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Editorial

- Christianity and Culture . . . C. S. Lewis
Rosenberg's New Nordic Religion . A. C. Bouquet
Our Possessions . . . Wilfred L. Knox
A Parish Priest in the Eighteen-
Thirties . . . W. K. Lowther Clarke
Mass-Observation and Religion . Marcus Donovan
Confession in the Eastern Orthodox
Church . . . Nicolas Zernov
— The Church and the War . . Karl Barth

For full list of contents see within.

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The world of to-day is suffering from a renewed attack of sin, which reveals the strength of its hold upon individuals and nations. Its collective character is especially clearly displayed at present, and the powerlessness of isolated efforts to check it is made obvious. In this time of anxiety and crisis the Christian Church in its efforts to help its members to fight against evil finds one of its best weapons in the sacrament of confession. Its proper use will be achieved only when the unity of the Church is restored, but even while this ultimate object is still out of reach it is essential for the welfare of the Church that Christians should feel more deeply their oneness. There is no better way of stressing their unity than a readiness to incorporate into their daily life those best fruits of the Christian experience which have been faithfully preserved and cultivated by the members of other confessions. It is time for the Christian East and for the Christian West to realize that they have one common foe—the sin and depravity which undermine the creation; and one Lord and Master—Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

NICOLAS ZERNOV.

The Church and the War

A letter by Professor Karl Barth to a French pastor, editor of "Foi et Vie," translated by Pastor Ernst L. H. Gordon and Reginald H. Fuller, members of the Queen's College, Birmingham.

December, 1939.

As you say in your letter, three-quarters of the French theologians whom I had the privilege of meeting and with whom I had the privilege of working in Bièvres in January this year are today serving your country in a military capacity at the front or elsewhere. You invite me to send to them and to my other friends in France a message through *Foi et Vie*. I do so with great pleasure, since it gives me the opportunity of telling you what moves me at this present time as I think of you all.

Our situation here in Basle is such that we cannot possibly shut our eyes to the war. Only a few kilometres from here the fortifications begin. On the right are the German fortifications and on the left the French. The pilots of both sides are, I am afraid, in the habit of forgetting that they

have no business in the air above our heads. It has even happened that certain undesirable objects have fallen from above upon our territory. In the midst of our streets the barricades and barbed wire of our defences bristle ready to meet an even worse menace. Such are the circumstances in which I have to expound the peaceful mysteries of Christian Dogmatics, just now the Doctrine of Predestination.

But what is that compared with the problems and cares which are your concern to-day—you yourselves, your families, your congregations and the whole Reformed Church of your land? You may rest assured that I myself and many others in our still “neutral” part of the world realize what turmoils and hardships, what sacrifices and temptations events have brought and continue to bring to you. We know, too, that we are bound as Christians to share with you and with everyone in the belligerent countries in your anxiety and affliction: and we do this from the bottom of our hearts. You will not, dear friends, misinterpret the fact that we Swiss form at present an island of “neutrality” from a military point of view. At the moment there is no other possibility. The causes of the present war lie in the international decisions of 1919 in which our country did not take part. And since that date (as before) high politics in Europe have developed without our co-operation. Switzerland would become guilty of the same arbitrary methods in politics, the curbing of which is the task of to-day, if she voluntarily disregarded her repeatedly declared policy and entered the war as a belligerent without the compulsion of external pressure. For the moment we have a duty towards the whole of Europe—the duty of preserving the integrity of that piece of European order which has been entrusted precisely to us in the form of military neutrality. You will agree with me when I say that it is necessary and salutary for all nations, and not least for the Church of Jesus Christ in all nations, that there should be, as long as possible, such places through which it is possible to maintain contact between men and Christians in some sort of tranquillity. Such a place is Switzerland for the time being. “Neutrality,” interpreted in this sense, is laid upon us as an obligation for the time being. This neutrality signifies, not that we dissociate ourselves from The Event of our time, but that we associate ourselves with it in our own *particular* way. It signifies the special form of *our* responsibility in Europe. There are probably few Swiss who under-

stand our "neutrality" in any other sense. At any rate I should like it to be known that I personally understand it in this sense and in this sense alone.

