

**John C. Bennett - Introductory Statement on 'Toward a Third Way' -  
June 1949**

Not for publication.

Study 49E/303 A  
June 1949

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Study Department  
17 route de Malagnou, Geneva, Switzerland

Conference on "Christian Action in Secular Society"  
Oxford, June 29th to July 5th, 1949

Introductory Statement on  
TOWARD A THIRD WAY

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I.

1. The report of Section III has on the whole provided a sound platform for the World Council during the months since Amsterdam. It has given a lead to the World Council especially in connection with the so-called East-West conflict. It is clear in rejecting the ideology of Communism, particularly its idolatry and its false promise of redemption, and its ruthless totalitarianism, but it also lays the foundation for a constructive approach to the people who are attracted by Communism. It is clear in rejecting the reactionary type of economic opposition to Communism which is associated in most of the world with Capitalism as a symbol and it marks out an approach which is easily distinguishable from the self-righteous "holy war" against Communism which is being waged by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. It neither fully sanctions nor fully rejects any existing economic system as such but points to a new way, often called "a third way", which is as a matter of fact anticipated in part in the economic institutions of many countries.
2. The report has met with strongest criticism from two sources, from the conservative spokesmen for Capitalism in the United States and Switzerland and from the propaganda authorities on the Communist side of the iron curtain. The Monthly Letter of the National City Bank and the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate criticize the report for opposite reasons.

I shall deal briefly with two kinds of inadequacies which I see in the report as a result of the way in which it has been received.

3. (1) The first is lack of clarity in the way in which the report deals with Capitalism. The barrage of criticism in the United States was greater than it might have been because of this lack of clarity though it is evident from the letter of the National City Bank that any criticism of Capitalism would have been widely resented. The most controversial sentence that came out of Amsterdam was the sentence in which the report says that the Christian Churches "should reject the ideologies

- 2 -

of both communism and laissez-faire capitalism." There are many people in the United States who insist that because Capitalism does not carry with it a total philosophy of life, it has no ideology. But Reinhold Niebuhr is right in saying that the very sensitivity of the American conservatives to any criticism of Capitalism is an indication that the report was correct. As a matter of fact, the report said quite explicitly what the content of the Capitalistic ideology is. It is the false promise that "justice will follow as a by-product of free enterprise." Those who say that the addition of the words "laissez-faire" rendered the report innocuous proved to be mistaken because this seemed to do little to temper the American criticism. Even though laissez-faire Capitalism may be dead as a type of institution it still exists in the minds, and, we may even say, the hearts of American conservatives as an ideology in the precise meaning of the word.

4. My conclusion at this point is that the report was right in what it said but that the criticism of it was more widespread than it needed to be because the report did not make clear enough that in attacking the ideology of laissez-faire Capitalism, it was not suggesting either that the very fluid economic institutions of Capitalism should be fully rejected, or that Capitalism has an ideology which is a total view of life and therefore incompatible with Christianity on as many levels as the ideology of Communism. The American criticisms of the report are in one respect a good sign because they show that the report has an edge and deals rigorously with the temptations of Christians in the West as well as in the East. But I regret that many Americans were misled because of real misunderstanding of the meaning of one paragraph.
5. (2) There were some inadequacies in the report apart from the lack of clarity which I have mentioned. It oversimplified the conflict in the world by seeming to identify one side with Communism and the other side with Capitalism. As a matter of fact the conflict between Communists and Socialists is quite as acute as that between Communists and Capitalists, often more so because they know more about each other from actual experience. They are more bitter rivals because they have solutions for some of the same problems. Also, there is a conflict between the uncritical defenders of free enterprise and the various forms of democratic socialism which have developed in western Europe. Later I shall deal more fully with the different levels of conflict in the contemporary situation.

## II.

6. The World Council today does actually, in the life of its member churches, transcend in some respects the conflict between East and West. This fact calls for careful examination. Churches in several countries in the Communist orbit in eastern Europe, notably in Czecho-Slovakia and Hungary, are active members of the World Council and there is also the church in the part of China controlled by the Communists which is in a similar situation. It is to be expected that within the constituency of the World Council there will be quite different

views concerning the attitude which Christians should take toward Communism.

