An Ecumenical Consensus

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ONE of the most serious limitations in discussions by Christians of the post-war world is that so few contributions to the discussion have come from outside the United States and the British Commonwealth. A recent document prepared in Geneva by the Study Department of the World Council of Churches in some measure helps us to overcome this limitation.[1] Throughout the war the Geneva office of the World Council has been able to keep in close contact with the churches in Germany and in the occupied countries, especially those of Western Europe, as well as Britain and America. We can be confident that we have here the result of a careful investigation of the tendencies of thought in many of the silent churches of Europe by men who were already fully informed concerning the background of those tendencies.

The form of this document should be understood. It sets forth eleven common affirmations which have behind them a consensus of opinion. After each affirmation, the differences of opinion that still remain either in regard to the theological background of that affirmation or in regard to its practical implementation are presented. Since the affirmations are common to both Anglo-Saxon and Continental thought, the glimpses that we gain of the latter come in the expositions of the differences. There has been ample opportunity to take German thought into account. It is often possible to spot a particular expression of opinion as British (in regard to colonies, for example) or as showing the influence of Karl Barth, or as representing a distrust of democracy that is known to exist among German Protestants.

The eleven points of the consensus are:

1. The Church has a specific task in relation to peacemaking and the creation of international order.
2. The Church performs its task in this realm by being itself a world-wide fellowship under one Lord in which national differences are transcended.
3. The Church is to announce to the nations that Jesus Christ is Lord over all men and all powers.
4. The Church is to proclaim the divine commandments concerning the order which is to reign in the world.
5. The Church is to call the nations to repentance for their common guilt and to work for their reconciliation.
6. The Church is to proclaim that international relations must be subordinated to law.
7. The Church is to proclaim that the State is neither an aim in itself nor a law unto itself and that its God-given function is to maintain an order based on law which guarantees fundamental human rights.
8. The Church is to proclaim that political power must be exercised with a sense of responsibility toward all those who are affected by that power.
9. The Church is to proclaim that society must provide all of its members with the opportunity to fulfill a meaningful vocation and that it should provide conditions of social security for all.
10. The Church is to proclaim that the nations are interdependent and that they are all to share in the resources of the earth.
11. The Church is to proclaim that no people can claim the right to rule over another people, and that the dominating purpose of colonial administration must be to prepare colonial peoples for self-government.

II

The most significant trend that is revealed by this analysis is that it presupposes throughout the importance of the responsibility of Christians and of churches for the structures of social life. This is in line with all the reports of the ecumenical conferences which preceded the war, but the fact that this document comes out of the heart of the European Continent and that it was written by those in closest contact with the theological positions which have often seemed to undercut Christian social responsibility gives this document added value as evidence. The following sentences are, from this point of view, the most remarkable in the document:

"The doctrine, which has for long dominated Christian thought and life, that the Lordship of Christ is to be conceived as confined to the realm of the 'inner life,' and that it has no bearing on public life, is discredited. Discussions between advocates of a 'social' gospel and those of an 'individual' gospel are largely a matter of the past. The Bible has again taught us that the Lordship of Christ is all inclusive and universal. . . . Viz-a-viz of idolatrous conceptions of state, race or class, the pre-war ecumenical gatherings have clearly condemned the heresy which declares public life to be an autonomous realm following immanent laws of its own, and this witness has been confirmed by the stand of the churches during the war, very particularly by the stand of several of the suffering churches. This ecu-

[1] "The Church and International Reconstruction," obtainable from the American office of the World Council (297 Fourth Ave., New York City).

menical consensus concerning the claim of Christ to rule in all areas of life contains great promise for the future." (p. 9)

A second gain registered in this document is that the churches seem to be on the way to a realization that God is at work in establishing an international order that will perform on a world scale some of the functions which Protestant theology has identified with the national state. The belief in the necessity of an international political and legal structure pervades the whole document. Under the sixth affirmation, for example, it is said that "the anarchy of competing and unrestrained national sovereignties must be overcome and international authority must be created to declare the law and to enforce it." (p. 14) One of the curious lags in Protestant theology has been the assumption that the state is God's chief instrument in dealing with the anarchical results of human sin though it has long been evident that the sovereign state is itself a source of disastrous international anarchy. This document adds to the evidence of a real development of theology at this point. One can go further and say that the kind of experience and thought which underlie this document point to a more dynamic view of what have been called "the orders of creation" in Protestant theology. It is not enough to see the providence of God as it is shown in the structures of life that already exist. We may see it in the new structures that have been made necessary by the catastrophic results of anarchy in an interdependent world. We see also the necessity of human cooperation with God in the development of this new order.

A third gain in this consensus is that even those Christians who have suffered at the hands of the aggressors in this war (one author of this document is Dutch) insist that the Church should "call the nations to repentance for their common guilt." To be sure, after that is said, serious differences appear but it is said as part of the consensus: "such a confession of universal guilt excludes the attributing to one nation of the *sole* guilt for the present world catastrophe." Each Church is to emphasize the "injustices and the crimes committed by the nation for which it feels responsible and whom it represents before God." It is added: "thus also the passionate hatred which exists in the hearts of many peoples can gradually be overcome." (pp. 12-13) It is a moral triumph for the Church in the heart of Europe to say such a word as this.

III

There are three fundamental religious and theological differences which appear in the analysis. They were to be expected and I am surprised that the first has been whittled down as much as is the case.

