

Christianity and Crisis

A Bi-Weekly Journal of Christian Opinion

Volume II, No. 15

September 21, 1942

\$1.50 per year; 10 cents per copy

The Churches and the War

THE attitude of the Churches toward the war has now become a matter of public controversy. The actions of Church councils during the summer and the impact of the preaching of a large and influential section of the Protestant clergy have given rise to the charge that the Churches have assumed a position of aloofness from humanity's struggle.

The Churches are right in recognizing that there is a conflict for the Christian conscience in all war. But so far most of their pronouncements have not made clear that in this war the conflict is within the Christian conscience itself and not between a man as a Christian and a man as a citizen, or between the Church and the State. In other words, there are grounds for supporting the war and for believing in the necessity of victory for the United Nations which should make a stronger appeal to the sensitive Christian than to the conventional patriot. This journal has often stated these grounds. The chief of them are a concern for the possibility of justice for all peoples and a sense of solidarity with the victims of totalitarian tyranny and aggression. These are, to be sure, not exclusively Christian grounds. All that we maintain is that Christians should be especially sensitive to them. What we protest against above all else is the attempt of some leaders of the Church to discover for themselves, as Christians, a lofty position of neutrality in the struggle and to protect themselves in this by cultivating callousness to what is happening to people around the world and blindness to the dynamic character of the power that has enslaved them.

It is a mistake to suggest that the existence of the Christian Church or the survival of the Christian faith depend upon the outcome of the war. It is not amiss, however, to point out that the freedom of the Christian Church in many nations and the possibility of its reaching the souls of scores of millions of people—especially the younger generation—do depend upon the outcome of the war. There is a danger to the Church in having its freedom depend

upon a military victory; let that be said but let not the other things be left unsaid because they are inescapable facts.

The most poignant aspect of the position that has been taken by a large part of the leadership of the American Churches and which the silence of the councils of the Churches seems to echo is that men must face the horror of killing and the fate of dying with the suggestion made to them that they are merely victims of a common tragedy or of God's judgment. It would make a vast difference to many of them if they could know that on what they do depends the possibility of justice and freedom for men everywhere. They need not be told that what they do will insure justice and freedom. They know better than that. But to suggest that they are caught in the same tragic necessity, with the same meaning in it and no more, that confronts men who are drafted by the German, Japanese and Italian governments is to withhold from them a true interpretation of their situation and to deprive them and their families of a source of strength and morale which is rightfully theirs.

"Let the Church be the Church" has been a slogan that has led many Christian leaders to seek a position that transcends the partisanship and conflicts of this world, but in applying it they have in fact by their words and their silence come down on the side of a particular partisan position—the interpretation of the world's political situation—which has been held by a particular school of pacifists which has flourished chiefly in the United States. Some of them advocate an early negotiated peace without realizing that such a peace, prior to the defeat of the German power, surely would mean the betrayal of the conquered nations or Russia. That same slogan means something quite different to the Churches in Britain and even more to the Churches in such countries as Norway and Holland where the effort of the Church to preserve its own freedom has been the spearhead of national resistance.

The Church in order to remain the Church should

not by its silence give the impression that there are no momentous issues for the Christian conscience at stake in this war. It can state those issues clearly and broaden and deepen the resolve of Christian people in America to win the war and it can at the same time affirm the Christian duty to overcome hatred and vengeance, the Christian belief in the unity of the World Church, the Christian concern for freedom of conscience, the Christian imperative that calls us to work now for the basis for a just peace. Perhaps the test of it all is this: the Church can stress the need of repentance for the common sin that underlies this war; it can be specific in

showing how much the democratic nations share responsibility for the conditions which gave rise to the madness of the Axis powers, but it can do this without obscuring the fact that, however much we may all share the guilt for these things, it is still true that Germany and Japan represent an objective evil that we must defeat. It is as great an error to use our repentance as a means of hiding from ourselves the devastating character of the objective evil to which we are opposed as it is to suggest that this is a struggle between righteous and unrighteous nations.

J. C. B.