

THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Leo Tolstoy once remarked that "certain questions are put to mankind, not that men should answer them, but that they should go on trying." The highly complex Middle East situation in which we must deal with the rights of Jews and Arabs against the background of a power struggle between a Russia and an America with nuclear weapons often seems to be one of those questions. I do not here propose to offer any final answer. But I will try to state clearly what I conceive to be some misconceptions blocking a possible solution.

A political solution which does not consider the question of the rights of the local people is not morally justified. But neither is a solution which appeals to moral principles but lacks political and historical sophistication. To begin to evaluate the Middle East situation from a moral point of view, I believe the following considerations are essential.

1. As a Catholic, I am seriously disturbed by the continued lack of recognition of the State of Israel by the Vatican. This is a source of some irritation to the Israeli government, and rightly so. I am not at all convinced the Vatican should be involved in the diplomatic game of recognizing governments. But it so happens that it now is and there is no immediate change in the foreseeable future. And the recent visit of President Nixon to the Pope underlines the Vatican's continued importance. I strongly suspect that the traditional theology of Christianity which relegated Jews to a life of perpetual wandering for the death of the Messiah, played an important role in the original decision not to recognize Israel. This was the reply given by Cardinal Merry de Val, then Secretary of State, to Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, when Herzl came to the Vatican to speak about a Jewish national homeland. There is still a residue of this theological anti-Semitism present in the Vatican according to Father Cornelius Rijk, head of the Vatican Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations. But the principal reason given for non-recognition today is fear of reprisal by Arab governments against their minority Catholic population. The fear may be real. Yet I feel that the justice of the larger

situation demands that the Vatican take a risk and abandon its narrow internal Catholic concern. Some may ask what value papal recognition would have at present given the current esteem of papal pronouncements in many quarters of Catholicism. I feel the principal value would lie in increased pressure on the thirteen or so other so-called Catholic nations (principally Latin nations) that have refused to recognize Israel because of the Vatican attitude. This lack of recognition frequently constitutes a difficult problem for Israel at the United Nations where she must sometimes deal with the Security Council, a majority of whose members do not recognize her. Vatican recognition would also remove the lingering impression that there is something immoral about the very existence of the State of Israel.

2. Christians must become much clearer in their notion of the recent history of the Middle East and of Zionism in particular before making any moral judgments on the current situation. The American Christian majority has, on the whole, been deprived of any real knowledge of modern Middle Eastern history because of the preoccupation of our educational system with American and Western European history. This situation should be corrected. Many Americans have learned that Zionism is a dirty word, that it is synonymous with militarism and expansionism. Zionism is anything but a rigid univocal concept. Once it is granted that a Jewish national homeland is vital to Jewish survival, Zionism takes on different meanings for different Jews. This has been the case from the very beginning of modern Zionism. Herzl's views were not fully shared by Ahad-ha-Am, Martin Buber or Labor Zionism. And there is hardly complete agreement in Israel or in the diaspora on what Israel's policy should be today. An Israeli such as Jack J. Cohen, in a major article in *The Reconstructionist* ("Arabs and Jews: From Dilemma to Problem," October 6, 1967), has expressed the belief that the Israeli government has not done enough for its Arab citizens. Zionism has fundamentally represented an attempt to insure Jewish survival (and what is wrong with wanting to survive?) through the concept of a nation-state. Now there is nothing sacred about the nation-state concept. I certainly stand with those who see the

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need for a movement towards a more global form of government. But realistically, that day is not yet with us. How many Americans are willing at present to relinquish some of their sovereignty to a world or regional government? Until we are willing to do this, I fail to see how one can suggest, as some Christian writers have, that the Israeli preoccupation with nationhood is somewhat philosophically and politically old hat. Let us not fall into the trap of judging Israel by some form of political eschatology.

3. Christians must begin to take a realistic attitude towards the Israel-United Nations issue. Christian writers have often given the impression that Israel should place her fate fully in the hands of the United Nations. For Israel to act otherwise would be somehow immoral. I am a strong supporter of the U.N. and firmly hope that one day it might become even more important than at present. But U.N. diplomats are hardly disinterested humanists. The dominant factor is still power and a *quid pro quo* mentality. And in terms of political clout at the U.N., the Arabs have power. Israeli cynicism about the U.N. in the present crisis is not totally unjustified.

4. The demographic changes resulting from the U.N. settlements of the British Palestinian Mandate need to be placed in proper perspective. The impression is often given that Israelis are living on stolen land which the Western nations granted her as a guilt offering for the genocide of the Nazi period. Some demographic changes were inevitable in a rational solution of the Mandate issue, changes that affected both Jews and Arabs. It should be remembered that Jews had been occupying a considerable part of the territory that is now Israel for years before 1948, having purchased the land through special funds set up by Zionist leaders. And there has been a continual Jewish settlement in the area from biblical times. Prior to the British Mandate, the area was in the hands of the Turks. The U.N. partition plan of 1948 called for the creation of an Arab and a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It was the Arabs who rejected the plan. This Arab refusal has been primarily responsible for the tremendous suffering endured by the Palestinian refugees for twenty years.

