

The Non-American Activities of God

One of the profoundest and most disturbing results of my experiences in England and Europe this summer has been the realized necessity of thinking larger thoughts about God. I came back ~~home~~ emphatically aware that God is greater and more wonderful than I had dared to believe before. In England I picked up a little book by the engaging writer, J. B. Phillips, entitled, Your God is Too Small. With brilliant insight the author ^{sketches} a number of the pygmy gods before whose altars so many of us have been worshipping.

Phillips elucidates our addiction to these small gods by naming them for us: the Resident Policeman, the Parental Hangover, the Grand Old Man, the Meek-and-Mild God, the Heavenly Bosom, the God-in-a-box, the Managing Director, the Second-hand God, the Pale Galilean, the Projected Image, and the God for the Elite. Everyone of these gods has a culture which we faithfully supply. But none of them is worthy of the God of great and awful majesty who speaks from the pages of the Bible and who was revealed in the life of Christ.

In America, I believe, we often succumb to the temptation to believe ^{that God} is best represented by the virtues and characteristics of our own national life. Perhaps we too have made God a tribal deity and worshiped Him ~~as an American~~ in the American image. Yet on this World-Wide Communion Sunday we are compelled to know that God is far more than just the God of America. If He has ~~made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth,~~ "made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth," a fact of which we are reminded today, then God is greater and larger than we have thought. I would like, therefore, to suggest to you that because of his infinite greatness and majesty ~~exists~~, God engages in many non-American activities. I would like to have you consider with me the reasons for believing in this fact.

-I-

In the first place we ought to be instructed that nations - which are composed of mere men - are most certainly controlled by self-interest. In making this assertion I am not passing judgment against nations; I am simply stating a political fact of life.

Senator John F. Kennedy, in his remarkable book, Profiles of Courage, has ~~xxx~~ persuasively indicated this fact. In this book Senator Kennedy makes a profound study of the great men of the United States Senate who have distinguished themselves for their courage in exposing themselves, and frequently suffering, ^{to} crushing political defeat ~~because they~~

by standing against their colleagues and constituents as champions of conviction and principle. The great and triumphant moments of American history are recorded in this book through the lives of men who stood up to be counted for conscience's sake though the personal cost was fearful. Such men were John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Sam Houston, Edmund G. Ross, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, and Thomas Hart Benton, and Robert A. Taft, and George Norris. At the end of the book Senator Kennedy attempts to analyze the meaning of courage. There are, of course, mixed reasons for these demonstrations of moral power. Some were frankly based on self-interest. Nonetheless, Kennedy reaches this conclusion:

But in the particular events set forth in the preceding chapters, I am persuaded after long study of the record that the national interest, rather than private or political gain, furnished the basic motivation for the actions of those whose deeds are herein described. (p.238)

Now out of this should come the important insight that every nation has its great patriots whose contributions to the national life have been similarly distinguished for courageous defense of national self-interest. In other words the very highest expression of patriotism in every land is unselfish defense of national self-interest. This is what makes nations nations. Nations are like families; individual families are more interested in and loyal to themselves than they are to other families. Yet over all families and all nations broods the presence of God.

~~Of course~~ One of the characteristics of national self-interest is the tendency to identify national virtue with the favor of God. And of course all nations make this claim for themselves. In a recent article the noted military expert of the New York Times, Hanson Baldwin, pointed out that "War has moved from the days of Napoleon's nation in arms, when God was on the side of the Big Battalions, through the Industrial Revolution, when God was on the side of the Big Factories, to the Technological Revolution, when God might be said to be on the side of the Big Bang." (Mag.Sec.June 3, 1956, p. 67) By the "Big Bang" he was referring, of course, to the atomic arms race and hydrogen explosions. It is generally a device of national self-interest to claim the special favor of God, just as our politicians are going now from one end of the country to the other claiming the support of the American people.

It is, therefore, a plain fact that it is the essential business of nations to be controlled by self-interest.

But in the second place it is hardly a debatable point of Christian theology

that the God of Christ is active in the interests of all nations and all peoples. God acts in many ways which are not strictly American or English or Russian. In fact some of his acts ~~are~~ among and on ~~his~~ behalf of others peoples might strike us Americans, or the English, or the Russians, as being not in accordance with our principles and best interests.

There is a considerable number of Americans who have a distinct distaste for the United Nations. They ~~either~~ fear it and suspect it of subversive activity against America. When its actions seem not to be in the best interest of America there are loud cries for America's withdrawal from its support and counsel. Yet I believe that it is fully within the realm of rational Christian theology to believe that God may be actively working through the United Nations to achieve His purposes.

In the same way God may have been working through the Bandung Conference of two years ago where only the colored nations of the world assembled for consultation and common purpose. God was undoubtedly working through the political and spiritual genius of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian's moral crusade to wrench its freedom away from Great Britain. I personally do not doubt that God may be working in the establishment of Israel as a national home for Jews, despite the ~~resulting~~ resulting hostility and frustrations to other nations. I personally believe that God is actively concerned with the stirrings of ~~the~~ demand for freedom among the black masses of South Africa, and against the self-interests of entrenched white supremacy. And it is quite possible that God is more actively interested in the welfare of the American Negroes and the American Indians than the United States Government. Perhaps beneath the foaming disorder of the Suez Canal there may be the active concern of God which is against our own self-interest

Ancient Israel knew itself to ~~be~~ be the chosen people of God, but in a day of its sinful pride and complacency the great prophet Amos arose to declare to them that God was going to destroy the nation by employing the might of invading Assyria. And he did. That must certainly have appeared to the Israelites as an un-Jewish activity of God against what they considered their best interests. But God is no respecter of nations.

