

PERSONAL AND LITURGICAL PRAYER IN A TIME OF DISINTEGRATION

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Within human communities myths and symbols arise, and rites and ceremonies evolve, as answers to or at least as modes of addressing fundamental needs. One of these is our need to celebrate in community with others, responding in different ways to life's crucial cycles. In primitive societies the jubilant character of celebration finds expression in song and in dance, which Huizinga calls "the purest and most perfect form of play that exists".¹ Sacred celebrations among most peoples have involved dance, for example Miriam and the women who danced at Yahweh's victory (Ex. 15: 20f). All such celebrative actions are not merely aesthetic pursuits but spontaneous or repeated responses to the discovery that we are not just spectators of creation but joyful participants in it.

A second need which has found expression in varying forms of personal and liturgical prayer is that of dealing with the chaos, death, or darkness which surround or threaten our existence, and from which we seek deliverance. Prayer expresses not only our sense of human finitude as we stand at the boundary of the infinite. It is our way of resisting also the fear and despair that are elicited by our mortality and incompleteness. To pray is not simply to reflect deeply on our life as it is but to reflect deeply on life as it may become. It is to seek that freedom in God by which we outsoar our creatureliness, sin, and death. So prayer is always directed towards salvation, and what the Dutch theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw says of religion holds true no less of prayer: "Religion is always directed towards salvation, never towards life itself as it is given; and in this respect all religion, with no exception, is the religion of deliverance."²

A third need which finds expression in personal and liturgical prayer is the need of empowerment. By power I mean not the ominous, self-assertive power of controlling others but that God-inspired self-abandonment to the love of God with heart, mind, and soul, and to the love of our neighbour. We are created to live in communion—with God, with our neighbour, and with the very creation of which we are part. But such life comes to us from without, it does not come from us or belong to us. The only

possibility of possessing it is to receive it as a gift of grace from God the Lord and Giver of life. The Reformation insistence on *sola fide* is a clearly understood affirmation that we live in this power only by the Spirit of God enabling us.

Forms of Disintegrative Prayer

With the nineteenth century the age of positivism dawned, experiment triumphed over speculation, and metaphysics was routed from the laboratory. Personal and liturgical prayer have consequently become less and less the mode by which we experience, interpret, and celebrate our existence.

1. Personal disintegration

The disintegration may be illustrated in what can be called the morbid psychology of prayer. In such prayer I attempt to put God in a relation to me that parallels the way I relate to my own inner being. Thus, if I fear and hate my own urge to control, or my competitiveness, or my gross sexuality, then I will find a God who will hate my controlling ways, my competitiveness, and my sexuality. But in this behavioural maneuver I am merely inviting God to have towards me the same disintegrative relationship as I have towards myself. Paradoxically, in the very prayer which should be a bond or communion between God and myself, I can actually create a sense of distance and make myself unassailable by encompassing God in my own delusions about myself. My confession of sins may actually prevent me from dying to the old and coming alive to the new that is in Christ, if, when I pray, I disclose a self-contempt which is actually a form of self-preservation. The spiritual director who is sensitive to this will pay attention to the disintegrative relationship between the person who seeks guidance and the God in whose presence prayer is made.

2. Pastoral disintegration

The disintegration may also be illustrated in the confusion between certain clinical trends in pastoral counselling and what has historically been called the cure of souls. The growth of the pastoral counselling movement especially in the United States has increasingly been accepted as a valuable and even necessary part of pastoral ministry. Its results have been beneficial for the most part, and the standards required by the American Association of Pastoral Counsellors are remarkably impressive. But there has also been a tendency to confuse spiritual direction with enlarging the human potential for growth and love. Dealing with depressive or schizoid states is not the same thing as that form of ministry by

which one person guides another in growth towards evangelical maturity. "To be healthy and to be whole," Michael Ramsey has written, "is no substitute for being penitent, forgiven, and holy."³

