

Dear Sirs:

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Professor Niebuhr's article "Barth's East German Letter" (Christian Century, February 11, 1959) is relevant.

It is relevant because it once again raises the questions whether a Christian's witness can be expressed in any other way than in what Niebuhr calls "Hazardous political judgments" which one feels one must make in order to be morally responsible. By characterizing Barth's advice as "above the battle" and therefore "irrelevant" because it contains too many evidences of Barth's "robust humanity", Niebuhr gives the western church the opportunity to ask itself what the alternatives are to a witness which attempts to speak first from the faith it shares with Christians behind the Iron Curtain, and secondly, from its political or moral judgments concerning Communism. Is there any advantage in being an American Christian over against being a neutral Swiss Christian in the question of insuring that our witness is more relevant or true in this divided world?

Niebuhr's article is relevant because it voices the concern of the western world in finding that Professor Barth distrusts the 'American way of life' as much as the 'Communist way'. Barth writes to the East German pastor that he can as little approve of the Communist regime's methods and practices as the powers and authorities of the West. Rather than dismissing this as political or moral irrelevancy, could it rather be asked if this is not the insight of any Christian who sees that the free world has been forced to share in the same desperate power struggle that characterized the materialistic East. Does this same insight not only warn the Christians of the world that all 'ways of life' are human ways and thus subject to the criticism of their faith, but also that even the best 'way of life' can not be even distantly equated with the Christian witness? Niebuhr is in agreement with Barth that the weight of sin for the present world conflict must rest on both the East and the West, and that both sides are guilty in God's sight. This, Niebuhr thinks, is correct because it mitigates "the self-righteous fury to which the 'Christian' world is tempted in dealing with 'atheistic materialism' ". But he feels that Barth's concrete judgments drawn from this belief are irrelevant because they reveal a political bias which is confused with the divine pronouncement. Professor Barth has not singled out the "American way of life" from any personal "animus", for he knows as well as any western European its material benefits, but he has rejected it as a source of religious

security which can be confused or compared with the Christian faith. It is not in the hope that Germany will one day be united and that East Germany can share in the "economic miracle" of West Germany, or even in the religious freedom of the western world that a Christian should decide to remain in a satellite country, advises Barth. Rather, it is in the hope of the riches and liberty that the Christian's faith can still provide anywhere. Must all Christians in the world align themselves freely or of necessity to the 'American way of life' in order to discharge their Christian responsibilities?

Niebuhr's article is relevant because it forces the reader to ask what Professor Niebuhr himself would write to a fellow Christian behind the Iron Curtain. What would be his advice as one who has acknowledged that there is no possibility of opposition in a Communist state to the East German minister who asked if it is not necessary for the Church to defend her position to preach? Even though Niebuhr insists that his political judgments are only the means of expressing his moral responsibilities, can it not be asked if there is not danger that these judgments will pre-judge or pre-shape the relevance of the Christian message? Could Niebuhr's advice have any more relevance for East German Christians, speaking from the position of his political judgments, than the Archbishop of Moscow could have for Christians in Winters, Texas?

Niebuhr's article is relevant also because it raises the question of Barth's objectivity or neutrality concerning the cold war conflict. Barth does not fit into Niebuhr's mold of a prophet. Barth is not objective. He is not neutral. Barth is vitally concerned that the "Church be the Church" in both the East and the West, and that neither the pride of western freedom or the dogmatism of eastern materialism should confuse or hinder this task. He does not abandon the Church behind the Iron Curtain nor force it to suffer the condemnation of western political judgments because of ~~this~~ political or moral surroundings. He does not wish the Church there or the Church here to suffer because of the accusation that its members seek first the comforts of the West before the Kingdom of God.

Niebuhr's hopes are relevant that a translation of Barth's letter may soon be available to the English-speaking world, for it would correct the impression given by him that the eight questions dealt with by Barth are "questions that he himself poses, thinking they are the kind that Christians in East Germany might have put to him".

These questions are the actual inquiries of the unnamed pastor and may include those of his colleagues. An English translation would reveal that any of Barth's weaknesses do not come from his "desperation" to be relevant, but rather as Niebuhr has said "from his robust humanity".

A letter received in Basel, dated February 13, 1959, from another East German pastor, gives some evidence that the questions and answers in Barth's letter were relevant to their <sup>u</sup>situation. He says "After conversations with many of my friends who are ministers and teachers, I would like to give you, our fatherly adviser and friend, a hearty word of thanks. You have consoled, comforted and admonished us, and warned us of every abyss, in order that we might fight well the battle of faith, and hold on until the victory has been secured."