

The Religious Conscience and the Soviet Challenge

Christianity and Communism Today by John C. Bennett. Association Press. 186 pp. \$3.50.

by *Richard Horchler*

Early in his book Dr. Bennett speaks of his "dual approach" to Communism, an approach which "on the one hand emphasizes the obligation to resist it . . . and, on the other hand, acknowledges the validity of much that Communism represents . . ."

In 1948, when the first edition of *Christianity and Communism* appeared, insistence on these as twin emphases was courageous and provocative, for those were the early days of the Soviet Union's Cold War offensive against the West. Between that time and the preparation of this revised and expanded version of the book, the course of events had wrought startling changes in American attitudes toward Communism.

By last year, the feelings generated by such events as the attack on South Korea, the McCarthy phenomenon, the massacre of Hungary, had somehow receded into history. Our present problems with Communism, it seemed, revolved around questions of peaceful coexistence, disarmament and nuclear controls. The "spirit of Camp David" was burgeoning, as we know, and the times seemed ripe for a new look at the moral and political responsibilities of the Christian in regard to the question of "coexistence."

Today, of course, only weeks later, the "spirit of Camp David" is merely one of the points of bitterness between the United States and the Soviet Union. What this bitterness will mean to the temperature of the Cold War we do not yet know, but the American

national temper, in an election year especially, seems unlikely to be disposed toward the attitudes and actions called for by Dr. Bennett: an abandonment of self-righteousness, confession of a share of responsibility for the horror which threatens the world, an end to reliance on military power as the prime safeguard against Communist expansion. And it is unfortunate that this is so. That American Christians will find it more difficult to enter the spirit of this book, because of the pressure of recent events, suggests it will be to just that extent more important for them to do so.

This is not to say that *Christianity and Communism Today* (the new title) opens any clear and easy path through the maze of perplexities confronting American Christians today. It is not to say, either, that Dr. Bennett's analyses win immediate and inevitable agreement; I for one am troubled or unconvinced by a number of his arguments. But there is so much wisdom in these pages, such insight into Christian values, above all such striving to meet the highest demands of these values as they relate to Communists and Communism as well as to anything else, that the book cannot help but elevate the minds and hearts it reaches.

As these comments suggest, Dr. Bennett's chief concern in this study is a religious one. The political implications of his ideas are important and exciting, and it is these, undoubtedly, which will draw most comment, but it must not be forgotten that his subject is most fairly described as Christianity in relation to Communism and the East-West struggle, not the reverse. This is of course the strength of his book, but it may also be a weakness. For Dr. Bennett's deepest interest is in the

perfecting of Christian thought and action in the world, not the achievement of the specifically political objectives of the state. In a sense, of course, and from a distant enough historical vantage point, these interests will doubtless coincide. But for us today, forced to make choices that are as ambiguous, as ill-informed, necessarily, as they are perilous and urgent, the relationship between these ends is murkier perhaps than it has ever been.

Dr. Bennett is no simplist, no religious idealist whose fervor blinds him to the limitations of political possibility. Furthermore, I find myself not in disagreement with the direction of his foreign policy recommendations. The problem, for me, is simply that the relation between these particulars and the preceding general moral principles seems rather more complex than is indicated here by Dr. Bennett.

For the central sections of the book there can be only praise. Here Dr. Bennett presents, in brief but remarkably comprehensive chapters, a calm and knowledgeable discussion of Communist doctrine and the basic theoretical issues between that doctrine and Christian faith. Such a preliminary may seem at first, after all these years, to be hardly necessary, but a moment's reflection reveals the extent to which Christian attitudes toward Communism are conditioned by fear, outrage and incomprehension of the appeal it can have for any save monsters or fools.

Dr. Bennett's survey is unusual not only for its lucidity, but for its "positive" tone. There is no hesitancy in defining the falsehoods of Communism, the threat it poses to personal and political freedom, and the need for Christians to resist it; but there is at the same time a willingness to

Mr. Horchler is an associate editor of *The Commonweal*.

recognize positive aspects of the ideology which few Christians are able to achieve. Thus Dr. Bennett insists that "the errors of Communism are in large part the result of the failure of Christians, and of Christian churches, to be true to the revolutionary implications of their own faith" and that "the effectiveness of Communism lies chiefly in the fact that it seems to offer the exploited and neglected peoples of the world what has been denied them by a civilization that has often regarded itself as Christian."

A number of early pages are devoted to a kind of ideological ground-clearing. Dr. Bennett addresses himself to the popular misconceptions of Communist doctrine in regard to its materialism, determinism and, most significantly, its moral cynicism. This last, he maintains, is perhaps the most flagrant and misleading of popular judgments. "In spite of the fact that Communism has been one of the factors in dissolving the moral assumptions of modern man," and in spite of "Communist criticism of 'bourgeois ethics' and of all absolute ethics," at its base "the whole Communist attack upon capitalistic society is ethical through and through." The dangers of these misunderstandings are evident: "that [Christians] may concentrate on a caricature of Communism and thus miss the corrective that is in it" and "that they may celebrate a premature victory over the caricature and thus fail to discern the deeper issues that divide Christianity and Communism."

