THE UNITY OF MANKIND

By PAUL EDWARDS

'The title of the article is called, "The Unity of Mankind".'
'Oh, that's the title of the article, is it?', Alice said, trying to feel interested.
'No. You don't understand', the Author said, looking a little vexed. 'That's what the title is called. The title really is "A Sour Sermon on a Lofty Theme".'
'Then I ought to have said, "That's what the article is called",' Alice corrected herself.
'No you oughtn't; that's quite another thing. The article is called, "No Man is an Island. So you have to Dig a Moat"; but that's only what it's called, you know'.
'Well, what is the article then?', said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.
'I was coming to that', the Author said. 'The article really is, "Private Property. Trespassers will be Prosecuted", and the cynicism is my own additive'.
So saying, he switched on his tape recorder and began.
(from *Alice Through the Television Screen*)

I DON'T GO MUCH for the Unity of Mankind.

I was a seminarist during the war. A seminary is traditionally a place of plain living and, it is to be hoped, high thinking. Add wartime restrictions to traditional plain living and nothing could be plainer. And the thinking, when you are trying to justify to yourself your sheltered existence while your schoolfellows are dying to keep England safe for seminarists, had better be very high indeed. Peter came out with the highest, widest thought of all. It goes without saying that it originated in France. There was at the seminary a student much senior to ourselves who enjoyed great prestige among us because he had been studying in a french seminary when France was overrun, and had subsequently escaped Hitler's clutches by crossing the Pyrenees. He told Peter what some of the young french jesuits were saying and Peter told us.

Wars should not be allowed to happen. Wars would not happen if there were genuine international understanding, effective com-

munication and sincere mutual appreciation between peoples of different countries and cultures. As the Society of Jesus was world wide, it should take upon itself the task of building up international understanding, communication and appreciation. Before this could happen, the different jesuit provinces would need to develop much greater knowledge of one another and much more effective and deliberate cooperation. And the necessary preliminary to this would be that individual jesuits of different nationality should foster a lively understanding, communication and appreciation between themselves on an individual basis.

We listened; we were thrilled. We decided to be the english jesuits who would devote themselves to building up understanding, etc. with individual jesuits abroad, so as to bring about large scale cooperation between jesuits throughout the world, to produce in its turn a climate of international goodwill which would banish war for ever.

There were five of us. I can remember reading a paper to the other four. I don't know what I said, but I remember Peter explaining that our aims were internationalist and not cosmopolitan. The manuscript of my paper was put in the archives. (I rather think that action both opened and closed them.) That was in spring. In summer the americans dropped the first atom bomb.

A year later I went to teach at the jesuit college in Leeds. I had a full teaching time table. I took dinner duty everyday. I was sacristan and master of ceremonies. I refereed a football game on saturday and considered myself slothful if I did not prepare my classes all day sunday. Peter was reading classics at Oxford university. At the end of the year he contrived to get to Leeds to see me. He told me about Oxford: I told him about my thirteen year olds. At one point in the conversation I asked him about our former goal of international understanding, communication and appreciation. 'I have come to realize', said Peter, who had obviously learned more than latin and greek during those two years, 'that we cannot start by trying to build up understanding and communication between the different jesuit provinces. We should have to start by tackling the various houses of our own province and trying to produce rather more mutual awareness and appreciation than exists among them at present. Indeed I think that this is needed not only between different houses within the province but very often between different individuals living in the same house'.

In 1967 I paid a visit to the seminary. One of the first things I did

was to go to the cemetary to stand by Peter's three weeks old grave. In the days of our youth we had hiked up mountains together, swum in the ponds, gone for cross-country runs even in the snow. We had read french classical drama and german romantic lyrics together. We had jointly brooded over the possibility of philosophic certitude and racked our brains about the essence of human happiness. I doubt if we had a thought or emotion that we did not share, an arrangement vastly to my advantage, for Peter was distinctly the more intelligent and the more knowledgeable. He was also immeasurably my superior in the magnanimity of his judgment and the affectionate generosity of his disposition and conduct.

