

# Christianity and Crisis

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## The Deeper Issues

**A**POLOGISTS for the United Nations in the present conflict face a baffling paradox. On the one hand, they are certain that upon the outcome of the struggle hangs the future of all they hold most dear. On the other hand, they find it embarrassingly difficult to state the issues of the struggle in clear and categorical terms which will stand under careful scrutiny.

The usual definitions of what is at stake are familiar. This is a life and death battle, it is said, between radically contradictory ideologies, or between antipodal ways of life, or between democracy and dictatorship, or between totalitarianism and free society, or between paganism and Christianity. Prior to Russia's entrance, such diagnoses passed readily enough in the muddled thinking of wartime, although none of them was ever more than a specious half-truth. With Russia ranged as one of the key partners in a Cause which had been represented as the defense of democracy and free society and Christianity, any such definition of the issues is obviously inadequate.

This embarrassment in which Allied apologetic discovers itself points to a more fundamental and significant paradox which has been too little noted. It is a truism that the past half century has been marked by the steady accentuation and advance toward crisis of five great conflicts in the life of mankind.

One has been the struggle between imperial power and the increasing self-assertion of subject and backward peoples. Another has been the mounting tension between white and non-white races throughout the world. A third has been the conflict between the principle of nationalism and the principle of universalism in world affairs, a conflict which came to permanent decision in the launching of the League of Nations. Still another has dominated the sphere of industry, between traditionalist capitalist enterprise and a rising socialist economy. Then there has been the even deeper cultural issue which has much occupied Christians, between advancing secularism and a spiritual interpretation of human existence.

Now it is a striking though obvious fact that, in not a single instance do the alignments of allies and enemies in this War coincide with the lines of cleavage in the five great areas of conflict whose tensions have so largely furnished the pattern for recent history. On the contrary, nations adhering to both of the embattled camps in *each* of these five areas are to be discovered linked in alliance within *both* coalitions of antagonists in the struggle.

The great imperial powers of Britain and America are rightly recognized as champions of the weaker and subject peoples of Asia and Africa against imperial Germany and imperial Japan with whom are allied, with whatever misgivings, frustrated Baltic and Balkan nations. Representatives of both white and non-white races appear in each camp. Voices of both the nationalist and the universal principles for world governance speak in the propaganda of each. Capitalist Britain and the United States make common cause with communist Russia against the pseudo-socialism of Germany and Italy associated with a Japan which still maintains many basic features of an individualist capitalist economy. The nation which has gone farthest in the ruthless outlawing of religion joins hands with those which profess themselves defenders of a Christian civilization against that nation which, of all the major antagonists, grants religion the most integral and necessary place in its culture yet is partner to the protagonists of militant paganism.

In brief, the lines of division which have seared and scarred the fabric of modern civilization with ever deepening crisis run directly across the lines of opposition in this armageddon which holds virtually all mankind in its grip. Moreover, whichever side should emerge victorious, there is no certainty that any one of the five pre-war conflicts would find solution in the outcome. On the contrary, not improbably each of the five will remain and will reappear in renewed tension amidst the readjustments of the post-war era.

To those accustomed to think of the War as a clear

choice between Darkness and Light, the recognition of this paradox may come as a startling and disquieting realization. Some may claim that its mere admission will cut the nerve of devotion to the Allied cause. If none of the deepest tensions which have been steadily tightening toward decisive issue all through the modern period are to receive solution through the outcome of the War, what *is* at stake, what is the ground of supreme sacrifice for Allied victory?

Such a deduction from the paradox would be altogether mistaken. Rather, for Christians its frank recognition would lead to two other conclusions.

It furnishes a distasteful but salutary reminder that seldom in corporate affairs are men presented a simple and clear choice between Darkness and Light. That does not mean that they lack a clear choice between a right and a wrong course of action. Seldom have men confronted a command to devotion on which hung such momentous stakes for mankind. If it is difficult to state satisfactorily what the United Nations are fighting for, they know well what they are fighting *to prevent*—slavery, suffering, ignominy, retrogression for virtually all humanity. Even if the objectives must be defined largely in negative terms,

their import is more than adequate to steel sacrifice to the end. It is well that we be reminded that, in the affairs of men and nations, so much may hang on the preventing of some evil greater than any we now know.

Secondly, this paradox forces upon us the even more important realization that Allied victory may assure triumph for none of the great goals of human advance toward which socially minded Christians have given their allegiance and bent their energies through recent decades. It may merely secure the *possibility* of their realization. It may announce the termination of a brief though critical interlude in the *main* drama of the modern era and a resumption of the earlier and more basic struggles within our society. For it is on the sound and peaceful solution of those five great conflicts that the hope of a better tomorrow hangs. To the overthrow of the present threat, prerequisite of any decent solution at all, those who envision a more Christian order must bend every resource, all the while that they remind one another with true Christian realism of the larger and even more fundamental tasks which will yet claim them.

H. P. V. D.