The dynamic role of seminary in my religious quest

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A SENIOR ESSAY

THE DYNAMIC ROLE OF SEMINARY
IN MY RELIGIOUS QUEST

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By
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INTERDENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER
ATLANTA, GEORGIA
To my beloved children,

John Albert, Jr. and Veronica Denice,

who were born during my training at I. T. C.

and add much joy to my life.
OUTLINE

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

1. THE GENESIS OF MY SEMINARY EXPERIENCES
   A. Testing Program
   B. My Concept of Seminary

II. MY FAITH RENEWED IN THE MIDST OF CRISES
   A. The Difference in the Status of Students
      1. Institution Within an Institution
         a. The Interdenominational Theological Center
         b. Gammon Theological Seminary
   B. My Blessing During a Dark Hour
      1. Financial Aid Granted
      2. My Faith Renewed

III. A NEW MEANING TOOK PLACE IN MY LIFE
   A. My Condition Defined
   B. Professors Who Influenced Me
      1. Professor G. Murray Branch
      2. Professor Robert C. Briggs
      3. President Oswald P. Bronson
      4. Professor Isaac R. Clark
      5. Professor Josephus R. Coan
   C. Other Theologians Who Have Influenced Me Through Their Works
1. Rudolf Bultmann
2. Nicolas Berdyoev
3. Emil Brunner

IV. APPROACHING THE EXIT OF A THREE-YEAR SEMINARY EXPERIENCE

A. A Combination of Studies at I. T. C. and Emory University

1. My Concept of the Two Schools
2. My Homiletical Experiences

B. My Experiences in Field Education

1. My Juvenile Court Experience
2. Avery Street Church of God in Christ Experiences

V. CONCLUSION

VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY
PREFAE

This paper presents the scope and major phenomena which have given rise to my motivations in becoming a non-static theologian, non-static in the sense that I am seeking to meet the needs of the generation of our time which I believe is the will of God for me.

Finally, behind most papers of this nature is a great number of people who deserve far more credit than mere mention in a preface, but naming some of them here is a small way of expressing recognition and appreciation for helping me in one way or another in the preparation of this essay as a graduation requirement: To my wife, Billie Jean Yates, who has been always at my side not only during the composition of this paper but during the entire task I held at the Interdenominational Theological Center; To Dean Charles B. Copher who has given his approval to my chosen topic; To Professor G. M. Branch who directed me with much caution while doing this paper; To Mrs. Georgia Wilkes who has shared her ideas in regards to the perfection of this paper; and, finally, to my adopted sister from the Philippines, Mrs. Amalia E. Villas, who has done the final typing of this draft of my Senior Essay.
INTRODUCTION

During my three years in seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center at Atlanta, Georgia, I had some dynamic experiences. These experiences have served as both negative and positive factors. Near the beginning of my enrollment at I. T. C., I recall some very confusing experiences, however, I am not saying that those experiences have caused me to give up in the process of my Christian development. I am reminded of a statement made by William Temple in his book *Nature, Man and God* in which he says that the act of putting Jesus to death by the Roman soldiers was an evil act no matter how one looks at it but that same act gave tribute to the purpose for which Christ came to the world. So the whole event of Christ's mission of suffering, death, and the cross was not independent of evil experiences, for those experiences have proven to be of great value to the Christian religion. The Crucifixion was a part of Christ's purpose for coming to the world. I am convinced that there have been profitable results in my life which would not have come about had my troubles not given

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birth to them. Therefore, what is evil in isolation may be considered a valuable act when it is linked to the total experience.

I know of no substitute for my experiences in seminary. If I were to make a parallel of my seminary life with that of Christ's, I would make it in regards to Christ's test in the wilderness....that, for me, seminary has been my wilderness experience. These experiences are unforgettable. These experiences will be life-long motivation for me. These experiences serve as a model in shaping my personality. These experiences are the foundation and structure of my life. As you read the following pages, you will see some of the forces which have influenced me in my religious quest.
My studies were completed at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, on May 29, 1966. I received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Science with a minor in religion. I had considered attending graduate school but I did not have the proper amount of funds.

