

# RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

## In World Affairs, as Elsewhere, Realism is a Virtue

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It is of the essence of Biblical religion that no aspect of life, including the areas of national and international affairs, is isolated from the governance of God or exempt from the judgment of moral conscience. To relate international responsibilities to religious concerns means, therefore, to walk in the authentic Biblical tradition, and what is at least equally important, to utilize its insights for meeting the crisis of our times: such an approach would prove more successful than the immoral or amoral procedures which govern international affairs today.

Historical analogies are notoriously misleading, but the Biblical experience affords a striking instance of the relevance of ethical standards for a practical national policy. The Hebrew prophets, who were uncompromising in demanding adherence to the ethical principle everywhere in human life, were far more realistic in their understanding of the international scene in their day than all the practical leaders of their time, the kings, the nobility, the military leaders, the international merchants and the statesmen, let alone the common people. From the days of Amos and Hosea through Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah, the Prophets, and they alone, espoused the doctrine of neutrality for their country, pleading, "In peace and in quiet shall ye be saved, in rest and in confidence shall be your might." From the vantage point of history, it is clear that the military alliances and diplomatic entanglements favored by the practical men of the age were far more unrealistic than the "perfectionist" standpoint of the Prophets. Had their counsel prevailed, the destruction of the Temple and the state might well have been avoided and the people spared the agony of homelessness and exile.

The relevance of the Judeo-Christian tradition for the political problems of our time is rooted in various aspects of the Biblical worldview: (1) The world is the handiwork of God and by that token His inalienable possession; (2) As the children of God, all

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men have an inherent right to the enjoyment of the blessings of the world He has created; (3) The law of consequence operates in human affairs, because history is a process governed by God, who may use evil to destroy evil and usher in the good; (4) The lives and destinies of all men are interdependent; (5) The ethical conscience, vis-à-vis the authority of the rulers and the will of the majority, is autonomous; (6) In tension with the autonomy of the ethical conscience stands another principle, the right of the majority to prevail.

Because of the tension between these two principles, the recognition gradually emerged in our tradition, not that there was some inherent and mystical virtue in the majority, but that its decision should not be set aside lightly. In his recent *Ethics and United States Foreign Policy*, Ernest W. Lefever has clearly set forth both the principle of majority-right and its inherent limitations: "Since all men are fallible, self-interested, and morally ambiguous, their decisions, whether in the minority or the majority, reflect their rational and moral frailties. Nevertheless, since one man's interest may cancel out another man's interest, one man's wisdom offset another man's stupidity, and one man's knowledge make up for another man's ignorance, a majority decision based upon adequate debate may often be wiser than and morally superior to a minority decision." Hence, both principles, the power of the majority to execute its will and the right of the minority to express its dissent and to seek to propagate it, constitute the obverse and reverse of the democratic way of life.

Here an important point must be made. We often overlook the fact that the scope of Biblical ethics, largely derived from the Prophets, is not exhausted by them. Within the Biblical canon, Wisdom literature occupies an important place. And the unique contribution of Wisdom literature to Biblical ethics lies in its emphasis upon realism as a virtue and upon intelligence as constituting obedience to the will of God.

For the authors of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*, the fool is a sinner and the violation of the moral law is folly as well as transgression. The basic approach to life in Wisdom literature was that morality is the

best policy. From this identification two corollaries follow—a course of action, however practical it may seem to be, if it violates the canons of morality, is to be rejected, and conversely, a course of action, however high-minded its aims, if it be impractical, is likewise unacceptable, because neither can advance human well-being.

When we include intelligence within the scope of the ethical virtues, as envisaged by Biblical thought, we understand the fatal flaw within the school of pre-war liberal idealism. Legalism in foreign affairs, which Lefever defines as “an approach to politics which invests in legal symbols, documents and structures a power and authority which they do not in fact possess,” does not fail because of an excess of ethics, but because of a deficiency of ethics, the lack of intelligence. Closely related to the quality of intelligence is the virtue of honesty—both with ourselves and with others. What is taken for granted is often overlooked altogether.

We should recall Samuel Johnson’s demand, “Clear your mind of cant,” echoed in Carlyle’s warning, “Until cant cease, nothing else can begin.” Our lack of success in meeting our international responsibilities and in winning the “Cold War” is often charged to our “moralism” and our high-minded effort to follow ethical doctrine in an area where it is irrelevant. “Moralizing,” however, is not an excess of morality, but a deficiency of morality, the lack either of intelligence or honesty.

Thus intelligence teaches what experience exemplifies—the human situation will often pose a plurality of opposing goals and ends which need to be adjusted to one another. But the contradiction between two ideals is not a denial of their inherent validity. Nor is it an inherent “evil” in the world or in human nature, when men seek to establish a hierarchy of values among them, to retain as much as possible of each good. When Lincoln declared, “If I can save the Union by preserving slavery, I shall preserve slavery; if I can save the Union by abolishing slavery, I shall abolish slavery, but I shall save the Union,” there was no ethical flaw in his position, merely because he did not seek to achieve all ideal ends simultaneously. The destruction of the Union, already in existence, would have been an ethical retreat; on the other hand, the retention of slavery, which was likewise in existence, marked simply the failure or the postponement of an ethical advance. Lincoln’s scale of priorities demonstrated the virtue of intelligence.