3. *Congregational disintegration*

We can find another illustration of how the spirit and forms of prayer have become disintegrative in the shallow religiousness of those who have never known or even been encouraged to learn much more about prayer than an occasional grace at meals or bedtime devotion. It is easy to be cynical and speak of this as the "See Dick, see Jane" level of prayer, and we should not forget that in prayer or any other pursuit we must start somewhere. But if we study the life of a local congregation that is revealed in bulletins and announcements, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that personal prayer is put to the side as a private matter and not part of pastoral ministry. Prayer, according to Theophan the Recluse, "must not simply be an occupation for a certain time, but a permanent state of the spirit". Or again: "Ceaseless interior prayer," says the old villager in another nineteenth century source, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, "is a continual yearning of the human spirit towards God."⁴ Yet it is doubtful if a typical congregation affords much of a welcome to that yearning of the human spirit or the means of enlarging it that is to be found in the older spiritual tradition.

The consequences of this disintegration are at least three. First, among some prayer comes to be regarded as an expression of Freud's universal obsessional neurosis, and therefore as in irreconcilable conflict with reason, science, and experience. Others in contrast turn to ways of nurturing their religious hungers which seem more personal or experiential and even hint of ecstasy, instant or incidental. Essential oils are drawn from yoga, Eastern meditation, encounter or charismatic groups, to reinvigorate a spiritual life seemingly ever in need of reinvigoration. A third and more serious consequence is that prayer loses its integrity when it neglects to be open to the gospel's fundamental criticisms of religion and society. Church history has provided painfully many examples of the tendency to forget that, in Origen's words, "we have another system of allegiance".⁵ Explicit in Jesus' own teaching is a summons to an evangelical *anachoresis*—a withdrawal from existing social structures, "house, brothers, sisters, father, children or land" for his sake (Mk. 10: 29). Prayer is a putting of space, *chora*, between me and my social ties and commitments so that they may not become controlling or determinative of my time, money-making or enthusiasms. In fact,

if we follow the line of thought which we find in Athanasius about the incarnation, Jesus Christ himself is the place for us where God is known and believed. To pray, therefore, in the name of Jesus means to make room for God in our natures by allowing God to take the place of those influences and forces to which we otherwise give property rights.

Communion with God as Trinity

In a phrase that was widely quoted and modulated in subsequent centuries of liturgical prayer and theological reflection Irenaeus wrote in the second century: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of his boundless love became what we are that he might make us what he himself is."⁶ In the incarnation Jesus Christ, by appropriating our human nature, unites himself with us. Baptism, by ingrafting us into Christ, fashions true humanity within us. In the eucharist we participate in his very life, and therefore also in his divine being. In the words and acts of this liturgical prayer we lay aside every earthly care and pass over into the life that is more than life. By offering the pure gifts of creation, bread and wine, to God who made everything good, we celebrate as participants in that creation. In and through that bread and wine we see and have fellowship with Christ himself who frees us from death, and we are empowered by the gifts of the Spirit and receive the hope of eternal life.

This is substantially the doctrine of Christ and the sacraments which is to be found from the second century, not a fixed core of binding doctrines but an insight into the meaning of God's creation, redemption, and Pentecostal empowering. As early as the history recorded in Acts, rites and ceremonies evolved which gave expression to the trinitarian character of the church's liturgical prayer. The process comes to its supreme expression in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, where the themes of celebration, deliverance, and empowerment are continually interwoven with one another. "You brought us out of nothing," the anaphora begins. God is the good Creator, whose creation we bless and enjoy in community with others. The prayer continues with the memorial or *anamnesis* of our salvation through Christ: "And when we had fallen, you raised us up again; you did not cease doing everything until you had brought us into heaven and given us your kingdom which is to come." God is the Redeemer, who has delivered us from death and darkness. Finally, the whole mystery of the eucharist is celebrated "in the fullness of the Holy Spirit", as we hear in the people's response after their communion: "We have seen the true light and have received the

heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith. Let us worship the undivided Trinity that has saved us." God is Spirit, who empowers us to live the life of communion and fellowship.

To these three ideas of celebration, deliverance, and empowerment we now give a somewhat fuller treatment because of their importance in the worship of the church.

