

# Concordia Theological Monthly



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## America, Listen and Live!

### A SPECIAL LUTHERAN HOUR ADDRESS

By Oswald C. J. Hoffmann

It is not my purpose to comment on the political results of Mr. Khrushchev's visit to the United States. I am a firm adherent of the doctrine of two realms, limiting the spheres of church and state. It is a Biblical truth, as well as a fact of human history, that God rules in both realms, although He does so in different ways.

God's rule of the world is governed by the ground rules He Himself has established in His universal and unchanging law. Ultimately all human law derives its validity from the divine Law, by which Almighty God judges the affairs of men everywhere.

God's rule in the church is based on the Gospel—the good news of His grace and good will offering forgiveness of sins and eternal life by virtue of the price paid for the sins of the world by God's own Son, Jesus Christ.

Government by law is God's own device to prevent people from sinning against Him or against each other in such a way as to destroy human society. Because it represents a restraining force against human wickedness and violence, government can be looked upon both as a divine punishment upon human disorder and a divine blessing calculated to bring peace and order wherever just law is respected and obeyed.

Government by the Gospel is God's own winsome creation in the hearts of those who trust in the merits of Christ the Savior for life and salvation. Here God invites, but never imposes—drawing men to obedience by the compulsion of love rather than of law.

In view of these facts, it is not up to the church to tell government how to run its affairs, nor to pass judgment on particular actions of government as long as they are carried out within the moral boundaries set up by God Himself. President Eisenhower and

other leaders of government have a divine responsibility in their conversations with Mr. Khrushchev — a responsibility not given to me or other preachers and theologians who are representatives of the church.

It is certainly within the province of God's spokesmen, however, to remind men everywhere, including leaders of government, that God rules. He is still the Lord of history. Before Him all decisions must be made. If men and nations fail to remember this fact, divine judgment will come.

It is a fact of history that God has used nations which openly defy His will to teach the facts of life to peoples who thought of themselves as righteous — so righteous as to be above God's Law. Martin Luther described God as a sharpshooter drawing a bead on whole nations when their measure of iniquity was filled. "Do you see the guns loaded?" he asked his own nation when it was threatened by the Turks. He went on to say that God "permits cities and rulers to begin to rise a little; but before they are aware of it, He topples them over. . . . God is able to scatter kingdoms as a peasant strews kernels of grain."

Since the dawn of history, "have not" nations have waited to take over civilizations grown soft and luxury-loving. The ancient prophets did not hesitate to proclaim the unpopular message to Israel: Your hearts have grown fat — a day of reckoning is on the way. There are signs in American life that we are becoming "fat-hearted" if not "fat-headed." We may be at the zenith of our power, but the barbarians are at the gate eager to submerge yet another civilization in the onward plunge of history.

I am persuaded that Communism is a judgment of God upon the peoples of the world. This evil force, promising heaven on earth and delivering hell on earth, has engulfed one nation after another, taking root and thriving wherever internal decay has set in. Wherever moral weakness prevails, Communism has found fertile ground for its own kind of rank growth.

Mr. Khrushchev's visit has dramatized this lesson of history for our own people. Communism will not destroy our free institutions. If we go under in the worldwide conflict now being waged, it will be because of our own weakness of spirit and will. The Goths did not defeat Rome. The splendid and wealthy Roman Empire was

overcome by free circuses, the love of luxury, and self-indulgence which had made its people soft — ripe for plucking.

It took Mr. Khrushchhev to point out that what he saw of Hollywood movie production was immoral. That fact should not be lost on us. A few weeks before, a representative of certain Protestant churches had called attention to films now in production which would prove, he predicted, an affront to public morals. He was howled down by the motion picture industry and even by another churchman.

Perhaps the motion picture moguls may be more impressed by Mr. Khrushchhev's comments than by those of a churchman. At any rate, one of the leading actors in the picture seen by Mr. Khrushchhev said later for publication: "I found this performance offensive." He went on to term it "dirty." Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Foy D. Kohler said he was embarrassed by the exhibition. Mr. Khrushchhev remarked: "It was immoral. Only people who are oversatiated like such things and similar pornography." Mr. Khrushchhev should see two or three other films now in production. They would really curl his hair!

Mr. Khrushchhev used this incident to justify his kind of censorship, which he said allows people to eat only his kind of borscht. The American people have their own kind of censorship registered through public disapproval. Unless we have the moral courage to exercise our kind of censorship upon the trash now being circulated and now being prepared for circulation by people whose moral sense apparently has been decapitated through the love of money, we are lost!

If Mr. Khrushchhev's appearance on the American scene is a vivid reminder to the nation of some basic facts in our national life, his coming is an even more dramatic warning to the church which professes Jesus Christ as its Lord.

