

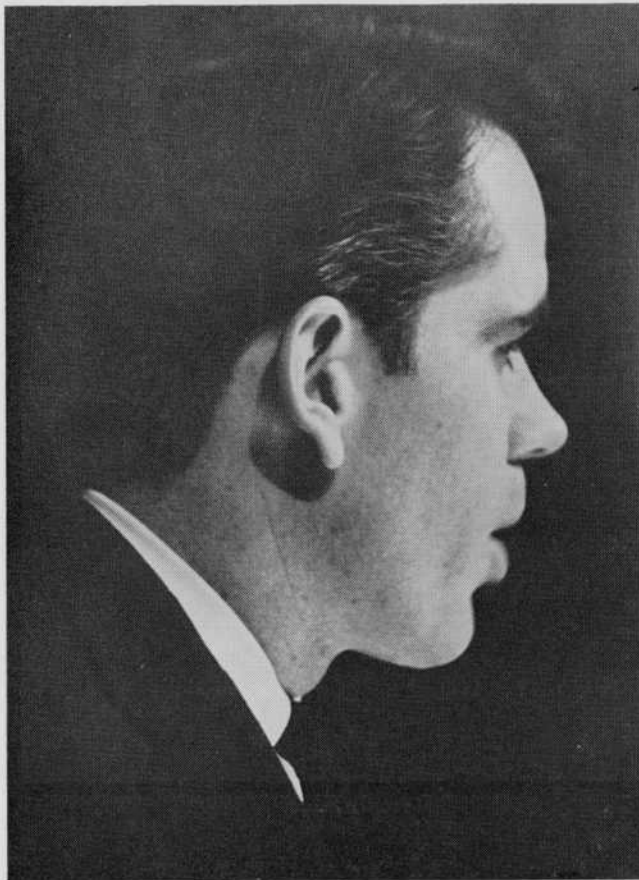
# Boyd and

Two uncommon men of the cloth, an iconoclast,

By Sheryl Freeman Young



Malcolm Boyd



Robert Short

The 1968 "something for everyone" Conference on Religion with its theme, "Theology and the Arts," offered a potpourri to stimulate, titillate, or whet the appetite for religion of students, faculty, administrators, and townspeople. Expanded from the usual two- or three-day conference to an eight-day emphasis, COR began with a folk mass on Sunday evening, March 3, at the Methodist Student Center. Employing both the traditional and the contemporary in worship forms, the service included the visual word, through still pictures placed around the chapel and through two short movies; the "preached" word from the minister; the "sung" word, with guitar accompaniment; the "shared" word, during which individuals spontaneously shared their concerns; and last, one of the earliest of religious forms, the "danced" word, "Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees," during which the dancers distributed the communion bread to the worshippers.

Other offerings of the week included a religious art exhibit, a panel discussion on the principal speakers, a glee club concert, a "Good News" folk musical, the movie *A Man Called Peter*, and showings of several of Malcolm Boyd's films. Participation in the week's activities heightened anticipation of the main event—speakers Malcolm Boyd and Robert Short, both ministers of the Christian faith. Unlike last year's COR Pike-Altizer dialogue (Sooner Magazine, May 1967) the 1968 conference was planned to include separate, unrelated presentations by "artists" Boyd and Short, men speaking in clearly different languages, representing different worlds of thought, and confronting wholly separate subjects.

Episcopal poet-priest Malcolm Boyd, author of the best-selling book *Are You Running With Me Jesus?*, spoke with candor for almost three hours on March 10, sharing random thoughts with us which, like the prayers in his book, were not connected by any bulging framework or blaring continuity. Malcolm immediately challenged the crowded Sunday afternoon session when he attacked the "separateness" of the detached, uniform seating arrangement of the Union Ballroom: (The speaker's platform was set apart by some distance from the rows of folding chairs where the audience was seated.)

Why this ridiculous space? Bring your chairs up closer . . .  
If you want me to relate to you, you'll have to relate to me.  
I'm not in any sense a performer. I'm nothing but Malcolm.

Lampooning his own writing endeavors, Malcolm commented on the conference theme and denied that he had anything whatsoever to do with the "arts":

Somehow I'm here doing something with the arts and that interests me, because I don't have anything to do with the arts. I wrote some bad plays. I wrote them to make a state-

# Short and the 1968 COR

and a man who finds theology in Peanuts, lay their messages on an OU flock

ment. One guy is doing a master's thesis on my plays and I told him, "You must be out of your silly little mind."

Whether Malcolm spoke as an artist is not particularly important. The strategic fact is that he involved and fascinated a large portion of an audience, pouring out his soul, his frustrations, and his questions, draining us of energy as he kept a constant barrage of thought coming throughout the afternoon. His comments ranged from sex and cheating to religion, false standards, and Vietnam. As he challenged stagnant ideas of any kind, he offended most of us more than once while making us aware that he didn't want us to accept *his* ideas; he only wanted us to examine our *own* attitudes.

