

CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY IN VIETNAM

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Let me start with three observations on which I think all sides agree. *First*, the present struggle in Vietnam represents a profound conflict of moral responsibility. It is this which makes peace by negotiation so difficult. If the issues were defined in terms of the interests of opposing powers alone, the disproportion of the means now being used to any conceivable rational end would long since have led to compromise. The fact is, however, that all sides in the conflict are driven by a profound sense of obligation to purposes in which they believe, and which transcend their interests. For Ho Chi Minh and the Communist leadership in Vietnam the war is part of the struggle of exploited peoples all over the world to overthrow their imperialist and capitalist enemies in order to build a socialist society. For a great majority of non-Communists in the Eastern world, and a large number in the West, it represents the struggle of a nationalist movement with democratic tendencies to establish control by the people of Vietnam over their own country. For those in the United States and in the West who support the American effort uncritically the issue is containment of an international Communist conspiracy which would clamp a totalitarian system on one country after another unless its methods of terrorism and guerrilla warfare are stopped once and for all. For the many who are seeking a negotiated compromise the moral issue is peace itself, out of which may grow the healing forces of reconciliation and social reconstruction.

From these various moral imperatives come differing analyses of what is actually happening. Each of these analyses is far too much a creature of the moral ideal which it supports. The ambiguous realities of Vietnam are remade in the image of a world as the various partners to dispute wish it could be. Here lies the basic problem for Christian understanding. Whence come the resources to understand the human conflict in that country in a way which reflects in some degree God's effort to overrule our bias and pass judgment on our actions?

Second, although it is expected that nations, political groups, economic powers and others will reflect the bias and the interest of their backgrounds and even that they will claim universal moral validity for

their own power and program, it is the task of the Church to think and speak in the light of the way the God whom we know in Jesus Christ judges and transforms the biased perspectives of its members through the ecumenical community. Christians are not allowed a good conscience about their moral principles or their political analyses when these proceed from the perspective of one nation or one side of a conflict. They are bound by their faith to seek the wisdom of the Church Universal as the Word of God speaks to all its parts. This will lead the Church into conflict with the interest and security of many social and political groups to which its members belong. This is a risk which it must take. Its obligation is to speak to this world not of its victory or security but of the things that belong to its peace.

Third, for Christians the central focus of responsible analysis must be directly on the human beings involved in the struggle. Broad terms such as freedom, democracy, communism, revolution and liberation must be resolved into descriptions of the human relations they imply before we will know what value to give them. As authority and standard we have the living relation of Jesus Christ to other persons in all the variety of its creative promise. It is from this relation that we understand justice and judgment, reconciliation and peace. For the Christian the world is a complex of ongoing human relations in which the qualities of faithfulness, justice and love mean more than any structural society we seek to establish or maintain. The Church can therefore not help but be inherently skeptical of programs which inflict great human suffering today to realize an ideal tomorrow. It should on the other hand be especially sensitive to the ways in which relations of mutual trust and respect may be built up between nations and peoples in their day to day decisions.

• Taking these three factors into consideration we face a moral dilemma in Vietnam which it would be well to state in all its force.

On the one side we are engaged in combat alongside many Vietnamese whose security depends on us, with a revolutionary movement basically under the control of the People's Revolutionary Party of Vietnam, a Communist organization under the direct con-

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trol and command of North Vietnam. Although there are other elements in the National Liberation Front, none of them has a serious influence. The record of the P.R.P.'s parent body, the North Vietnamese Lao Dong under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, is not one to inspire hope for justice or freedom should effective resistance to its power break down. Its ideology is rigidly Communist in the Chinese style. Every nationalist organization the Vietnamese Communists have joined they have subverted. They have consistently betrayed, terrorized and assassinated non-Communist leaders of the nationalist movement who would not accept their leadership and tactics. Their purges of the population from 1951 to '56 did to death many thousands and imprisoned or enslaved many more under the pretext of eliminating exploiters, traitors and opponents to land reform. The rich and the reactionary were only a small portion of these. Their tactics of assassination and torture in the present war have been aimed at removing precisely the courageous and responsible leaders from the areas they wish to control.

There is no evidence that this line of action would change were the National Liberation Front to come to power in South Vietnam today. It is determined by the basic concepts of class war, of revolution through guerrilla tactics, and of control by a centralized Communist party — all of which are rooted in Communist dogma itself. One does not have to make a case for Chinese or Russian control over the strategy and tactics of Vietnamese communism. The dogma itself as expounded by native Vietnamese leaders accounts for this inhumanity sufficiently, and explains also the solidarity which these leaders feel with China and the Soviet Union.

