

CHRISTIANITY'S MORAL DEFEAT

In the March 8 issue of The Nation C. Wright Mills, author of The Power Elite and professor of sociology in Columbia University, wrote "A Pagan Sermon to the Christian Clergy." The questions raised by Mr. Mills are close to the concerns of Worldview, and excerpts from his article are reprinted here, with The Nation's permission. Reprints of the complete article may be obtained from The Nation, 333 Sixth Avenue, New York 14, N. Y.

To say that war has become total is to say that the reach of modern weaponry now makes every soul on earth a quite possible victim of sudden hell. It is to say that weapons have become absolute, and that every calculation from on high now includes a military calculation. It is to say that the decision-makers of every nation, in particular those of the United States, are now possessed by the crackpot metaphysics of militarism. But more than that: it is to say that the morality of war now dominates the curious spiritual life of the fortunate peoples of Christendom.

World War III is already so total that most of its causes are accepted as "necessity"; most of its meanings as "realism." In our world "necessity" and "realism" have become ways to hide lack of moral imagination. In the cold war of the politicians and journalists, intellectuals and generals, businessmen and preachers, it is above all else moral imagination that is most obviously lacking. One reason for this lack, I am going to argue, is what must surely be called the moral default of the Christians . . .

Religion today is part of [the general] sorry moral condition; to understand the crucial decisions of our pivotal times, it is not necessary to consider religious institutions or personnel or doctrine. Neither preachers nor laity matter; what they do and what they say can be readily agreed with, and safely ignored. I am aware that there are exceptions, but the average output is correctly heard as a parade of worn-out phrases. In the West, religion has become a subordinate part of the overdeveloped society.

If there is one safe prediction about religion in this society, it would seem to be that if tomorrow official spokesmen were to proclaim XYZ-ism, next week 90 per cent of religious declaration would be XYZ-ist. At least in their conforming rhetoric, religious spokesmen would reveal that the new doctrine did not violate those of the church.

As a social and as a personal force, religion has become a dependent variable. It does not originate; it reacts. It does not denounce; it adapts. It does not set forth new models of conduct and sensibility; it

imitates. Its rhetoric is without deep appeal; the worship it organizes is without piety. It has become less a revitalization of the spirit in permanent tension with the world than a respectable distraction from the sourness of life. In a quite direct sense, religion has generally become part of the false consciousness of the world and of the self . . .

With such religion, ours is indeed a world in which the idea of God is dead. But what is important is that this fact itself is of no felt consequence. Men and women, in brief, are religiously indifferent; they find no religious meanings in their lives and in their world . . .

Total war must indeed be difficult for the Christian conscience to confront, but the current Christian way out makes it easy; war is defended morally and Christians easily fall into line—as they are led to justify it—in each nation in terms of "Christian faith" itself. Men of religious congregations do evil; ministers of God make them feel good about doing it. Rather than guide them in the moral cultivation of their conscience, ministers, with moral nimbleness, blunt that conscience, covering it up with peace of mind . . .

If you, as Christian ministers, accept the entertainment terms of success, you cannot succeed. The very means of your "success" make for your failure as witnesses, for you must appeal to such diverse moral appetites that your message will necessarily be generalized to the point of moral emptiness. If you do not specify and confront real issues, what you say will surely obscure them. If you do not alarm anyone morally, you will yourself remain morally asleep. If you do not *embody* controversy, what you say will inevitably be an acceptance of the drift to the coming hell . . .

Do not these times demand a little Puritan defiance? Do not they demand the realization of how close hell is to being a sudden and violent reality of man's world today? Should not those who still have access to the peoples of Christendom stand up and denounce with all the righteousness and pity and anger and charity and love and humility their faith may place at their command the political and the militarist assumptions now followed by the leaders of the nations of Christendom? Should they not denounce the pseudo-religiosity of men of high office who would steal religious phrases to decorate crackpot policies and immoral lack of policies? Should they not refuse to allow immorality to find support in religion? Should they not refuse to repeat the official, un-Christian slogans of dull diplomats who do not

believe in negotiation, who mouth slogans which are at most ineffective masks for lack of policy? Should they not realize that the positive moral meaning of what is called "neutralism" lies in the resolve that the fate of mankind shall not be determined by the idiotically conducted rivalry of the United States and the Soviet Union?

