

and the Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* are essentially those taken by the W.C.C. in the previous decade.)

The W.C.C. and its Commission of the Churches for International Affairs recognized the need to work patiently with both sides of the East-West conflict. In 1962 the CCIA said:

General and complete disarmament is the goal in the agreed principles accepted by all parties as the basis for disarmament negotiations. This goal has little meaning as long as agreement cannot be reached on even the first steps toward disarmament. Accordingly, in order to pave the way for more comprehensive agreements, there should be constant readiness to modify previously held positions in the light of new scientific evidence or political circumstances, and to accept provisional and partial settlements where final solutions cannot be achieved. In this process the great powers ought to accept, under international control and verification, a progressively lower level of armaments without disturbing the equilibrium of power. The trend is virtually as important as the immediate result.

Thus, one finds that on some controversial points the W.C.C. did not take sides. On others it accepted some points advocated by the East and some advocated by the West. As it correlated various proposals in producing its own position, the W.C.C. advocated policies which could be advantageous and feasible for for both East and West to follow. In general, one can see in the W.C.C. pronouncements greater endorsement of the American-British-French positions than of the Soviet position — which is understandable, especially in view of the greater support for the Western position in the United Nations.

It appears that an international church body such

as the W.C.C. does bring a greater objectivity to an international problem than a national or regional group. Utilizing its larger perspective it can bring its influence to bear upon churches and nations and it can also serve as a center for the cross-fertilization of ideas. It is interesting to observe, for example, that a 1958 statement of the Council for Christian Social Action of the United Church of Christ quotes the W.C.C. Central Committee action on nuclear tests and that a number of C.P.C. statements in the 1960's express agreement with certain stands taken by the W.C.C. in New Delhi and elsewhere.

Effects of W.C.C. pronouncements upon nations can be seen in at least two instances. Back in 1948 the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs proposed the establishment of a system of International Observer Commissions to act as on-the-spot observers in areas of tension. This proposal was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1950 as a part of the "Uniting for Peace" resolution. In addition, there is reason to believe that the W.C.C. and its member churches helped to provide the climate to win approval of the test ban treaty.

One should not disparage the role of the churches within a particular nation or region, however. By contributing to and by being open to ecumenical insights and by serving as effective communicators, they have the ability to influence their people and their government. If they act with intelligence and competence they can help to raise the sights of the nations in which they exist.

## Moral Earnestness, Political Prudence and the Church

*Who Speaks for the Church?*  
by Paul Ramsey. Abingdon Press.  
189 pp. \$2.45 (paper).

by Edward Duff, S.J.

During a hectic game of hurley in Ireland, the story goes, the ball went into a tree. All efforts to dislodge it by shaking the tree and throwing stones at the branches having failed, one captain exclaimed to the other: "Ah, the hell

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with it, let's get on with the game!" Professor Paul Ramsey is persuaded that the "older" ecumenical movement is similarly by-passing, when not subverting, its proper purpose in a stultifying fashion. His admittedly "partial" critique concerns chiefly the 1966 Geneva World Conference on Church and Society sponsored by the World Council of Churches, but his general indictment bears on a common syndrome he finds characteristic of the "social action curias" of the churches: "the passion for numerous particular pronouncements on policy questions to the consequent neglect of basic decision and ac-

tion-oriented principles of ethical and political analysis."

To be sure, the Princeton Professor of Religion is unhappy about what he considers the faulty selection of participants at such church conferences on social problems; the inadequacy of discussion, so that opposing views and unsurmised consequences are not seriously weighed; the unseemly rush to compose reports to be edited in late-night sessions by special *periti* and, after minimal debate, adopted by an exhausted audience, pleased that it has taken resolute stands, thus confronting the world and making religion relevant to man's

present and pressing needs. Ramsey's main complaint, however, is not procedural. He questions not merely the propriety but the justification of such church assemblies in opting for concrete policy decisions, in issuing specific pronouncements on controverted questions of economic justice and international peace. He finds the entire process a "flight from justice" (which he dates from the 1937 Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State), an abandonment of the effort to formulate an agreed ethical perspective of the role of the responsible Christian in the contemporary world in preference for utterances that preempt the proper sphere of political prudence, thus faulting the consciences of fellow Christians and aggregating to the churches a competence beyond their scope.

