

## On Rendering to Caesar and to God

**How to Serve God in a Marxist Land** by Karl Barth and Johannes Hamel. Association Press. 126 pp. \$2.50.

**Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter** by Charles C. West. Westminster Press. 399 pp. \$6.00

by Roger L. Shinn

Recently, Western religion has sometimes labored conscientiously for peace; it has also led to implacable opposition to Soviet power. Occasionally, it has seemed that the most religious people were the least willing to see any hope in negotiation or in peaceful resolution of difficulties.

In this perplexing situation two books throw new light upon the Christian understanding of Communism in a variety of situations. Both, at the very least, confront American Christians with views radically different from the conventional ones in our own society.

A well-publicized letter of Karl Barth, written in August, 1958, to answer some questions from an East German pastor, gives the occasion for the first book. American readers, finding a few of Barth's more sensational statements in the press, wondered whether he was drawing closer to Communism. Now that the entire letter is available in English, Barth's thought appears to be about the same as in many occasional utterances since the second World War.

Barth can be annoying enough. He dismisses a challenge as dishonest without answering it or looking for its meaning. He gives advice on a loyalty oath which he has never read. He comments caustically about subjects on which he has not bothered to get information. And he treats glibly Christians who try to live faith-

Mr. Shinn is a member of the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

fully with painful responsibilities which Barth and the Eastern pastors, quite properly, do not have.

Yet, when that is said, it remains true that European pastors have responsibilities which we may fail to appreciate. For American churchmen to neglect their opportunity to influence foreign policy would be a shameful retreat. East German Christians do not have that responsibility; for them to concentrate on it would be irrelevant daydreaming. They do have a dangerous ministry, which some of them exercise courageously in the midst of frustrations that would destroy any conventional faith.

When Barth tells them the Biblical message about faith in times of persecution, he writes meaningfully for any Christian. He speaks profoundly about the Christian's relation to atheists: "You must meet their unbelief with a joyous unbelief in their attempted atheism. You as Christians must confidently claim that your atheists belong to God as much as you do."

Actually, Barth, despite many sentences which imply the contrary, says plainly that he disapproves Soviet practices "just as much" as he disapproves "the powers and dominions that rule over us here in the West." Elsewhere he has expressed a Christian preference for "civil communities of free peoples." But he is reluctant to say so now, lest he feed the fires of anti-Communism. The West, he thinks, is too likely to succumb to insidious temptations just because it sees Communism as the main threat. On that point Barth is unquestionably right. He might be surprised to know that American preaching frequently says the same thing.

In the same volume with Barth's letter is an essay, "The Proclamation of the Gospel in the Marxist

World," by Johannes Hamel, a pastor in East Germany. Writing in terms of a Barthian theology, he speaks out of vivid and dangerous experience. He answers defeatism and despair by showing that the church which trusts in Christ's victory can always undertake its mission in confidence. He sees in Communism (as Isaiah saw in the Assyrians) the "rod of God's anger" against the injustices of Western society; he acknowledges a validity of Communist government; and he looks for every opportunity to proclaim the Gospel and exercise its healing ministry. An American, who might disagree at points, is more likely to be silenced by admiration for Christian courage.

When Hamel extends his immediate testimony into broader theories of history and politics, he is on shakier ground. He comes dangerously close to the notion of the "wave of the future," which accepts any powerful historical movement as somehow God's work, which should not be opposed or reshaped. This is not to question Hamel's vocation of ministering within the Communist regime; it is only to assert that other Christians—perhaps Bishop Dibelius or Chancellor Adenauer—can find their vocations in persistent Scriptural themes which Hamel does not use.

Charles West's massive study of *Communism and the Theologians* raises similar issues in vastly different style and scope. Instead of the occasional writings by Barth and Hamel, he produces a thorough scholarly analysis of relations between Communism and Christianity, both in the lives of people and in the writings of eminent Christian thinkers.

West raises questions for any Christian response to Communism—questions which are likely to

be humbling to us in the West, who usually face Communism only in terms of a power struggle. Does Christian thought answer adequately the Marxist challenge that it is the ideology of the comfortable? Does Christianity show appreciation for the revolutionary ferment of our time, and can it compare with Marxism in giving urgency and direction to tasks of social change? Does the Christian know how to use power, and how to use powerlessness and suffering in today's world? How does the Christian exercise his ministry to the Communist as a person?

West (unlike some of the theologians he studies) is convinced that resistance to Communism's tyrannical power is necessary. But resistance is an incomplete answer. For we live in a revolutionary age. Communism is an occasion for Christian repentance and a prod to Christian revolutionary activity.

In examining the many types of Christian confrontation with Communism, West deliberately omits the obsolete attempts of a left-wing Social Gospel to bring Christianity and Communism together. He concentrates on thoroughly contemporary materials. Here he discerns, first, those Christians who identify Communism simply as the enemy. The chief of these is Emil Brunner, but West also mentions John Foster Dulles, Charles Lowry, and Whittaker Chambers. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who, without confusing Communism with the Christian revelation, nevertheless see in Communism the nemesis of an out-moded civilization and the creator of a new society in which the Church must live. Among these West includes Josef Hromadka and Bishop Beresky.

In both these extreme views West generously acknowledges elements of truth. But his verdict is a smashing rejection.