The same quality of intelligence offers the clue to a distinction highly important in our day. Expedi-

ency means the temporary suspension of a moral principle because of the demands of necessity. Prudence is the reconciliation of two valid moral principles which under given circumstances stand in conflict with each other. Both expediency and prudence are called for even in an ethically motivated foreign policy. It is, however, the duty of intelligence to recognize the difference. Military aid to Franco, economic assistance to Tito, or cooperation with King Saud may perhaps be necessary. But to confuse expediency with prudence and to speak of dictators and autocrats as defenders of the free way of life is either an affront to intelligence or a lack of honesty.

A great deal of our idealistic slogans and protestations are forms of self-deception, if not worse. One can think of numerous examples in our recent history, but the American position with regard to the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 is frequently cited as a classic case of the inherent conflict of morality and foreign policy. Here, it is maintained, America’s moral idealism impelled it to condemn France and Britain, its two oldest allies, and to demand the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from the Sinai Peninsula.

That the practical consequences of the American policy offer little grounds for jubilation is by now tragically clear to nearly all observers—except possibly to some members in the highest echelons of our government. As a result of our demarches, Nasser was encouraged to embark upon a policy of expansionism, so that today he represents the most dynamic threat to Western interests in the Middle East. Today Syria and Yemen are officially linked to the United Arab Republic, a revolution has occurred in Lebanon, pro-Western Jordan is wracked by inner weakness, and Saudi Arabia gives evidence of substantial capitulation to Nasser. And even before all these developments, Russia entered the power vacuum created by the elimination of France and Britain and converted Syria into an outpost of pro-Communist influence. The nationalization of Western property in Indonesia was explicitly modelled upon Nasser’s successful expropriation of the Suez Canal. It would be fatuous to believe that the threat to the Western world is spent. On the contrary, the danger of a Third World War being ignited in the Middle East is less remote than ever before.

Such are the practical results of United States policy in the Suez Canal crisis. Was this policy, however, justified on the grounds of morality? Was our position a sacrifice of material interests on morality’s high altar? This is questionable. Egypt had always recognized that she was bound by the Convention of 1888 for the international operation of the Suez Canal.

Nasser's unilateral abrogation of the Treaty which had nearly a decade to run and his forcible seizure of the Canal was therefore a clear violation of an international understanding, aside from the injury done to the Canal shareholders. Had Britain and France invaded Egypt in total strength, quickly taken control of the Canal and proceeded to operate it, and then turned the dispute over to the Court of International Justice in the Hague or to a similar tribunal for adjudication, it is arguable that the succession of defeats sustained by the West in the area would have been avoided.

My purpose here is not to assess the blame or to urge any specific new approach to the problem. The damage may well be irremediable. But I am concerned to indicate that not even the Suez crisis can fairly be adduced as an example of the inherent conflict between ethics and foreign policy. My thesis is that if the qualities of intelligence and honesty are included, as they properly should be, within the constellation of moral virtues, the implications of the religious and ethical heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition are both practical and relevant to our international responsibilities. We are not compelled to construct our foreign policy simply in terms of power, pressure, and propaganda.

The Hebrew Prophets, as we have seen, found not a contradiction, but a confluence between their idealistic aspirations and their realistic understanding, in their doctrine of neutrality for a small, weak state, at best a pawn in the battle of empires for world mastery. I believe that the sternly practical goals of America as a world power can similarly be buttressed by the imperatives derived from the full ethical tradition of Judaism and Christianity. A few illustrations can be briefly mentioned.

*Foreign aid.* The recognition of the interdependence of mankind as a reality will necessarily destroy the illusion, sedulously fostered in many quarters, that foreign aid is a "hand-out" by over-generous, stupid America to the backward and undeserving peoples in far-off regions of the world. Such undertakings as the Marshall Plan and the Point Four program are therefore not only logical consequences of an ethical outlook but basic to a practical policy for the United States. Isolationism is neither ethical nor realistic.

*International negotiation.* The practice of negotiation with one's enemies is to be recognized, not merely as a practical necessity in a divided world, but as resting upon a profound moral basis. In the first instance, it is the expression of a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind," for obviously

there are men and nations who differ vigorously with us in their outlook. Secondly, negotiation between opponents rests upon the truth that there is a common destiny and therefore a common interest binding all men, even enemies, together. We may and should deny the moral right upon which the Soviet system rests as vigorously as they do ours. Yet in negotiating with Russia, maintaining relations with her and extending cultural and economic contacts, we are not merely yielding to expediency. For the Soviet bloc shares one overriding common interest with the free world, if no other—the desire to survive and be spared the perils of atomic destruction.

To keep the avenues of communication and negotiation open among governments is therefore a moral good of the highest order and the most significant function of the United Nations. Conversely, the refusal to negotiate is the ultimate sin in group relations, not only because it makes impossible the peaceful adjudication of differences, and thus increases the incidence of violence and destruction, but because it denies the right of others besides ourselves to live.

