

# The Church in World Wars I and II

SAMUEL McCREA CAVERT

TWICE within a single generation the churches of America have faced the necessity of orienting themselves to the fact of world war. We ought to be able to find some illumination for 1942 in the experience of 1917-1918. This article is an attempt to review some of the trends in the life of the churches during the earlier period by way of comparison with the situation today.

One of the things which stands out prominently in the picture of the first World War is the uncritical identification of the cause of Christianity with the cause of the Allied Nations. "The flag and the Cross," a trusted Christian leader declared in 1917, "are now both working for the same ends." This over-idealization of the Allied cause came to clearest focus in the work of what was called The Committee on the Moral Aims of the War, initiated by the Church Peace Union (which had been created by Andrew Carnegie's benefaction shortly before the war) and enthusiastically supported by the churches. The "moral aims" were specifically those which had been enunciated by the American Government, including President Wilson's commitment to a League of Nations. The churches accepted the governmental aims without qualification, baptizing them in wholesale fashion with the Christian name, and made little or no independent effort to formulate objectives derived from a consideration of Christianity itself. As one of the leading spokesmen of the movement said, "The Church is to express the spirit which moves the

nation." In the Church's attitude toward the war, he added, there is "no occasion for hesitancy, reservation, moral perplexities, conscientious objections." There was a conspicuous lack of any sense of tension between what the Church stood for and what the nation stood for.

Today the churches are much more independent in their judgment. Nothing is more evident than their unwillingness to make any general or sweeping identification of their interests with those of the United Nations. Even in those church circles in which support of the war is strongest, the war is not described as a holy crusade. The prevailing attitude is that the war is a grim necessity which Christians cannot escape and which they must meet resolutely because every alternative is worse than war. This sober realism stands out in sharp contrast with the mood of 1917.

The recollection of what happened in the churches then is probably an important factor in keeping them today from making an easy identification of Christianity and patriotism. One wonders, however, whether the pendulum of reaction from 1917 has not swung to an unjustified extreme in the opposite direction. If Christians of twenty-five years ago were uncritical in assuming that the issues of the war were identical with those of Christianity, there are Christians today who are equally uncritical in assuming that nothing of deep moral and spiritual significance is now at stake.

### *Distinctive Function of the Church Maintained*

There was also in 1917-1918 less sensitiveness to the need of maintaining the distinctive function of the Church in wartime than prevails today. The main work of the war commissions then as now, was, of course, in the area of such definite religious service as furnishing chaplains and camp pastors and keeping in touch with the men who had gone out from the churches into the armed forces. But in the first War the churches were also enthusiastic in furthering all the enterprises of the government.

Since the people who make up the membership of the churches are citizens as well as churchmen, it is never possible to draw a clear line of demarcation between what they do in their relation to the State and what they do in their relation to the Church. In 1917, however, the distinction was not felt to be very significant. Since the conflict was generally regarded as "a truly Holy War," projects that helped to win it seemed appropriate for the Church. Churches participated actively in the sale of Liberty Bonds and helped to promote Liberty Loan Sundays. One of the strongest and most active denominational war commissions, in a record of its work, emphasized the extent to which it "had mediated between the government and the churches in such work as that of food conservation, support of the Red Cross, war loans, etc." and also in mobilizing "the mind of America for the carrying on and winning of the war." Not a few pastors urged their members to enlist in the Army. On the whole, the churches did not do much to restrain the hysteria of hate which mounted rapidly as atrocity stories were reported.

Today there are ample evidences that religious leaders are more concerned to "let the Church be the Church." If clergymen serve as "minute men" for bond sales their activities are usually in the community-at-large rather than in the churches. There is little use of the pulpit for arousing the people to prosecute the war. As for "war hatred" the churches, both in England and America, are singularly free of it. Even at the enthronement of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, his "bidding prayer" included a petition for "our enemies." This is characteristic of the temper in the churches today.

But, again, the question arises whether the churches of 1942, avoiding the pitfall of 1917, have not fallen into another pitfall on the other side. In some quarters the concern to keep their own spiritual function clear has resulted in an aloofness toward the war, which could only be justified on the assumption that it makes no difference, from a Christian standpoint, which side wins. Churches which have long insisted that they cannot be aloof from social, economic, political and international problems now appear as pro-

tagonists of the view that they should remain aloof from the greatest social, economic, political and international issue of our time.

