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# Adventures *in* Evangelical Civility

A Lifelong Quest *for* Common Ground

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To Phyllis,  
loving and wise companion in the quest  
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# Contents

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Preface ix

1. Calvinists in an Edinburgh Pub 1
2. A Tale of Two Authors 6
3. A Many-Faceted “Imaging” 18
4. More Than Calisthenics 35
5. Lessons from the Philosophical “Moderns” 44
6. Commonalities in the Public Square 58
7. Preaching Civility 81
8. Depravity: Less Than “Total”? 91
9. Our “Direction-Setting” 113
10. Paying Attention to Context 125
11. Reformed and Evangelical 142
12. When Truth Is Distorted 153
13. On Being a “Public Intellectual” 163

vii

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| 14. Interfaith Engagements     | 178 |
| 15. Of Hymns and Dialogues     | 196 |
| 16. Concerns about the Journey | 208 |
| Notes                          | 225 |
| Index                          | 237 |

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## Preface

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**S**HORTLY AFTER I RETIRED AS PRESIDENT OF FULLER THEOLOGICAL Seminary, I met a local businessperson in the aisle of a grocery store. He asked me the typical “How are you enjoying retirement?” questions, and then he said: “I hope you are writing your autobiography! I’m sure there are some great stories to tell about your twenty-year presidency at Fuller!” My response was that, no, there was no autobiography in the works. But, I added, I was beginning to write a memoir. “How is that different?” he asked.

I forget exactly how I answered his question, but I know it was a quick response, meant to get me back to grocery shopping. His question did motivate me, however, to do a Google search about the meaning of “memoir.” I discovered that a number of academic conference sessions have been devoted to lengthy discussions about what constitutes a memoir and that many a book reviewer has complained that something an author claims is in the memoir genre fails to meet the standards for inclusion.

I’ll leave the details of that for literary critics to discuss. For my part here, I only want to take note of a contrast that often shows up in those discussions. There is a general consensus that a memoir

must be characterized by a “sustained narrative,” and that when this is absent the result is frequently described as a “collage.”

Autobiographies, as well as memoirs, are certainly meant to be “sustained narratives,” but this book is certainly not an autobiography. There are no reports here about growing up in New Jersey, or being a pastor’s son, or playing tuba in the high school band. The only reference to an early romance, for example, focuses on my teenage arguments with Mary Jane, a devout Catholic, about Marian dogma. If I were to discuss the most important of my human relationships—the life “adventures” (to use the word from my title) for which I am most grateful to God—I would focus on my life with Phyllis (to whom I dedicate this book). I would also say much about our son, Dirk; our daughter-in-law, Christine; and our two grandsons, Willem and Peter—but there is nothing about them in these pages. And the man from the grocery store will definitely not be offered here the kind of “great stories” about Fuller that he hoped I would narrate.

Nor is this book a detailed report of my intellectual pilgrimage as such. Someone once asked me to list the ten most influential books in my life, and I began with—and this was only half jokingly—*The Boy Scout Handbook* and the Sugar Creek Gang adventure stories, written for preteen evangelical boys. Most of us don’t really mention in such contexts the subclass of the writings that have actually shaped our views of life. But I do not even discuss in these pages several of the books that have profoundly shaped my theological and philosophical perspectives. Given the theme that is my organizing principle here, there is no occasion to describe what an illuminating experience it was for me to read Father (later Cardinal) Avery Dulles’s *Models of the Church* or works by and about Edith Stein, a Jewish convert who became a Carmelite nun and was killed by the Nazis. And those are only two prominent examples of many influences that are not treated in what follows.

Recently I read a comment by a writer, much younger than myself, who talked about having produced her third memoir. While

she could easily be running the risk of telling us more about herself than most of us care to know, she is not violating the nature of the genre. A person can write multiple memoirs, but there can really only be a single autobiography. If one writes a second version of the latter, it is because there was more to add, or there were important revisions to make. A memoir, though, has a more limited scope. It typically has an explicit angle, a specific area of one's life that one wants to reflect upon.

My angle in this book has to do with the idea of *human commonness*. As I look back over my academic career—I write this now at age seventy-five—I see commonness as a theme that has been informing the main intellectual endeavors that have engaged me from the start of my academic career. More often than not, the theme has been an explicit topic that I have wanted to address. At other times, I can now discern, it was there just below the surface of what I was wrestling with. But it has been a consistent theme for me, whether in thinking about the implications of my Calvinist view of election, or my philosophical investigations of action theory and body/soul dualism, or my efforts to learn what I could from Mennonites, or my interfaith dialogues, and so on.