At hand, then, is a new and sophisticated (if not seldom sple- netic) argument on the proper role of the church in the world, on the correct stance of ecumenical bod- ies, on the level of legitimate church utterance. That the author's own political judgments—on Viet- nam and the use of nuclear weap- ons, for example—are at variance with positions taken at the Geneva Conference does not invalidate his strictures (or, at least, his ques- tions). For Dr. Ramsey is adamant in insisting that he would equally oppose any endorsement of his own ultimate political assessments by any similar church assembly.

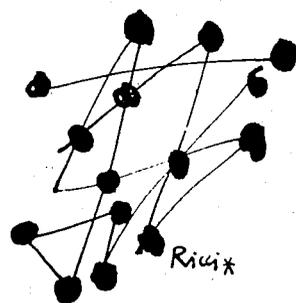
That Paul Ramsey is not advoc- ating ethical escapism is in no need of demonstration. As a serious practitioner, he addresses himself regularly to acute and perplexing moral issues; nor has his courage in taking positions ever been in question. What he is challenging is the right and competence of ecumenical bodies, no matter how official, to commit the churches to concrete positions in the realm of public policy.

Dr. Ramsey sets down emphati- cally and in detail what he deems the errors and the expedience in

the procedures of the Geneva Con- ference (and by extension those of the National Council of Churches); the alleged superficiality and partisanship of its pro- nouncements are condemned pre- emptorily and sometimes mock- ingly. This, one concludes, was the primary intention of his expanded pamphlet: to point out that moral earnestness is no substitute for political prudence, to warn of self- righteousness supplanting a sincere will to service, to cauterize the im- pulse toward world problem-solv- ing by ecumenical decree. All of this is to the good.

But what should be the ethical grammar of ecumenical discourse, what the methodology of its elabo- ration, and what should be the pitch and idiom of church utterance on political and social issues? For a developed discussion of these cru- cially important and controverted questions one must wait — and with unfeigned interest — for another book. We have, however, a few pages to indicate the direction of the Princeton moralist's thought.

A determining factor is the pur- pose of church pronouncements. This, in Ramsey's view, should be to broaden and deepen public de- bate instead of mobilizing public opinion behind a specific policy as if Christians as such have insights and information superceding those



of responsible public officials. Again, conceding that "none of us knows the contours or the contents of the ecumenical ethics of the future," Ramsey calls for an abrupt abandonment of the strategy of "directives" for action in favor of a more reticent approach, a radical shift of posture to what he calls "direction-oriented or action-ori-

ented" political or social analyses based on Christian themes. (Incidentally, this approach seems a surreptitious return to "middle axioms" which Ramsey appears to dismiss as outdated.) The "decision-oriented" methodology is not for a minute to be considered a cop-out on current problems; indeed, multiplied specific policy directives that have not weighed consequences and alternatives may well screen nugatory (and noxious) generalities. Thus, ritualistic recommendations of U.N. action in contests involving the interests of the great powers translate to little more than the slogan "make love, not war!" Furthermore, the adop- tion of such a "decision-oriented" methodology offers definite long- range goals of ethical excellence against which more concrete deci- sions can be measured. Thus, the Methodist General Conference used as a partial test of "every nation's foreign policy . . . whether it makes possible disarmament under law," presumably multilateral, simultaneous and supervised general disarmament. Perhaps, again, with due reference to considera- tions of political prudence, foreign policy decisions could be appraised by the degree in which they transcend narrow nationalism and contribute to an international order based on justice. Examples of economic life might use the minimum test of "decent and frugal comfort" for all families rather than opting for one of nine versions of a nega- tive income tax proposal outlined in a recent brochure of Cornell's industrial relations center.

Such, in the main, is Paul Ram- sey's cause. Its demand for an immediate abandonment of the strategy of specific recommenda- tions and condemnations by church bodies is definite; its caution against finding Christian warrant for partisan political preferences is clear; and yet, its focus is dis-concertingly theoretical. It is one thing to deplore the tendency of ecclesiastical bodies to offer gratui- tous advice to governments, but what are they to do when con-

fronted with concrete legislation which they may either support or ignore? The shape, even the survival, of the poverty program rests on the fate of a concrete Congressional bill with an assigned number. The same is true of foreign aid. With no overwhelming expertise in such matters, the churches have given their explicit and official support to these bills. Perhaps such action is an example of a "decision-oriented" methodology, but Professor Ramsey, with his confidence in the political prudence of the responsible magistrate who should be left to do his gritty duty as his conscience dictates, does not encourage me to be sure on the point. (Nor, having read George Kennan's memoirs, have I as much confidence, not in the dedication but in the wisdom of the middle-echelon, policy-recommending magistrate.)

