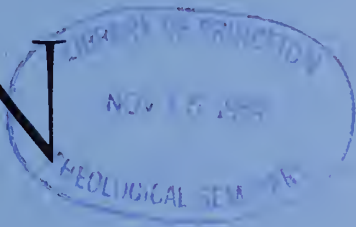


THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN



A Time to Say No

Editorial

Ronald C. White, Jr.

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Commencement Address, 1984

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Ronald C. White, Jr., Editor

J. J. M. Roberts, Book Review Editor

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A Letter to Presbyterians

by JOHN ALEXANDER MACKAY

To commemorate the importance of John A. Mackay's "A Letter to Presbyterians," it is reprinted in its entirety in this issue of the *Bulletin*. Actually released in November 1953, the letter was widely hailed but also criticized in 1954. The *New York Times* printed the entire document and reported about it on the front page. Praised by the *Washington Post*, and such newsweeklies as *Time* and *Newsweek*, the letter was strongly criticized by the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and other newspapers.

Mackay authored this letter while serving as chairman of a newly expanded and empowered General Council of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. In 1953 he had been elected Moderator of the 165th General Assembly. In the course of preparing this letter for the General Council, Mackay was at the same time touring the country on a moderatorial visit to churches and presbyteries. This travel increased his awareness of the need for such a letter in a divisive hour. The letter underwent seven drafts in the fall of 1953. The first five paragraphs of the letter were added by Stated Clerk Eugene Carson Blake to clarify why the General Council was publishing the letter at this time.

The letter was commended for study and discussion. The most heated discussion was engendered by an article by Daniel A. Poling, "Clergymen Are Citizens, Too," which appeared in April 1954 in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Poling, editor of the *Christian Herald*, accused Mackay and the General Council of being duped so that they were unknowingly instruments of communist propaganda. Poling compared the letter, line by line, to writings in communist publications. Poling was rebutted by many writers and publications, including Robert J. Cadigan, editor of *Presbyterian Life*.

When asked what were the sources of the letter, Mackay replied, "The Bible, the Presbyterian heritage of Bate, and Christian common sense applied to the contemporary situation." "A Letter to Presbyterians" is reprinted here as a case study in prophetic insight and courage.¹

DEAR FELLOW PRESBYTERIANS:

The General Council of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America is instructed under the constitution of the Church, "to cultivate and promote the spiritual welfare of the whole church," and "to

correspond with and advise the General Councils of Presbyteries . . ."

Profoundly concerned about the present situation in our country and the world, the Council addresses itself to fellow Presbyterians through

¹ Helpful perspective on "A Letter to Presbyterians" can be found in Edward A. Dowey, Jr., "Poling and the Presbyterian Letter" in *Christianity in Crisis*, vol. 14, no. 16, October 4, 1954; and K. Steven Parmelee, "The Presbyterian Letter Against McCarthyism" in *Journal of Presbyterian History*, vol. 41, no. 4, December 1963, pp. 201-23.

the Presbyteries and the ministers and officers of the congregations. In doing so it is guided by the historic witness of our Church and the deliverances of successive General Assemblies. The Council hopes that the following statement may help to clarify certain important problems and at the same time initiate a process of thought by which our Church can contribute toward their solution.

The 165th General Assembly made the following pronouncement for the guidance of Presbyterians: "All human life should be lived in accordance with the principles established by God for the life of men and of nations. This is a tenet of Biblical religion. It is also a basic emphasis in our Presbyterian heritage of faith.

"As individuals and as a group, Christians are responsible for adjusting their thought and behavior to those everlasting principles of righteousness which God has revealed in Holy Scripture. It is no less their responsibility as citizens of their nation, to seek as far as their influence may extend, to bring national life and all the institutions of society into conformity with the moral government of God, and into harmony with the spirit of Jesus Christ."

In full accordance with this deliverance, the General Council would share with our church constituency the following thoughts:

Things are happening in our national life and in the international sphere which should give us deep concern. Serious thought needs to be given to the menace of Communism in the world of today and to the undoubted aim on the part of its leaders to subvert the thought and life of the United States. Everlasting

vigilance is also needed, and appropriate precautions should be constantly taken, to forestall the insidious intervention of a foreign power in the internal affairs of our country. In this connection Congressional committees, which are an important expression of democracy in action, have rendered some valuable services to the nation.

At the same time the citizens of this country, and those in particular who are Protestant Christians, have reason to take a grave view of the situation which is being created by the almost exclusive concentration of the American mind upon the problem of the threat of Communism.

