

[from Nolan: The Hartford "Appeal" or "Declaration" had mixed reviews by scholars.]

The Hartford Declaration

By Hazel Andrews

The "Hartford Declaration" emerged out of a conference held at the Hartford Seminary Foundation on January 24-26, 1975. The text of the declaration had been circulated for approximately a year by the two principal organizers of the Hartford meeting, Peter Berger, Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University and a member of THEOLOGY TODAY's Editorial Council, and Richard John Neuhaus, Lutheran pastor of the Church of Saint John the Evangelist in Brooklyn. The declaration has attracted wide attention, but the full text has not yet appeared in print. THEOLOGY TODAY hopes that by making the text available, the theological issues raised by the declaration might be aired and discussed.

The eighteen people, besides Dr. Berger and Mr. Neuhaus, who attended the meeting in Hartford and signed the document are: Elizabeth Ann Bettenhausen, Department of Church and Society, Lutheran Church in America; William Sloane Coffin, Jr., chaplain at Yale University; Avery Dulles, Catholic University of America; Neal Fisher, United Methodist Board of Global Ministries; George Forell, University of Iowa; James Gettemy, President of the Hartford Seminary Foundation; George Lindbeck, Yale University; Ileana Marculescu, Union Theological Seminary, New York; Ralph McInerny, University of Notre Dame; E. Kilmer Meyers, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of California; Richard J. Mouw, Calvin College; Carl Peter, Catholic University of America; Alexander Schmemmann, Eastern Orthodox Seminary; Gerard Sloyan, Temple University; Lewis Smedes, Fuller Theological Seminary; George H. Tavard, Methodist Theological School; and Robert Wilken, University of Notre Dame.

In addition to the eighteen people who attended the meeting, seven others who had participated in the preliminary study of the declaration added their names: Stanley Hauerwas, University of Notre Dame; Fr. Thomas Hopkoe, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary; E. Kilmer Meyers, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of California; Randolph W. Nugent, United Methodist Board of Global Ministries; Nathan A. Scott, University of Chicago Divinity School; Bruce Vawter, DePaul University; and John D. Weaver, Director of Planning for the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of California.

An Appeal For Theological Affirmation

THE renewal of Christian witness and mission requires constant examination of the assumptions shaping the Church's life. Today an apparent loss of a sense of the transcendent is undermining the Church's ability to address with clarity and courage the urgent tasks to which God calls it in the world. This loss is manifest in a number of pervasive themes. Many are superficially attractive, but upon closer examination we find these themes false and debilitating to the Church's life and work. Among such themes are:

Theme 1: Modern thought is superior to all past forms of understanding reality, and is therefore normative for Christian faith and life.

In repudiating this theme we are protesting the captivity to the prevailing thought structures not only of the 20th century but of any historical period. We favor using any helpful means of understanding, ancient or modern, and insist that the Christian proclamation must be related to the idiom of the culture. At the same time, we affirm the need for Christian thought to confront and be confronted by other world views, all of which are necessarily provisional.

Theme 2: Religious statements are totally independent of reasonable discourse.

The capitulation to the alleged primacy of modern thought takes two forms: one is the subordination of religious statements to the canons of scientific rationality; the other, equating reason with scientific rationality; would remove religious statements from the realm of reasonable discourse altogether. A religion of pure subjectivity and non-rationality results in treating faith statements as being, at best, statements about the believer. We repudiate both forms of capitulation.

Theme 3: Religious language refers to human experience and nothing else, God being humanity's noblest creation.

Religion is also a set of symbols and even of human projections. We repudiate the assumption that it is nothing but that. What is here at stake is nothing less than the reality of God: We did not invent God; God invented us.

Theme 4: Jesus can only be understood in terms of contemporary models of humanity.

This theme suggests a reversal of "the imitation of Christ"; that is, the image of Jesus is made to reflect cultural and counter-cultural notions of human excellence. We do not deny that all aspects of humanity are illumined by Jesus. Indeed, it is necessary to the universality of the Christ that he be perceived in relation to the particularities of the believers' world. We do repudiate the captivity to such metaphors, which are necessarily inadequate, relative, transitory, and frequently idolatrous. Jesus, together with the Scriptures and the whole of the Christian tradition, cannot be arbitrarily interpreted without reference to the history of which they are part. The danger is in the attempt to exploit the tradition without taking the tradition seriously.

Theme 5: All religions are equally valid; the choice among them is not a matter of conviction about truth but only of personal preference or life-style.

We affirm our common humanity. We affirm the importance of exploring and confronting all manifestations of the religious quest and of learning from the riches of other religions. But we repudiate this theme because it flattens diversities and ignores contradictions, In doing so, it not only obscures the meaning of Christian faith, but also fails to respect the integrity of other faiths. Truth matters; therefore differences among religions are deeply significant.

Theme 6: To realize one's potential and to be true to oneself is the whole meaning of salvation.

Salvation contains a promise of human fulfillment, but to identify salvation with human fulfillment can trivialize the promise. We affirm that salvation cannot be found apart from God.

Theme 7: Since what is human is good, evil can adequately be understood as failure to realize human potential.

This theme invites false understanding of the ambivalence of human existence and underestimates the pervasiveness of sin. Paradoxically, by minimizing the enormity of evil, it undermines serious and sustained attacks on particular social or individual evils.

Theme 8: The sole purpose of worship is to promote individual self-realization and human community.

Worship promotes individual and communal values, but it is above all a response to the reality of God and arises out of the fundamental need and desire to know, love, and adore God. We worship God because God is to be worshiped.

Theme 9: Institutions and historical traditions are oppressive and inimical to our being truly human; liberation from them is required for authentic existence and authentic religion.

Institutions and traditions are often oppressive. For this reason they must be subjected to relentless criticism. But human community inescapably requires institutions and traditions. Without them life would degenerate into chaos and new forms of bondage. The modern pursuit of liberation from all social and historical restraints is finally dehumanizing.

Theme 10: The world must set the agenda for the Church. Social, political and economic programs to improve the quality of life are ultimately normative for the Church's mission in the world.

This theme cuts across the political and ideological spectrum. Its form remains the same, no matter whether the content is defined as upholding the values of the American way of life, promoting socialism, or raising human consciousness. The Church must denounce oppressors, help liberate the oppressed and seek to heal human misery. Sometimes the Church's mission coincides with the world's programs. But the norms for the Church's activity derive from its own perception of God's will for the world.

Theme 11: An emphasis on God's transcendence is at least a hindrance to, and perhaps incompatible with, Christian social concern and action.

This supposition leads some to denigrate God's transcendence. Others, holding to a false transcendence, withdraw into religious privatism or individualism and neglect the personal and communal responsibility of Christians for the earthly city. From a biblical perspective, it is precisely because of confidence in God's reign over all aspects of life that Christians must participate fully in the struggle against oppressive and dehumanizing structures and their manifestations in racism, war, and economic exploitation.

Theme 12: The struggle for a better humanity will bring about the Kingdom of God.

The struggle for a better humanity is essential to Christian faith and can be informed and inspired by the biblical promise of the Kingdom of God. But imperfect human beings cannot create a perfect society. The Kingdom of God surpasses any conceivable utopia. God has his own designs which confront ours, surprising us with judgment and redemption.

Theme 13: The question of hope beyond death is irrelevant or at best marginal to the Christian understanding of human fulfillment.

This is the final capitulation to modern thought. If death is the last word, then Christianity has nothing to say to the final questions of life. We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and are ". . . convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world, as it is or in the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths-nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38 f.).