Now the question of the level of utterance of the churches is not as new as the controversy attending the Ramsey book might suggest. It was explicitly treated in a background volume to the 1937 Oxford Conference, *The Church and Its Function in Society* by W. A. Visser 't Hooft and J. H. Oldham, unfortunately out of print. Noting that pronouncements by church assemblies are intended first for the spiritual and moral education of members and, also, to exert an influence on public opinion and through it on the policy of the state, Dr. Oldham cautioned:

"Unreality of thought and statement ought to be avoided at all costs, if the testimony of the Church is to be effective. Pronouncements ought to be responsible pronouncements and it ought to be clear who are committed by them. It is surprising how often the sense of responsibility may be lacking in Christian assemblies. The danger is perhaps greatest in interdenominational and international bodies, in which sometimes resolutions are passed as an expression of the Christian mind on

a particular public issue when they do not in fact represent more than the opinions of the more or less chance collection of individuals who happen to be present at the meeting. Pronouncements which do not have behind them a solid body of considered and convinced opinion can have little or no effect on public action." Indeed, observed Dr. Oldham, "the habit of passing resolutions carried to excess defeats its own purpose."

Such warnings are always in order. Currently, in the Catholic community in the United States, Msgr. George G. Higgins is being listed as a tired liberal for repeating them. But the Ramsey argument strikes me in part as also being theoretical in the extended sense of being impractical. The suggestion of reconvening, for seasoned deliberation and, so, greater effectiveness, the Conference on Church and Society "in several sessions . . . over a period of years" is to ignore the financial resources of the World Council of Churches and the availability of the more than 400 participants who came to Geneva from 70 countries for two weeks in July 1966. To expect a unanimity of agreement on ethical suppositions before indicting the trade policies of the rich nations is to forget that the World Council is by definition "a fellowship of churches" of different theological traditions and therefore of ethical methodologies; it would also be to suggest that the gross effects of tariff rates and investment practices are arcane information.

Dr. Ramsey was present at the Geneva Conference as a member of the co-opted staff (as was I as an R. C. official observer). He points out the theological thinness of the performance, yet he concedes (parenthetically) in his book that "the field of social ethics as this is done by professionals today is in as much disarray as social ethics in the ecumenical churches." Writing in advance of the Geneva meeting, Robert S. Bilheimer, former Associate General Secretary of the

World Council had noted:

"Because the theological situation within the churches is nearly chaotic, the theological problem of the Conference is gigantic. Not only are there uncertainties as to the manner of interpreting the Bible but the accusation is at large that traditional Christian ethics is a residue of a defunct Christendom and an instrument of colonialism. Nor can the mistrust, even the mockery, of the young people who today constitute half the population of the world be forgotten. In larger and vocal numbers they proclaim their disaffection towards all forms of ancient wisdom, their disbelief in the sincerity, or at least, the effectiveness of all institutional ecclesiastical effort in a world of revolution." Moreover, Dr. Ramsey is surely aware that the Faith and Order department of the World Council, whose official purpose restricted it "to clarify theologically those problems which have to do with the unity of God's people," was by this self-denying ordinance uninvolved in the preparations of the Church and Society Conference.

It will be clear, then, that while by temperament (at the least) I am sympathetic to Ramsey's call for more intellectual modesty of utterance from church assemblies and the suppression of solution by slogan and the establishing of justice by incantation, I feel that he has been less than generous in his appraisal of the World Conference on Church and Society — to confine his case to that single instance. Indeed, many may not find his description accurate in any adequate sense. The Geneva Conference was in no sense a convention of ethicists, aberrant or no, nor was it a meeting mainly of the clergy. The majority of the participants were Christian lay people of various countries, vocations, eminence and wisdom; again, more than half were from the developing nations. They were invited to Geneva to make available to the World Council

