

## **THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS**

*The January 1959 issue of Theology Today carries an article by Reinhold Niebuhr on "Nuclear War and the Christian Dilemma." The following is a substantial excerpt from Dr. Niebuhr's essay.*

We are living in a tragic age in which all international relations are conducted under the Damocles sword of possible nuclear war, and in which the world is divided between two blocs of nations: the one led by our own nation, and comprising the so-called "free world"; and the other a bloc of nations, informed by a fanatic Communist creed and under the hegemony, and possibly the actual authority, of Communist Russia.

The situation tortures the conscience of all sensitive spirits, and it naturally engages the conscience of Christians. The question is what general and what unique insight the Christian Church and the Christian Gospel can contribute to the possible solution of this dilemma, that displays a dimension which former ages did not expect or were incapable of imagining. No one can give a confident answer to this question. I believe that one of the requirements of the hour is that Christians should cease to present the Gospel as a simple panacea for all the world's ills, insisting, for instance, that if only people loved each other, all these evils would disappear.

We are certainly beyond those simple precepts of the "social Gospel" which assumed that it was necessary only to apply the love ethic to collective, as well as to individual, man. The whole Christian apprehension of the human situation includes the Pauline conviction that there is a "law in my members which wars against the law that is in my mind." And we all know that this is the law of self-love, warring against the law of love. We also know that it is more difficult for collective man, as distinguished from the individual, to obey the law of love. We must take the self-interest of nations and even of whole civilizations for granted, and ask the question whether it is possible to achieve standards of justice and accommodation within the limits of this ineradicable self-interest.

If this generalization be correct, we ought to make a sharp distinction between the Christian solutions of the problems of the nuclear dilemma and insights of Gospel origin which might assuage the severity of the "Cold War." The distinction must be made because there is literally no definitive "Christian" or any solution for the nuclear dilemma.

The World Council statement on this subject, presented by the executive committee last summer, admitted as much, in a slightly confused way, because it entertained the possibility of a unilateral disavowal of nuclear weapons on the one hand, and on the other called attention to the responsibility of statesmen in preserving the defenses of the West. This means that it is acknowledged that our security depends upon the horrible "balance of terror," in which, in Churchill's eloquent phrase, "security is the child of terror and annihilation the twin brother of survival." It is always possible for individuals to bow out of such a terrible situation and disavow any reliance on nuclear weapons. That is a new version of the pacifist solution, and the question is whether it does not merely illustrate the hiatus between individual solutions of the moral problem and solutions which are applicable to nations and civilizations.

• Surely the fact that it is necessary for Christian nations to preserve their defenses against nuclear attack by the power of nuclear retaliation, hoping that in this way a nuclear war may be avoided, is merely the old problem of the difference between individual and collective morality in a new dimension. The one allows and enjoins an ethic of self-sacrifice, while the other transmutes love into justice; and justice enjoins both concern for the other and a discriminate judgment which gives "each man his due." Ages of experience have proved that an adequate justice requires not only discriminate judgments, apportioning the due of each man, but an equilibrium of forces, preventing one group from taking advantage of another. In a nuclear age this equilibrium means a balance of nuclear weapons.

Christians, like other sensitive spirits, may well call attention to the fact that we ought not put our sole reliance on military force; and, in estimating military power, not put our complete reliance on weapons which have the single purpose of preventing a nuclear war by preserving a balance of forces. But there is obviously no "Christian" way of avoiding the dilemma in which the whole world is caught. Escaping it by "self-sacrifice" means escaping it by the capitulation of the democratic world.

If there is little chance, either by Christian or other means, of abolishing the nuclear dimension of modern warfare and of escaping the nuclear terror which hangs over the world, there is a great deal of opportunity of harnessing the inspiration and in-

sights of the Christian faith in cooling off the "Cold War" and making co-existence with a system which we abhor, sufferable. One of the reasons it seems insufferable is that it is informed by a fanatic creed, which makes absolute distinctions between the "righteous" nations, who are all on the other side of the revolution, and the "unrighteous," that is, the "capitalistic" nations. But we are not sufficiently conscious of the fact that we are in danger of developing an even more vexatious self-righteousness of our own because we represent the "free world" or because we are "God-fearing" nations rather than "atheistic" ones. This self-righteousness is not only a moral hazard in our relations with the uncommitted nations, but it violates the basic principles and insights of our faith, which recognizes the fragmentary character of all human virtues and the ambiguity of all human achievements.

If the Christian faith is to be effective in moderating the arrogance of nations and the pride of civilizations, it must emphasize both the Biblical faith of the majesty of God, before whom the nations are "as a drop in the bucket," and the insights of political common sense, which must recognize that while our democratic society seems to us the ultimate in political virtue, it will appear as a luxury from the perspective of the dark continents. We have made freedom compatible with both justice and stability in the Western world. But we have accomplished this through centuries of tortuous experience, in which social power has been balanced by competing social power to prevent injustice, and in which various forms of unity have prevented the fluid and pluralistic structure of democratic society from degenerating into anarchy.

Even so the achievement of justice and stability is unique in Western society. Only the Western European nations and the Anglo-Saxon nations, including the British Dominions, have established stable democracies, and it is still a question whether either France or Italy can boast of a stable democracy. In part of the so-called "free world," more particularly in Latin-America, the usual form of government is military dictatorship. The division between the virtuous and the unrighteous nations is, in short, not as clear as we think or pretend. As for our own nation we combine the virtues of freedom with complacently high living standards which seem either odious or irrelevant to the Asian and African nations. They are impressed, on the other hand, with the Russian ability to climb from agrarian backwardness to modern technical civilization in four decades. Its despotism is no doubt an evil, but it will not appear

so to nations which have never known freedom. Whether we think of our own nation or of the so-called "free world," we are not the paragons of virtue we pretend to be and which decades of polemics against the foe have prompted us to believe that we are.

Nor is the Russian venture pure evil, however dangerous its despotism. It is idle to say that it is more evil than Tsarist despotism, for it contains the possibilities of development through its free and equal education, which the traditional despotism of the Tsars never achieved. These educational advantages will not result in democratic life immediately and perhaps not for a long time. But they are more generous than those offered by many of the nations of the free world.

In other words, common sense reinforces the precepts of our faith and emphasizes the warning not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. A more generous appreciation of the "virtues and good intentions" of the foe and more modesty in estimating our own achievements is the best application of the injunction to "love our enemies." It is, moreover, the only way of making long decades of competitive co-existence sufferable to us, and of preventing the Cold War from resulting in the ultimate war of nuclear annihilation. Certainly Christians are bound to offer a relevant insight of their faith for guiding the generation in accomplishing the most difficult task which any generation has been called upon to fulfill.

The most important insight deals with the problem of living together tolerably with an acknowledged foe for decades and perhaps for centuries. But one other insight of the Christian faith must be added as relevant to the present hour. It deals not only with the fragmentary quality of all our virtues, but with the inconclusive character of all historic tasks and responsibilities.

Modern culture, whether liberal or Marxist, has always sought the final fulfillment of history within history, and thus a utopian color has been imparted to the whole of our culture. This utopianism prevents us from giving ourselves wholeheartedly to the responsibilities which have no chance of being crowned with fulfillment. We must live, probably for centuries, in a state partly of peace and partly of war. We cannot live in such a state unless we observe the injunction of our Lord: "Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof." This can only mean that an act or task in God's sight has its virtue not in any immediate historical consequences but in the fulfillment of the divine intention in the present moment.

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