In another position, which recognizes the Western failures that

prompt the Communist protest, yet sees all the evils in Communism, West finds wisdom and realism. Within this area he looks at Tillich and Berdyaev, whom he appreciates but refutes. Then he concentrates on Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth. Toward these men he shows great admiration and affection, yet launches searching criticisms.

In Niebuhr, West finds "the sharpest analyst of world Communist power and of Christian responsibility in the face of it." Niebuhr above all others brings together "the way of love revealed in Christ" and "the problems of responsible social action." But, tracing Niebuhr's shift from early social radicalism to increasing pragmatism and conservatism, West sees the danger of ideological thinking. For Niebuhr, relying more and more on the importance of a heritage of American values, sees Communism as a threat to a good social order, and misses its powerful appeal to those in the midst of social chaos.

From West's description one might never guess that Niebuhr's writings have asked, in all seriousness, whether East Germany provides a more favorable environment for Christianity than America. Nor would one realize that Niebuhr has written penetrating comments on the problems, both international and domestic, of our economy of abundance. But all of us who enjoy American security and prosperity must admit vulnerability to West's charge that we too easily acquiesce in our present way of life.

In Karl Barth, West finds the epochal contemporary theology which best understands Christian faith and most powerfully confronts Communism.

Yet he finds Barth poorly informed about Communism and guilty of "ineptitude" in politics. Hence some of Barth's practical judgments about Communism are badly mistaken. In this area West wishes that Barth might learn

from Niebuhr. West himself turns to Helmut Gollwitzer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to improve upon Barth.

This discussion of Barth's theology has some logical flaws. West works laboriously but futilely to show that this theology has a built-in guarantee against ideological bias, because it derives so exclusively from Jesus Christ. But theology works from some *human* conception of Christ, which may be tragically ideological. It is at least possible that Barth's rather easy assumption of the victory of Christ over evil is the ground for an ideology of irresponsibility, quite natural for a Swiss thinker who need not participate in the major power struggles of our time. Although West shows the powerful nature of ideology, he does not quite see its full danger to all of us.

Another difficulty comes in West's abstraction of theology from human decisions. He constantly talks about Barth's good theology which is badly "applied" to the world of political affairs. This notion of theology as something to be fully developed, then applied, is a curious one. One might ask whether theology does not spring out of the address of the living Word of God to actual situations, in such a way that the so-called application is scarcely necessary because it has entered into the very meaning of theology.

Finally, West, prompted by his love for both Barth and Niebuhr, wants to show that the two are closer together than most people think. But his attempt has convinced one reader that they are farther apart than West or most people think.

These criticisms refer to the more abstract parts of West's arguments. When he deals with the concrete confrontation of Christianity and Communism, he has brilliant perceptiveness and powerful insight. Any American can learn a great deal from this book.

**Soviet Policy Toward the Baltic States, 1918-1940**

by Albert N. Tarulis. University of Notre Dame Press. 276 pp. \$5.50.

The lost countries of the Baltic—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—are a frequently neglected chapter in the history of Soviet imperialism. Dr. Tarulis, a native of Lithuania who witnessed the Russian occupation, now tells the story in a thoroughly documented version which dates the beginnings of annexation back to "the Bolshevik duplicity" of 1918.

**Triumph in the West**

by Arthur Bryant. Doubleday. 438 pp. \$6.95.

The second and concluding volume to be based on the personal diaries of Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke covers the crucial months between 1943 and 1946 and provides a provocative insight into first-level strategy decisions and the men who made them.

**The Riddle of Roman Catholicism**

by Jaroslav Pelikan. Abingdon. 272 pp. \$4.00.

Written mainly for Protestants by a Protestant, this study displays an intimate knowledge of the Catholic Church's history, structure and doctrines, and can be read with profit by persons of all faiths who seek an understanding of "the most formidable religious institution in the history of America and the world."

**Controls for Outer Space**

by Philip C. Jessup and Howard J. Taubenfeld. Columbia University Press. 379 pp. \$6.00.

Citing as precedents the various types of experimental international cooperation that have been developed in the past either by sovereign states or under the aegis of the League of Nations or the UN, the authors advance a series of proposals for similar international administration of Antarctica and the province of outer space.

**Issues and Conflicts**

Edited by George L. Anderson. University of Kansas Press. 374 pp. \$5.00.

In a collection of essays, a number of American scholars and historians examine the effects of twentieth century American diplomacy on China, the Middle East, Asian nationalism, immigrant groups, Latin America and Germany.

**Too Many Asians**

by John Robbins. Doubleday. 214 pp. \$3.95.

Malthus' prophecy is bearing bitter fruit today in Asia, where unprecedented growth in population now threatens the lives and welfare of over half the world's inhabitants and raises grave and immediate problems for the relatively secure West. This report provides an analysis of the population explosion, with particular emphasis on China, India and Japan.

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**CONTENTS**

Editorial Comment..... 1  
 In the Magazines..... 2  
 The Power to Negotiate..... 3  
     *E. Raymond Platig*  
 Right and Wrong Calculation..... 6  
     *Paul Ramsey*  
 BOOKS  
     God and Caesar by *Roger L. Shinn*..... 10  
     Current Reading ..... 12

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