

RELIGIOPRAGMATIC ~~PACIFISM~~ QUIETISM

A critical habit of mine is to read me, when in print, as though reading someone else. It's one more level of arguing with myself. I might make the argument that what's distinctive about our species (here with go again!) is our capacity, regrettably under-used, to be self-critical....Well, this Thinksheet bubbled up from my belowbeyond-with-in when I read this is the 22Dec87 CCNews (herewith): "I worried about that peace fever as I worry about today's." I thought: Now, Willis, apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to that memory: is it self-congratulatory? Are you reading your latterday wisdom back into the 1930s & up to "Pearl Harbor"? So didn't I check it out, for also the additional value of thinning my archives. Day by day these past few years I've been reading through my diaries of 1/2c ago; for this occasion I read through my correspondence from the time of Hitler's coming to power right up to Pearl; too, school newspapers of that period & a few other categories. Conclusions: My present memory, before this corrective experience, was (1) somewhat distorted both by self-congratulation & by self-depreciation; (2) accurate as to the proportionality of my awarenesses & interests; (3) unconscious of (a) my heavy production of letters (some days writing as much as seven hours!--before the days of PBS &&&), (b) my heavy, extra-regular-employment traveling to preach & lecture, and (c) my steady, sustained concern for the unity of heart & mind, exactly as unto the present day.

Confession: I was never caught up in any war-fever, was never militaristic; but, more than I remember, I was influenced by pre-WWII American pacifism, though never to the peace-fever extent of joining any public demonstrations. But I was a pro-peace letterwriter. Eg, 27Feb41 (10 mos. before Pearl, 3 mos. before my 2nd seminary degree) I sent the following to (my) NY Senator Robt. F. Wagner (copies to Pres. FDR, my other Sen. Jas. M. Mead, & my Rep. Walter G. Andrews):

Honorable Sir: I write to express my opposition to the LEND-LEASE BILL now being debated in Congress, on the basis that its passage would be tantamount to a declaration of war against every totalitarian political power throughout the world-- a declaration which would ultimately bring America not only to moral and economic ruin because its fulfillment would necessitate a second A.E.F., but which would militate against those very principles of democracy and freedom for which we idealistically would be striving. I am unable to sympathize with the "we-must-fight-sometime,-anyway" view; for I recognize Another Hand in the affairs of men, a Hand which will not allow the cup of iniquity to overflow. I am not an absolute pacifist, for I believe in resisting invasion of these our native shores; but I pray that we Americans may be prevented from committing the moral, political, and economic suicide inevitably attendant upon further involvement in the European struggle. Respectfully yours, In Jesus Christ, Willis E. Elliott, II (* American Expeditionary Force, sent to Europe in 1917.)*

COMMENTARY: (1) To fight Germany's U-boat wolf-packs, FDR had long been giving ("lending," "leasing") U.S. destroyers to Britain, and now was seeking Congressional backing for his fait accompli. I despised his sneakiness, for which I now thank God (not for my despising, but for his necessary sneakiness). "Necessary": The mood of the country was overwhelmingly what my mood was, viz, Geo.-Washington-isolationist. ... (2) Up until this '41 FDR request for Lend-Lease authorization, all the Federal Government's actions vis-a-vis the European war had been isolationist. Eg, in '37, FDR himself signed the U.S. Neutrality Act (& Britain that year signed naval agreements with Hitler & Stalin). We live forward but understand backward; but also we MIS-understand backward. We may still debate whether AEFI was a good idea, but nobody would say that AEFII was a bad idea. Well, almost nobody; some of our current radical pacifists just might.... (3) The 13Mar36 HOUGHTON STAR, my college newspaper, reports extensively--"Present-Day War Thought...", p.1 & contin.--on our mood the year Hitler got 99% of the vote. We were

over

Everyone should be aware of unrealistic idealism

To the editor:

While I applaud the Chatham highschoollers for putting their feet where their Statement of Hope put their mouth, their utopian tone makes me nervous for two reasons:

While realistic idealism is noble and hopeful, utopianism, as unrealistic idealism, is fatuous and dangerous. It is promethean, expecting too much of human nature and respecting too little the history element of the tragic and the character element of humility

in the presence of God.

