

# RELIGION, MORAL AUTHORITY, AND INTERVENTION

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If one believes in the universal brotherhood of man, the idea of a world polity—long available in history—is becoming today more desirable, more feasible and more urgent. But the question then arises: how can I help achieve justice with and among my international brothers, realizing that the nation-state presently and necessarily is the primary vehicle for international actions? How can religion and moral authority contribute to this objective?

However one chooses to examine ethics and politics, it seems to me he is driven to conclude that today they are and should be inextricably interwoven. By ethics I mean a structure of values prescribing conduct, a vision of the human good, a basis for judging and distinguishing between good and bad human acts. On empirical grounds, I am driven to conclude that ethics in this broad sense is a universal or near-universal in human experience. Still on ethical grounds, I conclude that in terms of the specific content of ethics—what the precise good is—there is no general agreement, but rather there are many ethical systems; and that ethical systems may in fact *be* without being well articulated or systematized, e.g., they may be “givens,” the premises of which are rarely explored in a thorough manner.

Finally, and more directly pertinent, I observe what I take to be a further fact: the substance of ethical commitment, if it is to be achieved at all, is today increasingly achieved in the social-political arena rather than in the narrowly inter-personal sphere. The many and various revolutions of our time have indeed served to shrink the world; but simultaneously they have expanded the area of human responsibility. Urbanization, for example, brings social problems demanding social-political responses; politicization relieves the individual of some responsibilities, but *he* helps decide how the body politic will meet those responsibilities on a social basis. Internationalization means, among other things, that the brother whose keeper I am may just as actually live in Nepal as Nebraska.

Thus, from an ethical starting-point, I see that ethical commitment is what specifies and gives meaning to the individual life, and that today that com-

mitment must, in significant part, bear fruit in social act and political decision. And thus the question: how does one relate ethical commitment to social act?

The result is much the same if one begins with an examination of politics. It seems clear, to me at least, that the central act of politics—judging *what to do*—is always and inescapably an ethical doing, whether articulated or implicit. In this sense, politics is only a species of ethics. Make no mistake: there is *no* neutral political decision. They all have ethical dimensions and the only question is whether the ethic will be good or bad, enlightened or unenlightened. If the problem is civil rights legislation, and within it the open occupancy question, it is clear that we are talking about different human goods, and different views of the human good. Rights associated with property are in conflict with other rights or goods, and they will be evaluated and finally what one accepts as the higher good will be identified. Even if a Senator votes on this provision not because of his reflection on the alternative goods, but because of constituency concerns, he is making a value-judgment: for that Senator, his own re-election represents *the* good.

If we are attempting to decide how much foreign aid should be provided next year, it is clear that the question is not simply technical or even economic. Rather, it is partially ethical—to whom do the world's goods belong, to what extent is wealth-sharing a moral imperative—though the limits of aid will be determined also by technical and economic factors. And if the question is what to do in Vietnam, it is clear that this, too, necessitates an ethical choosing from among alternative human goods. We hope, as always, that such a choosing is informed by the very best data available, but the data do not provide the judgment.

Thus, ethical commitment today seems to lead to politics, because it requires political expression. And politics, by the very thing that it is, involves ethical distinctions, evaluation, and judging. For our purposes, the result is much the same: the responsibility of the person with an ethical commitment, whether religiously derived or not, is to see that commitment related to the political order. But this is fairly apparent. The problem really comes when we

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ask: *how* is this commitment most *properly* related to politics?

Whatever the precise answer given to this question, it will have to reflect and be conditioned by three fundamental facts: (1) politics is today done for us through representative forms; (2) these representative systems preside over societies which are ethically pluralist, and in which this pluralism is taken to be a good to be preserved; (3) these political societies, such as our own, operate within a world order of many states, an order which is quite atomistic and unstable. In my judgment, these are the most important political realities confronting the ethically inspired person, and he is obliged to recognize them if he wants to be germane. They are, in a sense, the context within which his ethic must be "worked out," must be applied and made meaningful.

I emphasize this because there are many religious voices in this country which seem unreconciled to the fact of democracy and pluralism. They talk in terms of commands and absolutes which might be politically pertinent in a non-responsive political system—if, for example, such a voice got the Prince's ear—but which have little meaning in a democracy, where the collective princes are and should be highly sensitive to many voices, and dare not respond to any *one*. When you buy democracy, you buy the way it works, and there is no "guarantee of satisfaction or your allegiance back."

What are the implications of this context for the ethically inspired person? I will offer two propositions, the first negative, the second positive. Negatively, I believe an institutionalized church has no authority on political matters, and cannot be the prime connecting link between religious ethics and politics. Such a church body may, of course, speak to political issues. But when it does, it must recognize that its commentary is politically no different from mine, yours, Walter Lippmann's, or Al Capp's. That is, its force will lie in its argument, not its authority. The Catholic Bishops, or the National Council of Churches cannot sensibly tell the President to get in or out of Vietnam. They certain may, however, tell him *why* he should get in or out of Vietnam.

