

# Correspondence

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## The U.S. Press & Chile

To the Editor: In "Seeing Allende Through the Myths" in the April issue of *Worldview*, Paul Sigmund criticized several times an article I coauthored with Torry Dickinson in the March *Worldview*, "Apologists for Terror: The U.S. Press and Chile." Professor Sigmund is the only Latin American specialist I know who considers mythical the opinion that the U.S. press was hostile to the Allende government and blatantly tolerant, if not solicitous, of the military junta the first few weeks after the coup. Several academicians mentioned in my article have explicitly criticized U.S. press coverage of Chile, and it is not unreasonable to conclude that Professor Sigmund's views are relatively unrepresentative of the opinion of most professors.

The specific points addressed by Professor Sigmund, moreover, rather than refuting the arguments made in our article, quibble with some particulars and rarely address the major issues raised. For example, the Pollock-Dickinson piece did not cite tens of thousands "killed" in Chile after the coup, but rather "killed or imprisoned." Dr. Sigmund's revival of the specter of danger from the Left has been proved so clearly spurious by events, by the obvious power and overkill of the right-wing militarists, that one wonders why he continues to pursue that line of reasoning. To emphasize that the Left is "cold-blooded" in light of what the Right has destroyed is at this point myopic beyond belief. To draw attention to illegal arms importation by the Left when the militarists were receiving greatly increased arms shipments from the U.S. is to miss clearly the significance of all that has happened. To cite the *New York Times* as authoritative in claiming that only 476

bodies were processed by one of the main morgues in the immediate aftermath of the coup, refuting a *Newsweek* article claiming over two thousand, is to ignore the total death estimates made by the CIA, Amnesty International and the U.S. State Department (respectively, 10,000; 13,000; and up to 20,000, cited in a recent issue of *Latin America*, a weekly from Britain).

The Pollock-Dickinson article did not claim that the U.S. press has never opposed the junta, but rather that in the first few weeks after the coup, when the rest of the world press generally expressed horror at the bloody death of democracy in Chile, the U.S. press made efforts to present this denouement as a perfectly natural, logical and, most disturbing of all, justifiable outcome of events. The point is not so much that our press coverage was "one-sided," but rather that it was unique in presenting the repression in Chile in a "balanced" perspective. The number of dead, including many children lying in the streets with newspapers over their faces, the tortures and firing-squad executions in the National Stadium and the massive repression of all political activity, was appropriately condemned by the foreign press. The most reputable U.S. daily papers, however, excepting the *Washington Post*, ran articles which included several perspectives legitimizing junta activity. No conspiracy was needed to achieve this. Rather, a shared cold war orientation or common support for endangered U.S. economic interests in Chile may have prompted the response.

Whatever the appropriate explanation for U.S. reporting on Chile, it certainly gave our press bad marks for its unwillingness to value democracy enough to register the outrage

required by civilized people when faced with the barbarism so clearly evident in Chile after Allende. There is no question this is a shameful episode in the history of the U.S. press. To pretend otherwise is to cheapen our own humanity.

John Pollock

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Paul F. Sigmund Responds:

Professor Pollock's letter is an excellent example of the type of "double-think" against which my article was directed. Because the coup and the right-wing regime which followed it have been cruel and repressive, one may not even discuss the evidence that the Left had its share of responsibility for the tragic events in Chile. Because many people have been killed in Chile since September, one may not even make an effort to determine more precisely the extent of the slaughter. Because there are firing squads, torture and political repression in Chile, any attempt to get a balanced view of what went on in Chile before September 11 is guilty of "legitimizing junta activity."

Our differences on the subject arise out of a more basic disagreement, which is revealed in Professor Pollock's last paragraph. I believe that the primary responsibility of the news media is to provide as far as possible a balanced and informed view of the news, limiting editorial comments to the editorial pages. Admittedly the European press is much better at "registering outrage" in its news columns, but the outrage of *Le Monde* after the overthrow of Allende was matched by equally biased anti-Allende editorializing in the guise of news articles in other publications, such as *The Economist*. A further problem with the moral outrage theory of journalism is that it often plays directly into the hands of those it wishes to denounce by exaggerating or distorting the facts in a way which makes it easy for

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the regime to discredit it. The pictures and text of the *Newsweek* story cited in my article are a case in point.

Professor Pollock's analyses of the U.S. press have been useful; one of them done in late 1972 seems to have led directly to an improvement in the *New York Times* coverage of Chile. However, the journalistic theory on which he bases those analyses is pernicious and counter-productive.

## Ethical Ghettos

To the Editors: I do not wish in any way to detract from the good intentions which no doubt motivated George Tvard's "Ethical Ghettos in the Ecumenical Age" (*Worldview*, March). It is, however, of more than passing interest that the churches seem to have the chief difficulty in the area of ethical authority, which, at least in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, is a kind of last refuge for the Church's authoritative grip on personal behavior. (In fact, of course, as is well known, most Roman Catholics seem rather indifferent to the Church's official position on, for example, birth control.)

The question that is raised is whether it is not easier for the churches, which have largely lost their intellectual nerve in the face of the modern world, to come to rather easy agreement on previously knotty problems (such as papal primacy) in part because they know that the intellectual (theological) substance of these questions is of little or no interest to the larger world. And, of course, the vast majority of lay people has never been familiar with, nor very interested in, such theological minutiae. When it comes to ethics, however, specifically ethics relating to sex and family

behavior, the individual churches feel they can hardly let go without inviting the final coming apart of the whole institutional religious enterprise.

I write this as someone who cares about institutional religion, and I do not wish to be excessively cynical about the motivations shaping the several churches' behavior. It does seem unfortunate, however, that Father Tvard does not take into account this sociological dimension in his analysis of the contrast between doctrinal and ethical ecumenical progress.

James Karim

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### George H. Tvard Responds:

While I appreciate James Karim's good intentions in pointing out some present weakness of the Christian churches, I share neither his pessimism nor his reading of our times. I do not think that the churches have largely lost their intellectual nerves in the face of the modern world: They are courageously engaged in the ever unfinished critical process of sorting out the conflicting ingredients which constitute the hodgepodge of the modern world. Nor do I believe that doctrinal agreement has become easy because such agreement is of no interest to the larger world. The interest or uninterest of the larger world is irrelevant in matters which the larger world does not understand. That the vast majority of lay people have never been familiar with such theological minutiae may be true of the present century; it was not true of the early Church or of the Reformation, and I suspect that interest will come back when we tire of the games and gimmicks which abound in our society and which are stifling our soul. I do not agree, either, that the field of ethics, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, is a refuge for the Church's authoritative grip on personal behavior. Such a grip cannot exist in the standard Thomist ethics of conscience which have shaped most official Roman Catholicism; it has come into being and it

lingers on as a myth among persons who are unacquainted with the classical Catholic theory of law. Finally, I am quite sure the difficulty to start ecumenical dialogues in ethics does not derive from the churches' fear of "letting go." The institutional religious enterprise has lasted too long and it has survived too many deeper crises than the present one to be of such a flimsy nature as would be torn apart by a dialogue on ethical questions.

Of course, sociological dimensions are important. But we should make a correct analysis of their nature and of their impact on theological questions.

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