7. The conviction that is most widely held among the member churches is that Communism as an aggressive movement which has its base in the Soviet Union but which through Communist parties is seeking to extend its power on several continents should be resisted both politically and spiritually, and that the churches in the west should give moral support to their governments in their efforts to check the extension of Communist power. In the United States the churches have continually stressed the importance of constructive resistance by such methods as the European Recovery Programme but have opposed great emphasis on the military factor in resistance. Yet, except for a small minority of pacifists, the American churches have accepted the fact that there is a necessary military factor in this resistance. There is a general recognition among Christians in the United States that a third world war might defeat Russia but could not defeat Communism. People who do not know the American situation are mistaken if they believe that there is in the United States widespread support of the idea of a preventive war or faith in the efficacy of war as a means of defending freedom.
8. There is also in the World Council constituency, especially in countries which are in the Communist orbit, a far more favourable view of Communism. I shall not say anything about those who from expediency become uncritical collaborators with Communist governments. But there is a point of view represented by Professor Hromadka in Czecho-Slovakia and by Dr. T.C. Chao in China which all who live in the west should take seriously. This point of view combines religious and ideological rejection of Communism with qualified approval of Communism as a social and economic movement. It involves also a tendency to share the Communist criticism of the bourgeois West, especially in so far as the West is identified with Capitalism. Feudalism may often be the real enemy rather than Capitalism but it is feudalism seen against the background of what is interpreted as the propping up of feudalism by capitalistic power. Those who hold this general point of view can say with full honesty as Christians that they regard Communism as the best or the least evil possibility which their country faces.
9. I shall not attempt to evaluate this position except to say what attitude Christians who hold the belief that Communism ought to be resisted should, in my judgment, take toward it. I believe that they should admit that this critical support of Communism on the political level may be the best way in which Christians in those countries can deal with communism. Any other position would identify the churches of those countries with reaction and it would cause them to lose contact with the people to whom Communism makes a strong appeal. It should always be distinguished from a policy of uncritical collaboration. It is morally more difficult than either full resistance or full collaboration.
10. But Christians who believe in political resistance to Communism should say these things with two reservations. One is

the recognition that, though this critical support of Communism may be the best available alternative in some countries, it is likely to be mixed with real illusions. It may, for example, be accompanied by the illusion that Communism in a particular country is going to be exceptional in its moderation or by the illusion that there will be no insuperable difficulty in separating the constructive elements in Communism from the religious errors in Communist ideology and from the totalitarian aspect of Communism. I do not know how far these expectations are illusions for there may be some truth in them in some countries but this truth is likely to be emphasised to the point where it becomes the bearer of illusions.

11. The other reservation is more important and not unrelated. It is that any degree of approval that Christians in the West may give to the outlook of Christians in Communist controlled countries who give critical support to Communist regimes should not be allowed to undercut belief in political resistance to Communism wherever there is a truly constructive and indeed progressive alternative. It is not in my province to say whether or not a constructive alternative now exists in China but I do not hesitate to say that it does exist in western Europe and that the World Council should do what can be done to strengthen it.

### III.

12. The Amsterdam report points toward a third way that is not a middle way but a new way that is distinguishable both from consistent Socialism and from consistent Capitalism.
13. The concept of "the third way" is based upon the assumption that no known economic system adequately serves all of the values which an economic system should serve, especially the values of productivity, justice and freedom. Both Socialism, which in its most consistent form is indistinguishable from Communism as an economic system, and Capitalism offer far too simple solutions of the problem of incentive. The former has been based upon too optimistic a view of man as he is expected to be when he is delivered from the evil of private property in the means of production. The latter, with its belief that economic self-interest is made constructive by an ultimate harmony between interests, fails to take account of the anti-social effects of uncontrolled economic self-interest. Every industrial nation has had to act to overcome the anarchy of Capitalism in order to prevent such social catastrophes as mass unemployment and so economic planning has become a function of government even in Capitalistic nations, but consistent Socialism is in danger of overlooking the threat to political and cultural freedom when planning develops toward its own logical limit. The Amsterdam report summarises the dilemmas that every industrial society now faces in the following words: "Coherent and purposeful ordering of society has now become a major necessity. Here governments have responsibilities which they must not shirk. But centres of initiative in economic life must be so encouraged as to avoid placing too great a burden upon centralised judgment and decision."