Under the plea that the structure of American society is in imminent peril of being shattered by a satanic conspiracy, dangerous developments are taking place in our national life. Favored by an atmosphere of intense disquiet and suspicion, a subtle but potent assault upon basic human rights is now in progress. Some Congressional inquiries have revealed a distinct tendency to become inquisitions. These inquisitions, which find their historic pattern in medieval Spain and in the tribunals of modern totalitarian states, begin to constitute a threat to freedom of thought in this country. Treason and dissent are being confused. The shrine of conscience and private judgment, which God alone has a right to enter, is being invaded. Un-American attitudes toward ideas and books are becoming current. Attacks are being made upon citizens of integrity and social passion which are utterly alien to our democratic tradition. They are particularly alien to the Protestant religious tradition which has been a

main source of the freedoms which the people of the United States enjoy.

There is something still more serious. A great many people, within and without our government, approach the problem of Communism in a purely negative way. Communism, which is at bottom a secular religious faith of great vitality, is thus being dealt with as an exclusively police problem. As a result of this there is growing up over against Communism a fanatical negativism. Totally devoid of a constructive program of action, this negativism is in danger of leading the American mind into a spiritual vacuum. Our national house, cleansed of one demon, would invite by its very emptiness, the entrance of seven others. In the case of a national crisis this emptiness could, in the high sounding name of security, be occupied with ease by a Fascist tyranny.

We suggest, therefore, that all Presbyterians give earnest consideration to the following three basic principles and their implications for our thought and life:

I

The Christian Church has a prophetic function to fulfill in every society and in every age

Whatever concerns man and his welfare is a concern of the Church and its ministers. Religion has to do with life in its wholeness. While being patriotically loyal to the country within whose bounds it lives and works, the church does not derive its authority from the nation but from Jesus Christ. Its supreme and ultimate allegiance is to Christ, its sole

Head, and to His Kingdom, and not to any nation or race, to any class or culture. It is, therefore, under obligation to consider the life of man in the light of God's purpose in Christ for the world. While it is not the role of the Christian church to present blueprints for the organization of society and the conduct of government, the Church owes it to its own members and to men in general, to draw attention to violations of those spiritual bases of human relationship which have been established by God. It has the obligation also to proclaim those principles, and to instill that spirit, which are essential for social health, and which form the indispensable foundation of sound and stable policies in the affairs of state.

II

The majesty of truth must be preserved at all times and at all costs

Loyalty to truth is the common basis of true religion and true culture. Despite the lofty idealism of many of our national leaders, truth is being subtly and silently dethroned by prominent public figures from the position it has occupied hitherto in our American tradition. The state of strife known as "cold war," in which our own and other nations, as well as groups within nations, are now engaged, is producing startling phenomena and sinister personalities. In this form of warfare, falsehood is frequently preferred to fact if it can be shown to have greater propaganda value. In the interests of propaganda, truth is deliberately distorted or remains unspoken. The demagogue, who lives

by propaganda, is coming into his own on a national scale. According to the new philosophy, if what is true "gives aid and comfort" to our enemies, it must be suppressed. Truth is thus a captive in the land of the free. At the same time, and for the same reason, great words like "love," "peace," "justice," and "mercy," and the ideas which underlie them, are becoming suspect.

Communism, as we know to our sorrow, is committed on principle to a philosophy of lying; democracy, in fighting Communism, is in danger of succumbing, through fear and in the name of expediency, to the self-same philosophy. It is being assumed, in effect, that, in view of the magnitude of the issues at stake, the end justifies the means. Whatever the outcome of such a war, the moral consequences will be terrifying. People will become accustomed to going through life with no regard for rules or sanctities.

A painful illustration of this development is that men and women should be publicly condemned upon the uncorroborated word of former Communists. Many of these witnesses have done no more, as we know, than transfer their allegiance from one authoritarian system to another. Nothing is easier for people, as contemporary history has shown, than to make the transition from one totalitarianism to another, carrying their basic attitudes along with them. As a matter of fact, the lands that have suffered most from Communism, or that are most menaced by it today, Russia and Italy, for example, are lands which have been traditionally authoritarian in their political or their religious life. And

yet the ex-Communists to whose word Congressional committees apparently given unqualified credence are in very many instances people whose basic philosophy authorizes them now, as in the past, to believe that a lie in a good cause is thoroughly justified.

III

God's sovereign rule is the controlling factor in history

We speak of "This nation under God." Nothing is more needed today than to explore afresh and to apply to all the problems of thought and life in our generation, what it means to take God seriously in national life. There is an order of God. Even in these days of flux and nihilism, of relativism and expediency, God reigns. The American-born poet, T. S. Eliot, has written these prophetic words:

Those who put their faith in
worldly order
Not controlled by the order of
God,
In confident ignorance, but
arrest disorder,
Make it fast, breed fatal
disease,
Degrade what they exalt.

