

"WARS WILL CEASE WHEN..."

Religious and Moral Perspectives of Current Warfare

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When I was passing through England not long ago, a news photo in the *Daily Telegraph* caught my attention. The front page showed a picture of English students, the Cambridge Peace Action Group, carrying a sign before the married quarters area of the United States Air Force Base in Suffolk. "Wars will cease," the banner logically proclaimed, "when men refuse to fight."

Today, of course, when we see signs advising men to refuse to fight, we are almost always talking about the war in Vietnam. A good deal of information about the war in Vietnam, its history, its circumstances, and its problems is available to the general population. Everyone is aware of the Green Beret, of French colonialism, General Giap's theory of guerrilla warfare, the Seventh Fleet, Ho Chi Minh, napalm, Madam Nu, burning Buddhists, the bomb, the Gulf of Tonkin, General de Gaulle's theories, Dien Bien Phu, the Oakland Army Base, Cam Ranh Bay, the black market in Saigon, Viet Cong assassinations, the thousands of American dead, Senator Fulbright's Hearings, the elections in South Vietnam, the Geneva Conference, the 325th Division of the North Vietnamese Army, the Demarcation Zone, and General Ky's black flying suit with the purple scarf. These and a host of other images are never far from our Vietnamese reflections.

There is continued need to discuss the facts and proportions of this war, but it seems of greatest importance to raise certain background questions falling to the theological and moral areas about this war and about the problems in Southeast Asia. First, however, we might note that a rather peculiar phenomenon seems to exist in the present discussion. The moral and ethical issues about the validity of the Vietnam war are almost exclusively raised about the Americans, by both their enemies and their friends, as if this were only a problem of America's relationship with herself. The dialogue is considered to be more like a monologue. Several reasons for this seem worth noting. For example, Americans as well as most of the Western world exist in a climate of freedom in which the very questioning can arise. Probably nothing better serves

to demonstrate what this war is about than the lack of a true moral opposition to this war in the Communist world. Communist students only protest against America's involvement in the war, never the war their associates cause. Often I feel that the ultimate question is which climate shall prevail. The climate of freedom is not, in the end, something that can stand by itself.

A second reason for the monological nature of opposition to the Vietnam war is the iron intransigence of the opposition. While the Administration may not have fully exhausted every peace feeler floated from the North or from the Viet Cong, no matter how fleeting, still its record on this score seems to have been the most thorough and considerate in modern history. Somehow we are coming to suspect that the disciplinary unity of the Viet Cong and of North Vietnam on this score is so unbroken as to be terrifying.

Further, as Americans coming out of our generally liberal tradition, we are inclined to have an intellectual, almost dogmatic presupposition that a reasonable solution can be found for anything. Thus, when no solution is forthcoming, we assume that *our* leaders or something in us must be in the wrong for not trying hard enough. We are little prepared for the darker sides of reality. We are scandalized when even the best efforts seem to produce nothing. This same mentality prevents us from believing that a man or a nation can really, in all seriousness, have a firm, historical, fanatical commitment to a stated goal persevering over a long period of time. Again and again, confronted with diplomatic or political rebuff, the only conclusion we reach is that *we* are not trying zealously enough. To me, the almost classical example of this problem is contained in the Vietnam Hearings, in an exchange between the Secretary of State and Mr. Fulbright:

Rusk: Mr. Chairman, we wouldn't have much of a debate between us on the question of compromising and a settlement, but we cannot get anybody into the discussions for the purpose of talking about it.

Fulbright: I think there is something wrong with our approach, because, let's assume that these people are utter idiots. There must be something wrong with our diplomacy.

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Rusk: Senator, is it just possible that there is something wrong with them? Is it not just possible that the other side is wrong? This is of the greatest significance. For if we cannot answer that question affirmatively, then we are indeed American devils as the Chinese have no scruple in affirming somewhat stridently to the rest of the world.