I make no effort here to bring all of this under a chronological scheme. I jump around a bit from one stage to another, and then back again, in my intellectual journey. This may give a “collage” impression at times. But my intention is to reflect on my intellectual travels in the form of what I have consciously intended throughout the writing as the development of a “sustained narrative.”

In a casual conversation with a prominent theologian a few years ago, we engaged in a little bit of “What have you been reading lately?” chatter. We discovered that we had each recently read the same two memoirs, by authors whom we both knew personally. We agreed that the two books were good reading, but we also agreed that each contained elements of bitterness that detracted from the overall value of the narratives. “There’s nothing worse than reading old academics trying to get even with people in their

past, Richard,” the theologian remarked as we took leave. “So let’s agree that neither of us will make an attempt to settle some scores when we write about our own careers.”

He and I made the vow together, and I think I keep it in this book. Truth be told, at no point in writing this book was I even tempted to settle any scores.

Well, with one exception—I do have a score (more than one, actually!) that I want to try to settle with myself. In fact, an awareness of the need to deal with that score has been one of my motivations for writing this set of reflections on my journey. The score is the worry that I have about the possible undesirable consequences of some of the approaches and viewpoints that I have argued for thus far in my career. Not that I am ready to back off on any major position that I will be reflecting upon in this book. But I still worry about unintended consequences of what I have advocated for over the past several decades, and the worry nags me as I reflect back. While I am convinced that each aspect of my quest for commonness was meant to achieve something worthwhile, the net effect of all those efforts could very well encourage some bad tendencies. So I find it necessary to spell that worry out and to explain what I have done in my own heart and mind to try to hold the dangerous tendencies in check. I will explain all of that in a final “confessional” chapter.

# 1

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## Calvinists in an Edinburgh Pub

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**D**URING THE 1770s, A GROUP OF SCOTTISH PRESBYTERIAN pastors and elders met together regularly in an Edinburgh tavern for dinner discussions about topics of common concern. The conveners of this group were six members of the clergy, leaders in what the historian Richard Sher has labeled, in his major study of the movement,<sup>1</sup> the “moderate literati” of that period in Scottish history.

I wish I could go back and listen in on those tavern conversations as a fly on the wall. What I find intriguing is the fact that the participants were, for the most part, fairly strict Calvinists who were interested in promoting a more positive engagement with things that were happening in Scottish culture. Many of their discussions focused on the literary arts. Indeed, one of the leaders, the pastor John Home, had himself written a play that was intended for stage production—a project that did not sit well with the Presbyterian establishment, who saw theater as a significant force for promoting social decay.

The majority of orthodox Presbyterians of the day were quite negative about the very cultural trends that were being celebrated in those dinner conversations. Shakespeare's writings, for example, were regularly condemned from Presbyterian pulpits, along with other cultural expressions that were seen as contributing to the erosion of the spiritual foundations of Scottish life.

The alarm that many church leaders exhibited regarding societal trends in general was also directed specifically to the group holding its dinner meetings in the taverns. The moderate literati among Presbyterian clergy were seen as serving the devil's cause. And this perception was only reinforced by the knowledge that the philosopher David Hume regularly joined the dinner discussions. Hume was widely viewed (with considerable justification) as a declared enemy of the faith, but he was reported to be drawn to what he saw as the high quality of cultural discourse that took place in those tavern conversations.<sup>2</sup>

In their efforts to promote a broad cultural dialogue, the leaders of these moderate literati, themselves strong Calvinists, made every effort to ground their positive outreach in their orthodox Reformed theology. While they, like their more negative Presbyterian colleagues, saw much that was happening around them as displeasing to God, they were convinced that the solution was not simply to condemn the trends but rather to promote a wide-reaching program for the cultivation of public virtue and societal well-being. And this project required, as Sher describes their vision, "a religiously inspired commitment to morality that would follow a proper understanding of the ways of Providence."<sup>3</sup> For these Calvinists this meant encouraging the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivities, a tolerance toward persons of other religious perspectives, and—more generally—a spirit of public "politeness."<sup>4</sup>