Miss Lillie B. Spell, one of my instructors in religion, had spoken to me earlier about attending the Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, so after graduation she inquired about my decision, and told me that she had contacted the President of Gammon and that I was to get in touch with him immediately. I discussed my financial status with Miss Spell, but she still encouraged me to contact Dr. M. J. Wynn as soon as possible.

I wrote Dr. Wynn from Holly Springs, Mississippi, and then left for my home in Kansas City, Missouri. When I arrived home I had an answer from Dr. Wynn stating that he had conversed with Miss Spell and, on her recommendation, I had been granted my full tuition, room and board at the Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. I was indeed pleased but I prayed about the matter.

During the summer of 1966, I worked in Kansas City, Kansas,
at an A & P food store training for a store manager. But as the summer commenced, I had another call from Dr. Wynn. He gave me a verbal acceptance to the seminary without my having completed any type of application. He told me that he was the President of Gammon and the only thing I had to do was to get to Gammon for the fall semester. He told me that he would secure full employment for my wife and part-time employment for me.

I had not received any formal material from Gammon, so I had no detailed information as to when the registration for classes would start. So I gave my two weeks notice to my employer, and on September 1, 1966, my wife and I left Kansas en route to Atlanta, Georgia, after visiting relatives in Mississippi. I knew that registration at Atlanta University started around September 14, and I assumed that was also true of Gammon. So I called Dr. Wynn while I was in Mississippi and told him that I would arrive sometime that week. As I talked to him, to my surprise, I learned that I was a day late and that I was to have been at Gammon on September 3, 1966. That evening, I left with approximately four hundred miles to travel by eight o'clock the next morning.

I arrived at Gammon on September 4, 1966, quite fatigued and sleepy after that drive. I did not know about the affiliated seminaries at I. T. C. and that each school has a director
and that there is a president over the entire I. T. C. So in the process of finding the president, I ended up in the office of Dr. Harry V. Richardson, President of I. T. C. When I saw his name plate on his desk, I inquired about Dr. Wynn and he explained that I could find Dr. Wynn in the next building.

After locating Dr. Wynn, I learned that I was to take the entrance examinations that afternoon. I wanted to take the examinations at a later date, but the persons administering the examinations told me that I could not take it on any other day. I was very fatigued and took the examinations in an unpleasant mood. I am convinced that new students should be welcomed warmly and not only at formal gatherings. It is impractical to assume that a student can pass an examination under uncomfortable experiences such as those mentioned above. It is like getting in the water to swim with no knowledge of its depth. I got started very poorly at I. T. C. and it followed me constantly during my first year.

My concept of seminary developed more as I shared in experiences with other seminarians. Very early I discovered that ministers are not perfect, but they are men too, and each has his individual differences. It is idealistic to assume that ministers are supernatural, but it is not true.

In my first semester, I ran into difficulty trying to explain to the Dean why I did not have an application on file.
When I explained that I was of the holiness faith and that I had been granted a full scholarship through Gammon, Dean Charles B. Copher told me to go back and talk with Dr. Wynn again. I confronted Dr. Wynn with my newly discovered information and he said he assumed that I was a Methodist because I came from a Methodist related college (Rust College). He told me that if I would become a Methodist student, I could still receive the scholarship, but otherwise, he could not help me. I looked at Dr. Wynn and I said, "It is not the denomination that is my hang up but it is the principle. I cannot change merely for money." I saw that he was very sorry for making a false assumption about my being a Methodist student.

I walked out of his office without a scholarship and no money. I seemed to have heard the echo of my friends and Church members saying, "You have finished college; stop and work. You do not have to go to school to learn to preach for God will tell you what to say to His people." I lost the scholarship because I did not change my denomination, but I knew a providential God and I knew I did not have to become a slave to money in order to be successful. It was my endeavor to fulfill my duties in regards to my call.