Fundamentally, this limitation on the Churches is not a limitation which I or anyone else imposes. Rather, it is a limitation placed upon it by the realities of political decision. Such decisions are not made in an *a priori* manner, or by simply reflecting on normative principles. Political decision typically

involves many goods in conflict and necessitates judging among them. And this judging is not done in the abstract but in the very concrete order, in the context of circumstances. There is a certain uniqueness in every such act, which precludes its being decided by some outside authority not actually mired in the situation.

Thus, fundamentally, the Church cannot connect religious ethics and politics because it is not authorized to make political decisions. But we should note two other factors also. Whenever institutionalized Churches have become too intimately related to the political order, two dangers have been presented: the Church may become a pawn of the political order, too dependent on it, unable to transcend and criticize it; and if the state's actions become specified by a Church, the state is in a sense succumbing to an alien agent and thereby wronging its secular society. The modern secular state *properly* has no preconceived picture of the political good.

But, as we saw earlier, the modern secular state is inescapably involved in deciding questions of the good, on the basis of political dynamics within it. And here arises my positive proposition: the religiously-informed person, acting in his role as *citizen*, is in fact the proper connecting link between religious ethics and politics. Let me outline the considerations which generate this proposition.

The substance of political action in the modern democratic state is, correctly, I think, unspecified in any *a priori* sense. To the question "What should we do on *this* problem?" we do not have a fixed answer, a doctrine, inflexible answer. Classically, for example, we subscribe not to a substantive, answer-filled theory such as Marxism, but rather to a common good or general welfare theory, which is really concerned with procedure, not substance.

This substance of state action is taken on, or specified, in the situation, as the political institutions draw their broad directions, guides, and limits from the needs and desires of the citizens. Politically, this citizen-person is directly relevant in a representative system. It is to him and all his counterparts that the political system is actually responsible. It is he and his fellows who, through their representatives, specify the substance of political activity. It is he and others like him who rightly seek their ends through political decision, who enter and influence political parties, who seek office, who lobby, who counsel and recommend.

And it is he who represents the ideal reconciliation between religion and politics: they are joined,

but neither is threatened, by the political involvement of the religiously oriented person acting as citizen. In so acting, this person's religious dynamic is filtered through the political process, and the action he takes is not religious any longer, but rather a political act by a religiously inspired person. Thus I am suggesting that religion is properly operative in the political order as an agent for enlightening the ethical consciousness of its communicants. In a representative society, these communicants are political actors, and the ethical dimensions of politics will be specified in part by them.

To summarize: religious ethics and politics necessarily interact, but the Churches as Churches are not competent to serve as the medium of interaction. Rather, the Churches become politically effective through persons who have been instructed by the Church. The Church instructs on the content of religious truth. It instructs further on the human responsibility to *live* those truths. Which is to say it instructs on the person's responsibility to elaborate the ethical-political implications of his religious convictions. And this elaboration by the person as citizen is immediately germane to the political order.

At this juncture, I want to put some flesh on this analytic skeleton by portraying myself as the religiously inspired person suggested above, who attempts to apply the implications of his convictions. For purposes of argument, let me say that my basic conviction is that all men are indeed my brothers, and that I feel obliged to seek their good as much as my own, that I seek, for them and me, justice. Let me further say that the immediate political problem I confront is the question of the legitimacy of U.S. intervention in the affairs of other countries, the most pressing instance of which is presently Vietnam. How do I act in a brotherly fashion on this question? In what direction will justice be found?

Perhaps we should begin by recognizing that the question of intervention's legitimacy is a second-level query which presupposes an answer to previous questions: Is the nation-state a legitimate actor in the international order? And, if it is, is war one of the legitimate possible acts of this legitimate actor? Only if these questions are answered is it possible to judge on intervention generally and Vietnam specifically. There is a sense in which the arguments over Vietnam have been escalated further than is deserved. Vietnam is a second-level decision—admittedly an excruciating one—which in fact has grown out of other decisions made explicitly or implicitly.

Turning to the first question, my answer was tel-

egraphed by my previous identification of the three dominant political facts for us. The world is a collection of nation-states. While I think we should not defy this fact, it is a fact nonetheless, and a not altogether unhappy one. Historically, it was an advance over prior conditions; although occasionally disastrous, the nation-state has been humanly fruitful.

Furthermore, until and unless the nations of the world agree to transcend themselves and forge a world polity, the nation-state will remain the primary agency for the achievement of international order and justice—if those values are to be achieved at all. Until such time, the nation-state system is the human condition, and we will be judged by what we *do* with it, not how much we mourn the fact of nations.