1. *The eucharistic action is a joyful celebration of our participation in creation.*

If we speak of secularism as disintegrative, this is not so much because it rejects any religious explanation of the structure or order of the world, but because it rejects the deeper implications of Jesus' word in Mk. 2: 29: "The Sabbath was made for the good of man." It is one of the most surprising facts of religious history that when the people of Israel ended the period of desert wandering and crossed the Jordan to settle the land, they did not first build a sacred place for God. In what Abraham Heschel has called "an architecture of time" they remembered the Sabbath. The religion of Israel from the first was a religion of time. A particular day, measured by the rhythms of the sun and earth, is set aside to be a sign of the covenant between God and the people. For us likewise the worship of the Lord's day is part of the rhythms of creativity and repose, provisions for our benefit and health. It is the day of blessing when we attach ourselves to the God who calls us into being as dancers, celebrants or music-makers.

2. *The eucharistic action is also a sign and reminder of God's acts of salvation.* In the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue the words about the sabbath are different from the version in Exodus: "Remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and that Yahweh your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm; because of this Yahweh your God has commanded you to keep the sabbath day" (Dt. 5: 15). In the architecture of time we also remember God's salvation. The secular reading of history is inadequate to explain the events of the exodus. It was not a sheer happening in the chronicles of history but a mode by which we know and have communion with the God of redemption. Likewise, the Easter event is not simply a day on a Roman or contemporary calendar. It is the disclosure of the God who frees us from death and makes all things new in Christ. Therefore Sunday by Sunday when in liturgical prayer we proclaim the Lord's death, confess his resurrection, and rejoice in the mystery of our union with him, we go beyond history to that metahistory in which all things begin to be reconciled to God.

3. *Since the Spirit rests upon the whole church, we are*

empowered in the eucharist to become the salt, the light, and the leaven of the world. From first to last communion is the work of the Spirit (see 2 Cor. 13: 14). In holy communion the Spirit comes and touches both us and the gifts of bread and wine. Theologians in the early church were for the most part non-speculative about the presence of Christ in the eucharist. It was for them a mystery of ascension and transformation. The ascension of Jesus is his passing over into the fullness of life as it is where God is. It is a transformation from the old to the new. But what happened in Jesus involves both God and ourselves. We “con-ascend” with him. We have already entered, because of Jesus, into the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit. In the words of Cyril of Jerusalem: “Whatever the Spirit has touched is sanctified and changed.”⁷ And the change in us, which we celebrate at every eucharist, is tangible: for we are eating the bread of life and drinking the cup of salvation.

What happens, however, when this architecture of time becomes dismantled piece by piece? For one thing, we shall lose the sense of the holy day. The rhythm of creativity and repose is sacramentally expressed in the setting aside of a day when we “put aside all earthly care”, for in so doing we name care as care—as burden, as toil—and therefore in the power of the Spirit depotentiate the controlling and even enslaving powers of secular existence. But if we have no time of celebration, no time to name care as care and thereby to free ourselves from it, we remain imprisoned in the sheer happenings of time and space. In his study of the prospects for the colonisation of space T. A. Heppenheimer has a chapter entitled, “What’s to do on Saturday night?” “The colonists,” he writes, “will be no cadre of grimly self-sacrificing robots. They will be ordinary human beings.” Amongst the activities of Saturday which he names are sex, low-gravity swimming, and entertainment “pretty much what people want.”⁸ It may be significant that there is no chapter in the book entitled, “What’s to do on Sunday morning?” But where a human community has lost the cyclical and restful celebration of the good creation, new life, and empowerment, one of two things tends to happen. Either the life of that community is forced into cramped and inhibiting forms or else its liturgy becomes secularized in the form of sports, political contests, or musical celebrations of one kind or another. One way or the other large and usually unanswered questions remain: “What are we looking for?” “What is our purpose?” and “Can we look for anything better?”

The questions are not simply modern ones. They can be dated precisely to the year 386, the year of Augustine’s conversion. As

the events are recorded in the *Confessions*, one of Augustine's friends while walking near the city walls of Treves found a copy of the *Life of Antony*, written by Athanasius:

All at once he was filled with the love of holiness. Angry with himself and full of remorse, he looked at his friend and said, "What do we hope to gain by all the efforts we make? What are we looking for? What is our purpose in serving the state? Can we hope for anything better than to be the Emperor's friends? . . . But if I wish, I can become the friend of God at this moment."⁹

In the garden in Milan shortly afterwards, Augustine remembered how Antony too had felt himself directly and personally confronted by the word of the gospel. Like Antony, in a crisis of reorientation but with a new sense of purpose he embraced what he later called "a truly great vision for a life's work".¹⁰ Augustine's influence on subsequent Christian faith and practice is beyond calculation, and it is significant that his conversion occurred out of a study of the life of a Coptic ascetic whose ideal was to be realised within that faith and practice in continually vivifying ways. I propose to look at Antony and the desert experience in order to find certain models for dealing with prayer in a time of disintegration.

