"THE DOOR IS STILL OPEN"

Editorial Note: One of the most significant religious journals published behind the Iron Curtain is Communio Viatorum, the theological quarterly sponsored by the Ecumenical Institute of the Comenius Theological Faculty in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Communio Viatorum is edited by Josef L. Hromadka, the distinguished Reformed theologian, and represents an attempt by certain East European Protestant thinkers to relate Christian insights to the events of a Communist world. This journal, on the whole, is highly critical of the West, and for this reason, if for no other, should be better known in the United States than it is. We here reprint an editorial from the Summer 1960 issue, signed by Professor Hromadka.

The name of Walter Lippmann, one of the wisest and most realistic of American writers and journalists, has often appeared in newspapers in the last few weeks. With great and open seriousness he has reflected on the latest international events, and has reproached the American government, especially President Eisenhower, that in the decisive moment he did not make use of the chance offered him by N. S. Khrushchev, and did not save the summit meeting by a wise diplomatic step.

On this occasion I recalled that even at the close of the second World War, Walter Lippmann pointed out, toward the end of 1944, in his slender book on the war aims of the United States, the immense responsibility that American statesmen would have when the war ended. Americans were not prepared for their decisive position in world politics. Nor had they learned from the first World War. After the victory of 1918 they had withdrawn into themselves, sought profits and economic advance. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the first to push forward the statesmanlike aims of Woodrow Wilson, who had been abandoned by his nation in the gravest moments. He took in hand the social, economic, and labor problems, with the courageous aim of drawing the American people onto new paths. And during the second World War it was he who saw the great possibilities of the American nation in a struggle for a new international order, if it would preserve a sincere cooperation with the Soviet Union.

Walter Lippmann, much more conservative in his social views than Franklin Delano Roosevelt, at least saw clearly in a political way that the postwar world would be determined by two great powers: the United States and the Soviet Union. And that it would be necessary for these great powers to make a clear demarcation of their spheres of influence, work together, and not attempt to undermine each other’s position as a great power. In April 1945 Roosevelt died, and American policy came into the hands of people with no broad world outlook, no understanding of the new situation, and at the same time with limited confidence in, even with hatred for, the Soviet Union.

When Roosevelt was still alive, in the last period when his strength was exhausted, but especially after his death, the Cold War began on a large scale. This was the attempt to knock the Soviet Union off its feet by any means, permissible or impermissible, to separate away its allies on the Western borders, to strip it bare and gradually deprive the Soviet people not only of the results of victory, but also of their tranquil and undisturbed building of socialism.

Let us add to this the fact that dominant sections of America and the West in general have never been resigned within themselves to the Soviet Revolution of 1917, and for a long time—perhaps up to quite recently—have aimed their policy at the abrogation of the year 1917, and at ridding the world of the “specter of Communism.” The Chinese revolution and the unrest in Asian and African nations have only strengthened their terror of the East.

At times it seemed that the Western world was beginning to become reconciled to the fact that the new social structure, represented by the Soviet Union and People’s China could not be stopped and that history could not be turned back. Especially in July 1955, when the first meeting was held of statesmen at the top level, it seemed that a new era was beginning in postwar life. But a careful observer of what was happening, not only on the surface, but also in the thoughts of people and in the over-all atmosphere of the nations, could not fail to see that this very meeting, with all its great and clear possibilities,
brought fear to the dominant circles in Western countries, especially the United States, and caused a special tightening of the internal front.

I myself have lively memory of the holidays in 1955 when I attended ecumenical conferences in the Swiss town of Davos. Wherever we were from, our external relations were proper, amiable, correct. But when we came to discuss the particular questions of the situation at that time, we were perhaps further apart than we had been before. There arose an atmosphere of growing unwillingness to cope with world events, to take account of the enormous changes in Eastern Europe and in Asia, to stop the Cold War and do everything for genuine cooperation between both great world camps.

The pressure of propaganda to interfere by every possible means in the internal life of countries that lay between the West and the Soviet Union was stepped up from day to day. The events in Poland and in Hungary in 1956 fall into this framework. The hysteria (it really is impossible to use any other word here) which accompanied the events at the end of October, and especially at the beginning of November, of that year, only prove what I have just said. The people able to judge these events calmly, realistically and bearing in view the results of the second World War, with a wise realization of the conditions for a genuine peaceful fellowship of nations, were insignificant in number. Remembrance of what a failure the Korean War had been for the United States perhaps only intensified that spirit of perverseness, distaste and unwillingness to make a truly new start in political thinking and action.

Connected with all this is something that continually disturbs me personally, as a theologian. People in the West, with very few exceptions, have a constant feeling of human, cultural, and political superiority over other nations, especially the socialist camp. They have done everything they can to stop the advance of Eastern countries in their economic development and living standards, and at the same time have made use of all the difficulties and hardships of building a socialist society to affirm their own superiority and worth. Even in Christian circles one meets with this continually. It is not just mistrust of the Eastern countries, but also a feeling that what comes from the people in the East cannot attain the same level and have the same worth as Western life.