Communism is a sharp rebuke to the churches of today. The persistence of Communists in advancing their cause puts us Christians to shame. Dr. Billy Graham has said, "Nine million card-carrying Communists are winning the world, while 600,000,000 Christians are losing it." A young Chinese Communist said to a missionary: "In 10 years the Communists did more than the

Christian missionaries did in 100 years." The grandson of Mahatma Ghandi once remarked: "The missionaries taught people to read, and the Communists gave them books to read."

Communists are antichurch, claiming that the Christian Church has been on the side of oppressors in almost every struggle — against feudalism, imperialism, colonialism, and even the attempts of second-class citizens to secure their just rights as first-class citizens within capitalist nations. Communists tell us people are turning to them because the church has failed. Who would turn to the church for aid, they ask, when the church is no longer a vital force in the world?

The early church, we are told in the Scriptures, turned the world upside down with the good news of Christ. Today the world is topsy-turvy, and still many Christians stand on the sidelines as spectators, watching the world go down. The faith and love of early Christians called forth the admiration of their heathen neighbors. Today the unbelieving neighbors of Christian people are impressed by the indifference and apathy of people in the church.

Someone has said that "Communists have a philosophy, a program, and a passion." We have a faith; we are forever planning programs; but where is our passion? Communism has stolen a march on the church. It has borrowed — no, it has stolen away — the zeal Christians taught the world in ages past, when the church did not hesitate to make any sacrifice necessary for the spread of its God-given truth.

In almost every country where they have come to power, Communists have turned large churches into museums and national shrines. Christians all over the world have done the same thing, by making of their churches places to be baptized, married, and buried — just that, and nothing more! If Communists are against Christ, so are Christians who do not practice their faith actively and with conviction. Christ drew the line tautly and with exquisite discrimination between those who help and those who hinder His cause: "He that is not with Me is against Me."

Going to church on a recent Sunday morning in a Midwestern city, I saw one sign after another on the doorknobs of the hotel corridor: "Please do not disturb." People who profess Christ and

lie around on Sunday morning refusing to be disturbed are part of the devil's fifth-column, more dangerous in the long run than all the Communists put together.

If this statement disturbs you, the Holy Spirit of God may be speaking to you. It is God's purpose to disturb the complacent. It could well be one of the ironies of history that Mr. Khrushchhev's visit is God's call to the Christian people of America, arousing them to a new appreciation of their heritage and a new dedication to His cause.

We are on the edge of an abyss. The Russians have power to end everything for us almost overnight. We have similar power to do the same thing for the Russians. Never before in history have so many people been aware — acutely aware — of how quickly history can come to an end.

In spite of all Mr. Khrushchhev's prideful boasting, God still rules. He resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble. This truth still stands. Even in Mr. Khrushchhev's Russia, God's Word has not been annihilated. The divine promise is a constant threat to Mr. Khrushchhev's system: "My Word shall not return to Me void." Christ's banner still flies, inscribed with His declaration: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against My church."

The church of Christ will survive, though the world as we know it should go to pieces. It will survive in the hearts of ordinary people who, because of their faith in Christ, have not given up on God.

The church survives and grows by infiltration, a technique employed long before Marx and Lenin ever appeared on the scene of world history. God's strategy is that Christian people, in Russia or in America, around the clock, seven days a week, bear witness to Christ right where they are — where they live and work. God's strategy works through the Christian teacher doing his or her job to the glory of God, honoring Christ in daily walk and talk; through students witnessing for Christ on the campus, in the fraternity house or dormitory, on the athletic field, in the student lounge; through the Christian labor leader, businessman, military man, policeman, surgeon, dentist, architect, grocery man, contractor, housewife, barber, automobile dealer, mechanic, farmer, lawyer, accountant, Congressman, banker, coal miner, or office secretary.

Multiply each of these by a million, and you begin to get a picture of how God works.

Let's not worry about God and His survival in the face of growing godless power. God does not depend upon us. He can take care of Himself. Indeed, He is working out His purposes, in spite of Mr. Khrushchev and even through Mr. Khrushchev.

One of our pastors has reported to me prayers offered by children in his parish school on the first day of Mr. Khrushchev's visit. One prayed: "Thank you, God, that you did not let Khrushchev get mad." Another prayed: "Dear God, thank you that Khrushchev did not make war when he came over here, but was smiling and laughing on television."

Perhaps we ought to teach our children that God's smile is more important than Mr. Khrushchev's—for when God smiles upon the faith and trust of His loyal sons and daughters, it does not make much difference to them whether Mr. Khrushchev smiles or frowns.

God calls America to accept His offer of grace and favor in Christ and to trust in His watchful care. Listen, America, to God's voice! And live! Amen.

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