Antony and the Desert Tradition

Athanasius composed the *Life* during his third exile from 355-362, presumably just after the death of Antony at an advanced age in 356. The century during which Antony had lived was one of political instability, attempts at reconstruction, and recurrent collapse. The empire was being cannibalised, and an enormous human price paid by the civil population to support military preparedness. The church on the one hand was beginning to enjoy enormous prestige and temporal power in the new Christian establishment, where to be a Christian and to be a citizen were not simply coextensive but identical. On the other hand the doctrinal crisis of Arianism seemed to be making a half of the Christian body refuse to acknowledge the orthodoxy or even the good faith of the other half. A kind of diluted, socially respectable, and even politically powerful Christianity had much to offer in the late fourth century—but clearly not for Antony.

Christopher Dawson has described the new social order which arose in Egyptian monasticism as "a departure—*anachoresis*—from the city to the desert. . . . As the Jews had escaped from their bondage in Egypt and gone out into the wilderness to find a

new law in Sinai, so the monks left civilisation to meet God alone in the desert and to find a new way of life according to the Spirit."¹¹ A new way of life according to the Spirit—that in briefest terms is the ideal which Antony still represents in our own time. His withdrawal into the desert will be regarded as eccentric only by those to whom a church in alliance with contemporary economic structures or political power seems a more natural sight.

One of the most interesting words in Christian history is the word *paroikia* which in its English form through the Latin gives us the word "parish". For us, however, parish means territory, and therefore by extension it includes everything that is done within that territory. The word belongs to a way of thinking about the church that has been peculiarly successful and pervasive in European and North American Christianity. It refers to establishment of religion, to relations between church and state, and to any of a multitude of activities or ideologies prefaced by the adjective "Christian"—Christian art, Christian ethics, Christian commonwealth, and so on. In contrast, in early Christian history the word *paroikia* means "congregation", but it refers particularly to the experience of being strangers, pilgrims, and foreigners in the world. Like Abraham and Sarah, the prototypical sojourners and wanderers, the church is always going out. Here we have no continuing city (Heb. 13: 14). Consequently, the church will be renewed not by entering into ever more entangling relationships with secular power but by *anachoresis*, by seeking the new way of life according to the Spirit. We seek that new way in the prayer of the "anchorites"—the community of those who will no longer give rights to the controlling and enslaving forces of secular existence.

The spirituality of Antony is anything but antisocial. Indeed, it was not even prompted by the church of his day or for a long time supported by it. It was the product, rather, of a spontaneous lay movement, in order to build, as Georges Florovsky expresses it, "on the virginal soil of the Desert, a New Society, to organise there, on the Evangelical pattern, the true Christian Community".¹² We may summarise Antony's contribution to any renewed understanding of personal prayer as the discovery of the desert as a place of solitude, truth, and vision.

1. The first discovery to which Antony points is of *the desert as a place of solitude*. Prayer, as understood within this desert tradition, is the surrender of all things in which I have confidence, including my own self-certitude, in order to stand before God in my nothingness. Antony had gone into the desert not to escape reality but to find freedom and the grace of God. And what we

learn from him is that, as Christ's own life was a negation of the tyranny of the world and a self-surrender to God, so by sharing in that renunciation we may find the beginning of a new life. The first discovery of Antony in the desert is the first also in the spiritual life: I choose to surrender to Christ crucified and risen every contrary claim upon my life. "Draw inspiration from Christ always," Antony advised, "and trust in him. And live as though dying daily."