14. "The third way" calls not only for a new combination of economic procedures, new in contrast to both consistent Capitalism and consistent Socialism, but also for a new spirit, a new sense of the values which are important. A society can be said to be moving along "the third way" if it realises with equal force two things: first, that freedom lacks substance unless it is combined with economic justice and, second, that the quest for economic justice is likely to lead to new forms of oppression unless it is united with an insistent concern for political and spiritual freedom.
15. If we relate these ideas about "the third way" to the situations in various countries today, I think that we can say that there are real approaches to it in both the democratic forms of Socialism in Britain and western Europe and in the economic institutions of the United States since the development of the New Deal. I shall add a few words of explanation about the United States because it is often misunderstood. There is a split in the American consciousness between the individualistic ideals and theories which are widely praised and actual economic practices. Since 1929 there has been a gradual revolution in economic institutions, even in the working assumptions of the people. There is a vast body of social legislation which neither major party would dare repeal. It is now taken for granted that the national government must take responsibility to prevent a recurrence of mass unemployment. Labour now has great economic and political power. America still seems to the outside world to be the citadel of almost unqualified free enterprise. That is because the larger part of the business community hopes to reverse the trend and so the old slogans are still carried by the chief organs of opinion. Gloomy speeches about the drift toward Socialism are a part of the ritual at gatherings of business men. But it is morally and politically impossible to reverse this trend. So, in spite of the strong criticism of the Amsterdam report in the United States we need not assume that the ecumenical community will long be deeply divided along national lines between those who approach "the third way" through a modified Capitalism and those who approach it through a modified Socialism. "The third way" itself is not another system because it contains the kind of inner tensions which will always force a society to seek fresh solutions.
- IV.
16. The paragraphs in the Amsterdam report concerning "The Responsible Society" have been too much neglected at least in the discussion of Amsterdam in the United States. In the preparations for Amsterdam the first designation that was used in this connection was "the free society". This was obviously unsatisfactory because it defined the social goal in terms of one essential value without relating it either to justice or to community. It is probably misleading in an ecumenical discussion to use the word, Democracy, to designate the kind of society which has a claim upon Christians though recently this has been done by both Karl Barth and Pius XII. There is much to be said for the use of a fresh name such as "The Responsible

- 6 -

Society" which does not have an ambiguous heritage. The Responsible Society is described in the report as "one where freedom is the freedom of men who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it." Later it is said that implied in this idea of a responsible society is the freedom of people "to control, to criticise and to change their governments."

17. This is one point where there is no third way. We must choose between a society which is always open to criticism, in which minorities can organise in order to become majorities, in which there is freedom for men to speak the truth without fear of arbitrary punishment on the one hand, and the closed society of a totalitarian dictatorship on the other. It is, of course, possible to take the position that the dictatorship is a temporary expedient as Communist theory assumes, but there is little evidence that Communists today know anything about the conditions on which such an open society must depend. When a society that has in its soil the roots of this kind of freedom or openness is overcome by Communist power, the result is a tragic loss.
18. No one of the democracies which in its constitutional structure has some points of contact with the responsible society as described in the report is in any way perfect. But to say of all such democracies that the freedom that their people has is only "formal" freedom and that their institutions are façades for an oppressive Capitalism is nonsense. It should be called nonsense even in ecumenical circles. There are democratic nations which are to a sufficient extent responsible societies to enable them to be kept under continuous criticism from within. It is always possible to organise to correct any denials of justice in their life. This process is never completed but it is never hopeless.
19. In the struggle in behalf of the essential element of "the responsible society" against any form of totalitarianism the Church must not be neutral. It is not for anyone in New York or Geneva or Oxford to say what Churches should do when their freedom is already drastically curtailed. They will have to draw their own line beyond which they will not go in cooperation with an oppressive regime. The most important thing is that they draw such a line somewhere. They should never accept for themselves a conception of religious freedom which excludes all freedom of public preaching about matters of justice or about the religious and ideological errors of those in political power. If at any given moment they have to remain silent, there should be method in their silence and it should be their way of preparing for a situation in which they can speak.
20. The Churches should never be concerned only with their own freedom though they often win freedom for the community as a whole when they win it for themselves. It should be clear to the Churches that the use of terror to crush the spirits of men for political reasons is an offence against God. Amsterdam was

