

# EXCURSUS I

## Relief vs. Liberation: Another Misplaced Debate

The questions have been with us a long time; perhaps, in one form or another, for two thousand years. In what sense, if any, is the Church above politics? What is the connection, if any, between humanitarian assistance and social restructuring? How does the Church relate the personal virtue of love to the public virtue of justice? Today these questions are frequently posed in connection with the Church's response to the problems of the Third World. Last July they erupted with particular force within the inner circles of Church World Service, the massive Protestant and Orthodox relief agency operated under the umbrella of the National Council of Churches.

Since 1965 James MacCracken, a Presbyterian layman, has been executive director of Church World Service. He announced his "dismissal" by Eugene Stockwell, who last year came into the National Council as secretary for overseas ministries. Stockwell says MacCracken left by "mutual agreement," but, whatever the details, the fracas is perceived as a major policy dispute. The dispute touches on issues confronting not only CWS but also the Catholic Relief Agency, Lutheran World Relief, and, *mutatis mutandis*, secular voluntary agencies such as CARE. The tension between relief and liberation, as it is too simply put, has not been resolved in any of these agencies. Perhaps it cannot be. It can be contained, however, through flexibility and ever shifting accommodations. In CWS the tension was permitted to grow until it snapped, possibly destroying at least a part of CWS's notable effectiveness in alleviating human misery.

MacCracken wanted CWS to keep a low political profile, concentrating on getting food and other supplies to people in need. Stockwell, as the story is reliably reported, wanted a stronger focus on political analysis, inquiring into the injustices that create and perpetuate need, and asking whether feeding the poor might not in some instances also feed the injustices that keep them poor. Stockwell would seem to be closer to the thinking of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical groups that have in the past decade moved into more open alliance with "liberation movements" in Africa and elsewhere. MacCracken's thinking is no doubt closer to that of the church constituency that helps support CWS and in whose name CWS operates.

Relief and revolution are two quite different, although sometimes overlapping, goals. The primary goal of the revolutionary and those who support him never has been and never can be the immediate relief of suffering. It is rather to use suffering, even to create suffering, on the way to bringing about a new order in which, presumably, such suffering would be ameliorated. Nor is the primary goal of the relief agency to change the social structures that may, in part, create the need for relief. The purpose of relief is not to use misery for a supposedly good end but to relieve misery, which is a good end in itself.

Certainly relief agencies should not be politically naive. Astute analysis is in order—also astute analysis of what can and should be done within the limitations inherent in being a relief agency. It has something to do, as someone once said, with being as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. The wisdom comes in knowing when to step out of programs that are clearly fraudulent—as when, for example, regimes sell the relief supplies to the rich and use the money in purchasing arms. The wisdom also comes in not credulously embracing every "liberation movement" that would increase suffering in order to eliminate suffering. It is a painful wisdom that knows that some forms of human misery have neither political source nor political solution.

The innocence comes in favoring the concrete deed of love over the speculative scheme of justice. The political sophisticate may scoff at applying band-aids to cancers, but to the starving child food is no mere band-aid. Some radicals among us rich people are given to quoting the adage, "If I give a man a fish, I feed him for a day. If I teach him to fish, he feeds himself for a lifetime." True, in some circumstances; facile and dangerous in many others. As it is frequently used, the formula assumes that there are fish to be caught, that a new political order is the net in which to catch them, and that we know how that net should be constructed (or at least that we know who knows and therefore whom to support against whom). Such assumptions are always fragile and, more often than not, false. In contrast to the élitism that goes under the name of superior analysis are the thousands of workers in the field who, with the modesty compelled by history's horror, try day by day to reduce in some small, perhaps immeasurable, part the totality of human pain. They need make no apology for what they are doing, nor for what they are unable to do.

In the present American mood of isolationism there is little popular support for Third World concerns. What interest there is is generated

more by compassion than by the rhetoric of liberation. People are understandably suspicious of those who proffer a revolutionary formula for justice in a new world order. Agencies such as Church World Service have a precarious relationship to the millions of church-going Americans whom they presumably represent. That relationship will be broken altogether if the tension between relief and liberation is pressed too hard.

Does this mean the Church should stick to humanitarian relief and neglect the political dimensions entirely? Of course not. As church relief agencies—which are too often mere brokers of governmental monies and supplies—begin more effectively to build a constituency of concern and compassion in the churches, more and more Christians will begin to understand the issues of justice and political change. Until that happens, those who beat the drums of liberation will be viewed as suspect by most American Christians. As that happens, the relief agencies must exercise restraint, sticking to their last and letting others assume direction of the more explicitly political facets of the Church's ministry.

Some commentators on the recent Church World Service controversy have remarked that the Church's ministry encompasses more than the delivery of food, supplies, and services. They are quite right. Their mistake is in confusing Church World Service, or any other such agency, with the Church. Every organization that evokes deep commitment has a tendency to turn itself into a church. Organizations are most effective when they are instrumental; or, as the social theorists say, when they are functionally specific. The Church is a community, necessarily using many organizations for many distinct, although interrelated, tasks. When any one organization forgets its instrumental character and tries to take on tasks for which it has neither ability nor mandate, "more" is almost inevitably less.

The Church has a powerful responsibility to support the victims of political oppression and to witness to the changes justice demands. The exercise of this responsibility is best led by those most directly involved in the injustice protested, by the Church in the place. Today we have exciting examples of such leadership. One thinks of the courageous Christian protest against the racist regime of Ian Smith in Rhodesia, against the unspeakable terrorism of President Park Chung Hee in South Korea, against the brutal torturers who govern Brazil, and, less publicized, against the denial of human freedom in the Soviet satellite countries. To be sure, there are not enough such examples of courage. Equally certain, the American churches are shamefully weak in their support for these Christians who are

literally risking their lives for the sake of the Gospel.

Perhaps we are lacking the agencies needed to exercise the Church's concern for political justice. More likely we are lacking the concern. In any case, the political dimension will not be enhanced by depreciating the humanitarian. We may move through compassion to justice, through relief to liberation, but we dare not move away from compassion or away from relief. The Church protests injustice, the sorrow of which is all too evident; the Church invokes justice, the shape of which remains ever elusive; but the Church lives by love, the deeds of which are ever waiting to be done.

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#### **Wars That Are Not Wars**

Used to be we were inundated with news from Indochina. Now many Americans find their memory of continuing wars jolted only when they run across a small item squeezed onto page 36 of the daily newspaper. For those who want to know more, we warmly recommend *Indochina Today*, issued monthly by the Indochina Resource Center. It is a fair and thorough compilation of news items, articles, and documents keeping the reader abreast of changes that have enormous impact upon millions whom we once again find too easy to forget. For information: Indochina Resource Center, 1322 18th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

## **EXCURSUS II**

### **Leaders of the Western World**

The hunger for leadership in the world at large is an expectable response to the flabbergasting complexity of contemporary life, national and international. Ever responsive in mood, *Time* magazine has set out on a search for chieftains, preferably under forty. It is noteworthy from their selection that they seem more interested in brains than charisma, in the omniscient person who may have some plausible ideas about getting through the maze rather than sure cures. Ideologues are out, having lost their credibility to a more skeptical audience.

For the present we have older men in power, and for some time they have been disparaged as pale creatures in the shadow of the heroic