I told a new friend about my situation and he told me to go to Dr. Isaac Clark. I found Dr. Clark. He asked me if I were an I. T. C. student and I asked him to explain what he
meant. That was when I learned that there are several theological schools affiliated with I. T. C. He explained that those schools and the students of those denominations were supported by their churches and denominations. I learned that the Gammon students are supported by the Methodist Church; the Morehouse School of Religion students are supported by Morehouse College and Baptist Churches. He concluded by saying that all the students at I. T. C. who were not supported by a denomination were I. T. C. students, and could receive funds through I. T. C. I knew immediately that I should have been classified as an I. T. C. student but I was afraid that I had waited too long. I voiced my thoughts, but Dr. Clark told me to allow him to talk with Dr. Richardson and he indicated that he wanted me to talk with him also. Dr. Clark left but returned shortly and told me to come and talk with Dr. Richardson. I told Dr. Richardson my story but I also told him that I had decided to return to Kansas City and to return to I. T. C. at a later date. However, Dr. Richardson assured me that I would receive the scholarship I had been informed of. Being a full-blooded fundamentalist, I wanted to leap to my feet and shout for joy but I managed to utter a sincere "thank you". That was my providential God being manifested through President Richardson.

I entered my classes with much eagerness, but it gradually decreased as I tried to acquire certain grades, but did not
seem to be able to do so no matter how hard I studied. Nevertheless, a new creation took place in my life during the latter part of my Middler year. I wrote a term paper about Martin Luther, the person who questioned the doctrines of the Catholic Church, thereby starting the Protestant Reformation. I found a parallel in my early life and that of Martin Luther. I learned that his early childhood was filled with unrest because he tried to be a "perfect being", but after much struggling, I, like Luther, learned to accept the grace of God by faith. It was after I studied Luther's theology that I was re-converted. By this, I mean that I had been in bondage to the traditions of my denomination. Luther held that according to the Gospel, man became righteous before God by faith, and only through faith man is saved. I was inclined to believe that salvation comes through our efforts and "good deeds". It was through that term paper on Martin Luther that I received a new horizon to life and a new dimension in the Christian faith. I can now accept my inability to merit salvation, for salvation is a gift from God. Such an attitude was impossible for me before I came to seminary and came in contact with Luther's theology concerning Romans 1:17 because I, as Luther did in his early life, carried a guilty feeling which resulted from

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my lack of comprehending Romans 1:17.

There are several men at I. T. C. who have had positive effects on me and these men are unforgettable personalities who have, in some way, had a part in the motivation of my religious quest.

Professor George M. Branch is the Associate Professor of Old Testament at I. T. C. and has been my advisor for the past three years. I never was fortunate to have a formal course under his instruction. The major contribution that Professor Branch has made in my development has been his aid in completing this paper. He has provided me with helpful suggestions in giving form to this essay.

Professor Robert C. Briggs is the Professor in New Testament at I. T. C. It may be that Professor Briggs has made a greater contribution than he was able to recognize in the process of my development. I say this because I am aware of the vast amount of material which I am able to apply and master after taking a course called "Introduction to the New Testament" under his instruction. I base this assumption on the fact that my new insight on the meaning and interpretation of the New Testament Scripture has been realized. After learning the meaning of "form criticism", the canonization of Scripture, the study of New Testament composition, understanding Bultmann's work of "demythologization" in Professor Briggs' class, I am
now able to understand what Luther meant in his interpretation of the New Testament in many instances. And as a result of my exposure in New Testament class, I am able to understand Luther's interpretation of the righteousness of God in his treatment of Romans 1:17. The comprehension of that interpretation, as I said earlier, led to my new conversion. Having understood Biblical criticism, I was able to deal with the works of Luther with a wide scope of the meaning of the different opinions and form my philosophy. I mention this to support the fact that I have learned more than Professor Briggs was able to recognize according to the letter grade he placed on my record. However, I am sure that the breakdown was in communication and not a lack of insight on the part of the student. I say that because I am aware of what I was told by Professor Briggs in a conference in which he suggested that I get an English composition handbook in order that I put my assignments in good form. I don't have any problems with the professors who understand my "language". If I am not graded on what I know but rather on grammar and composition, I will probably suffer for a lack of communication. Because I am not perfect in grammar or composition, this will remain as one of my biggest problems in my studies. What am I saying? I am saying that if Professor Briggs could understand me as well as I understand him, I could make all A's in his class. This same problem is the fate
of many of my Black brothers. Of course, I don't stop because of a lack of communication between the White brothers and me who cannot understand me or even take time to try to see what I am saying through my limited vocabulary. But I know that I have learned something from this man which cannot be taken away from me. I have learned to unfold the Gospel in such a way that the dead lives can live again, even in my fundamentalistic Church. As a result of the class under Professor Briggs' instruction, I am able to read various works of many theologians and understand them with a great deal of appreciation and criticism. I am also able to address myself to the major theologies with rational thinking.

