

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

My friend, Christopher Dawson, raises in a letter an issue of fundamental importance in regard to questions recently discussed in the News-Letter, and in particular, in the Supplement on "Planning for Freedom" (C.N.L. No. 104). By what name are we to call, and in what terms are we to describe, the society which we wish to see established as an alternative to totalitarianism? The question has been perplexing some of us as well as Mr. Dawson for a long time, and I am glad that he has raised it so pointedly and called attention to the difficulties. He writes:

WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE TO TOTALITARIANISM?

"I am more and more impressed with the magnitude of the problems which confront us to-day in the conflict between our culture and the totalitarian systems, and with the danger of the disintegration of British society under the pressure of total war and totalitarian propaganda. It is clear that unless we can preserve the distinctive values of our society against these adverse forces, military success against Germany would be of little value; moreover I believe that it will only be possible to achieve military success, if we find a solution of this spiritual or ideological problem, and make our own people and the world clearly conscious of the real nature of our cause."

"The trouble is that, since our cause is not a party one and since it even transcends the national tradition, it has no ready-made label or programme. We are agreed that the spiritual values of Christianity and political, social and personal freedom are at stake. But our society is not Christian in the absolute sense, and much harm can be caused by a false identification of them. The accepted solution is to term our cause that of democracy, and a good case can be made for the use of the word, but it is not wholly satisfactory and is open to several grave objections."

"(a) Historically democracy is not an English tradition. English constitutionalism and parliamentarism were liberal rather than democratic, while English society was aristocratic and individualist. Modern democracy is mainly French and American, and the first modern regime—that of the Jacobins—was definitely totalitarian and suffered from many of the evils which we are opposing in the modern totalitarian states. American democracy has, of course, much more affinity with English ideals, but that is because it has been profoundly influenced by English liberalism and is, in fact, liberal democracy."

"(b) Morally, democracy is weak, just at the points that are most in need of defence at the present time. It involves (or at least permits) the lowering down of standards to a level which is acceptable to everybody, and it is, partly for this reason, very ready to accept a crudely materialist form of secular culture."

"(c) It is exposed to the danger of disintegration, owing to its lack of authority and discipline. Here England has been strong enough to survive the continental democracies and to resist totalitarian aggression, just because it was not purely democratic."

"Hence the danger that, if we accept democracy as our standard and slogan, we shall destroy the sources of our real strength, and lose the values which are an essential part of our national tradition."

✓ Dawson

"On the other hand there are obvious objections to using 'Liberalism' and 'Liberal' as our watch-words. They have acquired a narrow partisan character, and the associations of the words in America and on the continent are different from those which we wish to emphasize and which are in fact the real ones in this country."

"What then is the alternative? I admit that I have found no satisfactory answer to this question, though I feel it is of vital importance that one should be found. It is absolutely necessary to assert and maintain the distinctive values of this Christian-liberal-democratic-western tradition against the totalitarian alternatives of Nazism and Communism, and to create some direct positive form of defence against the psychological offensive of totalitarianism."

"It seems to me that the danger of disintegration has increased very much since the Russian war, since it is no longer possible to make totalitarianism the direct issue of the war, and since we are being faced with the false dilemma—Communism or Nazism—which obscures the distinctive values for which we stand."

"There is, moreover, the danger of yet another alternative—a Christian totalitarianism which is liable to deceive the very elect and to confuse the issue still further. The evil of totalitarianism is not in the least exorcised by transferring totalitarianism to the religious level. On the contrary, the threat to spiritual freedom is even greater, when totalitarianism assumes a religious form or appeals to religious sanctions. I doubt whether Christians are alive to these dangers and this is not surprising since the actual menace of secular totalitarianism is so much greater. But it seems clear that we cannot resist the latter, unless we have a clear understanding of the ultimate positions that have to be defended by Christians and non-Christians alike against all forms of totalitarianism, and what are the essential conditions for the preservation of the integrity and freedom of the personality. This is where I find a difficulty not only with the Fascists and the Communists, but with the scientists on the one hand, and the more intransigent Christians on the other, not to mention the practical men, whether in the political or economical field, who inevitably tend to adopt totalitarian methods, without ideological bias, in a purely utilitarian or technical spirit. Whatever our social doctrine may be and whatever name we may call it by, the preservation of these fundamental conditions of spiritual freedom should be the primary consideration and the determining factor in our thought and action."

THE FOOD SITUATION IN BELGIUM

I have received from the Belgian Red Cross London Committee through its Vice-President, Dr. E. J. Bigwood, particulars about food conditions in Belgium. The information is based on medical reports by members of the Universities in Belgium. The facts reveal an alarming situation.

The average general diet of adults in urban centres contains only about forty per cent. of the constituents necessary to keep the body in health. The deficit is particularly serious in the case of pregnant women and nursing mothers. The small milk supplies are distributed exclusively to children under four years of age, and their case is less serious. But from three years onwards there is a deficit varying from 20 to 50 per cent., while adolescents in the critical years of growth fare no better than the average adult population. The situation is likely to become considerably worse in the coming winter. Belgium was reckoning on an economic arrangement with Russia for the import of grain, but with the entry of Russia into the war this hope has disappeared.

According to one of the reports submitted to the University in Brussels 60 per cent. of the children of school age in towns have to go without breakfast; about one third have an inadequate mid-day meal and more than a half have to be content with an insufficient supper. The results of malnutrition are a definite increase in morbidity and infantile mortality. A survey in one of the clinics showed that among 330 children the last quarterly death rate was 15, whereas the normal figure is from 4 to 5. There are many cases of bronchial pneumonia, scurvy, anaemia and skin disturbances. It was found that of the children in kindergartens, 33 per cent. were in a definitely weak physical condition in May 1940, while the number had risen in January 1941 to 47 per cent.; the figures for primary schools were 48 per cent. in May of last year and 63 per cent. in January of this year. There is abundant reason to fear that the health of several generations may be irretrievably impaired.