reading theological statements that called the fundamentals of Christian faith into question.

The reaction to *Honest to God* was far more significant than the content of the book itself. In some quarters it was praised as courageous, imaginative, and edifying for the Church. Erik Routley, a Congregational minister and historian, wrote, "I cannot write objectively and dispassionately about this. I can only record that the reading of it gave me more comfort, more encouragement, and more sense that life is worth living, and the ministry worth exercising, than any book I have read for years and years."³ In other quarters the book was viewed as evidence of the presence of heresy in the Church. A British journalist wrote, "What should happen to an Anglican bishop who does not believe in God? This, I hold, is the condition of the Bishop of Woolwich, as revealed in his paperback, *Honest to God*, and it raises, I maintain, a question of Church discipline which cannot be shirked without the greatest repercussions on the whole Anglican Communion. . . . It is one thing to restate the eternal truths of religion in contemporary language and quite another expressly to repudiate the fundamental doctrines which were believed by those who learn Christianity from the lips of Christ."⁴ And in still other quarters there were those who failed to see anything at all significant, one way or another, in this book. The late C. S. Lewis, for example, wrote, "The Bishop of Woolwich will disturb most of us Christian laymen less than he anticipates."⁵ History has certified, however, that C. S. Lewis was wrong. Most readers did not respond to Bishop Robinson with such casual indifference. Prior to the publication of

2. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963).

3. Erik Routley, David L. Edwards (ed.), *The Honest to God Debate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 82.

4. T. E. Uteley, in *ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

5. C. S. Lewis, in *ibid.*, p. 91.

this book, the theological enterprise was left to the highly trained theologians in the seminaries, while the average layman, and many clergymen, in parish churches continued to live easily with the concept of God "up there" or "out there." To some laymen the appearance of *Honest to God* was liberating and revelatory. To others it was simply a confirmation of what they had always expected, namely, that the leadership of the Church had abandoned the fundamental doctrines of Christian faith in the face of the new knowledge available to our world.

Even before the discussion over *Honest to God* had run its course, a Baptist theologian named Harvey Cox published a book entitled *The Secular City*,⁶ which again rocked the life of the Church. It was only a short time before *The Secular City* was on the paperback best seller list, becoming one of the most talked about books of the year. Professor Cox's thesis pivots on four themes which he claims to be the consequences of urbanization and secularization: anonymity, mobility, pragmatism, and profanity. Urbanization and secularization, according to Cox, provide the shape not of man's sin, but of his liberation. Secular man is free from the traditional moral sanctions, from the old supernatural ideologists, and may now turn his attention to giving the world in which he lives a more human shape. Cox views the forces of secularization as largely rendering the traditional religions irrelevant. The forces of secularization have no serious interest in persecuting religion; secularization simply bypasses and undercuts religion, moving on to other things. The age of *The Secular City* is an age of no religion at all. It no longer looks to religious rituals and rules for its morality and meaning. It will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day they will come back. They have disappeared forever.

The point of these two books, and of my mentioning them to you, is simply to say that the response given to them by the man in the pew indicates the growing doubt and uncertainty about the traditional expressions of Christian belief, as well as the desire on the part of thousands and thousands of lay people to discover new images and new metaphors for faith. A young layman commented to me, "I have gotten to the place where I count the number of times my minister refers to God in spatial terms. I count the number of times my minister talks to me about God 'up there' or about God who has come 'down from heaven' or the number of times he looks up when he

6. Harvey G. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965).

prays." This layman said to me, "No literate and honest man can speak like that of God anymore." How do we speak of God? It is this issue that lies at the heart of the crisis of faith in our time.

This growing doubt about orthodox theology is also reflected in the sociological studies of the beliefs of Christians in the San Francisco Bay area conducted by Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark.⁷ They discovered that there was a larger diversity of belief within the denominations than there was between Protestants and Roman Catholics. In fact, there was no single doctrine raised by Glock and Stark on which Protestants even approached unanimity. They concluded that, "The new cleavages are not over such matters as how to worship God properly, but whether or not there is a God of the sort it makes any sense to worship; not over whether the bread and wine of communion become the actual blood and body of Christ through transubstantiation, or are only symbolic, but over whether or not Jesus was merely a man."⁸

My first point, then, is that there is a crisis of faith in the churches, not only in the minds and lives of theologians and clergymen, but in the viscera of the Protestant laity itself. The second point follows hard by the first and it is that there has been a popularization of the whole spectrum of theological debate that was once reserved to the theological seminaries. The crisis of faith and the ambiguity of belief are not confined to scholars anymore, but penetrate deep into the rank and file of clergy and laity alike. Glock and Stark reported that, among the Protestant laity, 29 per cent doubted the existence of God, 43 per cent seriously doubted the virgin birth, and 35 per cent doubted the reality of life after death. Among the clergy, 26 per cent seriously doubted the virgin birth, 18 per cent were in doubt over some type of judgment after death, and 62 per cent reported that they would expect any thinking layman to have doubts about the existence of God.

My first reaction to the Glock and Stark study was that this is simply a rejection of an old, worn-out fundamentalism, and not necessarily adequate evidence that there is a crisis of belief in the churches. In most decent contemporary theology, myth, legend, metaphor, and symbol have replaced the old literalism as bases for understanding and interpreting Christian faith. However this may be, one cannot

7. Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1965), Chapter V, "The New Denominationalism."

8. Glock and Stark, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-18.