Any attempt to impose upon society, or the course of history, a purely man-made order, however lofty the aims, can have no more than temporary success. Social disorder and false political philosophies cannot be adequately met by police measures, but only by a sincere attempt to organize society in accordance with the everlasting principles of God's moral government of the world. It is,

therefore, of paramount importance that individuals, groups and nations should adjust themselves to the order of God. God's character and God's way with man provide the pattern for man's way with his fellow man.

That we have the obligation to make our nation as secure as possible, no one can dispute. But there is no absolute security in human affairs, nor is security the ultimate human obligation. A still greater obligation, as well as a more strategic procedure, is to make sure that what we mean by security, and the methods we employ to achieve it, are in accordance with the will of God. Otherwise, any human attempt to establish a form of world order which does no more than exalt the interest of a class, a culture, a race, or a nation, above God and the interests of the whole human family, is foredoomed to disaster. Ideas are on the march, forces are abroad, whose time has come. They cannot be repressed and they will bring unjust orders to an end. In the world of today all forms of feudalism, for example, are foredoomed. So too are all types of imperialism. The real question is how to solve the problems presented by these two forms of outmoded society in such a way that the transition to a better order will be gradual and constructive.

Let us frankly recognize that many of the revolutionary forces of our time are in great part the judgment of God upon human selfishness and complacency, and upon man's forgetfulness of man. That does not make these forces right; it does, however, compel us to consider how their driving power can be channeled into forms of creative thought

and work. History, moreover, makes it abundantly clear that wherever a religion, a political system or a social order, does not interest itself in the common people, violent revolt eventually takes place.

On the other hand, just because God rules in the affairs of men, Communism as a solution of the human problem is foredoomed to failure. No political order can prevail which deliberately leaves God out of account. Despite its pretention to be striving after "liberation," Communism enslaves in the name of freedom. It does not know that evil cannot be eradicated from human life by simply changing a social structure. Man, moreover, has deep spiritual longings which Communism cannot satisfy. The Communist order will eventually be shattered upon the bedrock of human nature, that is, upon the basic sins, and the abysmal needs, of man and society. For that reason Communism has an approaching rendezvous with God and the moral order.

Nevertheless, Communists, Communist nations and Communist-ruled peoples, should be our concern. In hating a system let us not allow ourselves to hate individuals or whole nations. History and experience teach us that persons and peoples do change. Let us ever be on the lookout for the evidence of change in the Communist world, for the effects of disillusionment, and for the presence of a God-implanted hunger. Such disillusionment and hunger can be met only by a sympathetic approach and a disposition to listen and confer.

There is clear evidence that a post-Communist mood is actually being created in many parts of Europe and

Asia. Let us seek to deepen that mood. Let us explore afresh the meaning of mercy and forgiveness and recognize that both can have social and political significance when they are sincerely and opportunely applied.

Let us always be ready to meet around a conference table with the rulers of Communist countries. There should be, therefore, no reluctance to employ the conference method to the full in the settling of disputes with our country's enemies. Let us beware of the cynical attitude which prevails in certain official circles to regard as a forlorn hope any negotiated solution of the major issues which divide mankind.

In human conflicts there can be no substitute for negotiation. Direct personal conference has been God's way with man from the beginning. "Come, now, and let us reason together," was the word of God to Israel through the Prophet Isaiah. We must take the risk, and even the initiative, of seeking face-to-face encounter with our enemies. We should meet them officially, whatever their ignominious record, and regardless of the suffering they may have caused us. We too have reasons for penitence and stand in need of forgiveness. In any case, talk, unhurried talk, talk which does not rule out in advance the possibility of success, talk which takes place in private, and not before reporters or microphones or television, is the only kind of approach which can lead to sanity and fruitful understanding. Let the pro-

cess of conference be private, but let its conclusions, its complete conclusions, be made public.

In this connection such an organization as the United Nations is in harmony with the principles of God's moral government. American Presbyterians should remember with pride that it is the successor of a former organization which was the creation of a great American who was also a great Presbyterian. While the United Nations organization is very far from perfection and it functions today under great handicaps, it is yet the natural and best available agent for international cooperation and the settlement of disputes among nations. It is imperative, therefore, that it be given the utmost support. It stands between us and war.

While we take all wise precautions for defense, both within and outside our borders, the present situation demands spiritual calm, historical perspective, religious faith, and an adventurous spirit. Loyalty to great principles of truth and justice has made our nation great; such loyalty alone can keep it great and ensure its destiny.

May God give us the wisdom and courage to think and act in accordance with His Will.

With fraternal greetings,

THE GENERAL COUNCIL OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
JOHN A. MACKAY, *Chairman*
GLENN W. MOORE, *Secretary*