

RELIGION AND THE BOMB

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In his article "Morality and Modern War," published last December, John Courtney Murray anatomized several of the central elements of the problem—and he did it in his characteristically clear and cool-headed way. Beyond this, he argued that there is a sane middle ground between the extremes of pacifism and bellicism, and that the health of the nations demand that they occupy this middle ground.

I have no inclination to part company with Father Murray's judiciousness and perceptiveness, in order to traffic either with sentimentalists or with cynics, with those who piously believe that love can dispense with force or with those who scornfully believe that love, and even justice, merely complicate the efficient and decisive use of force in pursuit of national self-interest. Accordingly the questions which I raise here reflect, I hope, great sympathy for the stabilizing and moderating claims of reason, whose voice is too seldom and too impatiently heard in the land in our troubled times.

Where is the salvatory and salubrious middle ground, and what is the access to it? Abstractly, it is plotted between pacifism and bellicism; between life-at-any-price and let's-get-it-over-with; between total war and no war; between unlimited nuclear weaponry development and abolition of all such weaponry. The name for this position is "limited war"; and it is understood that the limits placed upon warfare are imposed by conscience and are enforced by some adequately powerful organization.

So far so good. The problem is how to take and to hold the middle ground for the purposes of policy-formation and policy-enactment. What is forthcoming to instruct the consciences of those who must make policy and those for whom it is made and enacted and who must endure its hazards and its hardships?

Father Murray is wholly right in warning us that conscience is not properly instructed by fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety are very potent forces, and they vehemently assail the contemporary mind when it is engaged with the harrowing problems of war and survival. They must therefore be rigorously disciplined so that the mind can be adequately empowered and directed by the apprehension of the real good, True. But the truth tempts us to sell short a fact or two, such as the very deep fear that the

family of nations is a wolf-pack rather than a human community; and the fear of having lost sight, and every other sense, of the real good.

Such facts forcibly remind us that efficacious instruction of conscience presupposes a stable community with unquestioned adherence to ultimate ethical principles. In the absence of this community the making and the executing of policy effecting the public welfare is bound to be arbitrary, if not capricious; and is therefore bound to use sub-rational appeals and warrants for its approval.

Then does this community longer exist, this socio-ethical presupposition of policy? Does it survive as a treasured myth and as a moral relic of its once unquestioned principles left in vastly attenuated force as merely expediential counsel?

I do not propose these questions as (merely) rhetorical. Father Murray has not, I believe, clearly enough come to terms with the question behind every serious consideration of limited war as a moral option, i.e., where are the ethical principles to fix the appropriate limits? *Where*, not *what*: can we make out the lineaments of the community which is the living repository (as it were) of the ethical principles relevant and efficacious to the moral determination of the limits of warfare?

There are two answers to such a question. One is to identify that society we call America as that community. Another is to elevate a religious community to the position of ethical monitor and tutor to the commonwealth as a whole. Let us briefly consider these as alternatives.

"America" is certainly a name for a generalized moral attitude, a fact which some home-grown prophets are frequently disposed to under-estimate. It is not, however, an attitude which is capable of illuminating and directing conscience on the formidable question here under discussion. It requires for itself just such treatment in our time. And what is often proposed as that physician and mentor to the American ideal is the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The proposal is barely plausible. "America" is a variant of a cultural synthesis; and Judaism and classical Christianity are components in that synthesis; and the mother which "birthed" America has no great power now to rebuke, chasten, and amend her child. The Judeo-Christian tradition is a memory, not a presently-efficacious conscience. As such it can occasion a residual guilt but hardly the shuddering awe which only the living God can strike into our hearts.

So we consider the living religious communities honored in America as having every right to exist so far as none is pledged to the destruction of the state. Each of these has accommodated itself to the requirements of law and massive sentiment; but each has also persisted in standing out against the cultural synthesis, in a rich variety of ways, running from mild non-concurrence to militant dissidence upon grave

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occasion. And here is the rub: policy in behalf of the public welfare can be qualified only marginally by any community in the state unless that community, in this case a "Church," can convince the massive sentiment that the best interests of all will thus and not otherwise be served. Really to establish such a claim the spokesmen for the Church must presuppose an intuition of the good at the heart of the massive sentiment, and proceed upon the assumption of the coincidence of that intuition and the ethical traditions of the Church.

