

Protagonist Corner

Disturbing Learnings—from Europe
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We have had the privilege for the past couple of years of living in London, England, serving as “listening ears” for the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our listening has been a part of the Peacemaking Program of our church. In that time we learned some things which disturb us as ministers of the Gospel of God who are called to be about that ministry in the United States. We pray you are disturbed by these learnings also.

I. Europeans in the main believe that the USA is presently the superpower that is the most destabilizing major power in the world.

From our perspective, most Europeans are convinced that our nation is more interested in building up arms, in becoming “superior” rather than just “equal” to the USSR, than it is in arms control. Why do Europeans think this?

They look at Kenneth Adelman who heads our Arms Control Agency and Richard Perle who designs strategy for the State Department and become convinced. For neither man is known for his love of seeking accommodation with the USSR. They see us clinging to SDI as we most recently did at Reykjavik and they know we cannot have SDI and arms control at the same time. They have now watched us exceed the limits of SALT II. They have watched for a year now as our nation has continued nuclear testing in the face of a Soviet unilateral moratorium on testing. They have noticed our government’s unwillingness to negotiate a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Besides concern about the arms race, the Europeans have become alarmed by our recklessness in the world. They have seen that recklessness in our actions of downing an Egyptian domestic airliner with fighter jets over Italian territory, in the bombing of Libya, and in our ignoring of the World Court in the case brought against us there by Nicaragua. Though the scandal over arms sales to Iran with the “profits” going to the “Contras” has broken since our return to this country that operation surely only reinforced our reckless image in European eyes.

II. Nuclear weapons are supported primarily because they are a national status symbol.

In Britain we learned that the Labour Government after World War II secretly moved to develop an independent British nuclear force not just because of the threat of the Soviet Union. Britain developed its nuclear arsenal so that, in the words of its Foreign Minister at the time, it would have a “seat at the top table” of nations. Nuclear weapons are supported today in Britain

not mainly because they “deter the USSR.” They are *still* supported because the British are *proud* to be in the Nuclear Club.”

Is that national pride the agent which fuels support for the making of more and more nuclear weapons in this country as well?

III. *Christians in Europe, especially in the two Germanys, are going to press us on whether in light of the massive presence of weapons of mass destruction our day is now a status confessionis.*

The Reformed Alliance of West Germany in its 1984 Assembly overwhelmingly affirmed a statement that said “In the face of the threat to peace posed by the means of mass destruction (both “conventional” and atomic, biological and chemical weapons), we as the church have mostly kept silence and failed to witness to the will of the Lord with sufficient decision. Now, as the possibility of atomic war is increasingly becoming a probability, we are forced to this recognition: Peace is a confessional issue. For us, the *status confessionis* is given with it because the attitude taken to means of mass destruction has to do with affirmation or denial of the Gospel itself. In obedience to Jesus Christ we declare: Means of mass destruction are not appropriate or necessary instruments with which a state is entitled to frighten off potential military opponents or, in the event of war, to join battle against them. It is certainly the duty of the state to secure law and peace and to protect the lives of its citizens. But weapons of mass destruction destroy what they feign to protect. They deserve on the part of Christians an unconditional ‘No!’ spoken out of confessing commitment to God the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, a ‘No! without any kind of Yes’.”¹

Right now in West Germany a grass roots movement in the churches is underway to press churches to call a “Friedenskonzil,” an ecumenical council inclusive of all churches—Protestant, Roman and Orthodox—to make a statement about peace which “humanity cannot fail to hear.” As wild as this sounds this is a serious movement in the German churches.

When we are asked as Christians in America whether indeed this is the time to say a “No without any Yes” to weapons of mass destruction what will our answer be?

IV. *Europeans are wondering if the Church in the USA has abdicated to right wing nationalism.*

This is mainly a concern of lay people who hear of the church in the USA through the popular press which plays up the Falwells and Robertsons among us. Yet there is a dis-ease in Europe about the Church in the USA. For Europeans do see the tendency of our TV preachers to identify the Gospel with the American way of life and to identify America as God’s instrument of right in the world. They worry about us because they see those churches which proclaim this style gospel growing, and they see our main line churches which do not proclaim this gospel shrinking. They also don’t hear many fervent voices from within our main line churches objecting to this American style

gospel. They worry about us for they have experienced the destructiveness of this identification of the Gospel with a particular culture in the past. We saw on a visit to the German Naval Museum in Bremerhaven German Navy belt buckles from the wars of this century which bore the words "Gott Mit Uns"—"God With Us." Europeans have experienced the danger of nationalism cloaked with the words of the Gospel.

So Europeans are asking us in the Church in the USA "Do we really believe Christ is our peace?" Or deep down in our domesticated "Main Line" congregations do we believe what it appears our right wing sisters and brothers believe instead: that our American way of life, of government, of commerce are the *only* way, the only way for anyone on this globe to live?

Are our European sisters and brothers crazy? Are these disturbing words they share off base? If they are not crazy, if these words speak the truth, what is our present task as ministers of the Gospel of God in this country at this time in this world which belongs to God?

NOTES

¹ A DECLARATION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE REFORMED ALLIANCE IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY: 1982

"The Responsibility of the Church for Peace in the Light of Its Confessing Commitment to Jesus Christ."