It is to save millions of innocent people in South Vietnam from the power of this movement that we are fighting there. There is little evidence that the National Liberation Front is a popular movement among those who know enough about it to make an intelligent choice. Almost no influential non-Communist leaders have lent their support to it. Vietnamese society is a bewildering complex of ethnic religious and cultural groups which find it hard to unite around any common concept of the nation or loyalty to it. A long period of growing together accompanied inevitably by struggles for power, shifts of government and compromises of interest is inevitable in such a situation. This process is being subverted, however, by a terrorist movement, supported by its ideological comrades outside the country, which is using internal tensions and conflicts for its own ends.

One might make the case that the United States nevertheless need not attempt to rescue the people of Vietnam from this fate if no internal force arises to

give responsible focus to the struggle. Given the character of Communist dogma and its tactics of revolution, however, the question of the safety of neighboring countries arises. Laos is already divided, and should South Vietnam fall the United States and its allies would face the same choices there. Thailand is also vulnerable, first through the Vietnamese, Laotians and Chinese who live on its soil and form a substantial proportion of its population. The struggle in Malaya would probably flare up again. There is of course no inevitability to Communist triumph through its tactics of guerrilla warfare. The situation in each of these countries is somewhat different. But a guerrilla war is far easier to prevent than to control once it has started. Even where it may not succeed in controlling a country it can destroy it from within. Given the fact that the United States has the power to absorb the energies of this destructive force in South Vietnam, what is its responsibility to the neighbors of that country who still enjoy a degree of peace and the hope of development? What suffering would we bring upon peoples in other countries around Vietnam by a unilateral withdrawal?

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These are the hard moral facts which underlie our active engagement in the Vietnamese conflict. They do not depend on raising the spectre of an international Communist conspiracy directed from Peking or Moscow. The power political problem of containing Communist China is not the first issue here. Nor need we pretend that the government of South Vietnam is a democratic or even a military success. Enough that American power in this area provides the balance which protects the lives and a few of the liberties of hundreds of thousands of people in Vietnam itself and makes it possible for other nations in Southeast Asia to retain some control over their own destinies. This is one side of the dilemma. But there is another.

American efforts to suppress guerrilla warfare in Vietnam can hardly be called successful. Instead they have led us into actions which have inflicted suffering on vast numbers of Vietnamese comparable to that which we seek to overcome. Terror has been used by both sides in the war, though perhaps less discriminately and to less effect by our soldiers and the army of South Vietnam. Our answer to Viet Cong infiltration has been the removal of whole villages and the bombing of other villages which did not move. The price of victory seems to be the destruction of an economy which the Viet Cong had only taxed and controlled. The bombing of North Vietnam has only engaged that part of the country more actively in the conflict. Though the rising tide of Viet Cong control

has been arrested by massive American intervention during the last two years, the tide has not been turned. There are few areas peaceful enough that the construction of a non-Communist justice and freedom may begin. The government of South Vietnam has been neither strong enough or popular enough, assuming that it had the desire, to institute serious social reform. In short, our intervention in South Vietnam has increased the suffering of its people while their hopes for a free and peaceful future are continually postponed. It is about our responsibility for this suffering which we inflict that the Church must speak most seriously to the nation.

All of this is intensified by the tendency of our government to impose its own ideology on the Vietnamese situation. The result has been to obscure unpleasant facts, and to cut off dialogue with other peoples, including those of Vietnam itself, about our moral responsibility. Our leaders have continually overstressed the ideological conflict between communism and the so-called free world. Thereby they have ignored the element of nationalist ambition that also drives the National Liberation Front and its North Vietnamese mentors. They forget that Ho Chi Minh has been for years the most powerful symbol of Vietnamese unity despite his communism, and that the alliance he leads is the only all-Vietnamese political force not based on some ethnic, religious or regional interest. Our government has tended to over-militarize the conflict, forgetting the subtle influences at work in the villages where the Viet Cong, along with Saigon government influence and the presence of Americans, are accepted as one of the facts of life in the bargaining struggle for survival. Finally, our government has overestimated the capacity of foreign intervention to accomplish good. Increasing American strength has led to greater Vietnamese dependence which festers in anti-Americanism. We understand too little the religious and ethnic conflicts, the values and desires of the people of Vietnam caught in the midst of civil war. Our very foreign-ness and our power make this difficult. Our over-confidence in our own plans and programs makes it impossible.