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What all of this means to us simply is this: national power must be utilized in the world, and this is far more a responsibility than an opportunity. It is the awareness of this which so characterized the Truman Administration's response to prevailing international conditions in 1947 and thereafter. But what are the acceptable forms of state action in the international order? And do these include war? I have tried to answer these questions by examining the Christian pacifist position. That position seems to draw direct political commands from religious commands: thou shalt not kill, love thy brother as thyself. These commands proscribe certain possible political acts, and especially war. It seems to me that a Christian needs to examine this position and the judgments within it.

If it is examined and rejected, it will likely be rejected on grounds somewhat like these: the potential of international injustice deriving from unchecked aggression in the world is a greater wrong than is the potential of war. If this reasoning is followed, as I, for example, follow it, it does not lead to a blanket endorsement of war as a means. In the specific situation, it could be justified only by a judgment that war's non-use *here* would be worse than its use. And even if the judgment to war *now* is made, it does not carry with it a justification of any technique or level of war in the concrete situation. This war once chosen must remain human in the sense of being controlled by reason, and specifically by the principles of discrimination and proportion.

Against this background, it is possible to talk about intervention. The "intervention" of which I speak is the extreme case of military intervention,

as in Vietnam or the Dominican Republic. The first point that seems clear is that there is definite danger involved in the intervention of a state or states into the affairs of another. Such intervention represents an unbalancing of the *system* of nation-states, a system based on nation-state integrity. An intervention in Santo Domingo may be a precedent for other interventions by other countries, and may thus contribute to an ascending spiral of tumult and international disorder.

But even if this very real danger is recognized, is it so great as to preclude in an *a priori* sense intervention as a possible legitimate national policy? The answer, in my judgment, is clearly no. The intervention of the United States into Vietnam, for example, seems to me much more a *symptom* of international unbalance than a *cause* of it. What if, for instance, alleged "nation-state integrity" is used as a shield for indirect aggression? Should such aggression be left unhindered? Is there some law of nature which says aggression is *only* direct—i.e., one nation's armies crossing another nation's borders—and anything else is not aggression? Again, I must say no. Forms of aggression will vary, as do all things, with prevailing circumstances. This aggression may very well take the form of insurgency warfare, aided and perhaps directed from outside. From the standpoint of the potential aggressor, this may be the most appropriate method. This will be especially true if two conditions obtain: (a) there is a countervailing force in the world which is too strong to confront directly; (b) there are potential target countries which are sufficiently weak internally to offer a good chance of insurgency success. If the United States, after careful examination, concludes that in country X this kind of aggression, new and indirect, is truly happening, I think we may legitimately *consider* intervention as a possible policy. The specific decision—whether to intervene *here* and *now*—depends on the complex of circumstances, e.g., does the target country want help, can we provide it, what will be the cost of action or inaction, how feasible is success, and so forth.

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Of intervention, therefore, I am saying that as an ethical-political problem it is not a separate genus of problem, but simply a species of the traditional problem of the legitimate use of national power. It is only a case, though admittedly it is an important one.

And Vietnam is a case of a case. I have postponed discussion of Vietnam up to now for the reason suggested above: rational discussion of it presupposes

many other things, and, I think, the chaotic state of much argument over Vietnam derives from a too direct immersion in that case. I will touch on it only briefly here, so as to complete the logical descent from ethical principle abstractly perceived to the very concrete decision of *what to do now*. I am impressed that indirect but genuine aggression is taking place in Vietnam. I think the Viet Cong represent a political reality greater than indigenous rebellion, and that they are and have been allied directly with North Vietnam, and indirectly with both China and the Soviet Union. I judge on the basis of this that the Viet Cong, North Vietnam and their allies represent a disruption of international order.

Precisely because outside forces are deeply involved, I believe that Vietnam represents more than itself. I do not subscribe to any notion of a monolithic communism. But a polycentric communism does not automatically mean a non-aggressive communism. Instead, it may mean that the movement has many, or several heads, each of which may be aggressive and expansionistic. This I take to be the case. These several heads are agreed on several things: (a) the U.S. is too powerful to confront directly; (b) many nations in the third world are susceptible to internal overthrow; (c) let the scene of combat, therefore, be the Vietnams of this world.

If the Viet Cong, North Vietnam, and their allies are successful in Vietnam, I think it would have a negative impact on the political future of many emerging nations. It would suggest that communism may indeed be the shape of the future, and in turn that the United States in the final analysis was an inadequate guarantor of national integrity.

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On such bases, I have decided that intervention in Vietnam is *desirable* policy. I have judged further that it is feasible. I think behind a wall of pacification a political community can develop. Furthermore, in confronting the insurgency, we are frustrating the current mode of Communist expansionism, without directly threatening the Communist countries. Given the depth of Leninist political pragmatism built into Communist systems, it seems unlikely that either China or the Soviet Union would risk total war for the sake of something only desired.

Such is an outline of my judgment regarding Vietnam. But, in the terms of argument I have offered, I cannot and do not put forth this Vietnam judgment as a prescription for anyone else. The only prescription I have to offer is the general view of ethics-politics relationships, and what I take to be the individual's responsibility flowing from it.