From a theological point of view — here assuming a theological development of man's moral conscience — the sub-culture of religious protest to war as such is an especially interesting one. A case can be made for the thesis that war is going the way of capital punishment, at a slower pace perhaps, but still the collective conscience of mankind seems to be growing to a recognition that war cannot helpfully be used by nations. We might ask ourselves, then, what prevents this condemnation of war from being universally accepted? The answer is not, as pacifist-oriented literature sometimes seems to maintain, merely the bad will and corruption of men and nations. Indeed we have a paradox here of the utmost subtlety and irony. This is the historical probability that acceptance of the simple immorality of war, acceptance outright of the proposition that wars shall cease when men refuse to fight, would increase, not reduce the amount of evil and suffering in the world. For we simply are not in a world in which *all* men have refused to fight.

In a way, then, this is the heart of the matter. For religion does not only teach that we *shall not kill* and nothing else. It also teaches us that we shall be *responsible* for our brother in need, for our brother who is suffering persecution and injustice. We know from experience that these two fundamental obligations can come into conflict. And however free we may be to sacrifice ourselves when we alone are involved, the human race has always judged it to be cowardice when we sacrifice someone else because of our unwillingness, whatever the reason, to help when we have the power to do so.

How we are to apply these observations to our times is, certainly, a matter of concrete judgment and action. The point to be made is that reality is complex and that it does have its darker side. The human race has recognized that its social and political institutions exist in part to control and minimize such manifestations of evil and disorder, and that the most dire consequences result to man when the forces of evil or disorder capture the apparatus of the state itself. It has also been part of the tradition of the race that the state or states that do not succeed in regulating and controlling the forces of evil and disorder will end up being controlled by them. We have never considered a people or

a nation which allows such disorder to come to itself to be totally innocent. We have even less respect for those neighboring peoples who could have done something but who would not. There are, in other words, limits to the doctrine of non-intervention.

Nevertheless, the problem is even more complicated. Anyone who has read the literature on the Vietnamese war is familiar with the ramifications of the "escalation" argument. Escalation admits that something should be done about aggression, disorder, and injustice, but wonders how much. In the case of Vietnam, we have the haunting fear that if we pass beyond a certain limit the Chinese will sense some danger to themselves and we will have a repetition of the Korean experience. If we should then fight China we may provoke a war with Russia — a development that is generally considered to be indistinguishable from doomsday. Some outside limit, then, seems to be placed on the extent to which we can regulate disorder and injustice. And yet, these very limits appear to perpetuate the injustices that needed to be corrected in the first place.

Discussions along these lines arising out of the Vietnamese war lead to interesting theological reflections. The first question is whether we do not today have a massive confusion between violence and injustice; whether we do not too readily confuse the visible act of violence with the intrinsic act of injustice. There is a further problem. "I hate war," Franklin Roosevelt used to affirm. To hate war, certainly, is a perfectly rational and religious sentiment. Even those who approve the Vietnamese war or any other war are still generally healthy enough to hate it; we have little enthusiasm in this country for war for its own sake.

Whenever war occurs, a widespread search for its causes is begun. Whom are we to blame? We do not accept war as a simple fact like a tornado. Everyone has a theory about the responsibility of starting W.W. I for example. No one ever bothered to accuse anyone for starting the San Francisco earthquake. Richard N. Goodwin's observation about the causes of a future great war may be accurate:

... not long ago an important politician intimate with the process of power, told me he thought that if large scale war ever comes, it will come not in a burst of strangelove madness or a Fail-safe accident, but through a long series of acts and decisions, each seemingly reasonable, that will place the great powers in a situation in which they will find it impossible to back down. It will be no one's fault.

Yet, even though we do not have the easy capacity of putting our finger on the forehead of one person and proclaiming, "You are guilty," still we persist instinc-

tively in believing that someone has failed, someone is culpable. Indeed, from this viewpoint the literature of the Vietnam war is fascinating as it is one huge search for responsibility. When we believe, however, that someone is at fault, especially when it is a question of a large number of people involved, we are confronted with the question of the nature of the world itself. The nature of the world as we see it in history and in every-day experience is such that acts of violence do take place. And these must somehow be prevented or minimized.

