

ETHICAL RHETORIC & ETHICAL REALITY: VIETNAM AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Both the long, unending war in Vietnam and the sudden, brief Arab-Israeli conflict continue to provoke strong — and diverse — ethical assessments. In the blizzard of righteousness which is piling up around us we are told by many that the Johnson Administration is immoral, by others that it did or is doing the only thing ethical realism finds conceivable. Sometimes the judgment is made within the framework of what is usually called “situation ethics,” sometimes it proceeds instead from an “ethic of principles.” From the evidence of the articles themselves the method does not evidently ordain the conclusion; or if it does, then there are some very clever knaves at work twisting each method to yield the wrong answers.

For some half-dozen years now it has been reasonably clear that the great debate between “situation ethics” and an “ethic of principles” has been a matter more of emphasis than of fundamental contradiction. Nevertheless the persisting difference of emphasis *does* make a perceptible difference; in the case at hand the difference is that one whole class of arguments appears to be morally irrelevant because its method appears faulty. In what follows, my purpose is not to argue for a particular course of action in either Vietnam or the Middle East but, more modestly, to rule out of the debate certain kinds of arguments purported to be moral, to distinguish between ethical rhetoric and ethical reality in the ever-growing literature on these two current wars.

If we look back to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, and particularly the reaction to it of the leadership of the World Council of Churches, we will find a paradigm for our ethical assessment of today's wars. The disclosure that there were Russian IRBMs in Cuba was followed almost immediately by President Kennedy's announcement of the American naval blockade, presenting the world with an established fact before there was time to mount debate. The General Secretary of the World Council considered it essential that the ecumenical leadership should speak immediately if the churches were to have any effect. Accordingly, he framed a statement, and after

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a quick telephone conversation with the President and Vice President of the Council's Central Committee, an American and a Briton respectively, issued the document to the press as coming from these three men, speaking for themselves but in their official capacities as ecumenical officers.

The critical statement was aimed directly at the United States government. It judged the American “unilateral military action” to be clearly in defiance of established methods of peaceful procedure among nations. The general secretary leaned heavily on a quasi-legal argument: The United States had violated international law by imposing the blockade without declaring war. Moreover, the violation of the law acquired, in his eyes, a serious theological dimension, for he declared that finally America had “joined the ranks of sinful nations,” and now “we have all sinned.” So convinced was he of the correctness, the biblically prophetic character of this utterance, that he even suggested that while Western governments were lining up solidly behind the United States, the World Council came through with the one clear voice.

There were some minor ironies here which we may savor in passing. For instance, an American witnessing this performance might have taken wry comfort from the fact that the ecumenical leader evidently considered the United States to have *been* virtuous *before* the Cuban affair, and thus to have come only *lately* to the ranks of sinners. But the important issue lies in the way the ethical judgment was rendered. The statement asked to be considered on the grounds that it pointed to a violation by the American government of a fixed principle in international law, and that this legal transgression amounted, theologically, to sinful action. This is the language of legalism, and as such it must be rejected by everyone who takes his ethical bearings from biblical theology. Actually the ecumenical movement had itself gone through the battle of transformation from an ethic of fixed principles, with its roots in a rather traditional application of natural law theory, to an understanding of the contextual nature of ethical decision; and its moral judgments for years have exhibited praiseworthy realism. So it is ironic that the argument on the Cuban missile crisis should have turned on a legalism, with no

reference to the context in which the American action was taken. There was no mention, for example, of the Russian action which had called forth the American response, no reference to the technical issue of the nature and range of the missiles, which were all-important in assessing their character and the sort of threat they posed, no assessment of the judgment of the United States government that the measure was actually necessary for the preservation of peace, no discussion of the attitude of other governments which felt themselves indirectly threatened by the Russian move — in short, no reference to the “cold war” context, without which the affair could not be understood.