While aware of the perils posed by these efforts, these Calvinists were convinced, as Sher depicts their concerns, that the project of charting the path to becoming "a fully civilized individual" was worth the effort, as long as they could do so within

a carefully articulated Calvinist perspective. Thus their diligence in attempting to clear the way, theologically and spiritually, for a Presbyterianism characterized by “genteel manners, religious moderation and tolerance, and high esteem for scientific and literary accomplishments.”<sup>5</sup>

I said earlier that I wish I could have heard those conversations. But my interest in what the group had to say is not simply a matter of intellectual curiosity: I personally identify with both their Calvinist convictions and their cultural efforts. My enthusiasm for what they were attempting is held in check, however, by my realization that they basically failed in what they hoped to accomplish. Looking back, we can see that they did not in fact stem the tide of the more God-dishonoring aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment. Indeed, it can be argued that they actually helped that tide along by what they were advocating. The overt unbeliever David Hume may have been a decidedly minority voice in their dinner gatherings, but in the long run the religious skepticism that he stood for has now become the status quo in “high” cultural circles.

So I ask myself: What went wrong? Was there some inadequacy in the manner in which they went about their explorations? These questions are urgent ones for me. The moderate literati were engaged in searching for a basis for common cause between Christian believers and representatives of other perspectives in the larger human community. They certainly seemed firm in their basic convictions. They were Calvinists who were sensing a rather strong disagreement with many of their fellow Calvinists about the very legitimacy of their search for commonalities. Like those eighteenth-century literati, I am a Calvinist who has expended much energy on a similar journey for understanding how my Reformed theological perspective can allow for the kinds of commonalities those Scottish clergy were looking for. For me, the search has taken place in several contexts. As a teacher of philosophical and theological topics, I have always seen my pedagogical task as including the need to urge my students to look for ways to learn

from non-Christian systems of thought. In the early days of the “evangelical social action” movement that emerged in the 1970s, I sensed a special obligation—as a Dutch Calvinist who was expected, in the words of the Belgic Confession, to “detest” the Anabaptists—to engage in a more positive manner the perspective of present-day Mennonite thinkers. In my years as president of Fuller Seminary, I initiated programs of dialogue with Jews, Muslims, and Mormons. And I have devoted considerable time to friendly give-and-take with Catholics and liberal Protestants. In my own attempts to find “proper bounds” for all of this, I have concentrated on what I have called “convicted civility”—a concept I borrow from Martin Marty, who once remarked that people these days who have strong convictions are often not very civil, and civil people often don’t have very strong convictions.<sup>6</sup> My own overall quest has been guided by a conscious desire to cultivate a civility that is compatible with Calvinist convictions. So, while I admire and take encouragement from those eighteenth-century Scottish Calvinists, their example does give me pause about all of this.

I am theologically content, on the whole, with the kinds of theological boundaries that I have attempted to respect throughout my pilgrimage thus far. But I have also been reminded regularly, especially in recent years, that there could be unintended consequences for my project—negative ones that encourage the wrong kind of thing in the long run. For all my good intentions and proper Calvinist motives, I have asked myself on occasion whether I am unwittingly giving aid and comfort to the increasing relativism of our own day, encouraging the widespread assumption that being clear about borders is not a matter of great importance. It’s not that I see an alternative to keeping at it. Nor do I wish that the eighteenth-century dinner discussants had simply chosen to stick with the purely negative Calvinism that characterized the Presbyterian establishment of their day. I am convinced that there can be no turning back from a sustained and continuing quest for commonalities. But neither can I give up on paying attention to

my qualms. I have to keep reminding myself about the full scope of the theological tradition to which I claim allegiance, staying attuned to warning signals as well as to words of encouragement.

I'm glad that those eighteenth-century moderate literati saw the need to explore territories beyond the strict boundaries of their confessional identity. And I'm glad that they chose to include David Hume in their pub conversations. In my own way, I also have had my conversations with Hume and others like him—by sustained interaction with their thought—and have received much from those conversations. Indeed, I consider those intellectual encounters to be gifts from God. But I have also made a point of listening carefully to the theological concerns of the kinds of Calvinists who were quite critical of the patterns associated with the moderate literati of Edinburgh. And while I have not been willing simply to heed the critics' warnings, I have intentionally refused to drown out their accusing voices as I have looked for, and have regularly stood upon, the common ground that they saw as enemy territory.