There can be no doubt that this war is for all of us, for belligerents and neutrals alike, a very special war, that it bears a totally different character from the war of 1914 and from nearly all the wars of previous centuries. France and England hesitated long (perhaps too long, but when one considers the grim character of this *ultima ratio*, this hesitation was certainly justified) before they took up arms to put an end to the arbitrary use of the law of might ("Faustrecht") which the present German Government has openly proclaimed and put into practice with ever-increasing unscrupulousness. After having made Germany from end to end a land of fear and terror, Hitler's National Socialism has become to an increasing extent a menace to the whole of Europe. This menace has led to an awakening. In the midst of the sin and shame of all nations there still remains, through the goodness of God, something of law and order, of free humanity, and above all, and as that which gives its meaning to all else, of freedom to proclaim the Gospel. Where Hitler reigns, even this remnant is destroyed. But Hitler is not satisfied to reign in Germany alone. When this last fact became sufficiently clear for even the blind to see, war came. "Il faut en finir !" said your Prime Minister in the hour of decision, and his English colleague repeated this declaration. The question as to how deep this resolve and this determination go may safely be left to the sense of responsibility of these statesmen. It is certain that every Christian too, who has followed the last years with his eyes and ears opened, must, just because he is a Christian, give his own Yes and Amen to this "Il faut en finir !" Undoubtedly, France and England have had in the past, and still have, their own imperialistic motives for waging this war. That, however, does not make any difference. Our generation would be answerable before God and before men if the attempt were *not* made to put an end to the menace of Hitler. In the end war remained the only means of achieving this purpose. France and England had to undertake the task, because they are chiefly responsible for the state of affairs which arose in Europe after 1919—because they are responsible, too, for making Hitler possible. But, now that they have undertaken the war, it cannot well be denied that in this war not only the interests of France

and England are at stake, but also those of *all other* nations—in the end even the interests of the German nation itself. Herein lies the peculiarity of this war. It has arisen from the mortal jeopardy of all, and it must be waged in the defence of all. We “neutrals,” too, are not neutral in so far as we know full well that the efforts and the sacrifices of this war are necessary to preserve for *us* too what is more indispensable for life than life itself. Our French and English friends, and our German friends as well, should know that we are grateful to those who, in accordance with their historical position and responsibility, have taken upon themselves the waging of this war against Hitler.

The Church of Jesus Christ cannot and will not wage war. She can and will simply pray, believe, hope, love, and proclaim and hearken to the Gospel. She knows that The Event by which we poor men are succoured in an effectual, eternal and godly way has come, comes, and will come to pass, not, according to Zech. iv, 6, by force of arms or by power or by any kind of human effort and achievement, but only by the Spirit of God. The Church therefore will not see in the cause of England and France the “*causa Dei*,” and she will not preach a crusade against Hitler. He who died upon the Cross died for Hitler too, and, even more, for all those bewildered men who voluntarily or involuntarily serve under his banner. But precisely because the Church knows about justification which we men cannot attain by any means for ourselves, she cannot remain indifferent. She cannot remain “neutral” in things great or small where justice is at stake, where the attempt is being made to establish a poor feeble human justice against overwhelming, flagrant injustice. Where this is at stake, there the Church cannot withhold her witness. It is the command of God that justice be done on earth: it is precisely for this purpose that God has instituted the State and given to it the sword; and, despite all the shortcomings of which it may otherwise be guilty, the State which endeavours to defend the right proves itself precisely by these endeavours to be a Just State, and may claim the obedience of everyone. It would be regrettable if the Christian Churches, which in previous wars have so often and so thoughtlessly spoken the language of nationalism and of militarism, should just in this war equally thoughtlessly decide to adopt the silence of neutrality and pacifism. The Churches ought today to pray in all penitence and sobriety for a *just* peace, and in

