

## **CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS**

*As Pamphilus notes on page 2, the October issue of The Chaplain, (a bi-monthly published by the General Commission on Chaplains and Armed Forces Personnel), features several articles which discuss "Christian Ethics in the Nuclear Age." Among them is a contribution by Waldo Beach on "The Frontiers of Christian Ethics." The following is an excerpt from this essay.*

Among the many issues that are "hot" in contemporary Christian social ethics—and of which now we take a rapid survey—the relation of the Christian faith to politics looms large. American Protestants are curiously ambivalent in their thinking here. Sometimes they run in the direction of the slogan marked "Separation of Church and State" and under its protection affirm that religion should have nothing to do with politics, or public education, and that the enemy to religious liberty is the Roman Catholic Church. Sometimes they run in the opposite direction to a sign marked "This Nation Under God" and proclaim, in the face of "godless" Communism, and in the language of what has been called "piety along the Potomac," that America must return to its religious foundations and recover its spiritual values.

One of the main matters that is getting close current attention in Protestant ethics is an attempt to formulate a positive Protestant consensus on the relation of Christianity to democracy, one that avoids the bad confusions of both these slogans. Clearly, separation of church and state should not mean the divorce of religion from common public life. And just as clearly, "This Nation Under God" should not mean "God Is on Our Side"—that would be tribal theology. The task is to formulate a position in which the church can be the "conscience" of the state, influencing democracy as a political form with norms of the Christian ethic, so that it is prevented both from anarchy and from tyranny. At the same time, the values of separation, of the precious and precarious rights of conscience against the state, or against church imperialism in Roman Catholic or Protestant form, are equally important.

A second political issue of great moment is the relation of Christianity to the philosophy of American law. In the early part of this century the philosophy of most jurists, eminent and small, was that there is no "higher law" beyond the laws—that, as Justice Holmes said, the law is "the prophecies of what the courts will do in fact, and nothing more pretentious." In this view, laws may be merely an expression of power, not of justice. Though this view still dominates American law, there is a rising minor-

ity sentiment, shared by Protestant and Catholic thinkers alike, that is searching for a "higher law" norm, by which laws can be called just or unjust. For many Christians, and not only Roman Catholics, the "natural law" tradition provides out of Christian ethics the basis for legal decision.

Under the heading of politics there is yet another matter high on the agenda of Christian social ethics: the problem of the moral controls of power in the nuclear age, within the given context of the East-West controversy, with satellites whirring overhead.

In the 1930's the debate between the pacifist and the nonpacifist took the center of the stage of the Christian conscience. Was it right for a Christian to go to war, or not? The events of World War II did not answer this ultimate question, of course. But for the majority of Christians the best answer was found in the proximate solution of the support of the war, though evil, lest the worse evil of tyranny overtake the free societies. . . .

Now the issue is rising again, on university campuses and at church conferences, but not in the same form as before the war. The issue as now posed is not: Is it right or wrong for the Christian to take life as a soldier? The question is rather: Given nuclear weapons on both sides of the East-West conflict, how is it possible to expect moral controls on the use of such weapons that can prevent total annihilation? In this apocalyptic stalemate, of armistice on the very brink of total war, how can American foreign policy express Christian realism, at once holding firm against aggression and also maintaining the peaceful co-existence which is, in fact, the only alternative to "no existence"?

There are no purely right answers to this tragic dilemma, of course. The only possible alternatives for the nation to follow are between better and worse. But there is a strong ground-swell movement of the common people to speak out somehow against the accelerating drift toward universal disaster, and to break through the stalemate. This is a movement of little people on the back streets, not the voices of diplomats on either side, who must assume the posture of belligerence. It shows up in the hunger for international cultural exchange between Russians and Americans, in the "walks for peace" and popular protests in America and Britain against nuclear tests in the Pacific, protests increasingly supported by church groups and journals not traditionally "pacifist." This is a minority movement, to be sure, hardly detectable amid the general hopelessness or apathy of Americans who hide from themselves the threat of the last holocaust by having fun. But it may prove a "creative minority" and a saving remnant.