Yet when I stood by his grave I had not seen him in seven years; and during that time we had exchanged nothing more communicative than the annual christmas card. He was absorbed in teaching metaphysics and all manner of wisdom to the young seminarists, while I poured out my lesser energies in a Yorkshire classroom. I think that our friendship was as real as ever, as real as a piano whose owners are too busy to play it. The strings were still in tune; yet a tuned string has no advantage over a broken one when music is asked of neither.

When people prate to you glibly about international understanding, remember the parable of Peter and Paul, who intended to unite all mankind, but who swiftly came to see that to unite a single religious community can be a herculean task, and who in the end lost contact even with each other. Nor is their failure to be explained by the feebleness of their character, for if Paul is of ordinary clay, the generous high-minded Peter was something of a saint.

Now let me introduce you somewhat fleetingly to Joan. I used to preside benignly (I hope benignly!) over a discussion group drawn from three catholic sixth forms.[1] The first discussion we held was devoted to the Common Market and united Europe. When at one stage the discussion flagged, I tried to rally it by saying, 'I suggest that the real difficulty about a united Europe is that we don't really think of foreigners as human beings'. Joan, probably the most intelligent youngster present, raised her pale, pensive face and said, 'That might be true of your generation, Father. It certainly isn't true of ours'; so squashing both me and my suggested line of discussion.

[1] The 16–18 age group.

I was, in my cynical way, intrigued by Joan's trenchant assertion. There were girls from two schools present. And what a job it was to get girls from one school to speak to those from another! These catholic girls of the same town and the same age had everything in common, except that they went to different convent schools. And that solitary difference was a gulf both wide and deep which only the resolutely and conscientiously social-minded ever tried to cross, and that somewhat in the spirit of 'Excelsior'. To attend the other school was to be an inhabitant of another planet, but without the fascination that martians and venusians have for earthmen or earthgirls. Oh transcendently intelligent Joan (I think that she is now an Oxford D.Phil.), you did kid yourself!

But I must quickly give the convent girls the credit they really deserve. At least the girls knew the girls from the same school. But our second year sixth boys did not know the boys in the lower sixth, and, which exasperated me madly, could see no earthly reason why they should know them. Nobody paid you to know them. Knowing the boys in the lower sixth wouldn't help you with your 'A levels' or university entrance or provide you with a 'pop' record or a ticket for Elland Road.[1]

I have found adults quite as bad, with less excuse. One catholic society in which I took an interest used to meet in small groups. From time to time they used to say how nice, stimulating and profitable to salvation it would be to meet the other groups. So we would organize some regional 'get together'. And there everyone would be standing or sitting with his or her own group, meeting nobody at all. I used to point this out to them; I used to preach at them; I suspect that I even nagged. And in ten years I altered them not at all.

But let us return to Joan and 'That may be true of your generation, but not of ours'. The school once had a french *assistante*, aged twenty-one, who pointed out a little tactlessly in the staffroom that she was much nearer in age to the boys than to the staff. We were maliciously amused when in the course of one of her classes the sixth form said to her – not in french, I'll be bound – 'Your generation can never hope to understand ours'. This is a foundation dogma of the sixth form credo, that they are quite different from any previous generation. And there is an utterly absolute assumption that 'different from' here equals 'greatly superior to'.

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[1] The local football stadium.

I once suggested to some boys arranging a day's discussion on university life that they should invite a chaplain, a university don and some students. 'But', protested Smith, 'a don would be boring and he wouldn't know anything about students'. In rather strangled fashion I suggested that a man who was so constantly in touch with students might have learned something useful about them. Not as far as Smith was concerned. Nobody older than students could possibly say anything to the point about student life. The university chaplain introduced me to a young woman of about twenty-five, a lecturer and a warden of a students' hostel. We invited her. Attractive, *soignée*, highly articulate, she talked with verve and penetration. Meeting Smith afterwards I rather crowed. 'Well, are all university lecturers completely ignorant of student life?'