Even on the statement's own chosen ground, the danger and wickedness of unilateral action, there was no reference to the efforts by the American government to bring the United Nations and the Organization of American States and NATO allies into the affair almost simultaneously with its announcement and before the blockade actually went into effect. Nor did the World Council statement show any awareness of the technical necessities such as speed of action which lay behind the unilateral nature of the American declaration. The singular failure of the ecumenical document as a piece of ethical wisdom was evidenced almost at once in the criticism it received even from politically liberal church sources, actually defending an American military action, unfamiliar though that sounds now. And subsequent events very rapidly showed the World Council declaration to have been wrong. It was put out before the facts were all in hand.

There are several problems here for people who are concerned with the role of religious ethics in political affairs. The desire to speak effectively argues both for speed before the moment of crisis passes, but also argues for care in appraising all facts though these may not be immediately available. This is one serious issue, among others. But the point I want to make here concerns the method of contextualism. The World Council statement was framed in terms of an ethic of fixed principles. It assumed as normative a world where the ethical obligations of nations to each other can be codified in something called “international law,” in which transgressions can be easily identified and swiftly and surely condemned. The statement failed to consider factors in the situation which might have made the American imposition of a blockade the only responsible, peace-promoting course under the circumstance. The ecumenical trio did not weigh these factors and find them unpersuasive; they simply declined to *consider* them at all.

In its own terms of reference, the World Council statement on the Cuban blockade appealed to a rigid

ethic of principles against contextual ethics. However, if we look behind the scenes, we can see two circumstantial factors at work in shaping what was said. The first of these has to do with ecumenical politics and deserves the short shrift it is going to get here: The World Council had just received into membership the Russian Orthodox Church, after a long and difficult courtship, and its officers were particularly anxious not to appear pro-Western in international affairs.

More deserving of our serious attention is the other situation factor which was obviously behind the legalistic-sounding statement on the Cuban blockade, namely, an overriding fear of war, a desire for peace at almost any price, on the quite plausible theory that the risk of nuclear war was too great to run under *any* circumstances. Therefore the American blockade was condemned. This was not the principal reason actually given for condemning it, though the threat to peace was mentioned obliquely in the last sentence; but it was apparent to anyone who breathed Geneva's atmosphere in those days that the fear of war was the first factor in everyone's private calculations. There was that pervasive dread of the first confrontation between an American warship and a Russian blockade runner. Would there be firing? Would an incident set off the war no one wanted? By all means the Americans must be dissuaded from imposing the blockade. So the World Council, for whatever slight effect its voice might have, must vigorously object to the American action.

Here is the heart of our problem. The World Council did indeed object, but chose the wrong ground entirely. It resorted to a legalism whose superficiality was quickly perceived. Pretending to be horrified at unilateral military action, a breach of international law, it played down its real objection, its terror of nuclear war. Giving one reason for its attitude, it turned attention away from the ultimate issue on which its condemnation rested.

How much better it would have been if, instead, the ecumenical officers had spoken out honestly, confessing the truly contextual nature of their judgment, saying frankly that it was not the legal question of the blockade that bothered them so much as the chance of escalation to holocaust, not the violation of an abstract principle so much as the temptation to disaster which lay in this particular, concrete circumstance, the face-to-face confrontation of the superpowers. Then their statement would have carried some weight. It could have been judged more fairly. Its honesty would have been compelling; and when

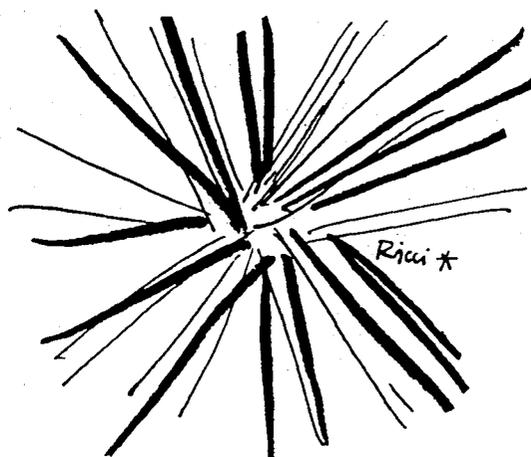
circumstances demonstrated the viability of the American action, the World Council declaration could easily have been forgiven its appraisal of the circumstances. The basic soundness of its ethical insight would have remained. Instead, its *ethical* perceptiveness was disputed, its ability to relate religious wisdom to contemporary international affairs cast into doubt. The result of its work was a needless setback for religious ethics.

