

K. L. Billingsley, *From Mainline to Sideline: The Social Witness of the National Council of Churches* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center/Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990). Hardback, ix plus 209 pgs., indexed. Reviewed by E. Calvin Beisner.

K. L. Billingsley is an outspoken critic of the political Left. He is not the sort of author to pull punches, as one of his earlier books, *The Generation that Knew Not Josef*, so clearly shows. A former radical Leftist himself, Billingsley has come to embrace Western democratic and free-market values with exuberance, and he misses few opportunities to tell people why.

Granted these facts, Billingsley's latest book, *From Mainline to Sideline: The Social Witness of the National Council of Churches*, is a monumental exercise in self-restraint. Here is Billingsley the critic and sometime gadfly turned historian and documentarian. But his task in this book is at least as important as his tasks in his other books and many articles, and the results could turn out more influential.

For over a decade suspicions have multiplied that the National Council of Churches had long been tilting farther and farther Left, that it had become an apologist for Marxism and revolutionaries, and that it had lost touch with the members of its constituent denominations, endorsing policies that most of them disapproved of. But with the exception of two investigations by member denominations (one by the United Methodist Church and one by the Presbyterian Church, USA) that expressed serious concerns about the council's lack of internal and external accountability but failed to deal with specifics or with major policy positions, no major study of the NCC had ever been done. Documentation of the Leftward tilt was scarce, and critics had few rejoinders to the NCC's standard response: that the critics were misrepresenting the NCC's positions by presenting evidence selectively.

That retort will no longer work, and informed critics will have a sound rejoinder in Billingsley's book. Except for a few pages at the beginning and the 16-page last chapter in which he assesses the NCC, plus brief isolated comments sparingly sprinkled through the text, the book is simply a summary of the majority of the NCC's policy statements and resolutions throughout its history on issues including foreign relations, domestic policy, education, civil rights, economics and poverty, international human rights concerns, and labor relations. Indeed, Billingsley offers so little analysis that one can almost imagine the book's being published by Friendship Press, the NCC's publishing arm, as an in-house effort to help people know more about the council and its policies.

Except for one thing: the simple recitation of the policy statements through the years makes the Leftward tilt glaringly obvious. It also makes it crystal clear that the NCC has operated with a double standard, criticizing the West, especially the United States, for relatively minor infractions of human rights and other problems, and ignoring or even making excuses for the relatively egregious human rights abuses in Communist countries--sometimes even ingeniously blaming the problems indirectly on the United States, whose policies are said to create defensiveness and concern for self-preservation in the Communist countries and so to breed "excesses," if the NCC will be so audacious as to use so extreme a word about those countries.

Perhaps most galling are the thunderous silences in the NCC's record of policy statements and resolutions: silence in response to the murder of Jerzy Popieluszko, a pro-Solidarity priest, by Polish security police in 1984; silence about the repressive police state of East Germany throughout the council's history; silence about the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968; silence about the repressive government of Hungary ever since 1956, when it did manage to condemn the Soviet invasion crushing the Hungarian uprising against Marxist rule; silence about the persecution of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, and indeed about anything in that magnificently cruel domain; silence about religious persecution and every other form of human rights violation in Romania; and near silence about all human rights violations in the Soviet Union. The silences contrast sharply with a steady stream of official NCC criticism of United States policy, especially the policy of conservative administrations, on everything from foreign relations to unemployment policy.

From Mainline to Sideline is crucial reading for anyone who wishes to understand the National Council of Churches and its policies.

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