A third person who had a great influence in the building of my motivations in this religious quest is President Oswald Perry Bronson. President Bronson was Vice-President of I. T. C. when I first joined the family and he was one of my instructors also. I have found President Bronson to be the type of person who can integrate the principles of the wise theologians and philosophers and make them so comprehensible that even a boy from the ghetto, a boy born in poverty, a boy with distorted and cloudy psychological maturity could understand his teaching. He accepted me not for my ability at that moment but rather for what I could become if given the opportunity to learn. After my dynamic experiences with President Bronson, I can only say that
we need more men like him in this Black institution's classrooms.

I hope that I have not been misunderstood on account of the statement above. I am not saying that President Bronson understands simply because he is a Black man. Seemingly, there are also some Black instructors at I. T. C. who do not comprehend me. They don't seem to understand the dilemma we are in as a whole, or even our unique situations as sons from the Ghetto, victims of unjust treatment, historically, escapees of the snares of unfair societies and still victims of unfair labor practices. What I mean is that some of us are full time students and are working full time, but some of us are paid only $1.40 per hour which is not by choice but by necessity in order to continue our education.

Another professor who has dealt with me personally by helping me to overcome my barriers in relating to people is Dr. Isaac R. Clark, Professor in Homiletics at I. T. C. Professor Clark has been a "Moses" in my life. Homiletically speaking, he went down to the bondage of my psychological being and helped me free and my soul. He loosed my soul from the bars built by twenty-four years of life experiences in Mississippi, the black belt of the south. I shall not relate information concerning conditions in Mississippi for they have been the talk of the nation for a long time.
The final person who has affected me dynamically is the Professor in Christian Education at I. T. C., Professor Josephus R. Coan. He has taught me for five semesters since I have been at I. T. C. and if I am allowed to say this, I feel that he is indeed a "soul brother". I say this because I do not only learn in his classes but I get "soul food", too. I cannot think of Professor Coan without recalling the term "mandate" which he defines as Christ's great commission to the disciples and he holds that it is also to us today. He is a man of great wisdom and is able to relate to the students and in turn be related to by them. He is a man seasoned with knowledge, integrity, humility, ability, and firmness. Dr. Coan has traveled widely abroad and he is able to relate those experiences to the students in such a manner that they are able to understand what he is saying and be able to identify with what he said so that they can communicate these things to their laymen in helpful fashions.

At this juncture, I would like to include some theologians who have influenced me through their works that I am able to read from time to time, which thing I have mentioned earlier in this essay.

Rudolf Bultmann agrees with Karl Barth in finding the essence of Christianity in the Kerygmatic Proclamation of the New Testament - a word of God addressed to man and demanding the response of faith. Some of Bultmann's critics say that
he has been driven into this theological orientation because the negative results of his researches have left him with so little in the way of a factual historical foundation for his theology; but other critics allege that he has deliberately stressed the negative findings of historical research in order to make it clear that faith is not at all dependent upon such research. However, the essential thing which impresses me is that Bultmann has attempted to interpret Christianity in such a way that one can be radically skeptical about the factual content of the gospel narrative and yet continue to believe in the essential message of the New Testament. 3

Bultmann defines mythology as the use of imagery to express the otherworldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life. 4 Despite the fact that Bultmann's definition of mythology was a bad one, as many critics have pointed out, it has called to the attention of many theologians a need for further clarification on the gospels. Bultmann has made great contributions and he enabled us to recognize that there are many unresolved problems and difficulties on our hands. He pointed out that "the task of working out a program of de-mythologization would be arduous enough to occupy scholars for a


4 Ibid., p. 461.
generation, which is the dilemma of modern man". I have learned that modern man's dilemma is my dilemma also because it has become my concern to understand and preach the gospel with meaning for people of our times. I am quite appreciative to Bultmann and other theologians for keeping the Christian faith a living issue in the contemporary world.

