

# Correspondence

## Bennett on Realism and Hope

To the Editors: Few men have contributed so much to the social consciousness of American religion as has John C. Bennett. I was therefore delighted that *Worldview* gave so much space to his "Realism and Hope After Niebuhr" (May). Certainly it must be considered one of Bennett's major statements.

It is therefore with great respect that I must take exception to the concluding remarks of Bennett's article. After an admirable survey of Christian social ethics over the past fifty years . . . Bennett seems to have little to say about contemporary reasons for hope. He says that he is grateful for the "Theology of Hope" but is not sure that it provides "a basis for assurance that humanity will be saved from such empirical threats as nuclear annihilation or ecological smothering." While I have no vested interest in the theology of hope or any other particular school of theology, is it really theology's business to provide such assurance? Might not all kinds of perils be part of the unfolding, frequently tragic, human story?

Even more troubling is this: "I see no way in which such a redemptive event as the Resurrection can have an effect that is on the same level with these possibilities of catastrophe, annulling them." If the Resurrection is an event in history in which death was "annulled," does this not say something about the finality of death and historical defeat? The New Testament answer would seem to be clearly positive. . . .

I too am grateful for what Bennett describes as the growing consciousness and articulateness of the victims of injustice, and can even share his gratitude for "judgment" experienced through such things as our disastrous war in Vietnam. But are these the only grounds for hope?

Are none of the great acts of God recorded in the Bible part of the foundation of hope? If Bennett is right, it would seem that traditional Christianity is quite irrelevant to "a reason for the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3:15). The absence of theological substance tends to turn [Bennett's article] into little more than a survey of changing moods among socially concerned spokesmen who happen to think of themselves as Christian, or perhaps just religious. One is comforted by the confidence that this article will not be John Bennett's last word.

E. R. Soderstrom

New York City

John C. Bennett Responds:

I am grateful for Mr. Soderstrom's generous letter and for his raising such an important issue. Those last paragraphs in my article dealt with hope for history. Since Mr. Soderstrom admits that there is no assurance of avoiding nuclear annihilation and ecological smothering, there may be no difference between us, since I think of those as possible threats to the continuation of what he calls the "unfolding, frequently tragic human story." Such assurance is the only lack that I suggest when I say that I do not see how such redemptive events as the Resurrection can annul the possibilities of such catastrophes. I do not understand the statement that "the New Testament answer would seem to be clearly positive." My understanding is that most of the New Testament writers thought of an early end of this historical aeon by a divine redemptive action. This meant that they did not need to think about an indefinite continuation of human history for which they might have hopes or fears. They did not need to think in terms of a long future struggle to overcome slavery or to secure structures more favorable to peace and justice. We cannot avoid thinking about such hopes and fears, and we are responsible to do what we can politically and in other ways to realize our best hopes, knowing that such realizations are precarious.

I take very seriously the conviction

that events that bring judgment may clear the way for positive developments and that the two factors that I mentioned are sources of hope in this regard: that our humanity is not destroyed by our sin (and this includes the humanity of those whom at a particular moment we may see only as a threat), and the direct and indirect effects of the redemptive work of God in our midst, of which the "Resurrection" is the symbol when seen in most general terms. I also think of the Resurrection as that mysterious event or cluster of events that mark the new beginning after the death of Jesus which made his grace available to his followers and in many ways, chartered and uncharted, to all humanity.

How the effect of the distinctively Christian mediation of God's grace is related to the "common grace" experienced outside the Christian circle is an open question to which I cannot try to give an answer here. The global struggles for justice and peace are not even predominately the struggles of those consciously related to Jesus Christ, and while readiness to discern the signs of the grace of God outside the Christian circle is essential, theologians so far have given us very little help on this. I put my emphasis on the interaction between the three sources of hope that I mentioned. The events that shock and bring judgment by themselves might lead only to despair. The redemptive influences by themselves might save only a remnant from the world. The universally human realities may perhaps lack intensive commitment by themselves, but it is a sheer abstraction to think of them as "by themselves," for God has not left them alone.

Hope that transcends history is another theme, and Christian faith implies it. Christians, when they express this faith—and it should be remembered that they often use the language of the Hebrew Bible when they express it—should be able to face the precariousness of history with courage and to discern God's glory and signs of His Kingdom no matter what happens. This may be

(continued on p. 62)