

ASPECTS OF DEFENSE

The British Christian quarterly Frontier published in its summer issue the substance of a lecture delivered by The Reverend Alan Booth, London Secretary of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, to the Imperial Defense College. Although Mr. Booth's remarks are directed at the defense establishment of his own country, much of what he says has implications for American policy as well.

When the Englishman is lured by one means or another into the area of discussion which includes religion, he tends to shrink back into his shell. And here I think the English share a characteristic with the Chinese: the bait to which both these nations will rise, after they have taken cover from religious argument, is a discussion of "morals." I have therefore chosen "the moral aspects of defense" as my title. If I were more candid in advertising my own occupation in this field, I would prefer a title like "religion and the problems of defense." But one must, as an Irishman, accept other people's prejudices, at least to start with, and go on from the familiar to the risky.

Whatever code of morals we accept, the whole idea is bound up with a notion of unqualified obligation—of "ought" and "ought not." How this sense of obligation comes about, what the authority is to which we owe this obligation—these are questions we set aside for now. But we must ask whether this whole way of thinking, this way of experiencing life, is at all relevant to defense. We might easily think that once it comes to warfare or its preparation, all obligations to one's opponents and the outside world are suspended, and we can only do our duty to our nation or civilization.

But such a view is neurotic and extravagant. We may recall that the all-or-nothing unconditional surrender atmosphere of the two Great Wars is already seen as an unnecessary savagery which distorted policy rather than advanced it. The recent sparring of the Great Powers—in Korea, the Congo, Cuba—reveals a more modern and controlled reaction. Perhaps the two Great Wars, in historical perspective, will appear as aberrations into uncontrolled and nihilistic violence, due in part to the fact that they fell upon civilizations where humanism and defense had forgotten each other.

If, then, moral considerations are not, *prima facie*, excluded, what sort of moral considerations are relevant? Some people think of morals as a sort of fence within which everything is in order, but which you must not attempt to break through. For instance, for such people what goes on between husband and wife inside a legal marriage is relatively unquestionable, but any sexual relation outside marriage is condemned. Such a view conceives morals to be not so much a way of life as a set of "no road" signs, and so, when applied to defense questions, concentrates on "setting limits," establishing thresholds of violence, defining legitimate and illegitimate targets.

I would prefer to use a broader concept of morals altogether, and say that the main moral preoccupation is that men should not destroy their own and other people's humanity in the pursuit of short-term advantage. In this sense, morals were made for men, not men for morals.

Applied to defense, such a moral attitude would be bound to affirm the following:

1. Defense is not an end in itself. It is only one of the activities of human societies (thank God!). It must therefore be controlled in such a way that it always serves human purposes and does not demand that all else be subordinated to it. This is the reason why we insist on civilian and political control of military questions, *pace* Mr. Goldwater. For there is an inbuilt tendency, once military activities begin, for them to pursue an insane logic of their own. Some of us may have reflected on this after seeing on television the recent capitulations of the Great War of 1914–18.

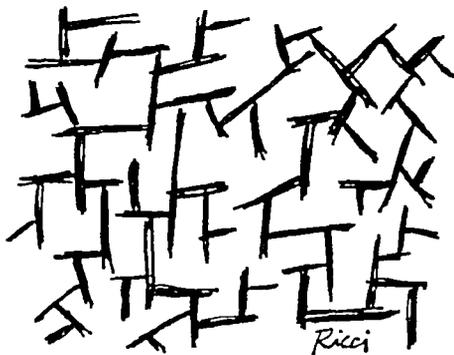
2. Defense is a means of preserving what men value by being prepared to destroy what an opponent values. Since destruction is the easier option, special care has to be taken that means of defense do not of themselves destroy the very things that justify military action in the first place.

3. The ultimate objective of defense is a new relation with one's opponent, not his liquidation. I say this without supplying justifying arguments because I think it now represents so widespread a judgment that we don't need to argue about it.

You will have perceived by now that I have assumed in us all a positive attitude to the human race as such. I suppose this is generally fair. There are relatively few people who look at the rest of us with

unqualified distaste. But many of us limit our positive attitude to certain categories of people—to British people; to “upper class” or “lower class” people; to “our kith and kin”; to people of our own skin coloring (and it is not only the white race who do this); to people who share our culture or way of life or religion; and so on.

But it is just here that we come to the religious aspect of defense problems. For true religion is not in the first place preoccupied with standards of behavior—this is derived and a consequential business. It is concerned rather with an attitude to reality and an assertion about the nature of reality. The Christian faith, which I believe, and believe to be of universal validity, asserts that the universe we are aware of is not, as it often appears, mindless and impersonal, a sea in which we desperately swim to keep alive for a while the illusion that human relations matter, only to be drowned in the end with our dreams. Rather, it is a disguise for a reality of which the best available name is “Father.”



Now the duty of those of us who are prepared to make the bold commitment of our lives to the belief that this is true, is to try to reflect that truth, in spite of all the destructive forces we meet, in the daily business of living. Defense there has to be, because men (and that means all of us) are not yet trustworthy. But the shape and style of defense arrangements should be such as to reflect, as closely as our wretched situation allows, a desire to preserve and nourish human society, and to accept the unpalatable work of destruction only within the limits necessary to achieve ultimate preservation. We are not required to believe that humanity is universally nice or worthy—indeed the truly religious man begins by waking up to the un-niceness of himself.

