

**Ecumenical Jihad: *Ecumenism and the Culture War*** by Peter Kreeft. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996. Pp. 172

A Review article by Rev. Bassam M. Madany

Reading Ecumenical Jihad is a unique experience. Many of us share with Peter Kreeft, this intensity of feeling regarding the by-products of secularization in the life of Americans. But, I find it very difficult to accept his plan for the fight against secularism which would include a so-called ecumenical jihad. Furthermore, I am baffled by the absolute conviction he shows in equating the Roman Catholic Church with the Church our Lord Jesus Christ established 2000 years ago! As a twentieth century Henry Newman, he considers himself a herald called by God to summon Protestants (as well as followers of major world religions) to find their safe home within the Catholic Church, the leading world institution in the great war against secularism.

In this review article, I plan to set forth the various theses of his book before giving an analysis of its contents.

While there have been many articles written in religious magazines describing and deploring the moral chaos in American society, Peter Kreeft is singularly gifted in the way he enumerates the glaring and shocking sins which pervade various sectors of our public life. He writes simply and convincingly endeavoring to follow in the footsteps of C. S. Lewis, a man he greatly admires and quotes. In his first chapter he describes the problem as follows:

So: without religion, no morality, and without morality, no salvation of society or of individuals. But: there are two structural obstacles to this solution, this only possible solution. One is the separation between our society and religion, and the other is the separation and split both within the Christian religion and among the religions of the world. (21)

These words help us get into the mind of Professor Kreeft. He acknowledges an inherent problem within the American experience: that of attempting to define the foundations of private and public morality apart from their source in a religious faith. This is due, as many contemporaries think, to the constitutionally-mandated separation between "Church and State." Furthermore, recognizing that nowadays we live in a global milieu, Kreeft is tremendously exercised by the divisions among the religions of the world. This does not help in our war against secularism.

How are Christians (as well as followers of other world religions) to face the common foe and eventually defeat him? Peter Kreeft's answer is that followers of the major world faiths must work together in a struggle which is nothing less than a worldwide jihad. As he puts it:

The battle lines are obviously changing. No longer are Protestants and Catholics anathematizing each other. Relations with Jews and even Muslims are beginning to show signs of understanding and respect never before seen in history. ... It seems that our divine Commander's strategy is to bring this change about by

confronting us with the increasingly clear and present danger of the common enemy, the new Tower of Babel. (28)

The war against secularism is bringing people of different faiths together. More than that, in spite of their theological differences, they are fighting together. This is the important thing today. No one can tell what the outcome of this new alliance would be. It is still in its "early stages of formation. That formation is in a clearer and more advanced stage in front of abortuaries and in inner-city drug centers than it is in the churches or seminaries or universities. Practice is leading theory." (28)

This war or jihad against secularism takes place within several circles. First, within Christian groups regardless of their ecclesiastical differences. This is Christian ecumenism in practice. It is followed by Jewish-Christian ecumenism, Christian-Muslim ecumenism, also that ecumenicity which embraces Hinduism and Buddhism, and finally, "even atheists and agnostics, if they are of good will and intellectual honesty and still believe in objective truth and objective morality, are on our side in the war against the powers of darkness. Perhaps they can be called 'anonymous Christians', as Karl Rahner suggested." (31)

That this is not a merely practical alliance in the war against secularism is seen in these hopeful words regarding the future possibilities of ecumenical jihad.

I have no idea what new theological understanding might emerge from this new tactical moral alliance; but I think that such an understanding will happen. For love causes knowledge. Orthopraxy leads to orthodoxy, as well as vice versa. (31)

Peter Kreeft sees this coming together of people of different religions in their spiritual warfare as part of "God's Strategy." He has the highest admiration for pope John Paul II whom he regards as "a new Gregory the Great." After all, "he has surely done more than anyone else in our century to save the world from Communism and from nuclear war. (33)

Seeing that many Western readers would object to the use of the term Jihad in describing the war against secularism, Kreeft devotes Chapter Two to the defense of this theme, followed in Chapter Three by another defense, that of Fanaticism. Another defense appears in Chapter Four, that of "Culture Wars." In a rather amusing way, he tells us of a unique experience he had when he was attempting to surf after "Hurricane Felix turned the East Coast into Hawaii for two weeks." He was caught by a "twelve-foot wave" which ushered him onto "a Heavenly beach" where he had a great discussion with Confucius, Buddha, Muhammad and Moses. (Chapter Six)

The remaining part of the book marks a shift from the main theme of Ecumenical Jihad. Having set forth the urgency for all religions to work together in the fight against godless secularism, Peter Kreeft begins a discussion designed to prove that the Roman Catholic Church is the true church of Jesus Christ. This is accomplished in a rather skillfully described meeting between C. S. Lewis, Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas. Our author, as a lifelong student of the great British apologist, enlists the "help" of the German Reformer and the Italian Doctor of theology, in an attempt to heal

the great rift within Western Christianity. The dialogue is built around a subject treated in one of Lewis's well known books: "Is there such a thing as "Mere Christianity"?"