the same penitence and sobriety to bear witness to all the world that it is necessary and worth while to fight and to suffer for this *just* peace. They certainly ought not to persuade the democratic states that they are, so to say, the Lord's own warriors. But they ought to say to them that we are privileged to be *human* and that we must *defend* ourselves with the power of desperation against the in-breaking of open inhumanity. The Churches owe the duty of witnessing to the Christians in Germany as well as to the whole German nation: Your cause is not just! You are mistaken! Have no more to do with this Hitler! Hands off this war! It is his war alone! Change your course while there is yet time! Why have the representatives and organs of the ecumenical movement preserved so diplomatic a silence in all these years, and even during the fatal developments of this summer and autumn, as if there were no prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ, and as if the Church had no duty of watchfulness? Why have we heard and why do we continue to hear, and that not infrequently, voices of an eschatological defeatism, a defeatism which, appealing to the truth that "the whole world lieth in the evil one," busies itself almost cynically with asserting that Hitler's present adversaries for their part are no saints either? The apprehension of the truth that God alone is holy will not excuse us from the duty of putting up a resistance to-day. On the contrary, the Church in every land will have to give much comfort in the dark times upon which, according to all appearances, we are entering. The Church, however, will only be able to give real *comfort* if she can also, without hatred or phariseeism or without any illusions concerning the goodness of any human beings, give *admonishment*, if she will earnestly and frankly say that to-day resistance is necessary.

And it will be particularly the Church of Jesus Christ that will at the same time no less clearly recognize and proclaim that other truth, that the ultimate in war—and in this war especially—cannot be war. War is like a painful yet purposeful surgical operation; it can only be waged in order to help, to heal and to secure life. The time may very soon come when there will arise in every country the urgent necessity of bringing this aspect of the matter into the foreground.

My dear French friends, you know how closely I am associated with Germany, with her Church and with her

people. You will, I know, not take it amiss, if I ask you both individually and collectively, to concern yourselves even now with the question of what ought to happen if the disaster which Germany has brought upon herself is manifested in her defeat, a defeat which according to all human calculation is inevitable. At the beginning of the war the slogan was announced that the war was not directed against the German people but only against its present rulers. This was a noble formula, but it was an oversimplification of the problem. The new slogan, however, that every people gets the government it deserves, and that the whole German people must be held responsible for the actions of its government, is again too simple. The truth lies somewhere between these two poles. The German people are not wicked as a people, are not at any rate more wicked than any other people. The idea that to-day they must be punished as a whole is an idea which is impossible both from a Christian and from a human point of view. But Hitler's National Socialism is most certainly the wicked expression of the extraordinary political stupidity, confusion and helplessness of the German people.

Let me just sketch the causes and the real significance of this fact as I understand them: The French people and the English people are no more "Christian" as a people than are the Germans. But the German people suffer from the heritage of a paganism that is mystical and that is in consequence unrestrained, unwise and illusory. And it suffers, too, from the heritage of the greatest Christian of Germany, from Martin Luther's error on the relation between Law and Gospel, between the temporal and the spiritual order and power. This error has established, confirmed and idealized the natural paganism of the German people, instead of limiting and restraining it. Every people has just such an heritage from paganism and from certain Christian errors which have strengthened this paganism. Consequently every people has its evil dreams. Hitlerism is the present evil dream of the German pagan who first became christianized in a Lutheran form. It is a particularly evil kind of dream, a dream which endangers the life both of the Germans themselves and of the rest of us as well. Apart from the torment which it has caused the dreamer himself, this dream has made the dreamer a menace for Europe. He must in the first place be rendered harmless.

It is essential that those who now face the German as

an adversary in war and all who may later find themselves face to face with him (if they will themselves think as Christians and not as heathen) should not lose sight of the fact that in this adversary they have to deal with *a sick man*. Particularly when the war is over—and even now we cannot devote too much thought to what must be done when the war is over—it will become necessary to treat him as a sick man is treated. Very firm yet very compassionate hands will then be necessary. Of course, it will be imperative to render physically impossible any further developments on the fatal course which leads from Frederick the Great through Bismarck to Hitler. It will be even more imperative to make manifest to the German people an illustration of that political wisdom which as yet is so foreign to them. By this I mean that there must be created for them *conditions of life* of such a kind that they will be prevented from going on dreaming that evil dream in some new form or other. The illusion that they can only stand their ground against other nations by terrorism must be eradicated from them by an unconditional resolve on the part of these other nations to *do justice* to Germany's real needs as they are conditioned by her geographical situation. That does not mean that Germany should be granted the freedom to become what Bismarck and Hitler wanted to make her. But it does mean that Germany should be granted the freedom to live by her own labour. It cannot be said that this freedom was granted to her in 1919, or in the period from 1919 to 1933. It is for this reason that every nation has its share in the responsibility for the rise of Hitlerism. I myself lived in Germany at the time of the occupation of the Ruhr, and, after that experience, I know what I am saying. It may be that the coming peace will have to be sterner than the peace of Versailles, sterner both politically and militarily. But it will have to be a wiser and a juster peace if all that we have gone through is not to be in vain once more. If this peace is to be wiser and more just it will have above all to show *more care and consideration*. We shall have to allow the population which occupies the wide area of Central Europe and which is set at such a disadvantage through the limitations of the natural resources of this area, to share in the means of life which other more fortunately situated nations enjoy. This must be done in such a way as will allow Germany to renounce that fatal course and to bring out her peculiar gifts—there can be no doubt of their wealth

and significance—so that she may become to herself and to the other nations a blessing and not ever and again a curse.

