

Christian Reconstruction in Europe

ROLAND ELLIOTT

SINCE the war began in Europe probably every Christian group in America has made Christian reconstruction a major theme. For two years there has been a national coordinating committee on Christian reconstruction in which various student and youth groups have cooperated. In late September a three-day conference of experts and common folk met to discuss this same subject. One important body of Christian youth meeting during the past summer offered to recruit from 1000 to 10,000 fellows and girls for this enterprise. For many it has become the great watchword of this generation much as "The evangelization of the world in this generation," was the watchword of an earlier. For some it has taken on the fervor of a new Messianic hope: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"

Wherever one goes—from New England to Texas to Oregon—he finds students engaged in reconstruction projects. The variety of these projects is amazing: chopping wood for indigent old folk, clearing and building play-grounds, organizing and leading nursery schools for Negro children, constructing dams and roads and, as in Newark, building up a Christian community composed of men and women who, with whole-hearted devotion, are giving themselves unitedly to a reconstruction mission in the city slums. Many of the students engaged in these projects are the keenest minds in the colleges; they are the leaders in the work of the Christian Association and Church.

At best, at its base, this new movement of the spirit of youth represents their acceptance of responsibility for giving Christian leadership in a world which has come crashing down around their ears. It is the American youths' way of saying what a group of French students recently said to the writer, "We must be not only Christians, we must be Christian citizens." More, it represents a profound distrust of the institutions of religion, not so much for having permitted this war to happen as of the inflexibility and conservatism of the Church in dealing with the new situation. The desire for direct personal contact with people is a fundamental characteristic of the mood of the Christian "reconstructor." The willingness, rather the

determination to begin the hard way, to undertake gladly the most difficult, even menial tasks, is proof of deep sincerity and of the urgent desire for new methods. The Christian Church cannot ignore the lessons this has for it in the days ahead. Nor can it afford to lose even temporarily the leadership now struggling to express itself freely, fully and with fine abandon.

As one studies these developments in America and takes into account the thinking of leaders in Germany, France, Switzerland, England and the Orient, it may now be possible to say some things about Christian reconstruction which will help give direction to a movement which may become either an iridescent bubble ending in futility and disillusionment, or a great force for Christ. Its very potentiality increases the danger that it may become sheer romanticism, ill-advised, amateurish, unreal in a world in which romanticism is the most tragic sort of escape from the rigorous demands of real living.

False Presuppositions Must be Removed

First of all, certain false presuppositions about Christian reconstruction must be cleared away:

"We can base our plans on our experience in and after the last war. . . . America will do the job. . . . Americans will be welcomed abroad . . . planning and enlistment can be done among civilians remaining in the U. S. A. . . . the American Friends Service Committee's service-project approach will be normative . . . new projects are more significant than old . . . dirty hands and pure motives are more to be desired than established principles and professional competence. . . . Christian reconstruction is a constructive alternative to war . . . there is, or can be a Christian reconstruction program." So far as the facts can be known at the present time and prospects foreseen, all of these presuppositions are wholly false or are utterly misleading over-simplifications.

This is a new kind of war. And its ending in all likelihood will be different from preceding wars, at least so far as relief and reconstruction are concerned. The opportunity to render aid probably will come

progressively as countries now dominated are freed. Moreover, in the aftermath of total war must come plans for reconstruction vastly more comprehensive than private agencies can assume. In its initial stages, the task of reconstruction in countries fired with hatred and hope of vengeance must be carried out in close cooperation with the military forces maintaining order. This means that a considerable share in reconstruction will need to be carried of necessity by the military itself. Certainly, the most crucial question at the war's end will have to do with the social outlook of the victorious nations. Will the conservative forces of the old British Empire come back to power? Will American isolationism control our foreign policy? Will American desire to get back to business-as-usual, and American ignorance and indifference align themselves with British conservatives to defeat world cooperation and to scuttle social gains? No view of Christian reconstruction can ignore these basic issues. We shall not build the Kingdom of God with a shovel—though shovels will be needed—but by exercising all the political sagacity, all the economic intelligence, all the ethical sensitivity of which we are capable. In this campaign the role of men in the armed services will be fully as important as that of the men and women at home. The call to simplicity is valid only if it is seen as a part of a total program which is as simple and yet as complex and varied as the Kingdom of God itself. Many new and revolutionary actions will be needed, but equally important will be the revival, the empowering, the remaking of old and established institutions, as witness the scores of young men and women in the past decade who have given themselves to the leadership of the rural church in the South.