Finally, Peter Kreeft displays his ardent faith in the power of the Eucharist to bring Christians together. "No Catholic dogma is so distinctive and so apparently anti-ecumenical as the dogma of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Yet this dogma may be the greatest cause of ecumenism and eventual reunion." (145) His testimony follows. He was born and brought up in the Reformed Church in America; he received his college training at Calvin College of the Christian Reformed Church. He was 21 when his conversion took place. He was not the only Protestant intellectual to make the switch to Rome. There was the conversion of Tom Howard of Gordon College. And in his dedication of the book, he includes another illustrious Protestant, the Lutheran Richard John Neuhaus who, not long ago, went over to the church of Rome.

### **Analysis**

I must confess that even before reading the book, I was intrigued by the title he chose. I had noticed it in an ad in a religious journal. The juxtaposition of "ecumenical" and "jihad" is extremely awkward. As a teacher of philosophy, he must have been aware of the tradition that one does not arbitrarily decide the meaning of a specific word. After all, words are not simply etymologically defined; they carry a historical baggage with them. This is specially the case for foreign words. While some modern writers on Islam have tried hard to down play the meaning of jihad, claiming that it denotes primarily a spiritual struggle with self, actually and historically across 1400 years, it has meant holy war to expand the territory of Daru'l Islam, i.e., the household of Islam.

Before the rise of this theistic faith in the seventh century, the tribes of the Arabian peninsula raided each other as a way of life. After they accepted Islam by 632 A.D., their energies were directed against the Persian and Byzantine empires in a holy war of conquest. Within one hundred years after the death of Muhammad, a huge Islamic dominated empire stretched from Spain to the western parts of India. The terms of jihad offered the conquered Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, either conversion to Islam, or the status of dhimmis, i.e., "protected groups." While dhimmis were allowed to remain within their own religions, they were required to pay special taxes and refrain from publicly witnessing to their faith. The by-product of jihad was the disappearance of the church in North Africa, and the marginalization of the various Eastern churches in the Middle East.

War against secularism is fine, but not that type of ecumenical jihad as envisaged by Kreeft. Our author has based his extremely optimistic view of Islam (as well as the other non-theistic faiths) on his encounter with some of their followers in the West. This is not a proper way to plan alliances with followers of world religions in the face of a common foe. Had he armed himself with a realistic global outlook, he would have realized that his dream for a common front against secularism was utopian.

At the very time I am writing this review (during the Advent season), a real jihad against the Christians and animists of southern Sudan by Islamic fundamentalists is taking place. In Iran, Protestants are officially denied the status of dhimmis which is accorded to the older Christian churches (Assyrian and Armenian.) They are persecuted severely; several of their pastors have

been martyred during the 1990s. This is jihad in action. No amount of Anglo-Saxon rhetoric can redeem this word!

Another matter that disturbed me in Peter Kreeft's apologetical work is his historiography. No responsible church historian has the right to make such generalizations as "the first millennium was the millennium of Christian unity. There was one and only one worldwide visible Church from Pentecost to 1054. The second millennium was the millennium of disunity: tears in Christ's seamless garment: 1054, 1517 and all the further tears that followed 1517." (26)

Nothing is more damaging than divisions within the body of Christ, especially when we face the challenge of secularism at home and the resurgent non-Christian religions abroad. But equally devastating is any departure from the truths of God's Word, the Bible. So when dealing with church history, we may not gloss over some undisputed facts. For example, division did not begin in 1054 but in the aftermath of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451! Several churches in the Middle East did not accept the formula of the One Person of Christ with two natures (divine and human), and exercising two wills (divine and human). I am not defending the theology of the non-Chalcedonian churches. However, I cannot condone the severe persecution which was inflicted on these Christians by the Byzantine emperors and the Orthodox Church.

The 1054 schism was not about an insignificant matter. While it is evident that quite early in the history of the Body of Christ, episcopacy became the *modus operandi* within the church, no specific episcopal center was acknowledged as primary or superior to others. It was the persistent claim of the bishop of Rome for primacy over the other centers of the church (in Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Constantinople,) which precipitated the division between the Western and Eastern churches. Thus, no objective research can substantiate the claim that the Roman see was the unique center of Christianity during the first millennium. At this point, I'm afraid that Peter Kreeft is engaged in propaganda and not in a serious account of ecclesiastical history.