In the festering and explosive conflict between Israel and the Arab States, for example, there are tragic issues at stake and the Arab case certainly possesses substantial elements of justice. It is true that the hundreds of thousands of pitiable Arab refugees who live on the borders of Israel left their homes because of the promise made by the five attacking Arab armies that the new State would quickly be liquidated and they would gain rich spoils as the Israelis would be driven into the sea. They were therefore in overwhelming measure the architects of their own tragic fate.

Yet their sorry lot in the present and the hopelessness of their future is a crying evil which requires a solution, in which the participation of the Israeli government is indispensable. So too, many of the spokesmen of the Arab states in the United Nations and elsewhere are undoubtedly sincere in voicing their fears that Israel may seek to expand its borders again in the future. In the present atmosphere Israel's repeated denials have not persuaded the Arabs. Israel, on its part, has its own very real grievances against its Arab neighbors. Aside from the fact that only negotiation offers any hope of solving the issues and of dissipating mutual suspicions and fears, these bitter foes do share a substantial common interest. The future of all depends upon the establishment of peace, the reduction of military expenditures, which are draining all these countries, and the economic and cultural development of the entire area.

The perilous status quo in the Middle East is a

practical threat to the free world and a moral calamity as well. On both grounds, it should have been one of the objectives of Western policy all along to use all possible means not to compel a settlement of the issues, desirable as that might be, but at least, to persuade the recalcitrant parties to sit down together and discuss their differences. Instead we permitted the situation to deteriorate steadily. Though it would have been easier to achieve the goal of peace in the Middle East before Russian penetration into the area, it remains indispensable even now.

*Civil liberties and integration.* These domestic issues offer another illustration of the confluence of ethical principles and practical policies. During the hey-day of McCarthyism, too many Americans made peace with the indiscriminate hounding of defenseless men and women, though they recognized it as basically immoral. All too often we acquiesced, by observing that one must break eggs to make omelettes and that national security, which was our paramount aim, might require occasional injustice to individuals.

One would be hard put to it to find a better vindication of the truth of the "unrealistic" prophetic faith in the operation of the law of consequence in history. The suppression of scientists and the spirit of free inquiry, the wholesale elimination or resignation of many workers from government services and classified research projects played no little part in the defeats we have sustained in the scientific aspects of the Cold War.

When Soviet achievements in the field of atomic energy first became known, Americans were assured that our atomic secrets had been transmitted by spies to the Russians, and undoubtedly espionage did operate in America. But no such comforting alibi is available with regard to the launching of satellites, where our achievement continues to limp badly behind that of the Russians. Thus our failure to preserve civil liberties at home led to a tragic debacle in American prestige abroad.

Similarly, our hesitations and evasions with regard to the integration of Negro citizens into American life, by giving a hollow ring to our idealistic claims to love, justice and liberty for all, is grievously jeopardizing our opportunities for winning the uncommitted world to our cause. For Americans at home the sun of freedom shines brightly, in spite of a few dark spots here and there. For the millions of darker-skinned people, yellow, brown and black, the sun itself has been blotted out by the spots.

*The United Nations.* If we apply the full range of our ethical insights to the United Nations, it is clear

that it is neither a mere debating society on the one hand nor an international parliament on the other. The United Nations is an instrument for expressing the opinions and interests of the various governments of the world. When these are democratic in character, they reflect in greater or lesser degree the opinions of the masses of the people. When they are totalitarian or autocratic, they are reflections of the constellations of power of the local ruling groups. The United Nations is a voluntary association of sovereign nations who seek to defend their interests without having recourse to the use of force.

The decisions of the United Nations, arrived at by the majority, are therefore of great importance. As we have noted, unless other factors enter into the picture, the opinion of the majority is likely to be more balanced than that of a minority. A numerical majority, however, is not *ipso facto* universally sacrosanct, as we are discovering to our cost. Soviet Russia and its satellites and the Afro-Asian bloc command many individual votes, but reflect very few individual positions.

It therefore follows that while the views of the United Nations should not be lightly set aside, a government striving for an ethical foreign policy will not abdicate the exercise of its own conscience in dealing with the problems before it. It is not high-minded morality but an evasion of responsibility to refuse to take a position on controversial issues on the grounds that the United Nations will deal with it. On the contrary, it is the moral right and duty of each member to think through the problem at hand and seek to utilize its influence to have its position prevail.

There is obviously room for wide difference of opinion with regard to the judgments I have expressed, or implied, on various aspects of our international responsibility as a world power. The burden of my thesis has been not to defend these positions, but to emphasize that as heirs of the Judeo-Christian tradition, whether in religious or in secularized form, we have no need to compartmentalize our minds and insulate the ethical ideals we espouse from the foreign policy we practice. If we keep before us the full dimensions of Biblical thought and recognize that a vital ethics includes intelligence as well as justice, truth as well as righteousness, we can find in our religious heritage a vital and relevant instrument for grappling with our international responsibilities. Nor need we have any cause to fear the ultimate outcome. We can share Milton's unshakable faith in the victory of truth over falsehood, because we continue to believe in a universe rooted in justice.