2. The second discovery to which Antony points is that of *the desert as a place of truth*. Here we face the possibility of advancing to a new degree of liberation, which is the awakening of a consciousness of self whereby the whole of our existence will be recast. Antony describes his experience in the desert as an encounter with the demons, and it will be helpful if we can transpose into modern terms what he says about his struggles in the depths. At the least they are to be interpreted as that penetration into the unknown abyss which all of us carry within and which conceals in most of us the dark forces which threaten or dominate us. But Christ's death was both a negation of the power of the world—the power to control and possess—and at the same time a total surrender to the love of God and of human kind with heart, mind, and soul. Faith in Christ and the acceptance of his cross mean sharing in this negation and self-surrender, but at the same time mean also sharing in his resurrection. For Antony, the use of the sign of the cross either in prayer or in blessing is a constant reminder of our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Correspondingly, when I seal myself with this sign, I abandon every shred of my conventionalised and structured experience and awaken to a new sense of living for the first time in reality.

3. The third discovery to which Antony points is of *the desert as the place of vision*. The *Life* frequently refers to Antony's visions, and we read, for example, of the beam of light which drenched him as he heard a voice, "I will be your helper for ever." The visions are recorded typically from the later period of his life, after the time when he came out of the wilderness "having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God."¹³ His life was now responsive and open at every point to the Spirit of God. He no longer therefore needed to cling to his solitude, and was wholly available to serve those who need his guidance or healing. Living a simple and unencumbered life, he immersed himself in the issues of injustice, social oppression, pastoral concern, and theological controversy.

Once again it will be helpful if we can transpose into modern

terms what he says about vision and service. Antony is a remarkable example of a spirituality that involves a daily reorientation of our life to Christ through a massive shift in personhood in which everything of oneself is now drenched in the light of Christ. It is a spirituality which is inevitably and radically social, and yet it is marked by a peacefulness and tranquillity that do not yield to the pressures of others to conform to their worlds.

Certain patterns and techniques of prayer and contemplation which we can find in Antony were later developed in the desert tradition and have more recently in our own time come back into prominence. The use of the body, for example, as in standing, walking about, and prostrating oneself; breathing as “the natural way to the heart”; the forcing of the mind (as St Gregory of Sinai put it) “to descend from the head to the heart and hold it there”; linking the name of Jesus to the breathing, particularly in the Jesus prayer; and that desireless awareness or *apatheia* in which the mind is emptied of any mental structures which keep us from looking at the truth direct—here are some evangelical treasures, which seem to have been hidden in a field, but which some have found again as they have penetrated deeper and deeper into the country of the spirit.

The Cosmic Christ and the Earthly Liturgy

We return to the eucharist as the response of loving gratitude by the whole church on behalf of all creation to the Creator. Each of these terms is significant, and requires amplification before we conclude.

1. *The eucharist is the response of loving gratitude by the whole church.* It is not simply the response of a local gathering of believers, who happen to come together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. It is an act done by the whole body of Christ. It becomes the time and place where we enter into the reality of the church in all time and space. Because our life does not end with death, in the eucharist we transcend the limits of death itself. Thus the naming of the living and the dead in our prayers Sunday after Sunday is not an optional extra but a way of sharing in that reality. We name Mary and the saints and all our friends living and dead, because they with us lift up the offering of praise. In the words of Anthony Bloom, “The living are related to the dead for whom they pray. In the dead we no longer belong completely to this world, in us the dead still belong to history.”¹⁴

2. *The eucharist is offered also on behalf of all human beings.* Christ has assumed our human nature, and therefore all of humanity is somehow linked with him. As Israel had behind it in

its history the destruction of the sea and the deliverance that came after, so the church has behind it the events of Golgotha and Easter. Behind the church stands the One who continually extends his government through the preaching of his gospel, and in the church the Spirit begins to take possession of the common life of all.

3. *The eucharist is offered on behalf of everything that is created.* The universe around us is a vast web of incredible energy patterns, all things interacting with one another in an infinitely complicated way. But it is in this universe of curved space-time that God is revealed and is to be worshipped. So as we bring with a blessing the fruits of the earth, wheat and wine, we stand in the presence of the God who has reconciled everything in heaven and everything on earth through Christ. With these elements of bread and wine the whole material and organic creation is offered up to God along with Christ's self-offering on the cross. At a time when we have become acutely conscious of the environmental crisis and the dislocations in human relationships, the eucharist affords a uniquely profound awareness of God's love and reconciling purpose for the whole of creation.

