

Religion in the Secular Society

Christians and the State by John C. Bennett. Scribner's. 302 pp. \$4.50.

Religion in America: Original Essays on Religion in a Free Society edited by John Cogley. Meridian Books: 288 pp. \$1.45.

by *Martin E. Marty*

Recent American Protestantism in its newly luxuriant growth has produced many strands of social thought. The newer, hardier stalks are represented by the "social realists." They weather the various winds of political doctrine, bending gracefully because they seem to be sturdily rooted in ideas which center in Biblical thought and the Reformation's impulse. At home with the *Realpolitikers* in foreign policy and the planners in domestic affairs, they have shown a genuine grace and a new ability to suggest that there is meaning in the Christian stance.

An older late-liberal stock has an easier time of it on the surface of things. This is represented by the gentler Christian ethicists. They yearn for a golden world in which the Golden Rule might really rule and where the Sermon on the Mount is heeded by the people of the plain. In their midst are many of impressive character and outlook, if of somewhat absolutist or doctrinaire tendency. More lightly rooted in an elusive spirit (if with less substance) of Biblical-Reformative thought, they are unbending in the winds of a new time. They are noticed by all, admired by almost all, and seen to be irrelevant by many. It is difficult to debate their positions, for the claim to have the mind of Christ and the spirit of the Master is one which is not easily dislodged by those who would discuss the substance and construct of Christian ethics.

A reading of the characteristic

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viewpoint of John C. Bennett, Professor of Applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York, in his recent summary work, raises certain difficulties as to his place among these various strands. Of course, there is no doubt at all but that he would be seen among the social realists; many would number him as the prince among them all. But he has managed with this position to combine many of the assets of the gentler school.

Somehow he has been able to clothe his discourse with the gentility of the later liberalism; this is a guise which the second-generation realists have often forgotten. In other words: the students of the Bennetts and the Niebuhrs have become doctrinaire about the anti-doctrinaire positions of their teachers. Bennett's new book unmistakably dissevers the author from those who do his position a disservice. He bends because he can afford to bend: the roots are there.

Christians and the State is one of the few full-dress systematic attempts in the English language to discuss a "theology of politics." The past year has seen the publication of any number of situational contributions to various aspects of the plaguing problems of pluralist society. Here is one opportunity to follow a viewpoint from its origins to its conclusions. So quietly and calmly does Bennett argue for this viewpoint that the reader, off-guard, may not realize that, if not actually revolutionary itself, the book is a celebration of the maturity of a revolution.

What is the heart of Bennett's approach? A bitter critic of his position recently dubbed it "the absolutizing of 'compromise.'" He saw the ominous "shadow" of Bennett dominating the National Council of Church's World Order meeting in Cleveland. The same critic summarized: the so-called

"realists" stressed the sinfulness of man and history at Cleveland. They shied away from revealed principles, urged reliance on temporary axioms, and proclaimed the inevitability of sinful choices.

Admittedly this is a caricature; it is an attempt to "give a dog a bad name, so it will smell." But if we unload the words and smooth their edges we shall see that much of the strength of Bennett's realist view lies in his ability to elevate (though not to absolutize) compromise.

Elevation of "compromise" there is. Bennett is disinterested in monopolies in the claim for social justice on the part of the churches. Wherever possible (*contra* the Karl Barths and the particularists of Christian revelation) he would build bridges to the shores of enlightened secularity. He is truly "catholic" in his approach to culture, genial in his discussion of erosions in the line between church and state. He is observably cautious about the immediate limits of a "Christological" social ethic. Original sin, in his categories, is not so much a "doctrine" that must be stressed out of divine revelation as an obviously observable fact subject to empirical analysis as being universal.

Instead of loftily mounting the Zion of the children of light, he would work among the children of darkness, sometimes preferring their partial lights to the blinding cruelties of misapplied "revelation." His view of the state is positive, and his attitude toward the pragmatic "growth of law" legalist tradition is one of congeniality. He would be seen by most Protestants to be somewhat "soft" on the Roman Catholic position on church-state relations, though under it all he has many reservations.

Several criticisms are in order, to suggest the next direction for the "realist" position. I am not sure that in the attempt to suggest the

positive goods of the "natural man" and the fruits of civic righteousness (*justitia civilis*) this approach gives enough attention to the particularity of Christian witness to the righteousness which avails before God: in classic Christianity, the righteousness which is God's gift to man in the Christ-event. In granting much power to the intuition and consensus of a people, Bennett and the realists must operate with what is residual, but which may be dissipating and diminishing as the Christian sources of that society become obscured in a "generally religious" climate.

Most of all, the second-generation problem has become the problem for those who first recognized the "break-through" and who "applied Christianity" (in terms of Bennett's chair) to it. That is this: behind the realist positions is a complicated and sophisticated background or rootage in theology and philosophy. I have heard a secular "*Realpolitiker*" of rather ruthless bent remark that he could accept all of Bennett or Niebuhr "if I don't have to stomach all that theological 'gook' that excites them so." It seems to me to be an inherent difficulty in the position and an enduring difficulty in the legacies of the men who shaped it. Too easily does it become the sanctioner or baptizer of a newly-refined brutality in foreign affairs and social doctrine in domestic affairs. Too easily can the readers of Bennett simply skim his results without sharing his presuppositions; in the process the "Christian" dimension is thinned out.

