

## **THE CHURCH AND WAR**

*The following observations on Christianity and modern war were made by Bishop Otto Debelius, Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, in his report to the Second Synod of the Evangelical Church, held in Berlin last April. Bishop Debelius' complete report is published in the July issue of The Ecumenical Review.*

Our fathers accepted war as an event which was taken for granted in the life of the nations. They only made a distinction between a just and an unjust war. I need hardly even say that a just war is no longer possible in this age of atomic weapons. No Christian church will condemn a defensive war. But everyone knows how problematical such an attack has become in this era of propaganda possibilities.

There is no such thing as a just war. War with atomic weapons means the murder of whole peoples. It is not really, as has been said, the organized suicide of nations. For it is not the nations that decide whether they want a war and, consequently, national suicide. The decision lies always with a handful of men and must be made in a matter of minutes. So we can only say: war with atomic weapons is mass murder of foreign peoples and of one's own people.

It is an empty hope that nations which possess atomic weapons will not use these weapons if war comes. States did not hesitate during the last war to send out their bomber squadrons to destroy cities which were of no military importance, simply in order to terrorize the population, women and children, the sick and the healthy. In a future war they would certainly make use of atomic weapons if they have them. And even if there were no more stocks of atomic weapons anywhere, ways and means would be found in a war, in which the bonds of law all cease to exist, of placing the previously discovered and mastered atomic power at the service of destruction.

Because we repudiate atomic weapons, we must repudiate war. What seemed only a few decades ago to be absurd utopianism has now become a claim that cannot be denied. And it is for the Church to shout that claim to the world, so loudly that it cannot but be heard: There must be no more war!

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And what causes war?

What causes war is the idea that the state is a power in whose nature it is to eye other states in a hostile manner and to appropriate from them to itself, when a favorable opportunity offers, anything desirable that they may own: land, natural resources, in-

dustrial potential, manpower and so on—that is to say a power which knows no law but its own interest and acknowledges bonds only as long as it can hope to derive some profit from them. This idea must be overcome. There have been periods in the history of mankind when individuals, family groups, classes of society or cities that had grown powerful thought and acted as states have later come to do. That was overcome. The need of the individual for security and the moral sense of responsibility for the human being joined forces in order to put a check—not completely, but at least in principle—on this way of thinking in the civilized world.

It must be possible to achieve this with regard to states as well. It must be possible to prevail upon the states to see themselves as the legally ordained forms of life of the nations, with the task of fostering economic and spiritual life, defending justice and giving free play to religious life—without seeking to extend their power beyond those frontiers which are imposed on a people by its numbers, its history and its character.

That is not by any means a utopian aim. Nor is it a vision forbidden to Christians by virtue of the Holy Writ, or a romantic notion that fails to take into account the sinful self-seeking of human beings. Instead, it is an aim towards which God has been leading men all through the developments of the last few decades. The age of the colonialist states, during which European nations wielded power over peoples of other races, is at an end. In Europe and in other parts of the world there is an unmistakable tendency for neighboring states to join together in supra-national unions. The number of neutral states which hold aloof in practice, or in accordance with international law, from international disputes, is growing. The idea of a league of nations, however often it may have proved illusory, is always revived. The conception that there are human rights which no state can override is alive in many hearts. Everything indicates that the age of national ambition is over.

Anyone who, like myself, has grown up accustomed to the ideas associated with the national will to power has not found it easy to win through to this realization, but the harsh realities of a changed world speak with no uncertain voice. The era of nationalism must not, and in my opinion will not, give place to an era of ideological fanaticism that incites to revolutionary conquests. Something else is on its way.

As Protestant Christians in Germany we have become wary of building up philosophies of history

from events of the past and the present and then producing them as Christian findings. Yet I cannot feel it would be too bold to put forward the conjecture that this time of nuclear weapons and of world-wide apprehension and uneasiness because of them has a God-given purpose, that of showing us how we have come to the end of a centuries-old road; God has opened the door to a new way of life for the peoples of the earth, and now we must go boldly through that door. We must preach a new international ethos to the peoples of the earth, in the name of Jesus Christ.

The politician, burdened with the decisions of the day, will say: "Such prospects for the future are—as the expression goes today—unrealistic; what am I supposed to do with them? They do not take me any further forward." They are not meant to take him any further forward, at least not directly. The Church has no authority to dictate to a national government what it must do at a given moment. It can only ask that government to reflect in a Christian spirit on all the various responsibilities it bears, and which a Church can never take in entirely at a glance, and then to do what it ought to do.

The duty of the Church can only be to hold something up to the view of mankind, over and above the day's decisions—a vision, if you like—something which they can feel is in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel. The Holy Scriptures lay upon the Church the task of teaching all nations. It is its duty not to exhaust itself with daily decisions, but to point the way forward, beyond each day—recognizing that all

the circumstances in which men move are the outcome of their ways of thinking. The Church's call to the world must always be in some way a call to penitence—not a Platonic, but a practical call: Take heed, bring forth fruit-worthy of repentance!

At this time when an atheistic ideology is seeking to master the world with an atheistic conception of the state, the Church must proclaim an idea of the state that derives from a Christian understanding of our being as man: the state must be seen as a form of life for the nation, its purpose not to increase its power at the expense of other peoples, but to serve the inner life of its own people in obedience to the command of the holy God.

I fully realize that behind such a conception of the state there are countless problems lying in wait—the question of an arbitration authority, of a settlement between dying peoples and vigorous peoples, the question of national minorities, and a thousand other questions. But the first important step is to establish a goal, and direct the gaze of individuals and nations toward that goal. The question is not whether it serves some immediate purpose.

Augustine's concept of the state did not eliminate the miseries of the migration of peoples, and Luther's preaching about just government did not make the brutalities of the Thirty Years' War impossible. Yet each of these two great concepts of the state has been exerting its influence down the centuries.

A new conception of the communal life of the nations that will abolish war—that is what the Christian Church now owes the world.



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