Reading the hundreds of ethically oriented articles on American policy toward Vietnam and the Middle East, I am struck by the same contrasting nature of the moral discussions offered. On the one hand there are those who pursue the ethical problems as a matter of translating abstract justice into political reality by adherence to legal codes. This is the type of reasoning that dwells at length on the American government's right to be in Vietnam because of its legal relation to the Geneva accords of 1954. The argument may conclude that the United States does or does not belong in Vietnam; but in either case the focus will be on such items as the significance of America's not being a signatory to the accords, or whether Ho Chi Minh could win or could have won a democratic election in the South, or whether the absence of a formal Congressional declaration of war restricts President Johnson's conduct of the war and in what way.

In the Middle East those who would make the moral issues dependent on crossing an arbitrary line of law are most interested in fixing precisely the responsibility for actually starting the war, in branding some one party the "aggressor" so that the other emerges as the righteous "defender." If the argument is pro-Israeli, then it turns on the fact that a blockade is considered to be an act of war, so that closing the Straits of Tiran made Nasser the aggressor. If the argument is pro-Arab, then it turns on the fact that Israel fired the first shot, that the blitzkrieg began as a surprise attack. To this legal mind the question of possession of the Old City of Jerusalem, of the West Bank of the Jordan, of Sinai, depends on the legal solution to the question of which party was the technical aggressor: if Israel, then of course the conquered territories must be returned, since it is immoral that aggression should be rewarded; if the Arabs, then the lands were forfeit by them as the price of their iniquity, and Israel deserves to keep the new areas as indemnification.

This approach to ethics is especially interested also in the problem of *consistency* in the attitudes of moralists toward the two wars. In the usual language, how can one be a "hawk" in the Middle East while a "dove" on Vietnam? Does not faithfulness to princi-

ples require equivalent attitudes? Thus the Jesuit-edited magazine *America* boasts of its own double-hawk attitude, calling attention to its "consistency" in supporting an American presence in both wars. But the problem can still be consistency even if one happens to be pro-Israel but opposes the United States government in Vietnam; only in this case one has to choose different principles with which to be consistent. Thus it is said by some that the extent of American commitment is the touchstone. We are morally obligated to defend Israel by intervention in her wars if necessary because of our long-standing public commitment to her national existence, dating back to her creation after World War II. But we have, it is said, no such commitment in South Vietnam, where our past participation has been limited to our interjection into local politics on the wrong side.



The ethical argument for supporting Israel but withdrawing from Vietnam can, of course, be made in other ways, as I shall acknowledge later; but when it is made by the defenders of fixed principles it tends to dwell endlessly on the history of the American government's past words and actions as a basis for intervention abroad, in the one case justifying, in the other condemning, as a matter of legal principle. Thus the celebrated speech in June 1967 of Rabbi Balfour Brickner demanded active support for Israel's war as an American governmental obligation stemming from historical acts of commitment for which there is no parallel in the Far East. There is more emphasis on what the United States has *promised* to do in the past than on what needs to be done now.

This ethic of fixed principles carries with it as consequence the implication that men who oppose its conclusions are not simply misguided, but evil. Thus some Jewish spokesmen can equate the reluctance of some Christians and other Westerners to support Israel militarily with a return to anti-Semitism. If not a holy war, the conflict is at least in Jewish eyes a "just war"; men who will not support the Israeli

side unreservedly become unjust, which here is the same as saying sinful.