But if these are hazards, they are simply the kind of hazards minds like Bennett's enjoy facing, as I know his does—and will. Until the realists come up with something better, this is the best we have.

The essays in *Religion in America* were originally papers delivered at a seminar on Religion in a Free Society sponsored by the Fund for the Republic in New York last May. In his introduction

editor John Cogley wisely shrugs off the task of placing the event in historical context. At the very least, he admitted, it had helped the ancient debates along a little bit. Perhaps it is as fruitless to make claims for the seminar along this line as it is absurd to discuss which minor poets are major. Nevertheless, I will hazard the judgment that, while from the newsmaking event it was not of first importance, in the basic turn in ideas there represented it need bow to no other meeting.

If this is so, it is important to determine how it was so. And, since the papers are presented in book form it is in place to ask whether the book preserves enough of the character of the seminar to reproduce its significance. The answer to the second question should be yes; no matter how stimulating the discussion, it was the punch of the papers that mattered.

And they are all here. Of course, there was continuity with past discussion and there were reaffirmations of past positions. There is little news in Leo Pfeffer's legal argument for strict separation of church and state ("The Case for Separation"); in James H. Nichols criticism of Roman Catholic parochial education. ("Religion and Education in a Free Society"—this provided the fireworks!); and certainly not in Stringfellow Barr's paper on censorship.

It is in a cumulative sense that an awareness of change comes upon the reader. This is most true of all in the papers which deal with ground-rules of future discussion (and indeed, of life itself) in a free society. Protestants, Catholics, Jews and "secularists" were all represented. There was a time when either of two expectations might be raised for such a gathering. Either partisans of the various faiths or nonfaiths would be there to cheer their spokesmen to new triumphs of debate. When all was over, each would carry home trophies and tensions. Men basked in heat and called it light.

Or—and this was the more re-

cent development—it was the practice to "rig" such gatherings that conciliators only would be invited. They would be expected to gloss over vital differences. In such instances, non-representative representatives met resistance on the part of the groups for whom they in theory spoke. The seminar and the book largely avoid both extremes; and the book in particular brings the light without the heat. One has high expectations, of course, for essays by Gustave Weigel, Paul Tillich, and Abraham Heschel, who closed the week's discussion. Their contribution to the book is solid.

From the viewpoint of direction (and this was clear from the nature of ensuing discussion which is not reproduced here) the papers by John Courtney Murray and Walter J. Ong were most important. They helped draw new ground-rules and boundaries and goals. They fashioned terms which we have frequently heard in subsequent inter-faith encounters. Both begin with the assumption that a religiously pluralistic society is here to stay and that denouncing it or dreaming of a restoration of ancient monopolies will not avail. ("Religious pluralism is against the will of God. But it is the human condition; it is written into the script of history."—Murray.) Since open warfare is not an option and One Great Faith is not in the offing, some sort of coexistence is a necessity.

Let it be creative, say both Jesuits; Ong, I believe, says it more enthusiastically. Their tack: dialogue. Murray quotes Thomas Gilby: "Civilization is formed by men locked together in argument. From this dialogue the community becomes a political community." Either a barbarian fray or a civil debate can result from the "locked" position. Despite the separate and alienating religious histories within a free society, there are residual agreements and there is a consensus which resides in the inherited intuitive wisdom of the people.

A History of the United Nations Charter

by Ruth B. Russell. The Brookings Institution. 1140 pp. \$10.00.

An account of the framing of the United Nations Charter and its place in the development of American foreign policy, this book covers the critical years of 1940-45 and deals, in great detail, with the Atlantic Charter and the conferences at Moscow, Cairo, Teheran, Dumbarton Oaks, and San Francisco.

If Has Come to Pass

by James T. Farrell. Herzl Press. 288 pp. \$4.50.

A famous novelist reminds us that he is also a good journalist in this latest book, which contains a wealth of observations made during a recent tour of Israel.

A Case History of Hope

by Flora Lewis. Doubleday. 267 pp. \$3.95.

The author begins her study of "Poland's peaceful evolution" with the death of Stalin and traces the subsequent upheavals and expressions of unrest through which the Polish people have gained a measure of freedom under Soviet rule.

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by Louis Henkin. Columbia University Press. 289 pp. \$5.50.

The legal and administrative problems involved in enforcing a system of arms control and inspection in this country, and the effects of such a system on our laws and political institutions, are analyzed in this timely volume.

Arab Unity: Hope and Fulfillment

by Fayez A. Sayegh. Devin-Adair. 272 pp. \$4.00.

Efforts to achieve Arab unity are traced from the nineteenth century to the present-day political scene. The idea of Arab unity, writes the author, is a "psychological-political reality" that will continue to gather force until unity is actually attained.

An American Amen

by John LaFarge. Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy. 254 pp. \$3.75.

Father LaFarge, editor of "America" and founder of the Catholic Interracial Councils, sets down his reflections on life as an American, a priest, and an intellectual, in this warm and thoughtful book.

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