While everybody knows that war fever can be dangerous, it's less obvious that so can peace fever. Day by day these past some years I've been reading my diary of the Hitler years, comparing those times with ours today. I lived through the American peace fever that seduced Hitler into the illusion that America would stay out of the European conflagration of the European confederation he started even if he were to invade Britain. I worried about that peace fever as I worry about

today's. That peace fever soon flipped over into war fever.

The statement's beautiful phrases, seemingly so pacific, contain the seeds of war. For example:

(1) The USA and the USSR are to fight side by side for human rights for all mankind. That is exactly what each now claims to be doing, but side against side because the two societies have polar definitions of human rights. The Statement means our slant on human rights, which is liber-

tarian rather than (as theirs) economic. To fight for our slant is to fight against theirs.

(2) The USA and the USSR are to fight side by side for true self-determination for all people. Again, both governments claim to be doing exactly that now, though side against side because the phrase, captive as it is to partisan ideology on both sides, is a war banner. To Marxists-Leninists — for example, Gorbachev, Castro, Tambo, Ortega — a people is self-

determined only when the communists take over and set up a one party government. Our slant is that self-determination is impossible without free and multi-party elections. To fight for our slant is to fight against theirs.

And what is a people? The European Africans in South Africa are a people and have self-determination, our style.

Idealism, yes; utopianism, no.
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geographical pacifists, as was Gandhi: fight only if invaded. So the Discipline (quoted in the debate) of the Wesleyan Church, founder of the college: "seek by every legitimate means to avoid armed conflict among the peoples & nations of the world....We, therefore, forbid our people bearing arms, except it be in the case of invasion..., or a voluntary service...." That same year, '36, Germany-Japan-Italy entered into an anticommuist pact, seemingly buffering us against communism: the three had not yet declared war against us, & Stalin's human-rights abuses so horrified us that the the-enemies-of-my-enemy-are-my-friends principle contributed to our anti-war feelings, attitudes, convictions. After much student give-&-take, a beloved prof. said: Before WWI, we felt as you now feel, but we were then caught up in the war-fever (Wilson's press-controls, through the Bureau of Propaganda he created), & "we acted like fools." "The only justification I see to downright hardshell pacifism" is this: "If when the thing is not on I tie myself up into enough knots, when the thing comes I cannot untie the knots." (This mindless pacifism offset, elsewhere in the discussion, the mindless militarism of "the less thoughtful you are, the better soldier.") The aggressive/defensive distinction, said he, is existentially spurious. I find surprising, in this newspaper account, the high degree of nuancing, the mature temper, the absence of religious or any other dogma (though the school was, & is, aggressively evangelical without falling into the aggressive ignorance of fundamentalism)....(4) My letter helps me to more sympathy for Bonhoeffer, who was too slow in concluding for assassinating Hitler. We knew that Stalin's purges began two years previous, ie, 1934; Hitler's Nuremberg Laws against the Jews were promulgated one year previous, but the Holocaust was still years in the future....(5) "I recognize Another Hand...which will not allow the cup of iniquity to overflow." This religious sentiment I've described, in this Thinksheet's title, as "religiopragmatic quietism." The adjective is an oxymoron: "religio-" means what's of incalculable value, while the essence of "pragma" is the calculation of consequences. The letter mixes these two sanctional levels, as does most theology. The noun follows from the internal tension of the adjective: "quietism" is the heart-&-mind condition appropriate when the simple passion for "God's kingdom & righteousness" strikes down into the complexities of the human condition. I am an activist, believing in action--but not as much as in integrity; I am a pacifist, my Lord calling me to be a peacemaker; I am a quietist, suspicious that much action is selfrighteous substitute for critical thinking & prayerful obedience, soul-active "waiting" upon the Lord.