'But she was young', said Smith.

'And do you think if she continues in her present job that when she is forty she will have forgotten all she knows now, and will have learned nothing in the meantime?'

'Yes', said Smith.

'Do you think that at forty a metal curtain comes down across the mind, cutting off all that one knew and preventing one from learning anything new about young people?'

'Yes', said Smith. 'Or how did my dad get the way he is?' Smith, who cannot talk to his father, specializes in french and german. He cannot bridge the generation gap, but he crosses the Channel and visits the continent. He is one of the beneficiaries of modern transport's lavish contribution to the Unity of Man. Does movement unify? This easter I met two very agreeable young women from South Africa who work in London as secretaries, have travelled in Europe and are planning to visit America. They live in Earl's Court in a house turned into flats. They have only a hazy idea of who lives in the other two flats. They have never had anything to do with them. The twentieth century will fly you across the continent of Africa, carry you around Europe and take you across the Atlantic. But it won't get your foot across the threshold of the flat beneath your own, far less can it gain you a toehold in the occupant's mind and heart.

Mobility disunites us. The more successful of our pupils go to a university, then take a job. Very rarely is it in Leeds. They may start in Lancashire; then they are transferred to London; next they are posted to Carlisle. Then the metropolis calls again. They and their wives are separated from their families and their friends.

Rarely do they establish anything deeper than an amicable acquaintance with their temporary, often equally migratory, neighbours. Like the girls in Earl's Court they may not even manage that.

Kitty, whose wedding to one of my ex-pupils I happily attended six years ago, has her home in Sussex, her third home. Her husband has a two-hour journey to work. He sometimes has to stay the night in central London. After her third child was born she had a period of lassitude, when it was far too much trouble to go out with three children. There was nobody to help, so she stayed inside. She saw only visiting tradesmen. The only conversation she ever had, except with her husband in the evening, was over the phone with her sister two hundred miles away.

Kitty's situation may appear extreme. But the predicament of increasing numbers of young women approximate to hers. On the whole, the 'working class' do not expose themselves to this sort of thing. A working class woman wants to stay in her own town, within reach of her mother and her relations and friends. But 'mobility of labour', they tell me, is part of the price of economic progress, and more and more of us will be called upon to pay it. The children, I think, pay heavily. I once spent a January afternoon in snow-covered Cambridge reading stories to two little girls. I learned later, to my surprise, and I admit, my pleasure, that the children spoke approvingly of me for months afterwards. And I once spent a sun-drenched August afternoon in a garden near Rochester pushing a swing for three small children. Again it came to my ear that the children remembered me with affection for long afterwards. I am by no means 'wonderful with children'. I was a hit both in Cambridge and Rochester because the children of our middle class suburban nomads are utterly unused to any adult, other than their parents, taking any interest in them. Grandparents may come once or twice a year; perhaps at easter or whitsuntide the car takes every one to visit aunt, uncle and cousins. Kinship is vestigial, and there are none of those honorary uncles and aunts who are the life-long friends of father and mother.

We are sometimes patronizingly intrigued to read that in the past many people lived and died without travelling more than a few miles from the town or village in which they spent their whole lives. The world beyond the horizon was remote territory peopled by 'foreigners'. Many a modern family lives in greater isolation. 'Rude forefather' lived among family, kin, friends and life-long acquaintances. For his descendants the homely and the familiar have

often shrunk to the dimensions of his own 'semi-detached' and its mini-skirt of a garden. The stranger no longer inhabits the next valley; he occupies the other half of the 'semi'. It is worth reflecting that when our justly renowned astronauts soar through space they live in a narrow capsule. Mobility does not necessarily liberate.