Here let us consider what Father Murray calls the traditional teaching of the Christian Church in the morality of war. Unquestionably the tradition makes a solid junction at certain points with the massive sentiment of modern culture in the West, and for the very good reason that both have a common ancestor in classical civilization. But there is also the Gospel. As a Christian I should find it quite literally incredible that the Gospel had not taught Western man something about justice which he could not conceivably have learned from Aristotle; but at the same time I should have to profess that the Higher Righteousness in which Jesus Christ alone can instruct us is open and meaningful only to faith in Him. Jesus Christ comes not with a code of precept and counsel but with the power of God unto forgiveness and absolute transformation. Thus in the "world" of His creation justice itself takes on a meaning impossible to it otherwise.

If this is so, what kind of criticism can the man of Christian faith make of the policies of the man of the world? The question is objectionable if it assumes ideal types, objectionable because highly, if not hopelessly, abstract. But the question need not be so taken. (Indeed, nothing is to be gained save the poison-ivy wreath of self-righteousness by denying the confused mode in which even the most sublimely pious Christian appropriates the Gospel.) We can in good faith make it the question whether the holy weight of the Gospel does not come down on the objectives of policy more clearly and decisively than upon a presumptive identity of ethical presupposition uniting the statesman speaking and working for the massive sentiment and the Christian churchman.

The Gospel has a kind of life in the massive sentiment but it is the life of cultural appropriation. This cultural appropriation has drained off the religious uniqueness of the Gospel in order to make the realization of the Gospel imperatives a purely human possibility. And now the immense power over nature and over man bestowed on human hands creates and richly nourishes the profound illusion of modernity, viz., that we have to render an account only to ourselves. For the time being, vestigial guilt survives for having killed "God," but tomorrow will be a brighter, freer day: no God, no guilt.

Father Murray has rightly called attention to the profound and pervasive moral disorder which em-

braces Western society. I find it necessary to relate this spiritual sickness somewhat more directly to war than he has done in "Morality and Modern War."

War is yet what it has been for a very long time in Western society, an integral aspect of this culture. However horrible its devastations, no one in a position of considerable power seriously proposes to eliminate it—and for a very compelling reason: elimination of war would strictly entail elimination of certain attitudes and values without which our life would assume an alien cast. It is a "right of nature" to aggrandize oneself at the cost of others, though convention dictates a certain softening, a certain glossing over of this "right" with the pale cast of sentimentality.

Historically this "right" has been more unequivocally imputed to nations than to persons, but not more passionately. But on the other hand, and with equal passion, Western culture in its modern mood has professed that against deliberate imposition of injustice by one State upon another, war is the finally authoritative recourse and redress.

But an important qualification obtrudes on the contemporary mind: unless the resort to force should be self-defeating. This reservation is a focus for great ambiguities and anxieties. Grant that the proximate objective in fighting a war is to win. Now suppose either stalemate or annihilation is the only possible result, given present weapons (to say nothing of weapons yet to come). Can a war on these terms then be justified by appeal to remoter objectives, i.e., justice and national honor? Better to have fought and lost than to have endured supinely the aggrandizement of injustice: as fine a slogan as one could hope to hear, but what does it mean to people who do not believe that they live and must live in a moral community transcending all national boundaries? What does it mean to people who believe that the values and comforts of the democratic West are the only God there is? Nothing is easier, in this state of mind, than to confuse justice with self-interest, and honor with prestige, so thoroughly that their critical distinction becomes impossible.

A significant part of the moral disorder of the West is the fear of destruction visited upon our way of life by "nuclear war." This fear has a religious quality so far as this way of Life is the only imperious God universally acknowledged. A very precarious and creaturely God it is, but it is therefore one whose survival and welfare generate immense and morbid anxiety. And this state of mind seduces honest men into believing that their State ought not to fight unless it is directly attacked, and that when they fight they are under no moral obligation to an actually existing community embracing all nations and all peoples. There is very little use in holding over their heads traditional moral values and obligations, so long as they are unable or unwilling to acknowledge the metaphysical realities undergirding them.