Are we then deceiving ourselves? Are we polarizing good and evil in our own way which does not correspond to the complex realities in Vietnam? To whom are we listening in order to discover that truth which lies outside the circle of our own ideology and is not intimidated by our power?

Thus the dilemma besets us. The more realistically we analyze the false pictures which our self-justifying desires beget, the harder it is to see any way forward which God does not judge. The more deeply we feel our human involvement with minds sensitized by

Christ, the less bearable our actions become. Quite bluntly, if we are to find a tolerably human way out of this dilemma, if we are to speak of hope realistically, the basis for it must be given us from outside the human conflict. Self-manufactured hopes are illusions and self-justified actions are the most profoundly inhuman.

It is in this context that the Christian faith speaks of hope for the human situation. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them; and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:19). This is the first movement of history. It is the context of political and social understanding and action. It does not depend upon some other analysis, but rather informs all analysis. Because we know by faith that the future belongs to the God whose character and purpose are revealed in Jesus Christ, we are called on to find signs of His grace overruling and guiding the conflicting plans and hopes of human societies today. "The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the nations. In him shall the nations hope" (Ro. 15:12). It is the creative task of Christians then to offer political authorities, in our own nation and others, a hope for the future which is not based on their strength or analyses, but in the relationship with God which has been given to all of us. Hope is a matter of trusting the future of this relation. This has a number of consequences for our attitude and action in Vietnam.



First, because our hope does not depend on our analyses we can afford to see facts as they are. We need no longer argue if we support our government in Vietnam that a free and democratic society is just around the corner, or if we oppose it that a Viet Cong victory will bring peace and social justice. We gain from our faith the power to be profoundly skeptical of these hopes which are mere justifications for a particular line of policy. In most cases actions bespeak

quite a different way of reckoning with the forces of reality than words express. The Chinese Communists speak belligerently of an international class conflict carried on by guerrilla warfare encircling the great urban centers of the world. Their actions, however, are cautious and restrained, and their commitment to the Vietnamese war is remarkably limited. The South Vietnamese National Liberation Front speaks mildly of democracy. Its actions, however, betray the classic pattern of Maoist tactics for the conquest of power. On our side the desire for negotiated peace is constantly belied by our ever-increasing commitment of troops and our bombing of the North. It is a gift of God's grace to our faith that we should be able to see ourselves as we look to those who oppose us, and our opponents as they look to God, and not to themselves. From this insight new and more realistic policies might flow.

Second, a proper understanding of the way God works ought to make us profoundly aware of the relative and biased nature of our own morality. Public order and justice in any form in this world are possible only as God's grace overrules the private and group ambitions of men, and forces them into responsible relations with one another. The sphere of international relations is no exception. A wise nation, therefore, will not make an absolute of its own cause, for it too is under judgment. It is honesty before God to recognize that the perspectives of our nation or our group are relative to our interests, and that our ideals and principles also reflect the bias of our experience and desires. The peace which Christ makes on this earth judges and transforms every people's idea of what is just and good. Christians therefore will commend to their government realism in evaluating both friend and foe, and a responsible relation to both. To idealize our allies and demonize our enemies is to forget who it is through whom we are related to both. Because we know ourselves as an ambitious, sinful nation, able to get along with other peoples only because there is grace and forgiveness in the world, we ought also to recognize other nations as peoples like ourselves, who pursue their interests as they see them and live by the same grace we do. "While we were yet enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son" (Ro. 5:10). We therefore have a responsibility to our enemy, not to define the conflict as the final reality between us, but to seek for ways of reconciliation which may transcend and transform the biased righteousness each of us claims to uphold. Because the future belongs to Christ, no human conflict is quite as absolute as we imagine it to be. Compromise, therefore, and peace without victory, can be channels of grace and hope.

Third, there is implied in this Christian realism a quality of human relations which reflects the quality of God's relation with man, reflected in the word faithfulness. "The Lord is faithful in all his words and gracious in all his deeds" writes the Psalmist (Ps. 145: 13), and illustrates it by His upholding the weak, giving food in due season, executing justice, and saving those who call on Him. Faithfulness is a relation of constancy, sincerity, and openness to the needs of the neighbor. It is an attitude which upholds a relation even when the other party breaks it off, as God remains faithful to His covenant with man in spite of man's disobedience. Faithfulness is a quality which discerns and reckons with hope and truth in a responsible relation to God, to nature, and to other men. Because the faithful man is conscious of the limit and correction of God, he is prepared to listen to, and learn from, and give himself to other men. The same should be true of a nation. Faithfulness means consistency of character in the give and take of human relations, not absoluteness of principle. It bears witness not to our own goodness but to the God we serve, that is, to the governing reality in this world with which we reckon. It is this quality for which other nations look when they are determining their relations with us. It is this quality in the long run, as shown by nations to each other, which will determine the peace of the world. For our nation this has definite consequences.

