

# RELIGION AND RESPONSIBILITY

## We Must Learn to Bear the Uncertainties of International Life

*William Lee Miller*

We Americans, collectively, have suddenly been burdened with a world responsibility for which neither our past experience nor our present values equip us very well. Less than two centuries after our country was but a collection of remote colonies it has become a superpower upon whom all the old colonial powers depend. Less than twenty years after perhaps a majority of Americans supported the isolationist position against involvement in World War II, the United States is the center of history's most far-reaching peacetime alliance.

This alliance which America leads includes both colonial powers and recently-freed colonies, bitter enemies and close allies from the last war, dictatorships and democracies. It comprises nations upon whose loyalty we know we can depend and others about whose intentions we feel nervous. And since the alliance itself is both complex and ambiguous, America's role in it must be complex and ambiguous too.

This nation seldom is in a position where it can please all of its allies. At the same time America cannot pretend that the conflicts among her allies—between, say, the colonial and the anti-colonial states—are no concern of hers. In most situations, she must act not on a single principle but rather toward some viable compromise that will not be very satisfactory to anyone. She cannot avoid action and she cannot avoid blame if she acts.

The situation in which the United States now finds itself is further complicated by the terrible phenomenon of nuclear weapons. These weapons have obviously raised the stakes for which we are playing to unprecedented heights. It is not melodramatic to say that the fate of civilization is involved. But the very magnitude of these weapons produces a new worry among our allies. On the one hand they feel secure in our strength, but on the other they wonder whether we would ever really act. Would the United States be willing to sacrifice its own cities to save Berlin or Paris or

London from Soviet occupation? And our allies have another worry too. Will America, in some crisis, act precipitously and thus involve the whole world in nuclear holocaust?

In this complex of new responsibilities, the United States faces special temptations toward irresponsibility and these temptations, it seems to me, have a single underlying element—the impulse to resolve prematurely the unresolved historical situation. To put it another way, this is an impulse to escape from complexity or, in a broad sense of the word, from politics. The flight may go in different directions, but in each direction one finds a protest against something human beings don't like—which is to live under the knife, to live responsibly, making decisions that affect the future of the race itself. Men want situations to be one way or another, to be clear. But the international situation today defies clarity.

Americans in particular find their present condition difficult, and this because of special circumstances in their own history. The United States had a long period of relative isolation from world politics; and it never experienced the deepest kind of national tragedy: defeat in war or a successful overturning of its constitutional traditions. An economy of abundance has enabled Americans to solve many problems by a sheer increase in productivity, while other nations have had to deal with them politically, and sometimes violently. And the intellectual heritage that has shaped the American mind is the classical liberal tradition. It has assured us that we can deal with the world in terms of fact. Our Puritan tradition has emphasized clear moral principles and an individual change of heart. All these things have tended to create in us an optimistic, voluntaristic spirit and an intense moralism. Historically, the "American character" is a stranger to the tragic sense of life.

Americans are at their best in those areas which demand the rousing of energy to solve a clearly defined problem—particularly a practical problem

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such as the mastery of nature. They are not as adept at dealing with the more subtle problems which involve questions of value and of incompleteness and of risk—the very kinds of problems that face them today.

Given their historical, psychological history, it is almost inevitable that Americans should feel temptations toward irresponsibility in the present era. They are eager to make clear the present cloudiness of international life. When, for example, this country entered World War II many Americans felt a positive sense of relief: now the situation was clear; lines of action were plainly drawn. This very human, very American desire for simplicity is the symbol of our impulse toward irresponsibility. We want either a crusade or complete non-involvement. Give us one or the other. But the in-between business—don't give us that.

But either a crusade or complete non-involvement is exactly what Americans can no longer have. If nuclear weapons mean nothing else, they mean this—that we must adjust ourselves to limited objectives in particular situations, that we must calculate risks carefully, because they always involve multiple considerations—never simple ones.

In their book, *The Reporter's Trade*, the Alsop brothers tell of a lunch with Sir Winston Churchill, who observed that America is like some colorful horse pulling the rest of the world behind it out of the slough of despond toward peace and prosperity. Then suddenly Churchill fixed the reporters with his amazingly penetrating eyes: "But will America stay the course?" he asked. Many of our friends put the question that way. Will America stay the course? Will this young hopeful nation have the stuff to stick it out in *this* kind of a situation? Can the United States survive over a long haul, without the satisfactions of any clear accomplishment; can it maintain a coalition that is never a perfect coalition?

The impulse to irresponsibility is the impulse not to stay the course. Some Americans, of course, might define "staying the course" in terms of the firm carrying out of lines of policy already laid down by dedicated statesmen. But staying the course should also involve a continuing ability to meet new situations in new ways. Responsibility demands that our past policies be continually criticized in relation to a changing history. It demands wisdom and courage and patience in dealing with contemporary events.

