

But Still a Liberal

David H. Smith

John C. Bennett has been writing about theology, the church, and social morality for nearly fifty years. His latest book, *The Radical Imperative* (Westminster; 208 pp.; \$8.50/\$4.50), provides a retrospective tour through the changes in Christian social ethics over that time, and, besides, it gives fitting occasion to come to terms with the thought of one of the significant leaders of twentieth-century Christianity.

When Bennett left Williams College for Oxford in the 1920's, liberalism was the dominant force in the English-speaking theological world. Bennett was formed by it. His theological starting points were human experience and the teachings of Jesus, especially the love ethic. Those sources revealed a God involved with the material historical world. The Gospel message was for "Social Salvation"—the title of Bennett's first book, published in 1935. The major social issue was economic, and the move toward socialism was Bennett's major ethical preoccupation.

A first shift occurred in the late 1930's. The Great Depression, the rise of Nazism, and growing revelations of the depth of social injustice were reflected in the "new" theologies of Barth, Bultmann, Brunner, Tillich, and the Niebuhrs. Form criticism made it difficult to discover the moral teacher in Jesus of Nazareth; historical tragedy led to preoccupation with collective human sin; the self-deceptions of individuals and groups moved center stage. Bennett felt this influence; *Christian Realism* (1941) employs a stronger doctrine of sin than *Social Salvation* and concludes with a discussion of the problem of evil. At the same time, there was a change in Bennett's ethical and political concerns. He addressed a much wider range of issues than he had before. With Reinhold Niebuhr he accepted New Deal pragmatism and put less stress on socialist reforms. Ambiguity seemed to be a fact of life; compromise was essential to the body politic.

Before leaving this longest period in Bennett's public life, it is worth noting that most of the contributions with which he is now associated date from it. These include the discussion of social strategies for the churches, especially the "middle axiom proposal" in *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* and Bennett's contribution at all levels to a National Council of Churches' (NCC) study of economic justice (*Christian Values and Economic Life*). *Christianity and Communism*—a remarkably clear and farsighted book—first appeared in 1948; *Christians and the State*, which has never had the use or paperback

distribution it deserves, was published in 1958.

Sometime in the 1960's, however, the theological wheels took another turn. For Bennett an important aspect of the change was an increased sense of continuity between the proclamation of the earliest Christian writers and certain aspects of the personality of the historical Jesus. Bennett had never admitted the unimportance of the historical Jesus, but he now feels more comfortable than before in asserting that Jesus belongs in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. While he agrees that Jesus was not a Zealot, Bennett now insists that Jesus' career "involved a series of public confrontations with various establishments." In these confrontations Jesus made use of limited force and engaged in "symbolic action" to dramatize problems. Therefore, Jesus' career provides the Christian with a precedent for public activism.

Moreover, according to Bennett, Jesus turned the existing social world upside down and identified himself with the poor. Although we cannot infer that Jesus was a revolutionary, this reversal of values "has radical political implications" for our time, in which Christians have "power and political leverage." Christ reveals the love of God for all persons, a love that requires a "strategic" preference for the poor. The result is the "radical imperative" to "seek justice and peace...a radical dealing with the problems of public life, the structures and institutions of society, the policies of governments, and political movements for change."

Congruent with this, Bennett now urges a pressing of basic socialist economic questions (in addition to major shifts of priorities so as to provide medical care, income maintenance, and employment for all). He now combines the pragmatic, cautious advance of his "realist" period with the passion of its more radical antecedent and consequent stages. Nowhere is the amalgamation more clear than in Bennett's discussion of theologies of liberation. He considers the liberation of women, American blacks, and the Latin American poor. A long critique of the male-centered theologies and myths of Christianity and Judaism leads him to insist that motherhood is no longer a lifework and that women need to find new roles. However, he adds that these new roles need not be public, and he rejects any attempts to downgrade motherhood, which involves "a unique and indispensable form of creativity."

Bennett's discussion of racial injustice in the United States begins with a confession of the sins of omission of white liberal church leaders during the first half of this century. He notes that "black theology" is a product of the second stage of the civil rights struggle and that its white critics are in an awkward situation. Then he turns to the important work of James Cone. Two quotations may convey his reaction: "I am not interested in white reflection on the sins of black people. I do think it is important that black theology show some signs that it is preparing black people for the discovery of their own sins, for their own self-criticism." Later, concluding the section: "I have no zeal for these criticisms of Cone's

DAVID H. SMITH is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University.

black theology because I believe that it appeared at the right time and that it has important work to do. It has deepened my own awareness of the blind spots of white theologians, beginning with myself."