Similarly on Vietnam there is an assumption among some opponents of Administration policy that Johnson is actually an *evil* man. Else why would he lead us ever deeper into this morally iniquitous war? Their condemnation extends fully to the American military chiefs, who are said to harbor a love of war born of professionalism and of the natural desire of technology, in this case military technology, to complete itself, to do what can be done just because it is technically feasible, hence to use *any* available war to test fighting methods and equipment.

This ascription of evil is surely part of our heritage of naive faith in the capacity of all men for reason, our conviction that all problems can eventually be solved in this fundamentally rational world. Therefore a continuing war is a sign of an evil will in the leadership. This type of reasoning really cannot admit the possibility that there may be nothing to negotiate, that attempts to find a common ground in the *present* situation may actually have been exhausted. No, those who direct the war *could* end it; and because they don't, they are evil.

This, then, is the result of one type of ethical thinking: a preoccupation with precise fixing of blame in these two wars, with remaining consistently faithful to abstract principles no matter what the situation, with the search for that rational solution which must surely exist behind the machinations of evil men.

On the other hand there is the approach to ethics which takes its cues from the unique factors in each situation and seeks primarily the welfare of the persons affected by the decision. As a matter of emphasis in theological ethics that is, of course, a familiar matter. In the debates on Vietnam and the Middle East its voice is heard at a number of different points. No longer is the problem one of consistency, of unswerving fidelity to a principle. Now we may appraise participation in each war on its own merits and not worry overly about the dove-to-hawk metamorphosis. Here we may begin by saying that there is no fixed principle which justifies or rejects American intervention as such. Intervention, considered by itself, is neither good nor bad. Rather it takes place in a context where other issues are at stake, issues which it serves for good or ill.

Thus there were those who rejected intervention in the Middle East not because they were not pro-Israel, which they were, but because intervention in this situation might have brought on a super-power conflict. After all, the Arabs were Russian clients, Israel

was considered a protégé of the West, and the Moscow-Washington hot-line was buzzing. The danger to world peace was clear and present and openly acknowledged. General war itself was and is the enemy, not a particular war. For this same ultimate reason the American presence in Vietnam may be rejected: The threat of escalation to the war of the giants is too great. Of course there is present in this line of thought the temptation to point to one's "consistency" in being a "dove" in both wars. But that is really beside the point. The issue is the threat of nuclear war in both of these particular situations, just as it was the real issue in the Cuban missile crisis.

This answer is not without its problems. It might conceivably end up sacrificing Israel; and it unwittingly makes a good case for a high flow of American arms to our friends among the nations so they can defend themselves in wars we dare not fight with them. But whatever the shortcomings of this argument for non-intervention, it has the virtue of concentrating on a real issue. For the U.S. to ignore or downplay this factor would certainly have been irresponsible, hence unethical.

Nevertheless the situational approach to the wars need not yield the conclusion of non-intervention. Indeed, this style of ethics was openly invoked mainly by those who wanted to escape the legalistic charge of inconsistency, who wanted to support Israel unreservedly despite a desire for withdrawal in Vietnam. So the two situations were distinguished in order to create the occasion for two different ethical responses. In one case the existence of Israel itself was threatened. Israel's loss of the war would have meant the destruction of her people, a new genocide. The Arabs faced no such threat. There would be Arab refugees, of course, but that problem is, in theory anyway, solvable. But nothing could undo the slaughter of a people. Therefore to assist Israel was a moral necessity.

In the other case it could be argued that the people of South Vietnam would be better off if the Americans left. The war would end. No genocide is in prospect, and it is not a war of conquest. So the moral course is for America to withdraw. This is not altogether a convincing argument, since there is the question of the terror that would follow the Viet Cong conquest, the mass murders whose inevitability only the most naive would deny. It is not easy to weigh these competing claims, and of course the ethical decision cannot simply be reduced to a body count: Would the United States cause more deaths by continuing the war than it would by letting the guerrillas triumph? But at least the right issue is in our sights here: What would happen to the people of Vietnam — or of

Israel — if we acted in such-and-such a way? Would they survive? What would their life be like? What are the different factors that would shape their future? That, it seems to me, is the way to approach the question.

