Christian Contrition and Action

I N the solemnity of this season, when heart-search-
ing should be at its height, we may well reflect on
two perils that beset the path of those who give their
moral support to the prosecution of war. One is
that they may become less sensitive than they have
been hitherto to the brutalities that war engenders.
The other is that in their tough realism about the
nature of man, they may lose faith in the possibility
of organizing the world politically so that such a
tragedy may not recur.

The first of these perils manifests itself in the fear
that softness and sentimentality will weaken the war
effort, and that even in victory the fruits of that
victory may be lost through misguided gentleness in
the political reordering of the world. The fear is
probably well grounded in both respects, but this
only enhances the moral danger. The necessity of
inflicting suffering on fellow human beings, even in
vindication of a principle and in defense of others,
is corroding to the conscience unless one is protected
from it by a miracle of grace. This is why self-iden-
tification with the enemy in a common fund of guilt
is so necessary to the Christian who fights. He is
unfit to stand and fight if he is not continually driven
to his knees in penitent prayer. All unawares, he is
caught in the flood of self-righteousness that is blind
to the fact that a Nazi is essentially still a man—an
insidious self-righteousness that can without a shud-
der contemplate the conventional cartoon, now a
national institution, that makes a Japanese appear to
be a baboon. It is better to admit frankly that war
inevitably breeds hate than sentimentally to refuse
to face that reality. But for a Christian to lose his
hatred of hate is to lose his Christianity. "It must
be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom
the offense cometh." It is a good thing for a min-
ister in these days to imagine himself a chaplain to
prisoners of war and to consider whether he could
lose himself in the cure of souls.

Equally urgent is it that we be not blind to the
evil inherent in the suspension of liberties, the regi-
mentation of life, the arbitrary exercise of power,
and the grinding discipline that seeks to turn boys

into hardened men before their minds and bodies
have experienced what youth should bring. All this
must be accepted if the war is to be won, but not
complacently accepted unless we are to lose the peace.

The second peril is of a different sort. It is theo-
logical in essence and is enhanced by the fact that
the war caught us at a time when the social hope
embodied in liberal Christianity was being effectively
assailed. The attack upon it was in part, certainly,
well founded, for our Protestant churches had be-
come cradles of an easy optimistic faith in salvation
by social mechanics. And the contention of the
"realists" got itself impressively documented in the
outbreak of the most savage war of modern times.
The illusion of modern progress was rudely dispelled.
That lesson must never be forgotten.

Yet it is doubtful if the real lesson has been
learned. If the great error of liberal Christianity
consisted in a spurious concept of man's nature, the
great error of the future is likely to be a preoccupa-
tion with the individual man to the exclusion of the
possibilities of a Christian culture. The question
here is not as to the derivation of the meaning of
history though that is a very important question for
Christian philosophers. Nor is it one of perfectionist
assumptions as to the realization of Utopia within
history. Rather it is a question of the significance
of society itself, of the power of a cultural discipline
as against man's original nature.

It is a commonplace among students of human
culture and human psychology that the savage in
man is ever near the surface. Human nature, in
any meaningful sense of the term, is more than what
an individual possesses by virtue of his native inher-
itance, whether biologically or theologically con-
ceived. It is a collective achievement. Christianity
itself is a communal phenomenon, and the Kingdom
of God, whether conceived eschatologically or devel-
opmentally, is realized only in spiritual community.
Redemption is profoundly individual in its reference,
but it is communal in substance. "The Bible knows
nothing of solitary religion." By the same token,
grace is as truly social as it is individual in its
operation.

1

Hence the possibility of making a better world, and a progressively more peaceful world, is not excluded by the most realistic view of the nature of individual man. The idea of a Christian society is indeed quixotic if it means that a redeemed man ceases to be potentially a great sinner, but if it is rooted in the efficacy of community as a molder of human nature, which changes the pattern both of man's sins and of his virtues, all that we know of human life supports it as a valid hope. We may grant that "Thy Kingdom come on earth" embodies a bit of New Testament eschatology, in that the "earth" was to be miraculously transformed, but "ye are laborers together with God" has a temporal reference which cannot be expunged without emasculating the gospel. And part of that labor is a prodigious effort to eradicate war.

F. E. J.