OU's sorority rush book cautions potential pledges not to talk of religion, politics, or boys during rush—and these same kinds of boundaries and ways of avoiding controversy and side-stepping meaningful, soul-revealing conversation were challenged again and again by Malcolm:

What is the academic situation going to do when it's totally anti-intellectual? Because it cannot simply be a system of academia where there are no questions of the system or anything else. It's just a factory where you keep your mouth shut. Use the right deodorant. Parrot back the right answers. Get your piece of paper and come out unprepared certainly to have a life style for the world you'll be living in.

Like Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) in *The Graduate*, we students finish our last course in our senior year and say, "What am I prepared for?" We are frustrated by the system, as Benjamin was, and strongly feel the credibility gap between the "old" and the "young."

For many of us, our first great dilemma at the University is deciding what to major in, and then, what to do with the degree after we have it. We may be influenced by superficial reasons—what our parents do or do not want us to major in, what our best friend plans to major in, what major has the greatest number of boys (or girls), what we heard the girl on the elevator say she was majoring in, and so on. For girls, often no consideration is given to the possibility that we may someday have to support a family. Malcolm also spoke to this problem:

I meet many young women. They have a sociology degree but can't type, file, take shorthand, or answer the telephone. Wouldn't it have been nice if the girl had planned to have to work? I think so. But for an ex-Mortar Board to wait on tables is considered sort of . . .

It is easy even in a university community not to talk about those "unpolite" subjects—premarital sex, chastity, intercourse, masturbation, and Malcolm assaulted our sacred cows in these areas:

Why do we have such a hangup about sex? I'm asked this

ridiculous question about premarital sex. As if the question could even be asked. We think sex is five minutes. We say, "We've never *had* sex." We've done everything above, around, and below the waist, but we haven't *had* sex. That's ridiculous. Don't you understand we're sexual *beings*?

A great many people these days indulge in the morbid, cruel game of "watching the bride." This occurs especially when a young couple decides to marry suddenly, and so the game is on as the onlookers watch expectantly for some sign that the couple *had* to get married. The object of the game varies from player to player, but the result is too often the same. Like gossip, bride-watching is a form of slow torture, and perhaps even murder of reputation and self. But even worse than this game is the game which Malcolm described:

Why does the pregnant, unmarried girl threaten everybody? If now in a sorority you say that you have a slight nervous disorder or a sore throat and that you must go away for a period of time, it is assumed by everyone immediately that you are pregnant, as I'm sure you are aware. I think if you said you were pregnant, people might say you have a slight nervous disorder.

One day I talked with a girl—beautiful, rich, talented, top sorority, pregnant, and unmarried. She was sitting across from me. She wanted to have the child and to keep the child. I made arrangements for her to go away. She said, "What will you tell my sorority sisters, they'd stone me if they knew?" And I said, "What do you mean sorority *sisters*?" She said, "What will you tell my housemother, she'll never forgive me?" I said, "What do you mean *housemother*?" And she said, "What will you tell *my* mother?" I called her mother, and she said, "I wish you wouldn't wire or phone this sort of thing. We have a social reputation to maintain."

Many criticisms have been directed at Greek-lettered fraternities and sororities over the nation in recent years for bigoted membership policies, hidden behind "Christian" doctrine, which exclude anyone from membership who isn't White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. But when a fraternity at the University of Oklahoma recently *did* try to induct a "minority group" student into its membership, the alumni promptly stopped plans on the fraternity's new house. Meanwhile, the student pledged another fraternity. Says Malcolm:

Small communities must exist on a big campus. The dormitory is a cruel jungle and many people just can't take it. Why should they? But I think we've got to sort of redefine the small communities now. I'm aware that in many cases the alumni are controlling them, older people who have an emotional and financial stake, and a lot of the youngsters don't know what to do about it.

Speaking on the subject of church renewal, Malcolm had this to say:

I cannot condone the worship of religion in place of the

worship of God. I feel that the church probably must die in order to have a resurrection. I'm a hard renewal rather than a soft renewal person. I don't want folk masses, jazz masses, church coffee houses, gimmicks. I don't want window dressing or to make it attractive or interesting. I think the church must stand up within the Establishment and speak in a prophetic way. In Mississippi, Alabama, Detroit, the church has a budget to keep, a parish hall to complete. The church is afraid of Jesus. Between a bishop and district superintendent, ministers must go underground to express themselves.