Many of us look for liberation to intelligence, to intelligence developed by education. Knowledge and understanding shall both free us aud unite us. 'This also is vanity'. At least it is sometimes. The intelligent apprehend ideas readily; they learn to manipulate words easily. But words and ideas are mental substitutes for things, for people, for concrete situations. The intelligent are tempted to remain in the nursery of their own mind, playing long, happy games with words for counters and concepts for building blocks. Concepts are neat and smooth, very light to handle and they don't dirty your hands. Facts are commonly so awkward in shape, so rough to sensitive hands, so recalcitrant. They are too often rather squalid and really very unrewarding. How seductive was the first of the great philosophers when he taught that the concrete and the individual are but mis-shapen fleeting shadows, while abstractions are the true realities, elegant and eternal!

Plato's metaphysics and cosmology find few customers today. But the real platonic error, which is to think that wisdom is concerned with abstractions, perverts the minds of the *litterati* in every generation. That is why, dear reader, you are disappointed in this article, if you have patiently come even this far. 'The Unity of Man'! There is a sublime concept, fit theme for the devout choreographer of sonorous polysyllables to express in shimmering sequences with rank upon rank of exquisite ancillary abstractions to serve as the *corps de ballet.*

And I have offered you several sixth formers, five callow seminarists, three children on a swing, two typists, and a housewife in a black hour. I have ignored Man and talked about people. I have said nothing about the almost God-like ('in our own image') potentialities of the human race and described the limitations of individuals. How trivial! – I admit it; but – can you deny it? – how pertinently true!

I do not contest the unity of mankind. We are made of the same fabric, put together on the same pattern with 'hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passions . . .' We are united by our common vulnerability. 'If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?' The technical progress of the last two

centuries has certainly united the human race in one common exposure. We have given seven-league boots to, or, if you like, powered with jet engines, our ancient predators, plague, famine (which I hope you will let me extend to cover all forms of economic deprivation) and war. Shylock's words have a new force. 'Subject to the same diseases', we transport infection at supersonic speed. At Expo '67 a special clinic had to be established to deal with the unexpectedly high incidence of venereal contagion. 'Fed with the same food': thanks to our economic interdependence, 'recessions' speed down the transcontinental trade routes to impoverish us all. 'Hurt with the same weapons': the unity of mankind could well be realized by the whole species sharing a common funeral on a single atomic pyre. To vary the metaphor, the world is now a single boat and we are all in it together. It is easy to rock it. It is not beyond our ability to sink it: one ark of destruction for all.

'Healed by the same means', men recognize their common peril and unite in some degree to avert it. The World Health Organization strives to protect us against plague; statesmen, bankers and economists confer to ward off the Rider on the Black Horse, UNO to forestall the Rider on the Red. If a man invent a more economical fuel, transplant a brain or make a better mousetrap, the world need not make a beaten path to his door. They can read all about it in the technical journals, abstracts and digests. Agronomists, engineers, educationalists and cosmeticians hold international conferences to pool their knowledge and tour the world to inspect one another's achievements. That one sinkable craft could still bring us all to the haven of peace and plenty. But the Knights of the Global Table must meet and slay some very powerful ogres, some highly destructive and apparently unkillable dragons before they find the holy Grail of our unity.

I think that they will die of old age before they have begun to grapple with the arab-israeli conflict which focusses the hatred of millions of arabs from Iraq to Morocco upon three million intransigent jews (who can now blame me for anti-semitism). Yet this is a mini-monster beside some of the horrendous fauna which devastate the world. Everywhere we feel the shadow of the ugly mutual suspicion and vicious reciprocal denigration between that part of the world which calls itself 'communist' and that part which pretends to be 'free'. Racialism, vast, blind, irrational, comes welling up from the mindless viscera of men like some apocalypse horror from the bottomless pit. But the lurid imagination of the author of

Revelations never begot its equal. Nationalism, I think of not as a single monster but as a grand alliance of tribes of plague-bearing rats, which, having rotted for ever the unity of Europe, embarked their flea-infested bodies in european holds, crossed every ocean and infected with their virulent epidemic every inhabited landmass. Then there is economic competition. A nice sporty word, 'competition', redolent of healthy exercise, silver cups and congratulations for the plucky loser. Our economic competition makes the world a remorseless jungle of opposing economic interests, wherein manufacturing countries prey on the primary producers, capital and labour dispute every morsel of consumer's flesh, while the peasant is exploited so that the factory worker can have cheap food, except where the agricultural lobby protects the peasant, even when inefficient, and increases the cost of living for everyone else.