### *Treatment of Conscientious Objectors*

In the first World War the record of the churches, with reference to conscientious objectors left much to be desired. Their official position, as defined at the meeting of the Federal Council of Churches in May, 1917, when a wartime program was outlined and the General War-Time Commission projected, was one of clear recognition of a duty to defend the rights of the individual conscience. But, under the pressure of war propaganda, the avowed intention failed to crystallize in action. Norman Thomas even declared that he found it "easier to talk with military officials and representatives of the War Department on this subject than with the high officials of the Christian Church." This was doubtless a rhetorical exaggeration but it is fair to say that the leaders of the churches, preoccupied with other tasks, did not give much evidence that they regarded the treatment of the conscientious objector as a serious moral issue. Certainly much more might have been done to keep "conscientious objectors" from being popularly regarded as "slackers" and from suffering heartless imprisonment. If they had been accorded respect and fellowship in the churches, they might have received less injustice at the hands of the government and an unthinking public.

In the present war the attitude of the churches is strikingly different. Not a few Christian leaders seem to show more consideration for the conscientious objector than for the conscientious participant. Apparently the tendency in the first World War to identify Christianity with an unqualified support of the war produced, by way of reaction, a tendency to identify Christianity with pacifism. One absolutism led to another absolutism. The failure to be discriminating with reference to the situation in 1917-1918 led to subsequent failure to be discriminating with reference to moral issues involved in the Nazi revolution, and made it fatally easy to assume that the present war is nothing but another struggle between two imperialisms.

### *Concern for Character of Peace*

In the first World War there was far less concern than today for the character of the peace that should follow the war. The mood of millennial expectation that the victory of the Allies would almost automatically "make the world safe for democracy" was fairly widespread. There was a Utopian optimism that permanent peace would be ushered in by the defeat of Germany. There was, it is true, great interest in the

creation of the League of Nations, but little realistic examination of the enormous difficulties to be surmounted.

Today the leadership of the churches is conspicuously interested in the character of the post-war world. Perhaps, however, there is a present danger of being as unrealistic about the war as our predecessors of 1917-1918 were about the peace. In the case of certain churchmen (though not of most) enthusiasm over the issues of the future peace may be a form of "escapism" from the issues of the war. At least there is need for a reminder that it is gratuitous to talk about a "Christian peace" in case Hitler wins the war! Even when we grant (as we must) that a military triumph of the United Nations will not, *ipso facto*, insure a better world, we must insist that their victory is a pre-condition to our having even a reasonable opportunity to carry out any plans for such a world order as thoughtful Christians are now discussing.

#### *Ecumenical Movement*

In the first World War the ecumenical spirit had not yet come to be deeply felt in the churches. Only one of the great modern ecumenical gatherings, the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, had been held. The World Alliance for International Friendship through the churches had just been organized but the coming of the war had prevented its development internationally. All contacts between the churches on opposite sides of the battle-line were broken. There was virtually no communication of any kind between leaders of the churches on different sides of the struggle. The result was that the post-war process of knitting up the broken strands of fellowship was slow and difficult.

Today the situation is a much happier one. The World Council of Churches, although it exists only in the form of a Provisional Committee, has been able to function in an unprecedented way. It has maintained its headquarters in Geneva uninterruptedly with a little ecumenical staff that includes Christians of Dutch, German, French, Swedish and Swiss citizenship in a single office, in constant contact by cable and mails with their colleagues in Great Britain, the United States and other lands. An "International Christian Press and Information Service" provides an exchange of information about the activity of the churches in all parts of the world. Members of the Staff have been able to make personal visits to nearly all of the European countries. Thus the churches of warring nations have been kept from being wholly isolated from one another. The office of the World Council has also been able to promote, to some extent, an exchange of views as to the kind of world order that should be sought after the war, to carry on ac-

tivities in behalf of refugees and to provide a chaplaincy service to prisoners of war on both sides of the struggle. The maintenance of a real measure of ecumenical fellowship in spite of all the strains of the war is the point of greatest advance in the churches between 1917 and 1942.