cil's membership their collective notions on the present complications of man's earthly existence under the general theme of "Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of Our Times." They did a considerable amount of sounding off, as will people who know that they are being disadvantaged and are determined to reverse the historical forces responsible for their situation. Their opinions when collated (and judiciously edited by the curia) became the Conclusions and Recommendations of the Conference. Personal taste might find some of these utterances (as I found several of the speakers) pompous and naive, but it must be remembered that the Conference was not speaking for the World Council (which, in any case, can't speak for its constituent churches). Professor Ramsey's experience at Geneva was with the section, one of four, dealing with "The Nation as a Factor of the State in a Revolutionary Age." It may well be that here is the reason why his book, while forcefully arguing for an eschewing of the endorsing or condemning of specific policies on political and social problems, fails to indicate the general scope and certainly the special atmosphere of the Conference.

It is my memory that the Geneva Conference was notable not so much for the specificity of its stands (or are we becoming inured at this point?) as for the stridency of its challenge to the smugness and affluence of the industrialized world. If some of the Americans, myself for example, found some of the speakers arrogant in their attitudes and silly in their expectations, we were, nevertheless, exposed to our spiritual profit to the ideas of fellow Christians, readers of the one gospel. At the very least, the experience enlarged our sympathy for Arthur Goldberg in his U.N. post. For one had the inescapable feeling that the East-West tension was muted in the confrontation of the northern part of the hemisphere by the exigent south.

As I have written elsewhere of the Geneva Conference: "The central issue was world economic justice and the dominant concern was how to arrest the growth of squalor and sickness and ignorance in a world made a single neighborhood by technology where rich nations, mostly Christian, are becoming richer and poor nations, frequently former colonies of Christendom, are becoming poorer." Dr. Ramsey fails signally to indicate the comprehensive, solid, balanced work that went into the Report of the section on "Economic and Social Development in a World Perspective" or, for that matter, some of the original insights for a church document of the report of the section on "Man and Community in Changing Societies."

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Deeper than the debate over the proper specificity of utterance of church bodies (or, perhaps, the question prior to the debate) is the issue underscored by Dr. J. H. Oldham in his 1937 book: "Our understanding of the functions of the Church in society and of its relations to the Community depends in the last resort on our doctrine, or our undefined and unconscious assumptions, regarding the relation of the Church to the world." This, I submit, is the primordial, controlling question. After reading a spate of current books on religion and secularity, the question (*pace* Harvey Cox) returns. It must not be begged even when calling for a new grammar of ecumenical ethical discourse. Dr. Ramsey proposes as a model of the proper utterance Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, neglecting to indicate that the document is the product of three years of intense deliberation involving thousands of reworkings by dozens of subcommittees. When presenting a section of it to the Council, Bishop John J. Wright noted that it is not the last but the first word on the subject. Perhaps the document's chief value is that it begins

formally with an examination of the Oldham item, an area which the World Council's Church and Society Department has had to assume as being in the common domain. Inevitably, then, there is in the "older" ecumenical community (as, indeed, there continues to be in Roman Catholic circles) difference between those who want the churches to play a concrete, prophetic role amid humanity's present anguish and those concerned that the church not exceed its proper function and, in an enthusiasm to be "relevant," lend its support to partisan political programs, for example to Saul Alinsky's tactic of "clout not conscience."

It will not be cravenly neutral, I hope, to recall that St. Paul discusses the gifts (and problems) of prophecy in the Christian community in the chapter in Corinthians devoted to the primacy of charity. The only authority of World Council pronouncements in the ultimate analysis, Archbishop William Temple once remarked, is their inherent wisdom. Of course Professor Ramsey would not find the disavowal of authoritative, magisterial intent an excuse for the promiscuity of policy utterances. Indeed, he would find the multiplication of pronouncements an illustration of Gresham's law of verbal debasement. The Conclusions and Recommendations of the Geneva Conference did not have even the authority of World Council utterances. Ramsey and I would agree, I am sure, that each of the participants should be accorded, in the context (and under the dominance) of St. Paul's doctrine of charity, the full freedom to exercise his prophetic witness in the world. We would ask in return that we not be committed, for example, to deplore the failure of the World Court to adjudicate the question of South West Africa after a previous ruling on the legal obligation to pay financial assessments for U.N. peacekeeping activities was regally — and successfully — spurned by two of the great powers.