(Incidentally, I think the problem is best framed in terms of people rather than of a "nation" as is sometimes done. The concept "nation" is a bit too vague sometimes, too shifting in definition to come into focus. Thus it is a mistake to make different responses depend on the fact that Israel is a viable nation and South Vietnam is not. To say that a nation united has a right to live as sovereign and to benefit from outside support for its defense, while a civil quarrel must be left to run its course without external interference, is to let the argument drift back toward abstract principles legalistically interpreted.)

There is, then, the contextual approach to ethics working over the problems of two current wars. If American unilateral action in these wars is (or would be) morally wrong, it is wrong not because it violates an absolute law against such action, but because it is difficult to mount such action without self-righteousness, without the "ideological taint," without miscalculating the purpose served by such action — wrong because it fails to further the moral purpose intended, fails to better the lives of the people it affects. If American intervention is (or would be) morally right, it is right not because infallible righteousness has been granted us along with our power, not because we faithfully serve the principles of law, order, and justice in the world, but because there is no other power available to assist people whose cause is just, because American might is American responsibility, because American wealth and technical capability, including military technology, ought to be placed at the service of other people's peace and well-being besides our own.

Behind the ethical method which is employed in reaching judgments on these wars stands a set of assumptions about the nature and goal of the ethical enterprise, about the character of the claim laid upon us. To use traditional theological language, these are assumptions about the manner in which the Kingdom of God is present among men.

For those whose ethic is essentially adherence to a code of principles, the world is fundamentally rational. All moral problems are susceptible of solution in time if thought is applied to them. The world of ideals may be attained within historical existence by progressive introduction of rationality, of order and justice, into the conduct of human affairs. Such

a world would be characterized by forms of international cooperation of the kind now embryonically present in institutions like the United Nations and the World Court, and in procedures like arbitration, negotiation, and democratic voting. Insofar as we trust and employ these procedures we further the coming of the Kingdom of God as an historic reality. Further, the ideal world would be one without poverty, without hunger, one where men have deployed wisely the resources of technology to make the material lot of every last peasant comfortable. The ethical imperatives add up to a summons to create the perfected order by the work of our hands, minds, hearts. Only deliberate frustration by evil and ignorant men can set back the Kingdom's coming.

This essential optimism tends to be exasperated by setbacks and to regard wars, poverty and racism as owing somehow to the sins of evil men. Thus such an ethicist who supports the Administration on Vietnam may regard the real enemy as international communism, and the refusal of Hanoi to negotiate as a sign of the enemy's persistence in malevolence. He will talk about "repelling aggression" and "defending freedom everywhere." This moralist will also dwell on the American schemes for rebuilding the country, for holding genuine democratic elections, and the like.

It is also possible to start with this view of the Kingdom of God as historical possibility and oppose the Administration on Vietnam. The arguments will be of the same type, but will be differently selected, of course. On Vietnam the focus will be on the unreasonableness of the United States, on its evil unwillingness to enter genuine negotiations, on its callousness in attempting to bomb Hanoi to the negotiating table, when everyone knows that mutual concessions and sweet reason are the essence of peaceful settlement, not to say the essence of the divine order willed for the world. And the same kinds of arguments can be mounted for a discussion of the war in the Middle East.

These several ways of conceiving the state of peace that lies beyond the two wars have in common the assumption that the Kingdom of God is an order of the historical future which is within the reach of human effort, a time of justice and well-being managed by men who have reached the maturity of reason, reflecting in themselves and their society the divine rationality.