Morality in isolation is perhaps more of a menace than a help in international affairs. It is only on the basis of an intense moral conviction that men will face the suffering of war today. The great rivalries of the nations are always presented to us in highly

moral terms—“oppressive totalitarian dictatorships,” “capitalist warmongers,” “arrogant white races,” “savage black races,” and so on. These overtones of moral judgment have a certain validity, of course. But at the same time they are always an attempt on our part to hide our own shabbiness by pointing to the other man’s rags. This is the trick known in the New Testament as Pharisaism and it is the occupational disease of the do-gooders.

One of the major services of true religion is to deflate self-righteousness, penetrate holy humbugs and open our eyes to the harsh reality of our situation. I doubt if we can bear to face that self-revelation except in the assurance of the trustworthiness of ultimate reality defined in this context as the forgiveness of the Father. In this sense religion may be regarded as a proper corrective of moralizing. In particular, the religious man will call in question the moral justifications we so readily develop to underpin our case in conflict with other human societies, and will ask whether the moral issues involved are really so grave as to justify the destructiveness we contemplate in their defense. You may well find in such circumstances that secular humanists in our society attack the churches for lacking moral seriousness.

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I must now seek to draw some practical consequences for defense policy. It is not, of course, my object to tell defense experts how they should go about their own business; but it is irresponsible to make large assertions as I have done, and then evade the real problem of translating them into practical courses of action.

1. If defense policies are considered as a service to mankind, and not simply as a function of national self-interest, they must be designed to bring about the maximum stability with the minimum of danger to men. By “men” in this context I don’t mean “our own people” only, but also neutral, uninvolved nations and even the population of an opponent state.

A posture that threatens massive retaliation is, at best, a very temporary expedient. So long as it lasts, no new relation with one’s opponent is possible. Moreover, our human affairs are too unpredictable to allow us the assurance that such a posture will in fact deter a foolish government, with all the disastrous consequences which would then follow. The case I have made earlier in this paper suggests that morality and true religion will find more congenial company among those who pursue a controlled response than among those who threaten an apocalyptic spasm.

2. The concentration of resources of research and development to make a counter-force strategy possible is a high priority. It is not the object of defense to destroy the enemy, but, rather, to inhibit certain courses of action. We aim to live with him in the future rather than to die with him now.

3. The long-term aim is to work ourselves out of the moat-and-castle age of international affairs into an age where a central government administers a rule of law. This is not simply a matter of idealism—the fate of mankind may depend on the speed with which the Western Alliance develops the maturity to work out a system for the inter-allied control of nuclear weapons. The tendency to value the independence of one's deterrent is a reversion to tribalism and must be denounced. Someone somewhere must make a start in devising the means of international control of ultimate weapons, or we are lost—and I have sufficient respect for the basic worth

of our Western traditions to believe that only within these traditions are the resources to be found to achieve success.

4. It has been the classical tradition that defense policy was a matter for experts and that it was better kept that way. If my general thesis is right, one of our major tasks is to consider defense policy not in isolation but in relation to foreign policy, to international institutions and to the convictions and interests of the civilian population. This means that we must develop organs of discussion for the purpose. I freely acknowledge that this presents at least as great a challenge to civilian groups as it does to defense specialists and one of my preoccupations has been to help produce on the civilian side a contribution to the debate worthy of the importance of the subject. But it will mean also a readiness on the part of Ministries of Defense to have their pet subjects scrambled over by vulgar outsiders.

Correspondence

"AN OPEN LETTER TO THE AMERICAN HIERARCHY"

New York, N.Y.

Dear Sir: In his open letter to the American hierarchy (*worldview*, September), Mr. Thomas Merton apparently intended to speak for "the common man, the poor man, the man who has no hope but in God." Yet, it seems to me, he grievously usurps the representative's role. He celebrates and condemns things when in the subjects touched upon much prudence would be in order, and does so in a tone of shrill triumphalism (is this the fashionable term?) normal for an impatient ideologue, unbecoming a monk.

Mr. Merton belongs to the so-called progressive wing of the Church intelligentsia. It is clear from his letter that he condemns what his fellow-progressives call the "Constantinian" stance, and what I would describe as the acceptance of the fact of power as an ineluctable reality of this world. He then goes on to warn the American hierarchy to make honorable amends at the Council for the fact that they belong to "a nation which is waging an undeclared war." I take this warning to mean: "You, members of the American hierarchy, should use your votes in favor of progressive decisions. You, more than the clergy of other nations, should attempt to outlaw wars and aggressions, so that in the eyes of

the world you might to some extent redeem your nation's guilt." Then, with hardly veiled threat, Merton points out that in recent history Catholics collaborated with another ugly regime, Nazi Germany; if the American hierarchy does not wish to be identified with another "monstrously criminal and unjust aggression," it must seize this unique opportunity, etc.

Grave and unjust as this quasi-blackmail based on an absurd comparison, appears to me, I do not wish to take up quarrel with Mr. Merton on this point; were I to do so, I would be sidetracked into a controversy over the war in Vietnam. The controversy would remain unresolved: I would insist that it is a war to contain a most horrendous enemy, thus a just war, while Mr. Merton would exalt Communists as freedom fighters.

What troubles me much more is that Merton claims to disengage the Church from the Constantinian embrace, that is from political preoccupations, whereas in reality he compels the Church to associate herself even more intimately with the political principle. All that Merton's effort would achieve is changing the identity of the source of political influence on the Church. Instead of linking (if this is the case) the Church to the nation-state and its