Even within nations God seems to be actively engaged against what is the popular understanding of national self-interest. In 1920 Charles Evans Hughes, a prominent lawyer, Governor of New York, Supreme Court Justice and Secretary of State, and Candidate for the Presidency, personally defended five Socialists who had been elected but denied seats in the New York State Assembly, largely because of the unpopularity of their views. In this

instance the public was outraged against Hughes' action ~~in this case, but largely because of~~ ~~his~~ and against his counsel the Assembly expelled them and outlawed their party. Yet ~~Charles~~ it seems certain that God was actively engaged on behalf of justice through the efforts of Charles Evans Hughes. In a similar manner John Adams of Massachusetts defended the British sentries accused of murder in the famous "Boston Massacre" of 1770. In this instance Adams proceeded against the sense of public outrage, but because he believed in justice, even in the midst of inflamed passion, succeeded in securing acquittal for these hated clients. Before the seething, packed courtroom he declared:

Whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence. The law will not bend to the uncertain wishes, imagination and wanton tempers of men. . . (Both of these above incidents recorded in Kennedy's Profiles of Courage, p. 234-235)

And in such a moment God again seemed to be actively engaged on behalf of justice and truth through one of his servants, yet opposed to the national self-interest. God still speaks to us through the mouth of his ancient prophet, Isaiah:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says, the Lord.
(55:8,9)

Our ways are to work for national and personal self-interest. But God's ways ~~make him~~ cause him to be actively concerned for all nations and all peoples.

-III-

In the third place I would suggest that the purpose of this Holy Sacrament, on World-Wide Communion Sunday, is to bestow upon us the grace whereby we can rise above our tribal and national loyalties, and in commitment in a larger loyalty to Christ, ~~to~~ give ourselves to ~~the service of~~ ^{Service} ~~the service of~~ acting for the welfare of all mankind. And this can happen, not because we are good, but because God's grace can enter our hearts through this sacrament.

Several years ago, E. B. White, of the New Yorker, wrote a book called The Wild Flag. It was an outright appeal for world government. In this book he described an American Firster, not so much as a fascist as "A man who hasn't grown into his pants yet. The persons who have written most persuasively against nationalism are the young soldiers who have got far enough from our shores to see the amazing implications of a planet." (p.16) I should say that the sacred atmosphere of this world communion ought to carry sufficiently far from the limited shores of our own selfish interests to behold the God "who made of one

all of the nations to dwell upon the face of the earth." Because of our narrow loyalties and restricted vision we cannot see this by ourselves. But it can come through the grace of God bestowed by this sacrament.

Some time ago I visited a man in the hospital (Wilbur Davis) with whom I fell into a deep conversation about many real things. He told me that he felt that he should love every child in the world as much as he loved his own sons. He also stated that one of his close friends objected that that would amount to unfaithfulness toward one's own children, a kind of disloyalty. But I think the man ^{was} ~~who~~ profoundly right and full of Christian grace. Indeed on the strength of our own emotions and horizons we cannot do that, it takes the grace of God. And the same is true with our feelings for the other peoples of the world. ~~By ourselves~~ ^{Alone} we simply cannot bring ourselves to be vitally concerned about them. It is the purpose of this sacrament to instill in us the grace of love.

At the moment many of us are fighting against God because His activities of love and righteousness are on behalf of peoples we don't like and with whom we will not associate. There are many otherwise patriotic Americans, for example, who believe in white supremacy and racial segregation. They are actively, sometimes violently engaged in carrying out this conviction. You may be among them. Yet you may be opposed to the activity of God who, accordingly, therefore would have to be considered non-American by you. I don't know how you can change your heart and switch your loyalty to the God of Christ, ~~except~~ through his forgiving love and grace.

I have a friend who has been for nine years a prominent preacher in Alabama. (Dan Whitsett) In an atmosphere of tension and hatred he has dared to hold interracial meetings in his church. He has been visited and threatened by the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Councils. One meeting he announced for a Sunday afternoon, when none of his parishoners would be compelled to attend. It turned out to be a wonderful meeting. That night at midnight a knock came at his door. He was almost afraid to answer. But his wife urged to do so. When he ~~h~~opened the door there stood outside a ~~member~~ of his church. He said he wanted to talk to his pastor. He ~~was~~ invited in. The man pulled out of his pocket a petition for which he had been securing names to bring about the removal of this man from the ministry. That afternoon he had gone to the interracial meeting ^{to} get information and ammunition. But at the meeting he had changed his mind. "Now I am going to tear it up," he said. "I still have a long way to go, but I'll try."

(this story told in Christ. Cent. April 21, 1956,) You see, only by the grace of God can our hearts be transformed. Only by His grace can we see Him as the God of all nations and of all love.

~~XX~~

(Bill Stanton)

The other night a man summoned me to his home because he said he had a problem. When I arrived he came quickly to the point: "I want to talk to you about my race prejudice," he said. And ~~for the next~~ until 11 o'clock we talked. What he wanted to know above everything else was this: what is the mind of Christ. I believe the grace of God was at work in his heart, because all of his life he had been a member of the Christian Church. He had heard the word taught and preached ^{for many} ~~all the~~ years of ~~his~~ life. And on countless occasions he had received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, at which times he had heard the familiar words:

"Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all. . . . If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world . . . God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

That grace is available to you now, and it comes only through your seeking of the God of Christ who is actively concerned for the welfare of all his children.