- - a. As a strong nation we are responsible for demonstrating our subjection to the will of God by subjecting our military and political power to the judgment and correction of other nations. Unilateral action on our part which cannot be checked by others whose interests are involved, raises suspicion and fear among friends as well as enemies. It destroys responsible cooperation and creates a relation in which other peoples react to our power itself, rather than to our reasons and our hopes. This is a serious consequence of our position in Vietnam.

- b. As a strong and wealthy nation we are called to demonstrate our stewardship of God's gifts by the way we share them with peoples less fortunately placed. It is God's faithfulness and not our virtue that has made us rich. This very wealth and our natural acceptance of it, however, has placed a barrier between poor peoples and ourselves. The judgment of God falls with special severity upon the strong and the rich. One reason is that a small act of selfishness and insensitivity by those who have so much can be so widespread in its consequences. The task posed for our faithfulness is to help our neighbors find their independence over

against us as they seek to achieve justice and prosperity for themselves. Once again, international control of the instruments of economic development and justice is required. We who are wealthy need to learn neither to keep our wealth to ourselves nor to use it to dominate others. The problem of the responsible use of wealth is the creative renunciation of power over wealth.

c. We are also required to be faithful to our enemies. As a very minimum this means respecting the written and unwritten rules of warfare, and the tacit agreements which limit our conflict. It means further, however, active seeking for a new relation with our enemy, and a new understanding of him which might be the basis of peace between us. We are commanded by Jesus, himself, to love our enemies and to pray for them, and by Paul to feed and clothe them. The latter means respecting his basic right to live. The former means understanding him from within, from the point of view of his own true interests and best ideals. It means being aware of the way in which God is transforming his society as well as ours, so that the future may not repeat the past. We have done far too little of this in Vietnam and with relation to China. We have not yet created the spiritual tools of perception which would make peace a possibility.

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Fourth, all of this leads to a final truth which is hardest for us to accept. We know from the New Testament that there are powers in this world that seek to rebel against God and yet in spite of themselves do His will. Nuclear armaments, predominance in sea and air, and a stable wealthy economy all are such powers as these. By means of them the United States is the strongest power in the world. Yet all of them are incapable of accomplishing anything except destruction, save as servants of the reconciling power of the servant of all men, Jesus Christ. This is the paradox of our position in Vietnam. We cannot impose a healthy democracy in South Vietnam; we can only win the respect and friendship of the people there by the quality of our concern for them and our understanding of their desires and points of view. We cannot conquer the Communist ideology by force of arms. We cannot even dismiss it by force of argument. We can only show Communists in various places in the world that we also are concerned for the welfare of our neighbors and that we respect the freedom of those neighbors a little more successfully than they. The power to redeem social chaos and to build justice and peace is the power of renunciation and service, "Behold my servant whom I uphold; my chosen in whom my soul delights; he will not cry nor lift up his voice or

make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (Isa. 42:1-3). Military power in Vietnam or elsewhere can only be a blessing therefore if it is used in full consciousness of its provisional, limited character. It is the disproportion of power to service which is so disquieting there today.

A corollary follows from this. The power of the strongest nation on earth to accomplish anything for peace and freedom is severely limited. With all our force we cannot control the events of the world nor even the course of history in Vietnam. There is suffering we cannot prevent and there are injustices we cannot set right. The way of the servant of God goes through suffering to the establishment of justice. The way of Christ's reconciliation is the way of the cross.



For the Church this means that Christians belong on both sides of every battle line and especially in those areas where their enemies are in power. For a nation like ours it means risks and perhaps sacrifices of our prestige, our capital, and even our security. It means entrusting our diplomats and our citizens to hostile lands. It means subjecting our power to international control and seeking patterns of relations where there are no dominant and dominated partners. There are examples for this in the modern world. Britain has never been so creatively related to India as during the past twenty years since independence. France has never been so popular in Africa as today when her last colony has gone. Our own relations to Indonesia are an example of what is possible. In all of these there has been suffering and loss. In many of them injustice has been done which the dominant power might have sought to prevent. But all of them are informed by a quality of renunciation, of faithfulness between equals, and of modesty in moral claims which characterize a society judged and redeemed by Jesus Christ. They suggest a quality which we should be seeking in Vietnam today.