very clear about this. The report said "it is part of the mission of the Church to raise its voice of protest wherever men are the victims of terror, wherever they are denied such fundamental human rights as the right to be secure against arbitrary arrest, and wherever governments use torture and cruel punishments to intimidate the consciences of men." If the Churches can do nothing to prevent such terror from taking place, they should not disguise from themselves the moral meaning of what is happening and they should not allow themselves to become instruments of propaganda and use words to make things out to be their opposites.

21. I should say in this connection that the establishment, preservation or improvement of a "responsible society" is not chiefly a matter of having the right institutional forms or the right constitution. Nor should defence against Communism as an external threat be our major interest. The whole emphasis in preparation for Amsterdam on the deeper roots of responsible living and upon the threats to those roots in technological society and in the destruction of genuine community life in our great industrial cities is of central importance. The spirit of a responsible society depends upon faith among the people. In the United States many high-minded secularists assume that democracy itself is a sufficient object of faith but to make this type of society its own absolute end is to destroy it. Unless a large part of the citizenry is made up of responsible persons who look to the rule of God above their society we can expect one of two results. Either society will make an idol of itself and that is one road to totalitarianism; or society will disintegrate because of group conflicts within it and that is another road to totalitarianism as a desperate remedy for chaos. So, the fate of any existing, if imperfect, embodiments of the responsible society depends more upon what happens in the souls of citizens than it does on any external threat from Communism.

V.

22. I shall conclude this discussion by gathering together some of the implications of what I have said for the concept of "the third way" which has become important in ecumenical circles.
23. It is clear that in the sphere of economic institutions a third way can be found. There is already a loss of confidence in the whole non-Communist world in doctrinaire forms of both Socialism and Capitalism. An open-minded approach to experiments in both Europe and America which are on the boundary between Capitalism and Socialism is called for in the Churches on both sides of the Atlantic.
24. When we move to the sphere of international relations, we can, perhaps, define the third way in somewhat different terms. Here a third way might be defined in contrast to the outlook and policies of Communists and their fellow travellers and in contrast to the outlook and policies in the West which are controlled by reactionary interests or by preoccupation with military forms of defence against Communism. In the first part of this paper I have tried to give expression to a third way in

this sense. There is a military factor in the resistance to the extension of Communist power and such policies as the holding of Berlin by the western powers through the air-lift and as the Atlantic Pact can be justified, but if the western powers should come to rely chiefly on military force their policy would become sterile and self-defeating. We can know in advance that a third world war, whatever it might do, would not leave much soil anywhere in which we could expect responsible societies to develop. It would be more likely to leave so many despairing people in the world that only totalitarian movements promising short-cuts to order and security would be able to gain power.

25.

It is not possible to define a third way in the sphere of politics where there is a real choice between Communist totalitarianism and political and cultural freedom. If it is true, as I have claimed, that there are regions where the institutions of political and spiritual freedom are no mere façades but real, though imperfect, embodiments of the responsible society, the whole ecumenical community has a stake in the prevention of those regions from coming under Communist rule. Even Churches in Communist controlled countries where many Christians give qualified support to the regime will be able to win freedom for themselves the sooner because such regions as I have described exist. The whole ecumenical community, whatever differences there may be among its members about policies in particular nations, should recognise that it has a responsibility to prevent the world from coming under Communist control.

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