Over against this view there is a conception of the Kingdom of God as trans-historical, impinging on the temporal realm at each moment but not realized within it. This is the conception usually lying behind the contextual method in ethics. It assumes a fruitful tension between the eschatological and the historical,

the ultimate and the actual. No order men can create will mirror exactly the divine intention, and no code of behavior they can devise will ever yield morally pure actions. We have to begin with the circumstances, the situation as given, and seek to act within the range of actual possibility, hoping to inform our deeds with divinely given wisdom, but offering up our failures to divinely given judgment and mercy.

This is, again, familiar territory in ethical discussion. What it means for an approach to Vietnam and the Middle East is a realization of the fundamental intractability and irrationality of the problems, and a consequent modesty in our expectations, a willingness to accept proximate solutions. The issues are not black and white, but dirty grey in both cases. For Vietnam this means admitting that negotiations to end the war are not separable from the context of power, that self-determination is not going to mean a model democratic state in the foreseeable future, that the nature of the conflict cannot be simplified by calling it a civil war, or a "war of national liberation," or an international power struggle, when it is all of these at once.

For the Middle East this attitude means admitting that the historical movement of people which created Israel cannot be undone, cannot be subjected to abstract justice *ex post facto*. In means admitting that no settlement of the area's problems is going to take place apart from tacit American-Soviet agreement, no matter what the legal issues or the multilateral pacts, as we surely could have realized when the so-called "maritime powers" rather abjectly left the Gulf of Aquaba issue in the lap of the United States.

In both wars this modest contextual realism will locate the impingement of the Kingdom of God primarily in concern for the people who suffer. This approach will not try to describe these people in the partially abstract categories of nation or ideology, but will begin with the tangible problem of food and shelter, dignity and peace. The refugees, the fields, the homes, the flow of commerce: these are the truly moral concerns. Political ideas are ethical matters only as they relate to these primary categories.

This approach to an ethical appraisal of the Vietnamese and Middle Eastern wars does not "take sides" or indicate a particular policy. I have tried to show the ways in which it can be used with rather different policies in mind. This argument for a method is not intended to imply a conclusion. But it is intended to cast doubt on the moral credentials displayed in many of the appeals to our consciences, and to concentrate instead on more fundamental ethical issues. Hopefully, moral appeals will carry more weight if they are more solidly grounded, and the enterprise of the moralist will acquire some useful relevance.

FOR GOD OR COUNTRY?

The Question of Disarmament

Paul Bock

When churches speak to their own people and to the nations on matters of international affairs, how much do their pronouncements reflect the political policies of various countries and power blocs? Is the voice of a national or regional church body likely to be very different from that of an international ecclesiastical organization? A single example will, admittedly, yield only partial answers, but they may suggest what a fuller study would disclose.

Consider the ways in which churches have dealt with the question of disarmament and arms control. Statements have been made by three representative groups: (1) The Christian Peace Conference centered in Prague, Czechoslovakia; (2) the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. and one of its member churches, the United Church of Christ; and (3) the World Council of Churches. These are representative church bodies from both sides of the iron curtain and an international body which has member churches in virtually all parts of the world.

The United Nations has struggled with the problem of arms control since World War II, its most tangible achievements being the partial test ban treaty of 1963, and of lesser significance, the treaty approved in 1966 by the U.N. General Assembly outlawing nuclear weapons in space and prohibiting military use of the moon and other celestial bodies. The East and the West have consistently differed in their approaches to arms control. In general, the East has insisted on mutual agreement to disarm before considering systems of control to implement disarmament, viewing Western proposals for inspection as a subterfuge for espionage. The West has reiterated its position that effective controls must accompany each and every disarmament step in order to assure actual disarmament. Since nuclear deterrence has been a critical part of Western policy from World War II onward, a proposal to abolish weapons of mass destruction presented, at least initially, a greater danger to the West's security than to the East's, whose ground forces were greater. It was within this kind of a world situation that the churches sought to give their guidance in the interest of world peace.

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