One of these is well summarized under the first affirmation: "Some hold that this task [in relation to peacemaking and the creation of international order] consists exclusively in reminding nations of the divine commandments and in protesting against manifest violations of the commandments. Others hold that this task includes also the interpretation of the commandments in terms of concrete policies." (pp. 6-7) The first group represents the fear of losing the distinctive Christian message by confusing it with programs of action which belong to the temporal order and which involve all the relativities of politics. The second group, familiar enough to us in America, has learned from its own experiments in direct social action and so they are here made to say: "The Church is not to deal with technical matters, for which it does not have the necessary expert knowledge." (p. 7) Actually there isn't much difference between the two positions as worded here. Also, there is in both cases a serious ambiguity in the use of the word, Church. There has been developed in recent years a technique according to which men with authority and influence in the Church can give Christian guidance for concrete problems without confusing that guidance with the essential truth of the Gospel and without denying to others in the Church the right to differ. Such semi-official activity on the part of the Church might not necessarily be condemned by the first group.

The difference which has been expressed here goes deeper than the words suggest; it is really a difference in emphasis in what is called in this document "the hierarchy of issues," a difference which in practice may be so great that it will often make cooperation difficult. If the Church really reminds the nations of the divine commandments and protests against manifest violations of them, and if it trains its members to perform its positive task of reconstruction through their respective vocations, its activity should satisfy the most enthusiastic believer in "social action." But it would be easy to deal with the commandments in an abstract way and to fail to discover the most important violations. Social conservation intrenched in the Church will be more important than the theological theory about the function of the Church.

The second theological difference concerns what we may expect in this world. As it is phrased here it is the difference between those who wait for the return of Christ and the future manifestation of his Lordship, and those who believe that Christ's Lordship over history is already evident and that it will become increasingly a reality. Those who wait for Christ's return may be millenialists of the more literalistic sort or they may hold to a highly sophisticated eschatology which does not give much content in advance to the fulfillment of history of which Christ's

return is the symbol. In either case there is a strongly pessimistic view of what can be realized in terms of human progress in this world. Those who take the more optimistic view range from uncritical Utopians who are now much chastened to those who live with hope concerning the future but who realize that progress is always accompanied by the threat of judgment. The difference here is greater than in the first case but in spite of the difference cooperation should be possible. As the more pessimistic statement puts it: "Precisely because the Church is aware of His actual Lordship [in spite of the fact that it is hidden from those who lack faith] and of its cosmic significance, it cannot but proclaim it to the whole world and call upon all powers, all groupings of men, and all individuals to recognize their true position—as powers who must choose between obedience and disobedience, and who dare not live and act as if the Resurrection had not taken place." (p. 10).

The third theological difference has to do with the controversy concerning revelation and general morality or "natural law." The extreme position is "that the Church is to proclaim only those commandments which it finds in the Biblical revelation." (p. 12) This position is maintained for religious reasons, to safeguard the sovereignty of God, and because of a real scepticism concerning the existence of any general moral law that can be known apart from revelation. This is one of the points where Karl Barth is still intransigent. All forms of Catholicism and most Protestants, except the extremists of whom Barth is the representative, reject this position and recognize that the Christian revelation is confirmed by natural morality, and that there is what John Baillie calls a "highest common factor" between the high minded secularist or the adherent of some other religion and the Christian and that this "highest common factor" forms an essential basis for cooperation in the world today. Some allowance for the necessity of such cooperation between Christians and non-Christians is made in the statement of the position which rejects natural law in these words, "it [the Church] must, whenever concrete ethical choices arise, take a common stand *ad hoc* on these specific social and political issues with those who take such a stand for other than Christian reasons." (p. 12)

IV

The differences that have to do with the practical implementation of these common affirmations can only be mentioned. There is a difference between those who believe that the peace should have in it a penal element and those who insist that common repentance excludes the possibility of punishing any nation. Those who believe that the "the moral condemnation of the wrong done by a nation must find expression in order that the nation may learn its lesson" also believe that all that is done "should have in view the ultimate good of the people concerned" and that as soon as hostilities cease "reconciliation is to begin in the restoration of relations between the churches concerned." (p. 13)

There is a difference concerning the inclusiveness of any world organization. Some believe that it should be limited to those nations which have a common ethos and that gradually it should be enlarged to include other nations as they become fitted for membership. Others believe that it would be unwise at the start to make such distinctions among nations. This difference is complicated by another concerning the extent to which full fledged democratic institutions should be required of participating nations. Three problems emerge here: (1) the status of the Axis nations; (2) the relationship of Russia to the Western democracies; (3) the problem as it appears to many Germans who do not believe that democracy should be universalized after the war. It is probably the Germans who feel most keenly that "an authoritarian regime which accepts the limitations imposed by law . . . , respects the relative autonomy of the main social and political units, does not impose any ideology, and allows its citizens as much freedom as is compatible with public order is not to be condemned as contrary to Christian principles." This difference between those who believe that only democratic institutions can guard man's essential freedom and those who believe that a constitutional, but authoritarian rule can in many cases guard such freedom best will make Anglo-Saxon Christians impatient but they will meet the problem both in the form of the Russian system (even if it is modified in the direction of constitutionalism) and in more traditional forms of power that are preferred by Roman Catholicism.

Lastly, there is a difference about colonies. The goals are the same for all and it is admitted as part of the consensus that "the Church cannot agree that colonial power be conceived as a 'right.'" The difference has to do with the interim period before it is possible for existing colonies to achieve self-government. One group calls for direct international administration of such colonies and the other for administration by the nations now responsible under stricter international regulation. This is a standing difference between American and British documents that deal with post-war problems and it is only fair for an American to say that while Americans can be more objective concerning the relationship between the imperial power and its colonies, they do not have the sense of responsibility for what a sudden change of relationship might mean to the people of the colonies, a sense of responsibility that is felt with obvious sincerity by many British churchmen.