This atmosphere, which is hard to express and often is not admitted, also affects serious political decisions. We have seen this in recent days. An American statesman and soldier is offended when he is told that he must apologize for certain impermissible acts. That has serious consequences in relations among nations. For it is not enough when people behave properly toward each other in a social way, they must also take each other seriously in a human way. We continually run across such ambiguous behavior, and formerly we observed this even among some of the people of our country, in the Church and outside the Church, when they were faced with changes and upheavals for which they were unprepared. We are living through a profoundly revolutionary historical process, and in it we must struggle not only with external conditions, but also with ourselves.

The meeting of statesmen at the highest level did not take place. It is not up to us to hand out marks for behavior. But we can say this much, in all responsibility, that American policy is headed by a man who, while he has fine personal characteristics, lacks the statesmanlike wisdom, decision, and courage that are needed today for us to push forward another step. The present American President is simply not equal to the task entrusted him by the American people and by history. It seems that he will be counted as one of the weakest of American Presidents.

This is a great disappointment for many people in the West who until recently have expected from Eisenhower the statesmanlike perspicacity and depth of vision necessary for the immense tasks in the current world crisis. The events in Paris around the 16th of May have shown that Western policy, headed by the United States, is in continual retreat, is constantly on the defensive in regard to the advance of nations in Eastern Europe, in Asia, Africa, and soon perhaps in Latin America, too. It is a policy of fear, negation, and—unfortunately—malice, as well. But this spirit is not equal to anything more than the rattling of arms or a savage Cold War that tries to stop the course of history.

I often ask myself these days if we in our congregations and churches have understood what the issues are in the world, and whether we are in the least prepared for our role in the world of today, for our responsibility in public and religious life. We have a good deal to learn, too. We need, also, much courage and wisdom in our faith and our testimony.

So far nothing is lost. The world of today is not yet prepared for what we expected from the meeting of statesmen on May 16th. Many questions have not yet matured. West German policy is shockingly dangerous, precisely because it is so blind, obstinate, and so unwilling to accept the consequences of the
terrible catastrophe that was caused by the wretched leaders of Germany in the years 1933–1945.

We have realized again what depths were reached by the world revolution and the ruin of the last twenty or perhaps forty-five years. We are standing amidst cataclysmic changes, amidst difficulties, with bleeding wounds which could not be repaired by a conference of statesmen, if it were to meet at a time which had not yet matured and when it had not yet been prepared for. We do not know whether the time will be riper in six or eight months. But N. S. Khrushchev rightly pointed out that the conference would have no sense if it lacked the serious political prerequisites, lacked an atmosphere of trust, and lacked simple human or social decency.

But we have noted that the door has not been closed. The speech of Khrushchev in Berlin is itself testimony to the fact that Soviet statesmen wish to wait patiently to discuss all serious international questions at the moment when they are ripe for decision. West European statesmen are surely aware of their enormous responsibility. And the American people, who undoubtedly long for peace, will emerge from this last lesson knowing more than they had before.

The United States, so rich in human values, will find the statesmen, we believe, who will in the near future take up the reins of foreign policy, with genuine readiness, maturity and courage. Finally, I perhaps need not remind anyone that the recent events have been a great lesson for us all, and furthermore an urgent challenge for us to assist, in our faith, in building the foundations and the conditions for future creative cooperation among nations.

Our brethren from Western Churches and countries do not take seriously enough the new historical situation in the orbit between the Elbe and the Pacific Ocean. They are still under temptation to measure our social and political institutions after the pattern of Western bourgeois democracy and interpret all the difficulties and predicaments of the so-called Eastern countries as a punishment for the new revolutionary efforts of social and political reconstruction. They do not take into consideration the fact that something historically new has been started, and that the efforts have to be assessed from the perspective of global change, not only from the perspective of Western society. Certainly we are finding ourselves amidst a long process of profound social and political transformation. Many aspects of our present life will be corrected. As long as there exists only a minimum of international security and stability we are bound to undergo many critical moments in our decisions. What is needed is to understand the new situation in a constructive way and to struggle for the future without any thought of restoration . . .

What is needed is a sincere and careful realization that—humanly speaking—the future of the Christian Church and theology depends on our courage to take the revolutionary changes in the east of Europe and in Asia as an opportunity to make a new beginning. Very much of the frustration and lack of freedom some members of our Churches feel and deplore is due to their unwillingness to take the present moment both as divine judgment and as a time of grace . . .

The Church of Christ is on the march. It is nowhere at home. It depends on no historical institutions and on no political system of liberty. It knows about the sovereign freedom of its Lord, who continually creates new opportunities and situations, even on the ruins of what had been dear to our fathers and to ourselves. He liberates the souls, ears, and minds of His people and makes them at home wherever He is. He may prompt His believers to revolt against many institutions and systems, but He also may help His people to work joyfully under new circumstances which may be at first frightening, and yet full of promise for the future. This joyful understanding of new opportunities has nothing to do with uncritical naiveté. It is more critical but also more creative than the observers from outside may be ready to admit.