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Here is another vital distinction that one must make when dealing with rights in the Middle East. It is not Jordan or Egypt or Syria or Iraq that have suffered injustice in Palestine. Only the Palestinians can make such a claim. And their problems are due much more to the actions of their Arab neighbors and to Russia than to Israeli policy. If the U.N. partition had been accepted, I am sure the Palestinians (who are in many

ways the most creative and educated of the Arab peoples) could have a well-developed national homeland. Instead, their rightful homeland is in the hands of Jordan (a fact which Palestinian commando leaders have acknowledged recently in statements appearing in the *Christian Science Monitor*) and they have been treated at best as second-class citizens in other Arab countries which have used the hate-Israel slogan to cover up internal problems. This is especially true for the U.A.R., Syria and Iraq. Jordan has been caught in the middle of a political squeeze. Left to itself, Jordan would have made peace with Israel long ago. I do not believe there can be a morally justified settlement of the Middle East problem without the creation of a Palestinian national homeland along the lines of the 1948 plan, joined perhaps in some sort of economic union with Israel and Jordan. And the states have to be politically separate. The current Palestinian proposal for a single Jewish-Palestinian state is unrealistic at present.

The major world powers ought to help the growth of the new Palestinian state in any way they can, either directly or through an agency such as the World Bank. Even from a strictly political viewpoint the Palestinians, through the recent organizational mergers, are strong enough to prevent any effective peace in the area if they fail to receive some form of national identity.

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5. Christian writers on occasion have criticized certain Israeli actions in such a way that it would seem Israel had no right to exist if it was guilty of any failures whatsoever. I noted earlier an erroneous application of political eschatology to Israel. Here we have the false application of moral eschatology to Israel. There is legitimate room to question some Israeli policies. Israelis themselves have, and are doing precisely this. But even if one were to judge certain actions of Israel as morally wrong, this would not automatically rule out the continued existence of the state. If such eschatological criteria of absolute morality were applied to our own country, I ask what the verdict would be. Certainly my conscience troubles me when I read of Israeli use of napalm in the June, 1967 war. And certainly I worry about the possibility of a war mentality being forced upon Israelis. But I must judge these aspects against the total picture of rights and wrongs and against the fact that the Israeli government is not dominated by militarists. In fact, the recent party merger in Israel has strengthened the doves.

On particular issues such as the status of Jerusalem there is room for discussion and disagreement. I wish

east Asia. But Schlesinger and other critics who weren't born yesterday have no rational excuse for their pathetic illusions. Is the way to bridge the generation gap to have over-thirties join under-thirties in ignoring the lessons of history, indeed of contemporary history? Unfortunately, the Cold War cannot be ended by unilateral gestures of good will by America. Youth is naturally impatient; adults shouldn't be.

If history and prudence suggest the need for resolution and patience in dealing with the Vietnam affair, they also suggest the same qualities are needed to achieve racial justice in America. Despite the fact that young blacks in this country get uptight when you say it, it needs to be said that the liquidation of discrimination cannot be achieved overnight. No comparable domestic ill in this country or elsewhere has ever been overcome without a long struggle. And, unhappily, racism is one of the toughest problems in America and around the world. This is not, needless to say, a call for tranquillity or indifference. It is rather a suggestion that leaders should enlighten public opinion, continue to promote programs of action which get at the roots of the problem, and at the same time insist to young black and white militants that their great expectations for an immediate end to racial injustice simply cannot be realized. As is the case with Vietnam, leaders should portray the background of the racial problem, put it into historical perspective. It should have been solved long ago. But it wasn't, for other issues were at the top of the nation's agenda. Today racial justice should have first priority among domestic goals. But its full realization will take time, as will the genuine end of the Cold War.

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It has been said over and over again that young Americans are the best generation in our history; best-fed, best-educated, best-informed, most generous and idealistic. It has also been suggested that some of the brightest and best are to be found in the ranks of the S.D.S. and other radical organizations. Some distinctions are in order. That the young are the best-fed generation in American history seems indisputable. Beyond that the other superlatives often heaped on them seem questionable to say the least. Youth has always been quick to judge, but deficient in knowledge and understanding. Young people lack historical perspective and the seasoned judgment which can only be gained by experience. Polls consistently show that the majority of young Americans have various grievances about universities and the policies of their government, some real, some imagined, some valid, some foolish. The minority of radical whites and blacks do not have majority support for their views and violent

approach. On the other hand, the majority of young people share some of the grievances of the radical minority. Young blacks of course have legitimate aspirations. Young white militants such as those in the S.D.S., who have interpreted Vietnam and racial injustice to mean that their country is totally bankrupt morally, intellectually and politically, are simply wrong. They don't really understand Marxism-Leninism, or know anything about life in the Soviet Union, Red China and elsewhere in the Communist world. They have concluded that the "power structure" or "The Establishment" in America is their foe, and since Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, and Havana are enemies of their enemy, have leaped via an act of faith (folly) to the conclusion that the "bad guys" are the "good guys." It is a psychological phenomenon, not a judgment resting on knowledge and understanding.