From this perspective much of the explicitly religious protest to the war in Vietnam is of some concern. For I have the feeling that in this discussion we are dealing with a theological issue of the utmost importance. When I filter out and try to explicate this feeling, I seem to discover a protest not just against this particular war, but against the very possibility of war. This is the meaning of the slogans, "Wars will cease when men refuse to fight," and "We're lovers, not fighters."

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Protest against the very possibility of war, however, seems to be something of the greatest theological significance. For protest against the very possibility of war is, in a very real sense, protest against the world itself as it actually is. And the world as it actually is does contain sin, death, suffering, injustice, and evil. The theological point that seems somehow rooted in much of the practical and theoretical opposition to war comes down to this: Must we protest against the structure of the world itself? Must we consider that whatever it is that allows the world to be must itself be unjust because it allows such a world in which wars can happen? Must we protest not just against evil, but against its very possibility? Must we reject all religion and all morality that purports to come to terms with these conditions in the world? Finally, on the grounds that such things should not exist in the world, must we reject everything and refashion the world anew? Must we, in rejecting this evil, create our own good?

Perhaps it is not legitimate to carry such reflections any further. There are few who would do so. Yet, I am of the opinion that such issues are present in the intellectual and theological climate of the nation and of the Western world. We are not being exposed merely to views on Vietnam. We are also confronting views on the nature of reality. We are praising our leaders or, more often it seems, condemning them on the absolute, theological grounds that they deal with ultimate issues. This is something new in our experience. We would do well to take note of it.

The conscientious objector, the man singled out

most often as witnessing to the true cause of mankind, the man who refuses to go to Vietnam or anywhere else has, often, many notable qualities. But one thing such a man cannot do is to lay down his life for his friend. For he will not be with his friend who must fight, who must confront the actual disorder that does exist in the world. Furthermore, we must recognize that our duty is to correct dire disorders and clear injustices. Somebody must plunge in to do the job. There will be people hurt, injured, oftentimes killed. Many of these people will be, strictly speaking, innocent. We will have what current philosophy calls "dirty hands." In hard reality we do not always have the guilty and the innocent clearly labeled. The guilty, furthermore, have always exposed the innocent to cover their own deeds. We do not, in this world, always have a choice of totally unambiguous situations. Nor is our choice to have nothing to do with violence and evil an innocent one. It usually prevents us from helping those who are being injured or misused. And in our ethic, it is the man who fails to come to the assistance of a fellow being who is considered most immoral.

The Vietnamese war does seem to present questions of a most profound ethical and theological import. It would be simple and easy, together with much of world opinion, to condemn American efforts in this war. America's self-appointed task of world guardian is seen by many as sheer arrogance and pride — terms, incidentally, which come out of the reformation polemics about princes and kings. Yet, as President Johnson sadly remarked, "We did not choose to be the guardian at the gate, but there is no one else." Probably the whole morality of America's current position rests on this — is there anyone else? Are we in truth dealing with the failing light of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in this generation, which it is this nation's historic mission to keep burning before men?

To many who feel that there is no question of liberty at stake, this must seem absurd. But the words of President Marcos to the Congress are timely reminders: "This dangerous security gap . . . can only be filled by America, however much Asian nations may abhor or at best regard with distrust such non-Asian power. It is only American military power that is acceptable in Asia and great enough to deter Communist China's aggressive tendencies." The widespread, often superficial effort to show that we are not, potentially at least, dealing with something very much like Munich seems very dubious. If we do compromise the freedom of fifteen million South Vietnamese — for whatever reason — this nation's historic mission to liberty will begin to lose its credibility. We can be sure of this at least, there will be no one else in our generation.