What does religion say about such responsibility? Does it have a word to say to our present situation? One answer to these questions is to say that

religion does not deal with the problems we have described: they are political; religion transcends politics; religion deals with individuals who compose the nation, not with the nation. Religion has to do with the spiritual dimensions of life. It speaks a word to the individual soul which transcends anything that can be heard in the travail of nations, but it does not speak to the travail itself.

What of this view? It is partly right and partly wrong. It is true that religion addresses a dimension of life that is larger than politics. It is true that religion does not speak a definite word on the relative and shifting problems of political power. But this answer is false when it implies that religion is a separate realm, apart from the tangled responsibilities of history. One must agree that religion addresses itself to the individual soul—to the person in depth. But one must add that part of the person in depth is his relation to the nation and to history. And for the very reason that God cares for the person, God is concerned about what happens to the nations of this world. Because the nations affect persons.

This first answer can thus become a source of irresponsibility if it is left incomplete. A second answer is that religion supplies a moral law, a set of principles sanctioned by Divine Power, by which history—this world and its politics—can be interpreted and judged. Thus, having clear moral laws, unambiguous principles, we can issue calls to crusading ethical action in their behalf. In this view, religion particularly speaks a clear word about non-aggression and peace and justice, against the narrow self-interest of man and the power-seeking of nations.

What of this interpretation? It, too, has a partial truth, but it, too, is inadequate. Of course, religion speaks against the narrow self-interest in which nations and individuals tend to live; it demands a love of neighbor, and should bring us to contrition for our sins. And it should add a dimension to our values which places the fate of civilization itself in a place lower than our ultimate concern. But none of these things translate immediately into concrete situations—especially political situations. And the attempt to foreshorten the distance between the claims of faith in God and the problems of national policy has a tangled history. The attempt can be another source of irresponsibility.

If we interpret religion in this way, we may deceive ourselves. We may too easily see "our" nation as the "righteous" nation. This is a special danger

for Americans, and our tendency, as Americans, so to confuse religion and politics is one of the things that rightly offends much of the rest of the world.

But if these two answers are inadequate, what word can religion speak to politics? The word it can speak, I believe, is the word of responsibility, of patient, alert, steadfast, discriminating responsibility. Where in our Jewish and Christian faiths can we find this word?

I would suggest that we find it in three major elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the first place we find it in this tradition's insistence on human solidarity. Man cannot go it alone, because he does not live alone, and neither—by extension—do nations. Individualism is a source of irresponsibility. Religion insists on our interconnection with persons everywhere; it preaches a universalism that discovers our interconnection in our common source and destiny as children of a universal God. We are, in Biblical terms, born together, created together in one man. This is a word against our finally shrugging our shoulders about the fate of others. We have a universal responsibility.

In our religious heritage one discovers, along with an awareness of universal human solidarity, an awareness of our own limitations. We are limited in what we can know and what we can do. And we are sinners: we have lost our innocence. We usually cannot accomplish what we will. In our national life as in our personal life we cannot pretend to omnipotence—nor to innocence. Our aspirations toward universalism are thwarted by our human condition. We must plan and work in the area of our finitude. Our religious tradition therefore does not say to us: act now, simply, according to the universal law and principles for all na-

tions. Rather it says: you have responsibility in *this* situation. Do what you can within the limits of its peculiar complexities.

The Judeo-Christian tradition thus teaches us a responsibility for action within particular historic conditions. Our religion distinguishes itself from the nature religions by worshipping a historical God, by knowing a God who acts in time. The worship of this God—the God who acts in history—illuminates our lives as historical beings who, from moment to moment, must take into account the particularities of each moment. And the choice we make is always conditioned by the responsibilities of the moment. In the light of Biblical religion we do not see men or nations as simply determined; we see them also as morally responsible.

This is a condition which men understandably want to flee, or else to straighten out somehow, so that it is clearer and neater. Biblical faith here has its most important words to say, both to our individual and to our collective lives. Here we may speak of the dimension of depth beyond history. In such a dimension one speaks of such things as providence, transcendence, forgiveness and grace. What do they mean?

They mean that this history of contending nations is set on the larger stage of Divine purpose. Believing in that purpose, we can combine our efforts to meet our international responsibilities with an awareness that no efforts are final efforts. With an absence of panic or frenzy or despair (in the dimension of faith we know that the outcome does not finally rest with us) we can learn to bear the uncertainties of history. If it is not properly understood, religion can be another way in which we become politically irresponsible—but in its deepest truth religion can be the basis for seeing our deepest responsibility.

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