

RELIGION AND...

The European Churches and Disarmament

European Christians have been prominent in the recent wave of demonstrations against nuclear weapons. Although Germany's Protestant church congress, the *Kirchentag*, was not the organizer of the march in Hamburg last June with 80,000 participants, many of its people took part, including Dr. Erhard Eppler, the new *Kirchentag* president. Arguments about armaments and peace-making were a major part of the program sponsored by the congress, and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt himself was there to reply to outspoken criticism of his policies. The demonstrations last October in London that attracted 250,000 people and in Bonn that drew 50,000 more coincided with several days of anguished and rather confused public "hearings" arranged by the World Council of Churches. Hundreds of church meetings in recent months—from official synods to special sessions at various Dutch and West German laity centers—have reflected the same concerns; and a multitude of young Christians, including school children, are joining the peace movements with great determination.

All of this is to the good; however, it is not at all clear what these thousands of demonstrators and their supporters in and outside the parishes really agree on, apart from sharing deep and well-founded fears that we may simply drift toward a nuclear holocaust.

It is worth insisting, first of all, and perhaps especially for American readers, that these protests are not dominated by the traditional "fellow travelers" who, ever since 1945, under hints or instructions from Moscow, have agitated for the nuclear disarmament of the West. There can be no doubt that these recent and massive peace demonstrations were on the whole both led and attended by people who are quite independent of—and indeed rightly suspicious of—the pro-USSR groups, those "useful idiots" of whom Lenin used to speak.

Of course a certain number of European Christians are Quakers, Mennonites, and so on—that minority of pure pacifists opposed to any use of major force—and some are prominent in the leadership of the present campaigns. A much larger group is made up of nuclear unilateralists of one kind or another—people who do not believe in the abolition of all military forces but are sure that nuclear weapons are wrong, at least for European countries. They wish to abandon such weapons, whether or not the USSR abandons theirs. Some in this group demand that their country give up deployment of such weapons, but they apparently have not given much thought to whether it will then rely on the United States to take all responsibility for nuclear armaments. Still others quite clearly are prepared to risk Soviet occupation, or at least domination, of their country. Some calculate rather optimistically that this is unlikely to happen, or anyway would not be so dreadful; that we must accept such a possibility for ourselves and our children, and that in the end Christian faith will triumph over temporal persecution.

It is important to note that such nuclear unilateralists, though certainly prominent in the demonstrations and debates, do not make up a majority of church leaders or members in Western Europe. True, there has been a renewed and very painful agonizing over the nuclear issue in many Catholic churches, in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, and in the Protestant churches of the German Federal Republic, but a clear acceptance of the unilateralist position has not emerged. Only the Dutch Reformed Church—*Hervormde Kerk*—has so far adopted such a stance officially, and it has written to all the major European churches to explain why, asking for their reactions. There is far less agreement in the West German, French, and Swiss churches; and though thousands of younger Christians are convinced unilateralists, many equally sincere church members are still backing NATO and urging multilateral bargaining toward disarmament.

What are the prospects for the next few months? There is no doubt that President Reagan's "zero-option" proposals and his apparent willingness to enter into a new round of hard but genuine bargaining with Mr. Brezhnev are welcomed by many multilateralists, who have been greatly embarrassed and worried by some of the more bellicose speeches and budget proposals of the U.S. administration. Unilateralists, for their part, have been more than a little discouraged by the continuing Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and by the astonishing Soviet gaffe in sending a submarine armed with some sort of nuclear device into Swedish territorial waters, which also discouraged hopes for a Scandinavian nuclear-free zone. Hope too for an undisturbed and neutralist Central Europe was clouded by recent events in Poland. Now unilateralists are rather less certain about the progress of their cause in 1982, despite a tremendous program of conferences and meetings planned for the spring and summer.

At the same time, certain technical problems demand attention by European—and American—Christians. Many of us fail to appreciate the fact that for over thirty years the defense of Western Europe has been based on relatively weak conventional forces (fewer troops and many fewer tanks than the Soviets) with "small" tactical nuclear weapons to make up the difference. If the latter are to be abandoned without Western Europe adopting a totally pacifist position, then countries like Britain, France, and West Germany must increase their conventional armaments considerably and at great expense.

There is much popular (and ill-informed) anti-Americanism among European church people, but the practical consequences of a U.S. withdrawal from Western Europe are not yet calmly or thoroughly discussed. We must add to our justified alarm about nuclear war some careful and critical judgments about the options open to us.

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