Finally, Bennett turns with respect and interest to the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez. He appreciates the Peruvian Catholic's methodological starting point—the experience of human misery in the world—his stress on liberation rather than development, and his emphasis on the need for class struggle in Latin America. The Latin American situation, however, is different from our own, says Bennett; in the United States the possibility for real political change through existing political processes remains. Bennett is uncertain that Gutiérrez provides adequate checks on violence; he is certain that Gutiérrez reflects a Latin American cry for justice with which we in this country must come to terms.

Again one is struck by the fact that Bennett is a churchman in many senses of that word. Not only has his career been that of seminary teacher and administrator; he has been deeply involved in the ecumenical movement, edited an important periodical for Christians, and sought to formulate policy for the churches. He writes for a Christian audience, and, more than any other theologian of his generation, he has concerned himself with the actual dynamics of the discussion of ethics in the churches. What other writer would devote two chapters (better than one-fourth) of a book like this to a discussion of ecumenical ethics and the problems of the churches as moral decision-makers—a discussion not of an abstract and ideal church, but of the actual American churches?

Bennett has an important theory about the function of ecumenical discussion. It is that the social diversity represented in high ecumenical bodies leads to formation of true social judgments by these bodies. World Council of Churches or NCC policy statements may not be absolutely true, but they are more likely to be true than the views of grassroots Christians. I find this a preposterous theory. Ecumenical consensus should not serve as an epistemological principle. The Episcopal Church's recent failure to approve the ordination of women does not prove that its General Convention was right against those diocesan bishops who would prefer to ordain without considerations of gender. Yet the General Convention stands to the various diocese as the WCC or NCC does to local churches.

This said, however, it also seems to me that Bennett's willingness to discuss the role of the church and the dynamics of church action in the world represents one of his greatest achievements. There is, after all, a side of the Gospel that calls Christian communities to social responsibility in some form. And group responsibility means there must be group leadership. Bennett has taken these facts very seriously, but he has been handicapped by what amounts to the absence of a well-worked-out ecumenical polity. Thus he has had to make policy proposals while, at the same time, developing guidelines for their debate and implementation. The policies he wants favor social equality, but he has run into the fact that those policies will not be endorsed by a majority of

Christians in the U.S. The ironic result is his ecumenical élitism.

One is not at all surprised by Bennett's attraction to contemporary Catholicism—for a more structured institution, with worked-out procedures, can be socially efficient and effective while preserving internal catholicity. Ultimately, as Barth argued, the Catholic and liberal sensibilities may be brothers under the skin. In any case, if Bennett's theories about the social function of the church are mistaken, the mistakes are interesting; the impulse that led to them was true. One's only regret is that Mr. Bennett did not, in this book, revive some of the distinctions among forms of church action and teaching that he had worked out in the 1940's and '50's.

When it comes to ethical theory, Bennett has always been a kind of rule utilitarian. He derives from Christian Scripture and tradition a commitment to human welfare. This goal is to be reached through pursuit of derivative social ends: peace, freedom, justice, and order. The doctrine of sin leads to conviction of the need for some of these values; the same doctrine means that neither they nor their subordinate rules are beyond criticism. Bennett's theory is obviously influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, but different in its stress on the ecumenical church as custodian of a valid perspective. It is easy to contrast Bennett's view with Joseph Fletcher's act utilitarianism and Paul Ramsey's distillation of Scripture into one-on-one covenant fidelity.

Utilitarianism is under attack today, and readers of this book will look in vain for Bennett's entrée into the thicket of relevant philosophical debate. It is not only that the footnotes are absent; one finds no discussion of issues such as conflicts between individual rights and the common good, reverse discrimination, or the relative priorities of liberty and justice. Pushing issues such as these would have stretched Bennett's theoretical foundations. Failure to do so involves real losses that another generation cannot afford. On the other hand, Bennett's mode of work reflects a kind of security in the sufficiency of Christian faith and community that frees him from the point scoring and game playing that so impoverish much recent writing in ethics. I do not mean that Bennett's views about the church are smug or insular. I do mean to report that I find it refreshing to read a moralist for and in the church, a man intellectually alive yet desperately concerned with the conduct of his community of faith. One cannot classify Bennett's writing as "academic ethics" or perhaps even as systematic theology, but in its clarity, its understatement, and in its commitment to truth and welfare it may be more important than either of those.

Finally, although the book is properly titled *The Radical Imperative*, Bennett the church moralist can only be described as a liberal man. In 1939 he wrote an article for *The Christian Century*, "A Changed Liberal—But Still a Liberal." That essay surveyed his intellectual growth over the previous fifteen years; many of its basic conclusions still fit. Bennett has changed, but continuities are striking. Theological discourse should

not be put into some "mythic" or "symbolic" realm; Christian theology begins with a generally reliable Gospel portrait of Jesus; no one's interpretation of this portrait should be canonized, rather we require discussion of how to implement its implications and consensus about next steps; inherited structures and traditions of the past are only of value insofar as they serve welfare now—many should be radically challenged; yet our finiteness and weakness mean we should change carefully, constructively, with a sense of our own frailty. To be dogmatic is almost as bad as being Republican! The slash of the "radical" edge is made doubly effective by

the drive of Bennett's irenic, tolerant hand. Conservatives forget the imperative; radicals dislike the style. In substance and spirit Bennett has something that escapes them both.