In the same general period as Antony a rich and extensive creativity had produced the liturgies of the east associated with the names of Mark, John Chrysostom and Basil. Within a fairly short period these had gained widespread acceptance as the form of the church's liturgical prayer, and at least by the middle of the fourth century we can find a basic unity and similarity in the forms of that prayer. What is required, as I see it, is a renewal of our contract with these sources of all our liturgical traditions.

Three Types of Liturgical Action

The recent history of Bible Societies in this country and overseas provides us with a valuable insight about liturgical renewal. Whereas in an earlier period it was the aim of Bible Societies to translate scripture into as many languages and dialects as possible, the more recent thinking—for example, of the United Bible Societies—is that it is usually necessary to have three types of scriptures in any language: first, a translation which will reflect the classical or traditional usage; second, a translation in the present day literary language so as to communicate to the well-educated constituency; and third, a translation in the "common" or "popular" language, known and used by the common people.¹⁵

The same principle surely holds good of liturgical prayer also, and in the fullness of its liturgical life the congregation requires three similar types: what we can call the classical or traditional rite;

the contemporary version at a high literary level; and the common or popular type. In the Reformed tradition, to take one family of churches, the contemporary version is exemplified in the rites of the Book of Common Worship (1946) or the Book of Common Order (1979). There is a place, too, in the life of the congregation for a much freer and more spontaneous form, with a minimum of structure, though for that very reason careful preparation will be required.

Not simply in the interests of ecumenical rapprochement, important though that is, but in order to draw once again from the sources, I suggest that we attempt on occasions to restore the rite in its traditional form as part of the liturgical life of the congregation. This means taking substantially the form and language of the classical rites of the eucharist and using them as the occasional vehicle of the congregation's praise and celebration. Cyril of Jerusalem's catechetical lectures on the eucharist will indicate the order of the principal parts from the washing of the hands to the Lord's Prayer, and the liturgies of St Basil and St John Chrysostom the text of the prayers. Adaptation and abbreviation to suit modern preferences will no doubt be necessary, but as much as possible the structure, language, and spirit of the rites should be retained. This will include the recitative chant which gives the rites their characteristic solemnity or awe. These are not responses that can be manipulated, but the emphasis on rational discourse by itself in Protestant worship is for many people, one suspects, a larger barrier to real religious experience than we are prepared to admit.

We are not made just for strap-hanging, clock-punching, and passing the time. We are not made just to exist. We are born to be free, graceful, and at peace. And in whatever time or space we are, when we worship, we remember that. Whatever others now or in the future may do "in the Spirit on the Lord's day", worship will open the gates to let us see the fullest that we can become, which is the very fullness of Jesus Christ.

NOTES

- 1 J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 164. Boston, 1955.
- 2 G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, pp. 681f. London, 1938.
- 3 Michael Ramsey, *The Charismatic Christ*, p. 45. London, 1974. The passage is quoted in Kenneth Leach, *Soul Friend*, p. 90, San Francisco, 1977. The whole of chapter 3 is worth studying in this connection.
- 4 *The Way of a Pilgrim*, p. 2. New York 1965.
- 5 *Contra Celsum*, 8: 75.
- 6 *Adversus haereses*, 5 pref.
- 7 *Mystagogical Catechisis*, 5: 7.
- 8 T. A. Heppenheimer, *Colonies in Space*, pp. 148ff. Harrisburg, Pa., 1977.

- 9 *Confessions*, 7: 6.
- 10 *De ordine*, 2: 10: 28.
- 11 Christopher Dawson, *Medieval Essays*, p. 23. New York, 1959.
- 12 Georges Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture*, p. 86. Belmont, Mass., 1974. The whole of Chapter III, "Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert," is worth reading to understand the place of Antony in early monasticism.
- 13 *The Life of Antony*, 14. New York, 1980.
- 14 Anthony Bloom and Georges LeFebvre, *Courage to Pray*, p. 60. London, 1973.
- 15 Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, p. 31. Leiden, 1969.

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