Recently several of the religious groups on campus decided to create an experimental series of worship services, to be conducted at the regular 11 o'clock hour on Sunday morning. The services had all the trappings which Malcolm objects so strongly to—a type of folk mass, with both popular (*Blowin' In the Wind*) and traditional songs (*Once to Every Man and Nation Comes the Moment to Decide*), with questions from the congregation at the end of the sermon, and with a dialogue sermon between the Rev. James Shields and Prof. George Henderson on the topic, "Tell It Like It Is." Yet here I think Malcolm, who probably would have classified the service as a gimmick, is himself being narrow-minded. Truly some of the things which were used in this particular service may have been gimmicks, because the service did draw a large crowd—yet, when the sermon was over, and it was noon, the worshippers didn't rush out to see who could be first to reach the cafeteria. Instead they lingered and asked questions of Dr. Henderson about things to be done to ease the strain between black and white—and how they could come to understand each other.

When he had finished his "informal" monologue, Malcolm listened to an agonizing student scheduled for duty in Vietnam say that "if I have to suffer the pain of one child who is in misery, I can't believe in God." Malcolm responded to the question with a special intensity:

That's what makes me believe in God. Auschwitz makes me believe in God. Vietnam makes me believe in God. Because I think that God isn't some idiot on a cloud saying, "I want two thousand more people tortured today." God, to me, isn't "up there"; nothing's "up there" but the ceiling and the sky. God is a spirit I was speaking of *in here*. I'm not afraid of God. God isn't asking me to buy my way either into a heaven or out of a hell because neither of these *places* exists to buy my way into or out of. When are we ever going to get rid of this ridiculous, dreadful legacy of Christianity and Judaism which is maiming us?

One student asked for Malcolm's views on the Bible:

It's the masterwork of theology because it's telling the story of the relationship of God and people. With biblical scholarship, which I think is fairly important as to who wrote what, when, why, and how, you have different people speaking from different historical periods with different views. But I don't worship religion; I don't worship the Bible. I worship God. Religion and the Bible can serve God or oppose God, or rather people can use religion and the Bible to get in the way of God and to manipulate an image of God.

When asked about his impressions of the "death of God," Malcolm had this to say:

I do not believe that the sort of American, nationalistic god, the white god, the god of much of churchianity is alive. He never lived anyway. But the God who is the spirit of loving, rather than murder, and of relationships is alive and always has been for me. I'm not selling this God. I'm simply trying to explain myself.

To this, a student sitting on the floor at Malcolm's feet responded wonderingly, "I believe like you do, and I thought I was an *atheist*." And when Malcolm had finished, people filed out quietly, stirred perhaps by what had passed before them.

Appealing to the more tradition-oriented, the Sunday evening speaker, Robert Short, author of *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, explained his own connection with the Conference on Religion theme by describing himself as an "interpreter of art from the Christian point-of-view." In the April 1968 issue of *Motive* magazine (a student publication sponsored nationally by the University Christian Movement), Richard Shaull writes, "A parable is a story—a very simple story—which provides new insight into the human situation. It makes transparent some aspects of man's life in the world—of his responsibility to be human—in a way that no abstract philosophical or theological argument can do." The cartoons of Charles Schultz, the creator of the *Peanuts* comic strip, have come alive as parables of specific biblical origin and religious intent through the creative interpretership of Short. Commenting on his role as an interpreter of Schultz's cartoons, Short said, "The rank and file of the world, which yearns desperately to understand what these very sensitive people called artists would say to us, has the same problem Lucy has when she says, after staring hard at a book from every possible direction, 'No matter how hard I try, I can't read between the lines.'"

Using colored slides of *Peanuts* cartoons to illustrate the art of "Christian indirect communication," Short articulated with simple language and uncomplicated examples such religious concepts as the doctrine of original sin, justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and conversion. These religious concepts are some of the main themes which run throughout Schultz's cartoons, and the concepts gained a new clarity through Short's almost oversimplified explanations. Commenting on the concept of original sin, he said:

*Peanuts* is very much concerned with man's fundamental condition, or man's original sinfulness. This doesn't mean man's original sin in the Garden of Eden by those two very remote people that we hardly know anything about, although this is related to it. But it does mean that all of us are born under the curse of sin and we all have our own personal origins in sin, hence the term "original sin." All of us come into life in this condition, lacking the one thing which we all really need, which is faith in our creator. Our hearts are restless or empty until they find their rest in thee. By original sin, we do *not* mean original *sins*, any bad acts we may have done along the way, regardless of how original we may have felt them to have been at the time.

One concept which is particularly unbelievable to the "non-believer" is the idea of justification by faith. The "non-believer" argues that Christians always dodge the question of faith because they have no adequate, logical explanation of why they believe as they do. Said Short:

The Christian church is made up of people who can't give you the simplest reason for the justification of their faith. This is what the traditional, classical doctrine of justification by faith means. It means that no reason can finally come between God's self-revelation of Himself and Christ and the heart of the individual believer. The church, then, is like a kid who is

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so much in love with this particular girl that he can give you no reason for his love for her but the best he can do is say, "It's the girl I love." As Karl Barth said, "Jesus is the Son of God because He is so." In other words, it's finally just that dogmatic without any justifying reason or proof. Schroeder, who worships Beethoven, comes close to this same type of Christian dogmatics when he's asked the question about his faith or his love for Beethoven.

