

Ethics Is Personal

The lack of religious foundation for much of "the social Gospel"

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THERE HAS BEEN a strong trend among some religious groups in the modern age to invoke religious sanctions for advocating secular decisions of policy and theories of social change, usually in the direction of socialism and collectivism. This trend, it may be noted, is in complete disregard of the spirit of all the great religions and ethical teachings. Common ground in the teachings of the Old and New Testament, of the Koran, of the Buddhist sacred writings, of moralists such as Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca, is that the relation of man to God and man's own ethical responsibilities is personal and unconnected with the political, social, and economic institutions of any given time. Ethics is deeply and unconditionally an individual concern.

A striking example of an attempt to give a religious coloration to a secular decision in the

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field of foreign policy was the recent action of the members of a World Order Study Conference, sponsored by the National Council of Churches of Christ, in passing a resolution calling for United States diplomatic recognition of the communist regime in control of mainland China and its admission to the United Nations. This proposal was prefaced by the sentence:

"With reference to China, Christians should urge reconsideration by our Government of its policy in regard to the People's Republic of China."

The clear suggestion here is that there is something un-Christian in the United States policy of refusing to open diplomatic relations with a bloody atheistic despotism which has never submitted its power to the verdict of a free election, which has subjected many Protestant and Catholic missionaries to cruel tortures, which is still technically in a state of war with the United Nations, which is responsible for the death

of many thousands of Americans in Korea and the savage maltreatment of thousands more who were unfortunate enough to be captured.

It is not surprising that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, as good a churchman as any of the signatories of this resolution, was not impressed. What makes this episode still more puzzling is that the vote in favor of this resolution, which also included much more criticism of American than of communist policies, was adopted unanimously. Yet the Congress of the United States, a reasonably representative cross-section of the American people, has twice put itself on record by virtually unanimous votes against the recognition of Red China or its admission to the United Nations.

Great Expectations

The tie-up between purportedly religious agencies and advocates of radical social and economic change is also a familiar spectacle. A man who for many years was the leading spirit in a church "federation for social action" was a vehement, polemical apologist for the political and economic institutions of the Soviet Union.

This and other groups which uphold what they call "the social Gospel" proceed on the assumption that management is always

wrong and trade unions are always right in labor disputes, that there is something inherently wrong and immoral in the capitalist — or individualist — economic system, that the realization of socialist aims is an obligation of the professing Christian.

But it is interesting to note that no great religious or moral teacher has set as his primary aim the changing of economic and social conditions according to a doctrinaire set pattern. The first aim of such teachers has always been the changing of men's hearts, minds, and souls. There can be no good society without good men. The cure for social evils is to train individuals to follow the path of righteousness.

Again and again enthusiastic leaders of revolutions have promised their followers a new heaven and a new earth as a result of substituting new institutions for old. Again and again these great expectations have been disappointed.

Jean Jacques Rousseau and some of the less remembered French intellectuals of the nineteenth century, whose thinking preceded the French Revolution and influenced its course, were convinced that man is nothing but a product of the laws of the State and that there was nothing a government could not accomplish in