

worldview

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ON "ABSOLUTE" MORALITY

The relationship between religious concern and international event is a continuing problem for both the statesman and the moralist. Mr. George Kennan, who has been one of America's most distinguished statesmen and is also something of a moralist, addressed himself to this problem recently in a lecture on "Foreign Policy and Christian Conscience," delivered at the Princeton Theological Seminary and published in the *May Atlantic*.

The main lines of Mr. Kennan's argument are noted elsewhere in this issue, under "In the Magazines." Mr. Kennan has a deep sense of the moral ambiguity of most political action and he warns us that, "in approaching the individual conflicts between governments that make up so much of international relations, we must beware of pouring Christian enthusiasm into unsuitable vessels which were at best designed to contain the earthy calculations of the practical politicians." But this ambiguity does not mean, Mr. Kennan insists, that there are no international issues on which Christians should take a clear-cut religious stand. There are such issues, he says, and they "involve not just the national interests of individual governments but rather the interests of civilization: the question of war, and the atom, and the other weapons of mass destruction."

Mr. Kennan is no friend to easy absolutes. In many of the areas where others see black and white, he sees only gray, and he warns us that we should not confuse "our" side with God's side or think that, in advancing the interests of the United States, we are somehow securing the triumph of righteousness itself. There can be no gray crusades. In a striking paragraph he writes: "While Christian values are often involved in the issues of American conflict with Soviet power, we cannot conclude that everything we want automatically reflects the purpose of God and everything the Russians want reflects the purpose of the devil . . . We must concede the possibility that there might be some areas of conflict involved in this Cold War which a Divine

Power could contemplate only with a sense of pity and disgust for both parties, and others in which He might even consider us to be wrong."

Mr. Kennan's view of most other issues is as complex as his view of the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. He obviously thinks that the general tendency to identify the cause of religion with the cause of anti-colonialism is, at best, sentimentalism. ("Nobody seems to suggest any more," he notes sardonically, "that God might conceivably be on the side of the metropolitan power.") In the great colonial conflicts of our century, he writes, "one will look in vain, as a rule, for any Christian meaning . . . Let us, as Christians, view [them] for what they are: tragic situations in which the elements of right and wrong are indistinguishable to us." And on the questions of foreign aid and the United Nations he similarly stands against the absolutes. None of these things, he argues (in some cases more persuasively than others), are properly "Christian" issues; they are all, at best, morally ambiguous.

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On the question of modern war, however, Mr. Kennan is very absolute indeed. And it is here that he is most challenging. How, he asks, can a Christian support a war fought with modern weapons of mass destruction, or how, even, can a Christian support preparations for such a war in the form of atomic tests? His answer is simple and clear: the Christian cannot support or even tolerate them. "I cannot help feeling," Mr. Kennan writes, "that the weapon of indiscriminate mass destruction goes farther than anything the Christian ethic can properly tolerate."

George Kennan of course does not defend an absolute pacifist position. He writes that he is "unable to accept the view which condemns coercion in the international sphere but tolerates it within the national borders," and he would certainly defend the moral necessity of fighting

certain limited wars for limited objectives. But in viewing the type of war we fought in World War II, with its saturation bombings to achieve unconditional surrender, and the type of war we would likely fight in the future with thermonuclear weapons, he becomes a relative pacifist. To these wars he thinks the Christian must say No. And if it is said that this means defeat, he replies: "I am skeptical of the meaning of 'victory' and 'defeat' in their relation to modern war between great countries. To my mind the defeat is war itself. In any case it seems to me that there are times when we have no choice but to follow the dictates of our conscience, to throw ourselves on God's mercy, and not to ask too many questions."

This conclusion seems inescapable in the terms of Mr. Kennan's argument. There *are* things which the religious conscience must reject, and the possible destruction of the human race is chief among them. But the difficulty with this argument is its terms. They are the terms of that absolute either-or morality Mr. Kennan so vigorously rejects when he considers the Cold War, foreign aid, colonialism, and the United Nations. In discussing modern war, and the testing of nuclear weapons, Mr. Kennan triumphantly ig-

nores the political complexities and consequences which are the heart of the problem of foreign policy and Christian conscience. Here he operates in a world which prescind from politics, and in such a world "pure" moral choice becomes easy. In such a world we must all be pacifists.

Only the hopelessly callous, morally cynical man could fail to agree with the Kennan position that a war fought with nuclear weapons of mass destruction, or the war that we fought fifteen years ago, goes far, far beyond any possible limits for the just war. Indeed, it is more and more agreed that the concept of a "just war" is an anachronism, and if we ever really face the dreadful choice of surrender or death, not only for ourselves but possibly for the whole human race, then it would be a curious morality indeed which would sanction our choosing death. But this is not now the issue before us and, God willing, it will never be. The issue before us now is to maintain some chance for peace with justice in a world where both are threatened as they have never been before; and, given the facts of Communist power, it is difficult to see how either peace or justice could be maintained were the "Christian" nations unilaterally to disarm. This could be the real moral betrayal.

correspondence

LIBERTY OR DEATH

New York, N. Y.

Sir: According to the April 25th issue of *Information Service*, you published in your issue of September, 1958 a discussion of an article appearing in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and a quotation from Hannah Arendt, in general criticizing the action of Congress forbidding the use of government funds to any person or institution who ever proposes or actually conducts any study regarding the surrender of the government of the United States. Might not your position have been stronger if you had advocated action by Congress condemning such persons to jail for incipient treason, for is it not clearly a duty of every citizen of our Nation to support it, if necessary, with his influence, his property, and his life, rather than to accede to defeat by an enemy?

When our armies go out to fight the enemy, all the soldiers do so at the risk of their lives. Just why should civilians back home expect to run no risks, when they are asking their sons to take chances with losing their lives? Can one imagine any position less logical? And what American worth his salt would want to take his chances of keeping alive and existing under the kind of a regime that the Soviets would impose upon us if we were conquered?

May I suggest that you send to Congress apologies for your criticism, and commendations for their action? Otherwise, you are likely to be indefinitely suspected of treason.

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