I do not wish to be politically dogmatic, but merely brief and, as you gentlemen surely have recognized, I am religiously illiterate and unfeeling. But truly I do not see how you can claim to be Christians and yet not speak out totally and dogmatically against the preparations and testing now under way for World War III. As I read it, Christian doctrine in contact with the realities of today cannot lead to any other position . . .

There is no necessity for more military emphasis on missiles. There is no need for more "science" in education; it is not "realism" to spend more money on arms. Necessity and need and realism are the desperate slogans of the morally crippled. The necessity is for moral imagination. The need is for political new beginnings. Realism means to stop at once and if need be unilaterally all preparations for World War III. There is no other realism, no other necessity, no other need.

You will not find in moral principles the solution to the problems of war, but without moral principles men are neither motivated nor directed to solve them. But nowadays we pagans see that Christian morals are more often used as moral cloaks of expedient interests than ways of morally unclinking such interests.

War is not today inevitable; it is, immediately, the result of nationalist definitions of world reality, of dogmatic reliance upon the military as the major or even the only means of solving the explosive problems of this epoch of despair and of terror. And because this is now so, to lift up and to make knowledgeable the level of moral sensibility is the strategic task of those who would be at peace.

Your role in the making of peace is less the debating of short-run and immediate policies than the confrontation of the whole attitude toward war and the teaching of new views of it by using them in criticism of current policies and decisions. And in the end, I believe the decisive test of Christianity lies in your witness of the refusal by individuals and by groups to engage in war. Pacifism, I believe, is the test of your Christianity—and of you. At the very least, it ought to be *the* debate within Christendom.

The brotherhood of man is now less a goal than an obvious condition of biological survival. Before the world is made safe again for American capitalism or Soviet Communism or anything else; it had better be made safe for human life.

But you may say: "Don't let's get the church into politics." If you do say that, you are saying: "Don't let's get the church into the world; let's be another distraction from reality." This world is political. Politics, understood for what it really is today, has to do with the decisions men make which determine how they shall live and how they shall die. They are not living very well, and they are not going to die very well, either. Politics is now the locale of morality; it is the locale both of evil and of good. If you do not get the church into the moral issues of politics, you cannot confront evil and you cannot work for good. You will be a subordinate amusement and a political satrap of whatever is going. You will be the great Christian joke.

Men and ideas, the will and the spirit, are now being tested, perhaps in all truth for the final time; and in this testing so far, you Christians are standing in default. The key sign of this is the fact of your general lack of effective opposition, of your participation in the fact of moral insensibility. That, of course, is a world fact about publics and masses and elites, but it is all the more grievous among Christians, if only because of the expectations that they have aroused about themselves.

Yet who among you has come out clearly on the issues of internecine war and the real problems of peace? Who among you is considering what it means for Christians to kill men and women and children in ever more efficient and impersonal ways? Who among you uses his own religious imagination to envision another kind of basis for policies governing how men should treat with one another? Who among you, claiming even vague contact with what Christians call "The Holy Spirit," is calling upon it to redeem the day because you know the times are evil?

If you are not today concerned with this—the moral condition of those in your spiritual care—then, gentlemen, what is your concern? As a pagan who is waiting for your answer, I merely say: you claim to be Christians. And I ask: what does that mean as a biographical and as a public fact?

In moral affairs you are supposed to be among the first of men. No moral affair today compares with the morality of warfare and the preparation for it, for in these preparations men usurp—as you might say—the prerogatives of God. By sitting down and by keeping quiet, by all too often echoing the claptrap of the higher immorality that now passes for political leadership—you are helping to enfeeble further in this time of cruel troubles the ideals of your Founder. Christianity is part of the moral defeat of man today . . .

I hope you do not demand of *me* gospels and answers and doctrines and programs. According to your belief, my kind of man—secular, prideful, agnostic . . . is among the damned. I'm on my own; you've got your God. . . .