Americans have always been an impatient people, with great confidence in their capacity to solve problems. Young people today are extremely idealistic and impatient, the Now Generation. Most of them, nevertheless, support the ideals and institutions of this country, and are not following the lead of radical young whites and blacks. Most young whites have had a relatively soft life during their childhood and youth, and they would like to have this continued during their adult years. But they should be told that America confronts heavy responsibilities in the world in the 1970's as it has for the last thirty years. They should be taught to think in terms of alternatives in this imperfect world, imperfect because man is not an angel. What are the alternatives to democracy? What are the alternatives to America's foreign policy of containment? Youth's natural emotionalism, idealism, and enthusiasm need to be joined in university years with appreciation that there is no substitute for knowledge and experience. The study of politics involves three basic factors: (1) ethical principles, (2) empirical

observation and analysis, and (3) practical judgment. The practice of politics and foreign policy requires one to "Keep his feet in the mud, and his eyes on the stars." Most young Americans today can be reached with this sort of balanced approach, despite the pressure of Vietnam, racism, and other problems, and despite the noisy minority of militants who receive a disproportionate share of coverage by the sensationalist or at least thoughtless mass media.

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If the S.D.S. and other radical, Know-Nothing groups are disturbing, the antics of some leaders over-thirty in recent years are equally alarming. A college president recently told President Nixon that until Vietnam and racism are ended there will be campus turmoil and extremism. Should he not center his attention on trying to give the students on his campus historical perspective? There have always been pressing problems in American society, and there always will be. There always has been and always will be a gap between the ideal and the real. To say that extremism will persist until ills are abolished is to say that there will always be radical militants, and in effect to justify their position. This is an invitation to chronic extremism and disruption. America has long been notorious for coddling of the young, but this is surely going too far. It is a sign of the times that so many over-thirties insist that utopias are the only answers to our problems. Utopias are by definition impossible of realization. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that some adults are suffering from a failure of nerve. They lack the persistence and patience to stick with tough problems. This is understandable in the young; it is pathetic in adults.

The Vietnam conflict has produced a new breed of critics. In former times they would have been dismissed for what they are: charlatans and mountebanks. Various and sundry preachers, professors and others have set themselves up as authorities in foreign policy without possessing even elementary qualifications. They don't know the A, B, C's of international relations. Yet they have pontificated endlessly about the alleged immorality, illegality, and folly of America's role in Vietnam. Whether America should have made a commitment to Saigon in the mid-1950's, and the manner in which this country has tried to meet that commitment, are of course matters of debate among competent students of American foreign policy and Asian history and politics. But Hans Morgenthau correctly asserted that ". . . most academic experts in international relations and Asian politics either actively supported the government policies in Vietnam or cast no public judgment on them . . ." The self-

righteous arrogance with which the Johnson Administration was assailed by non-expert critics over-thirty is even more appalling than the like quality demonstrated by the S.D.S. and other under-thirty organizations. One can grant the complexity of Vietnam, mistakes by the United States, and the generally poor manner in which the Johnson Administration explained its policies and options. But all this does not justify the extreme manner and statements of those doves who lack competence, but who have used their position in other fields to offer themselves as reliable guides to public opinion in the tangled area of foreign policy.

Martin Marty has recently called for a balanced approach by Christians, one which avoids secular utopianism as well as other-worldliness. This in effect constitutes a plea for an older attitude which has been obscured in recent years by the enthusiasm with which some Catholics and Protestants alike have sprinkled Holy Water on the perfectionist doctrines of the so-called Enlightenment. The difficult and numerous problems confronting mankind today are not susceptible to resolution by crusading zeal unanchored to a realistic appreciation of human nature and historical complexity. The antics of some over- and under-thirty New Breed types remind one of Montaigne's observation that "supercelestial thoughts and subterranean actions" go hand in hand together. Or, "He who would act the angel acts the brute." If Christian thinkers and doers are to offer relevant guidance, they must be neither Pollyannas nor Cassandras.

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It must be said that all too many leaders in education, politics, and the mass media have been doing a poor job of enlightening public opinion in this country in recent years. They should explain problems, policy options, and decisions in a manner which respects the public's capacity to handle complexity and diversity. This is ultimately the only way in which the widespread irrationalism of the time can be overcome. Henry Fairlie has said that democratic leaders must demonstrate political courage; be firm when the people are undecided; calm in the midst of passion; and brave in the presence of panic. These qualities are surely needed today, when repression from the Right is rising in response to the antics of the Left. Politicians are not saviors or magicians, as Fairlie has reminded us. They cannot hope to ply their trade successfully if they have to operate in the midst of widespread mental and moral confusion. All those in opinion-molding positions of responsibility should now more than ever demonstrate the need to combine knowledge and understanding with commitment and compassion.