

Editorial

JOTTINGS ON THE CHURCH AND THEOLOGY TODAY

1. *The "Unexamined" Church.* "The unexamined life is not worth living." Today the Christian churches are learning just how true this ancient assertion really is. When society and culture are fairly stable, it is only too easy for institutions to keep their established routines going, with little explicit consideration of the goals which those routines are meant to achieve. Indeed, just because serious reflection on goals necessarily opens up the question of the relevance of any given means to an institution's supposed ends, it must seem at least potentially subversive. Safety lies in not "rocking the boat." But suppose that a period of rapid social change has set in. Then those institutions which have lost sight of their goals can flounder along, trying with diminishing success to keep up their settled routines even when these have become a mere simulacrum of life. In such a case the boat is being rocked from the outside, not from the inside, and safety lies in holding to a well-charted course—but unhappily the navigators seem to have lost their charts. These remarks apply all too obviously to the Christian churches of our time. In a settled "Christendom" it was easy enough to keep the system running—so easy, in fact, that church leaders could plausibly conclude that almost any change would be for the worse. The ecclesiastical institution had a recognized place in society; the machinery was functioning more or less smoothly; to many (if not to most) it seemed not only possible but prudent to leave awkward questions unasked. But in an age of kaleidoscopic cultural pluralism it is desperately dangerous to be caught with a set of fixed routines whose ultimate purpose has somehow escaped us.

There was an old man of Khartoum,
Who kept two tame sheep in a room;
They remind me (he said)
Of someone who's dead,
But I cannot quite recollect whom.

What a fitting symbol of our modern churches that old man is! It is not surprising that they should find it increasingly hard to summon up resources of manpower and material to keep the machinery going. What we are experiencing is all too evidently a crisis of the long "unexamined" church.

2. *The "Irritable" Church.* A year or so ago Professor William Kilbourn edited a rather shapeless symposium called *The Restless Church* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966). Perhaps the one obvious point of the book was the profound bewilderment of many modern Christians. They find themselves hotly debating the methods of the church's mission; worse still, they fail to agree on the essential aims of the church's mission; worst of all, often they are not really clear whether they are arguing about the more practical or the more basic question. It is no exaggeration to say that the present-day church, agitated by these confusions and conflicts, is not only "restless" but "irritable." Distracted by controversies about methods, about purposes, and

about both indiscriminately, Christians understandably become worried, frightened, and bad-tempered. It is deplorably easy to find cases of the poisoning of church life by confusion-born irritability. In such an atmosphere differences are exaggerated, motives become suspect, and rational discussion is made almost impossible. No doubt in some instances the church's mission really is being undermined, either by a partial suppression of the gospel or by an encasing of the gospel in an inflexible formalism. But the irritable mind sees treachery or obstruction where they do not exist. Those who carry out even the most responsible experiments are charged with compromising the faith; those whose concern for the integrity of the church's message and mission leads them to criticize some hare-brained fad are accused of a self-serving adherence to obsolete structures. At times, our churches seem on the point of becoming fragile confederations of disputatious sects, with little hope of agreeing on ultimate aims, let alone on the means of pursuing them. It is not surprising that they should fail to hold the allegiance of some of their most perceptive and sensitive members or to attract the outsider to share in their faith and works. May it not be that we now need to spend much time and effort on an honest and charitable attempt at mutual explanation with a view to basic consensus—an enterprise often dismissed today as mere "introspection" or "ecclesiastical house-keeping"—before the church can hope to be truly effective in its ministry to the world? An "irritable" church cannot be a vigorous and compelling church.

3. "*Prompt to Impose, and Fond to Dogmatize.*" With engaging (and unwonted) tentativeness, Bishop John Robinson has invited us to *The New Reformation?* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1965). The invitation is not to be ignored; reform is both a venerable theological ideal and a recurrent ecclesiastical necessity. At the same time, history suggests that it is a delicate undertaking. Viewing them from a distance, few observers can believe that either Gregory VII or John Wycliffe, either Martin Luther or Pius IV, either John Wesley or John Henry Newman was as wholly right as each of them apparently supposed himself to be. Yet thanks to such men, by way of reformation or reaction, institutions have been shaped, party lines drawn, aggressive and defensive dogmas defined, divisions hardened. Granted that true faith and right worship are urgently important and that, at least in certain circumstances, dogmatic definition is not only legitimate but necessary, may we not still wish that our forefathers had been slower on the theological trigger? One of the more ominous features of our present situation is surely the menace of past mistakes repeated—and very likely magnified in the repeating. The aggressive and ill-founded self-confidence of our noisiest would-be reformers, together with the purely defensive reaction that it is certain to elicit from many of their fellow-churchmen, threatens a new dogmatic polarization—a second and shallower "Reformation" and "Counter-Reformation"—which must be just about the last thing that the present-day church needs.