Churchman, moralist, liberal—in all these ways Bennett's work continues an Anglo-American tradition going back, at least, to the Christian Socialists of the mid-nineteenth century. It is a tradition of faith, order, thought, and action that should not die but should lead in the contemporary churches. It needs a more self-conscious polity and social philosophy. It can claim, in John C. Bennett, one of the saints.

Willy Brandt: Prisoner of His Past by Viola Herms Drath

(Chilton; 364 pp.; \$8.95)

Ken Moen

Willy Brandt: Nobel Prize winner, symbol of Germany's *Ostpolitik*, the Peace Chancellor. In 1972 his fortunes were soaring. His unceremonious fall from power in 1974 transformed him into a truly tragic figure. Who is he? What caused his downfall? What is his future? Viola Herms Drath, the Washington correspondent for *Vorwaerts*, Germany's Social Democratic newspaper, provides some answers in *Willy Brandt: Prisoner of His Past*. She stresses the private side of Brandt's personality and purports to have found the seeds of his downfall in the depths of his flawed character. Her thesis is controversial and, I'm afraid, unconvincing, if not altogether inscrutable. Nonetheless, her "impressionistic" biography contains a wealth of information on Brandt and European politics.

Brandt once observed: "He who has a sense of history will not lightly overlook the fact that a man of my origin and convictions has become the German Minister of Foreign Affairs." An exile from Nazi Germany who worked with radical left underground organizations against the Hitler war effort, Brandt emerged from the war as a Norwegian citizen. He returned to Germany armed with charges that all Germans shared the guilt for Hitler's war crimes. Not surprisingly, many Germans resented his background and his message. As a politician he seemed fated to the ranks of the opposition, far from the levers of power. Somehow, however, he became

Foreign Minister. Then Chancellor. The poignancy of Brandt's remark is not lost on Drath. Examination of his past is essential, and she does it with relish.

Brandt's psychological makeup as revealed by his past is a central theme in her book. She characterizes him as an insecure outsider who will go to any lengths to avoid looking undignified. She maintains that he has never faced up to the embarrassments and human mistakes of his past, and she speculates that imminent disclosure of private indiscretions played a large role in his decision to step down. She hints darkly of blackmail. By Guillaume, the East German spy discovered employed in Brandt's own office? By East German leaders, in order to gain advantages in *Ostpolitik* negotiations? By the U.S., in order to slow his rush to the East? Drath asks each question rhetorically, offers no documentation, and ventures no guesses herself. Nonetheless, almost lecturing, she concludes that Brandt's "...character became his fate...."

In the early chapters Drath emphasizes Brandt's reputation as a ladies' man. Unfortunately, she creates the aura of sensationalism. Eleanor Lansing Dulles, sister of John Foster and Allen Dulles and a State Department expert in her own right, comments in an excellent foreword to the book:

"During the years I knew Brandt best, the Germans in Bonn, Berlin, or Munich gave little impression of being greatly concerned over his life as a

swinger. It was known that he had times of overindulgence and a reoccurrence of these tendencies could hamper his usefulness and age him prematurely. This possibility cannot be completely dismissed, but Mrs. Drath is more convinced than I am that these periods of erratic behavior are worth the reader's attention."

Whether or not Drath's emphasis on the psychological and the sensational is warranted, it leaves much about Brandt's resignation unexplained. Both Drath and David Binder, a *New York Times* correspondent who has also recently written a Brandt biography *The Other German*, note Brandt's keen disappointment when Herbert Wehner, Social Democratic Party (SPD) strategist, refused to advise him to ride out the 1974 Guillaume storm. There is every indication that had Wehner so advised in the final hours of the Brandt administration, Brandt would have clung to the chancellorship. Moreover, Brandt had already weathered sex-scandal accusations in previous election campaigns. By 1974 the German public was, in Drath's own words, "...a public sooner amused by Willy's legendary derring-do than shocked."

Drath does do justice to Brandt's contributions to European politics and lends insight to what we might expect of him in the future. She analyzes his political strength (selling a political idea whose time has come) and weakness (a penchant for yes-men and hangers-on of mediocre talent) and puts them into the context of European affairs.

Brandt's role in developing Germany's *Ostpolitik* is by now familiar. As Drath points out, the policy was not conceived by Brandt, but he was one of its earliest advocates and its most successful salesman. The German version of détente has several moral dimensions