To the exploration of these deeper issues Dr. Bennett brings a number of valuable insights. The most fundamental point of conflict between Christianity and Communism, as he sees it, is the fact that Communism "absolutizes a particular movement in history and promises that this movement will bring redemption from all social evil." The great

error of Communism, then, is not its avowed atheism but "what we may call its practical idolatry."

The second of his "basic issues" is Communism's methods of dealing with opponents, and the third, underlying it, its view of the status of the human person. Confronting the ruthless Communist principle that the end justifies the means, Dr. Bennett offers some reflections which are disturbing to Christian pretensions. The record of Christianity's religious wars and, even more, the behavior of Christians in time of national war enforce the judgment that the practice of Christians and Christian nations has been in this respect "much less different from that of the Communists than they suppose."

Dr. Bennett is equally insistent on Christian responsibility for solving the problems which drive so many to Communism. He notes the failures of the churches to live up to the commandments entrusted to them and their tendency to escape responsibility through evasive otherworldliness, instinctive conservatism or the convenience of identification with a political or economic status quo.

The last concern of his book is "Christian strategy in relation to Communism" and "the presuppositions which should control the thought of American Christians about foreign policy." These latter are, in brief: that the role of military power needs to be recognized as secondary in the present competition; that we should accept the fact that Communism is a reality in both Russia and China which will not be overcome by outside pressure; that to promote the cause of political and spiritual freedom we must attend to the quality of our own national life. Such ideas may seem unexceptionable, although the reaction to their presentation in the 1948 edition of the book has led Dr. Bennett to add a chapter: "Some Moral and Religious Objections to Coexistence."

My own objection here—not to coexistence but to Dr. Bennett's development of his thesis—is that his prior religious convictions and even these sensible "presuppositions which should control the thought of American Christians" do not in fact appear to exert any defining control over anyone's thinking on particular foreign policy questions. The principles of Dr. Bennett's "guide to thinking" could be endorsed, I dare say, by political figures as far apart as Norman Thomas and Barry Goldwater, and yet they would disagree violently on a great many specific policy questions.

I would dissent from Dr. Bennett's thought on a number of other points, but these are differences only of degree and emphasis, which stand out, perhaps, against the large area of agreement. For instance, while the changes within the Soviet Union are undeniably great and significant, I am somewhat less confident than Dr. Bennett of their forming any kind of reliable pattern. Again, while I recognize that the Communists and the West hold more objectives in common than is generally conceded—survival, obviously, and reducing the armaments burden—I am less assured than Dr. Bennett of the extent of these common interests. That both East and West can be assumed to have identical interests in the "relaxation of tensions," for example, seems to me doubtful. Finally, while I agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Bennett's attempts to puncture national self-righteousness, I am troubled by what seems to be at least a tendency toward balancing the sins and responsibilities of the West against those of the Soviets. Some Communist postures are unquestionably taken in reaction to those taken by the West, but I think the West by itself has much less power to reduce tensions than Dr. Bennett suggests.

The Kremlin and World Politics

by Philip E. Mosely. Vintage Books. 557 pp. \$1.65.

In a collection of essays on Soviet policy and action written between 1938 and 1959, a noted authority interprets "both the constant and the changing features that the Soviet system presents to its own people and to the world."

Challenge to World Leadership

by Howard G. Kurtz. Public Affairs Press. 24 pp. Free.

The author proposes that a world organization be created to apply the universally accepted principles of air safety control to the problem of international security against war. The comments of twelve leading citizens on the proposal are included.

The Overseas Americans

by Harlan Cleveland, Gerard J. Mangone and John Clarke Adams. McGraw-Hill. 316 pp. \$5.95.

The responsibility for preparing Americans for effective performance overseas is not being fully met by the foreign service training programs of our public and private agencies and universities, according to the authors of this study. Their analysis includes a program of recommendations that can be adopted by government personnel, missionaries and businessmen who work abroad.

Can We End the Cold War?

by Leo Perla. Macmillan. 251 pp. \$4.50.

Mr. Perla attacks the "double standards" implicit in our conduct of foreign affairs and suggests that survival lies in "the adoption of universal standards of right and wrong, applicable to all nations at all times, and a single standard of ethics applicable to national and personal conduct."

Beyond the Welfare State

by Gunnar Myrdal. Yale University Press. 287 pp. \$4.50.

A distinguished economist investigates the trend toward economic planning in the rich and progressive Western countries and the international implications of this trend, with particular emphasis on the underdeveloped countries.

U.S. Foreign Aid: Its Purposes, Scope, Administration, and Related Information

Legislative Reference Service, Library of Congress. 117 pp.

This government pamphlet combines complete factual information with critical scrutiny to make perhaps the most valuable official study of our foreign aid programs that has yet been issued. It is House Document No. 116 and may be obtained from the Clerk of the House of Representatives.

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