Political, ideological, nationalist, economic and religious antagonisms make us suspect, hate, fight and kill one another. There are other sources of disunity which in comparison are mild domestic irritants. Yet they do harm on a large scale and are formidable enough when one contemplates the task of eliminating them. Between the generations there is contempt and mistrust. 'Your generation can't hope to hope to understand our generation'. 'Young people today have no . . .' (fill in according to taste). Opposite sexes like opposite poles attract, but the attraction between men and women often involves very little appreciation and precious little sympathy. For many men a degree of disdain for women is an indispensable part of virility. And my blood has run cold to hear the amount of contempt that a good-hearted woman can put into the monosyllable, 'men!'.

The rich think of the poor as shiftless. (Not only the rich. I was recently staggered by the thirteen year old son of a schoolmaster commenting on the text, 'Sell all that you have and give it to the poor'. He said, 'But they would only spend it in the pub'.) The poor, perhaps with some justification, see the rich as linked in a conspiracy to preserve their wealth. The educated have learned to talk easily and well – but not to the uneducated.

The Unity of Mankind! We are riven by bitter hostilities, sullen suspicions and petty differences stupidly seen out of all proportion. And even when there is no conflict of race, class, culture, sex or generation, we contrive in our self-centredness to extrude indifference to others until it seals us off, each in his own solipsist cocoon. 'The grave's a fine and private place'. Some of us would have life resemble death, and entomb ourselves in our own privacy, pallid but breathing.

'I am happy nowadays because I expect nothing from nobody, and because, just occasionally, very occasionally, I get a bonus, like a really funny film or an unexpected rough kindness'. So a british peer of the realm, describing life at fifty-eight.[1] Savour the bouquet of this mature and noble vintage. (1910: Côte de Balliol: shippers, the House of Lords.) Can you tell it from vinegar?

As a christian you know all the answers. Genesis has taught you the solidarity of the human race, one in its divine origin, one in its god-like possibilities, united in the fall. Christ came to offer redemption to all; the Spirit descended and the apostles spoke in many tongues to reverse the effect of Babel. 'Make disciples of *all* nations!' 'There is neither jew, nor greek, there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female . . .' 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. It is the Church's mission to gather communities round local altars, to unite local communities under the leadership of the bishop, to bind all these communities in the one Church. It is the fashion to stress the community, the 'ecclesial' element in the sacrament. So hire a boat and ply up and down the Suez Canal explaining these truths to arabs and israelis. Get a loud-hailer and bawl them across the Berlin Wall. Tell them to Mao, Vorster and Nixon, to Kitty's next door neighbours and my sixth formers. But don't tell Lord X. If you do, he might start to expect something from somebody, and so imperil his present private happiness.

The conspicuous, and, I fear, increasing failure is in the private sphere. The narrow circle of those we really know, appreciate and love, is contracting rather than expanding. It is for each of us to expand his or her own circle. We should be as avid to know and appreciate people as a scholar or scientist is to know and evaluate facts. Differences of age, background, culture etc., should be stimulating challenges to our ingenuity and goodwill. These are gaps which we must bridge, obstacles which we must demolish. Make a highroad across the desert of our mutual indifference. Fill in the valleys of our ignorance of one another. Level the mountains of our ignorance of one another. Level the mountains of our reciprocal mis-understandings. Yes, I am adapting Isaiah (40,3.). If we are to belong to the messianic kingdom which Isaiah, the Baptist and Jesus preached, we must make ourselves open to God and open to one another. We must study to know and love God; we must learn to make contact with, to appreciate and love one another.

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[1] In the english weekly, *Punch* (21 May, 1969).