The saddest part of the book is in Chapters Seven and Eight. Having fully expounded his thesis in defense of a global ecumenical war against secularism, the author shifts gears to the second division of his book.

While formally staying in the background, it is Peter Kreeft who directs the proceedings of the "Dialogue with C. S. Lewis, Martin Luther, and Thomas Aquinas." His goal is to prove that whatever wrongs happened in the Western church under Rome, today it is no longer defensible to stay away from Rome.

Peter Kreeft allows Luther to give a shocking description of our times in which the awful consequences of secularism are depicted. Underneath this fair treatment of Luther's view, we encounter the real agenda of our author, which is that we may differ in our theologies, both Protestant and Catholics (and others as well) and still work together in a common war against the enemy. Eventually, our orthopraxy will enable us to re-formulate our doctrinal positions! Luther is treated cordially and not as he was actually handled after the Diet of Worms, but he is still classified among the heretics. Here is an important part of one "imagined" response of Aquinas to the German Reformer:

Historical research will show one position or the other. And I claim it will show the continuity of Catholic dogma and the roots of that dogma in the earliest writings of the Church Fathers. Many a Catholic convert has trod this path to Rome, the historical path --- for instance, Cardinal Newman. All the distinctively Catholic doctrines are to be found there very early in Church history, though some more clearly than others. And none of the distinctively Protestant denials of Catholic doctrines is there, except in those writers who were identified by the universal Church as heretics. (135)

Peter Kreeft believes that ultimately, the unique claims of Roman Catholicism are decided in The Eucharist. In his autobiographical account of his journey "from Dutch Reformed Calvinism to Roman Catholicism, the one Catholic dogma that most drew me in was the Eucharist."

The subject of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper was of primary importance for our author. He considers that Protestants merely have "Christ ... present only subjectively in" their souls! But what really drew him as a magnet to Rome was the doctrine that Christ was "more fully present, present also objectively, in the Eucharist ... I became a Catholic essentially for the very concrete historical reason that I discovered that Jesus Christ had founded the Catholic Church. ... A Protestant taking a time machine back to any time at all before the Reformation would not feel at home. I knew that, because I was that Protestant, and history is a time machine, and I did not feel at home. He would feel that he had stumbled into a Catholic church. The center of worship was the Eucharist, not the Bible; the altar not the pulpit; the consecration of the bread and wine, not the preaching of the sermon." (147,148)

Here is the theology of Peter Kreeft stated in the most succinct way! It is too bad that he caricatures the Protestant doctrine of the Holy Supper as a mere symbol. This a real blunder especially for someone who was brought up in a Calvinistic church and received his college education at Calvin College. Had he seriously studied John Calvin's Institutes and the Genevan reformer's commentary on John 6? Has he consulted Article 35 of the BELGIC CONFESSIO dealing with The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper? His specific tradition taught a very high doctrine of the Lord's Supper. It was not the Zwinglian genre which unfortunately considered this Sacrament as a memorial supper. This sixteenth century confession does acknowledge a real presence of Christ in the Holy Supper, but the manner of his presence is not physical, but spiritual, i.e., by the Holy Spirit.

Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all he represents by these holy signs, although the manner in which he does it goes beyond our understanding and is uncomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God's Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible.

Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ's own natural body and what is

drunk is his own blood ---- but the manner in which we  
eat it is not by the mouth, but by the Spirit, through faith.

**Belgic Confession, Article 35**

Ecumenical Jihad has some very serious parts where Peter Kreeft, as mentioned earlier, is at his best when describing the ravages of secularism in our American culture. This aspect of his work is laudable. However, his veering at one time towards universalism and at other times towards theological pluralism, renders his book confusing. Perhaps this is due to the fact that his religious-sociological laboratory was limited by his North American academic experience.

The author's argument that Rome should be our ultimate home is not convincing to anyone grounded in the fundamental disciplines of theology, church history, and above all, the Bible. It is hoped that this passionately written book will bring Protestants together, not in some kind of shallow ecumenicity, but around the heritage of historic Christianity as it has been preserved and handed down to us in the ecumenical Creeds and the Protestant Catechisms and Confessions of Faith of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If this book would act as a catalyst for such ecumenicity, it would have served a useful purpose, notwithstanding the manifest desire of Peter Kreeft who wants us to follow in his steps!

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