Ten Responsibilities of a Christian

But there are urgently important things for Christians to do in the cataclysm through which the world is passing. For the war is but one symptom of the world revolution in which we now see God's wrath precisely because mankind has been so callous to the demands of God's love and justice. In such a world the Christian task—whether we call it Christian reconstruction, or working for the Kingdom of God, or simply being Christian—must be advanced on a number of fronts—and simultaneously. Christian reconstruction means at least these ten responsibilities a Christian must assume:

(1) The way America will throw its weight in world government is an important element in Christian reconstruction. Christians now, and increasingly as the war-fever possesses us, must build a public opinion in support of a national policy of constructive responsibility for America in the world after the war.

We cannot evade the heavy responsibility our wealth, our size, our position give us. Neither imperialism nor isolation is the Christian answer. But whatever we do will be a force in world affairs.

(2) The war itself will settle none of the basic racial, political, economic issues which gave rise to it. Whether the world will fight future wars around these real issues will depend upon whether real solutions are found. To solve some of these issues now—in the U. S. A.—and in our post-war relations with other nations is a part of our Christian responsibility.

(3) Indications are that governments are now planning for post-war relief and reconstruction on a national and international basis. Our task as Christians is to align the Christian forces of America in immediately effective ways which will influence the development of these plans, and will provide trained Christian men and women to help in their execution.

(4) Whatever the plans by government for the reconstruction and restoration of economic, social and educational institutions after the war, there will be a great task of restoring cultural cooperation and intellectual fellowship across national frontiers. In educational circles this certainly will involve the revival of the real function of the university as a center of learning—again, in this country as elsewhere—and a return of the sense of solidarity which always has characterized the university world. At this point Christian forces have a contribution to make, providing they are alert to their unique responsibility for spiritual rebuilding which cannot be entrusted to the engineers and architects alone but must go hand in hand with what they do.

(5) We must be ready to render sacrificial help to our fellows in oppressed and needy areas to rebuild their own Christian leadership. In Czecho-Slovakia, in Germany, in China, in Korea, the test of our Christian faith will rest on our willingness to offer whatever resources we may have for our friends in these places to use in whatever way they may choose in strengthening the cause of Christ within their own lands. This is not a call to a new crusade for the American Century—not even for an American Christian Century! It is a simple recognition of the fact that within the body of Christ in the world we are members one of another. Fortunately this is one area in which we do not need to wait for the end of the war. The aid we can give *now* through agencies like the World Student Service Fund, to future leaders who are now prisoners of war, or refugees, or students in Chinese universities, will bear rich fruit for the future. One Czech or one Pole kept alive and enspirited and trained for Christian reconstruction will be worth any dozen Americans we might send abroad later on.

(6) An essential in any view of Christian reconstruction is the strengthening of the bodies which represent the world structure of the Christian Church: the World Council of Churches, the World Student Christian Federation, the World's YWCA and YMCA, the International Missionary Council. It is providential that through the world meetings just preceding the war, these agencies are as strong and as well led as they now are. The spirit of world Christendom as now struggling to express itself through these all too fragile instruments, must be made more competent to do the things which our Christian-world-faith impels.

(7) Along with the specific tasks arising from the war emergency, we can see clearly that the demands of the world-wide revolution of our times are for a deepened sense of Christian mission or vocation for men and women in all the professions. This call to Christian vocation is the new evangel. It is the way of salvation at the heart of any plan or hope for social or world reorganization.

(8) The missionary movement must be prepared in thought, in purpose, in leadership for a new advance. That this will need to be on a new scale of world-planning, of world cooperation, of larger initiative and control in the hands of the younger churches must not blind us to the demands upon us in America to provide fresh reserves in money and life for the missionary movement. The churches and the Student Volunteer Movement are aware of this challenge to a new advance; and this is cause for sound encouragement.

(9) We must strengthen Christian unity in Amer-

ica. World unity cannot be empowered by a divided Church. Nor can the desires of youth for genuine Christian reconstruction be met within the framework of the stepped-up denominationalism in which some sections of the Church appear now to be engaged. These youth are quick to see the fundamental inconsistency between institutionalism, even when organized on a world scale and making claims of ecumenical aims, and the urgent Christian mission in the world to which they want to give their lives.

(10) And in addition to all the above—but *not* as a substitute—we need the pioneering of courageous Christian youth in launching at home and abroad a variety of new projects which incarnate their Christian aspirations and convictions in greater measure than Christian institutions normally make possible. This is the glory of the Christian Church today, as it has been through the ages. What to our seasoned leaders may seem ill-advised or dangerous may be the seed for new growth, much as the "ephemeral enthusiasm" of students a hundred years ago created the modern missionary movement.

Christian reconstruction is each of these ten points—and is all of them—and many other things besides which we, as yet, have neither the grace nor the grit to see. The older generation needs to see in this movement the urge of our best youth for "something more" and "something new" in their Christian commitment. Youth themselves need to see, and many do, that the simple center of their searching is for the "something new" which always has happened when men and women, sensing God's purposes in the world, have responded, "Here am I, send me."