I have gained great insight from the writings of Nicolas Berdyaev for he held that man is searching not for "being" but for "truth" and the meaning of existence. He holds that man is not confronted with abstract truth but by the truth, as the way and the life. Berdyaev held that truth is a concrete personality; it is its way and its life. He believed that truth is, in its highest degree, dynamic. His philosophy has a colorful and sound meaning in my life.

As I searched to know myself and to find God, I ran across some words from Emil Brunner's pen. He holds that God approaches man and man comes from God and that their meeting point is Jesus Christ. He holds that God treats man as the free and responsible being whom he loves, and whose choice is to accept God's grace in faith or to reject it in sin. Brunner says that this is the choice that confronts man when he hears or

5 Ibid., p. 462.

reads the gospel of Jesus Christ.  

The theologians I have mentioned are not the only persons who have influenced me in my religious quest, but they are among those who have had the greatest impact on me.

As I approach the end of my studies at I. T. C., I am quite concerned with the needs of all people but I am concerned primarily with the little girls and boys in the Ghettoes of our cities. I recall an experience I had in my field education work when I visited the Juvenile Court on Capital Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia. There were about twenty-five seminarians present that afternoon. After we had toured the various departments, we went to the basement of the building to discuss what we had observed and to make comments on the insights we had received. One of the seminarians asked what we could do to help little girls and boys like those whom we had seen. One of the officers told us that we could stop passing those children on Sundays. She suggested that we carry them to church even if they are dirty and ragged. She, then, told a touching experience she had with a group of little girls and boys once. She asked the children if they knew God, and most of them said "no", but one little boy thought and asked her, "Is his last name damn? If his last name is damn, then I do know God". That is serious. That little boy had never heard God's name

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used except in vain by some adults and he had probably never been to church. She concluded by saying that we had much to do but it should be done before the children get to the juvenile home for then there is not much we, as ministers, can do.

The second great experience in my field education was the experience at the Avery Street Church of God in Christ at Marietta, Georgia. My field work at that church did not end when the requirements for the class ended, but I am still working there as Youth Pastor, and the encounters with these young people have been most redemptive in my religious quest. I have been able to deal with people even while I train for my professional vocation. The discussions I have had with these young people have been educational to me and the gifts they have given me are indications of their appreciation. I only regret that I am not going to be with them for a long time. I feel so close to those young people because they feel free with me and seem to be able to discuss their serious problems with me without feeling that I will look on them as being evil if their problems are not only religious.

Another dynamic and redemptive experience I encountered at seminary was during the summer of 1968 when I attended classes at Emory University. I enrolled at Emory through an exchange program which is a co-project between I. T. C. and Emory. I carried an eight-credit-hour load, four in Premarital Pastoral Counseling and four in Creative Sermon Writing.
Having been a member of the Creative Sermon Writing class under the instruction of Professor John R. Brokhoff, another dimension to my homiletical experience was added. I am now able to write and preach a creative sermon. I feel that Emory helped cultivate that ability of mine to write creatively.

My course in Premarital Pastoral Counseling has been most rewarding to me for it helped me discover what type of ministers our respective churches are in need of. My experience in that class has given me a sense of pride, knowing that I can be helpful to the laymen. As a result of that class, I am now counseling a young engaged couple at the Marietta Church of God in Christ. I look forward to being creative in my preaching and being helpful to young adults in their search for a "kind" of living. It was also through that class that I came to understand and be aware of the importance of sex education in the family and schools.
CONCLUSION

As I conclude this paper, I am convinced that I am not merely a theologian but also a better layman and man. For as I review my past, live presently, and plan for the future, I shall not allow guilty feelings about the past be dead-end signs in my pathway. I shall take my experiences of the past and anticipate for the future with concern for others and an endeavor to do God's will.

The experiences that I have had at I. T. C. are merely a portion of that which constitutes the vehicle which will carry me over the rough roads and through the storms of this life. The personalities I have spoken of in this paper constitute the wiring system of this vehicle and God is the indispensable force in the total make-up of this vehicle.
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