Short said that no matter how many good works or good deeds a person has done in his life, they're all for nothing as far as a man's own redemption or happiness in life if the deeds have been done for the wrong reasons—with "dirty hands" like Lady Macbeth, or Linus in the following Peanuts dialogue:

*Linus:* (admiring his hands) I like my hands. I think I have nice hands. My hands seem to have a lot of character. These are hands that may some day accomplish great things. These are hands that may some day do marvelous works. They may build mighty bridges, or hit home runs, or write soul-stirring novels. These are hands that may someday change the course of history.

*Lucy:* They've got jelly on them.

Phony gods are the cruelist of task-masters, said Short, and serving these gods causes a living death occurring inside us right now.

Turning to the concept of rebirth or conversion, Short said that "rebirth is necessary at some time in life because we do not come upon the scene worshipping God." Short continued, "We become aware of our idolatry when our false gods collapse. Who is going to save us? Who is always hammering away at false gods? Who saves us from too much security?" Of course, it's Snoopy, Charlie Brown's loyal dog:

The dog, just because of its loyalty and watchfulness, has often been used as a symbol for faith in literature and art—and of course it's a good symbol because all of us have first got to become as "dogs" before we can really become Christian. Christians are those "Hounds of Heaven" who have been called to be witnesses for God through Christ. This doesn't mean that all of us are called to be priests and ministers, but still we are a part of the priesthood of believers where the priesthood calls us to remain exactly where we are, bearing

witness to our faith in and through the work we know and can do best.

Although Malcolm Boyd and Robert Short both deplore the idolatry of false gods, their views of the church and its relationship to people strongly differ. In the introduction to his talk, Short said, "There are many people in our own communities and cultural situations who wouldn't be caught dead inside a church. In fact, this is probably the *only* way they would be caught there, come to think of it. These outsiders must be communicated with too." This attitude, that *insiders* implies "religious" and *outsiders* implies "non-religious," was particularly disturbing, as it exemplifies the kind of clannishness within the church which has been a block in communication between the church and those outside the "religious community." I think Boyd counteracted this attitude in a believable way with the following statement, which was received with considerable enthusiasm from his audience:

I love at 11 o'clock Sunday morning to get in some old clothes and go down to the heart of a great city. It's very holy outside of the church. And there's a great sense of community among those outside. It's one of the times I love the most—to be with those who are *not* in church at 11 o'clock. I have a very great suspicion that God might also be with those who are outside.

Because Short has delivered his Peanuts lecture over a thousand times, it came across in a stilted, canned manner that was so mechanical and structured that its potentially stimulating elements were somewhat neutralized. On the other hand, Malcolm's personal dynamism and his ability to deeply involve an audience in his thoughts made his presentation a special experience to many of us. Malcolm spoke to members of all religious faiths, not to just a segment of these. From Short we heard excellent definitions of a number of *Christian* concepts—concepts which he did not relate to events occurring today or to other religious faiths.

In the last two years, the Conference on Religion has evolved from a lecture receiving mediocre participation from students and faculty into a major event—well attended, well publicized, involving many activities and culminated by a sharing of ideas with nationally prominent religious thinkers. And in 1968, the conference attained a new relevance for all the University community in challenging students and faculty to confront current problems from a religious viewpoint. ●

## Experiment in Education

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professors, or society as catch-alls for their own faults. Perhaps the discussion was oriented toward the problem of free will versus determinism—whatever the formal nomen or misnomen, the debate was vigorous and the arguments of each position persuasive. One person's comment was particularly thought-provoking: "Please don't deny to others what you yourselves value most: your humanity." A fitting preface, indeed, to Dr. George Henderson's lecture on racism in America.

How long can voices be stifled? How long can zealots be misled? Perhaps at last the black American is refusing

to wait for the white's American Dream to come true. Beguiled by smiles and heartened by the false promises, the black American heretofore has bought the dream "lock, stock, and barrel." But his unquestioning hope has in recent months been replaced by a clamoring for his freedom—a clamoring which threatens to erupt into a mighty tidal wave, sweeping away those who attempt to dominate, intimidate, and oppress.

Dr. Henderson frightened us. The American Dream will no longer suffice. Hope doesn't fill an empty stomach or build decent houses; dreams don't teach English and mathematics in poorly equipped schools; visions do not yield pride in self and faith in one's own value and integrity. While fighting the white man's wars, cleaning his houses, mowing his lawns, and enduring his insults, Ameri-