The long entertained desire to give Hitler "a chance" proved dangerous. But it would prove still more dangerous if, after the war, no readiness were shown to give the German nation an honest chance. The mistake of 1919-1933 must not be repeated. The present resistance to the German menace would otherwise be from the very outset without meaning. Otherwise it would be even physically impossible to destroy the German menace by political and military resistance. This is what people in France, too, should clearly realize.

But, my dear friends, I think it would be very unchristian and therefore very imprudent if we pondered all these considerations without at the end making the frank confession that man proposes—and it is man's duty to propose—but God alone disposes. We can and we should shoulder our responsibilities, our political responsibilities and, if need be, our military responsibilities. But it does not lie with us to determine what will be the eventual issue. And in no circumstances should we have the right to marvel or to complain if the issue were wholly different from the hope and intention, the plan and resolve which we envisage at present. The outcome of this war is not to be predicted with absolute certainty by any calculation of man. I have no need to remind you that Germany is a doughty adversary. You must not think merely of her *capacity for military achievement*, but perhaps still more of the almost unaccountable *capacity for suffering* which the German people possess. This last is one of the best features of their natural and Lutheran heritages. And somewhere behind Germany stand the great enigmas of Russia, and of Italy too, enigmas which may find their solution in this way or that. Even if human calculation gave a hundred per cent. certainty, we as Christians have to remind ourselves that there are such things as "miracles of the antichrist," absolutely unexpected and astounding achievements of the "beast out of the abyss," which God has His own grounds for permitting, the occurrence of which could for the time being bring to nought all the calculations, not only of the "rational" portion of mankind but also of the Church and of Christians, be these calculations never so well grounded. We do not know whether Hitlerism is not capable of such a miracle—there is much in its development hitherto which tends in

this direction. Perhaps a question mark is yet being set over against that admirable resolve, "Il faut en finir." Perhaps the nations of Europe may be destined to resist this enemy in vain and finally to have to live a life of dishonour under the rule of undisguised Lie, a life comparable to that of men and Christians in Germany to-day. We are defending ourselves against this menace. We ought not to grumble if this threat were to become an accomplished fact despite all our wishes. We must realize that we shall then receive the due reward of our deeds. The use we all have made of that heavenly gift, that remnant of a free humanity, of democratic justice, and above all of the freedom of the Gospel, has not been such as to oblige God to preserve us from destruction. If we are preserved, it will be only by His grace. Are we prepared to be forced to recognize His grace even perhaps in His *not* preserving us? Are we prepared for a situation in which the defenceless confession of Jesus Christ is the only course left open to us? Are we prepared even then and under such conditions to remain loyal to our God and to rejoice in Him and to find our dignity in this and in this alone? On our answer to this question depends our title to defend ourselves now, depends our right to have a clear conscience in so doing, and our right wholeheartedly to ask God for His assistance. We must be prepared for God, just when we are acting in obedience to His command, to confront us with *His own* "Il faut en finir," and again by His command to lead us to something *wholly other*. We must be prepared to adhere to *Him* then and especially then, resolved upon a new obedience. Done in this spirit of preparedness, our work of resistance will then be a good work. Then and only then can it be offered with joy and confidence. We are both allowed and obliged to know that God will reign in any case and that He makes no mistakes.

When this letter reaches you, my friends, it will soon be Christmas. Then we, together with the whole of Christendom, which is poor and yet so rich, and with all the angels in heaven, shall be privileged to rejoice in the presence and kingly rule of Him who is our salvation and blessedness wholly and in every situation. As the people that walk in darkness, we see a great light. That our duty and privilege is—each in his own place—to watch, to stand fast in the faith, to quit us like men and to be strong—let that be our message to you this Christmas. KARL BARTH.