

# THE U.N. AND ITS CRITICS

*George G. Higgins*

"Theologians, like metaphysicians," an English friar observes in a recent treatise on political philosophy, "are particularly susceptible to the attractions of what has been called the linotype school of history. They can easily be found to argue . . . that if certain ideas are applied then they are bound to produce certain results. If all men served justice there would be no social problems—if free trade were adopted the world would be economically balanced and stable—both arguments impose a hypothesis after much the same fashion." This method, he continues, is legitimate but only within limits.

It would be fair to say, I think, that these limits have long since been exceeded by some of the more vocal critics of the United Nations, or, more precisely, by those particular critics of the United Nations who seem to argue from the hidden premise that international order can be established and international peace maintained as a sort of automatic byproduct of individual moral reform or by the automatic application, in an institutional vacuum, of abstract principles of morality; or, to put it another way, which comes to much the same thing, by the ideal implementation of disembodied moral principles in an ideal world organization.

Few of these critics are theologians or metaphysicians. The record will show that professional theologians and metaphysicians, or at least the majority of religious organizations, have been eminently realistic in their appraisal of the United Nations and in many instances have publicly endorsed it, not indeed as a perfect organization, but at least as a step, a very important step, in the right direction.

Witness, for example, Pope Paul's "moral ratification" of the United Nations in his celebrated address to the General Assembly on October 4, 1965. At that time he characterized the United Nations as "the obligatory path of modern civilization and of world peace," as a great school "where . . . the education of mankind in the ways of peace is imparted," and finally as the world's "largest hope of concord and

peace." In spite of such official religious pronouncements, however, many religious-minded men and women in the United States, and presumably in other countries as well, appear quite cynical about the United Nations today; at best, they seem to have lost interest in the organization.

Assuming, as I think we must, that the majority of these people, the professional demagogues excluded, are men and women of reasonably good will, acting upon reasonably worthy motives, we would do more harm than good, in my opinion, if we were to try to shame them out of their cynicism and their attitude of defeatism by the lazy rhetorical device of branding all of them indiscriminately as benighted or reactionary isolationists. What is needed at the present time is a patient attempt to exorcise the enervating spirit of cynicism and defeatism in the field of international relations, not by belittling the importance of religion and the moral law, but by demonstrating to the best of our collective ability the practical impossibility of ever adequately implementing the principles of the moral law at the international level without benefit of an international organization with adequate legislative, executive, and juridical powers.

This will involve the added and more subtle task of demonstrating that patience is a virtue even in the natural order, that the best is often the enemy of the good, or, to put it another way, that half a loaf is better than no bread at all. It will also involve a sincere effort on the part of all so-called internationalists to make the necessary distinctions between good and bad internationalism and a sincere effort on their part to understand why it is that so many good people are instinctively suspicious of any kind of internationalism.

I submit that what many of these people are instinctively concerned about is the kind of internationalism which might imply the suppression of legitimate national interests, a disdain for the virtue of legitimate patriotism, the abolition of nationalities, or the uprooting of ancient cultural traditions. The Code of International Ethics compiled by the International Union of Social Studies not so many years ago took note of this concern on the part of many well-meaning people but hastened to add:

There is another internationalism which we would rather call—if usage allowed—universal-

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ism, so as to emphasize the sense in which it complements the particularism of nations.

This type of internationalism does not disdain the very diverse cultural values which distinguish various national groups and form their heritage. It respects them fully, for it knows their worth.

But it goes beyond these contingent aspects of human life to discover and retain as a higher reality that identity of nature which makes all human beings to be members of one family, and all nations the constituent parts of a much vaster, supranational, universal society.

Without undertaking here the difficult assignment of convincing the cynics or the apathetic that they are wrong about the United Nations, I would like to suggest a few tentative approaches to the issue of internationalism. As a convenient point of departure, I would open the discussion, from the point of view of Catholic theology, with a pertinent quotation from a posthumous treatise by a brilliant young Jesuit who was executed in France by the Gestapo during World War II, Father Yves de Montcheuil, S.J.:

The Christian receives from his Christianity an ideal of universal communion between men, for the communion of each man with God implies the communion of all men in God. God cannot, so to speak, be possessed by each individual for himself, but only in common.

The ideal is realizable only in the hereafter, both in its intimacy and in its extension. But it should begin to take form here below; its beginning has a value, not only as a means to a future realization, but as a preliminary rough draft thereof . . .

The communion between human beings, a very imperfect good but a very real one, cannot simply be postponed for the beyond. Anyone who desires it (and could one be a Christian without doing so passionately?) will seek to bring it about without delay and will always wish to increase and deepen it. Such an endeavor not only presupposes an effort toward individual understanding, but also the creation of objective conditions which facilitate it.

Every factor of hate or discord which divides, which opposes mutual understanding and love, will unceasingly be opposed by the Christian. Everything which may aid in bringing minds and hearts together will be abetted. Therein lies the basis for an untiring activity in the political, economic, and social domain which is carried on in this life and which applies directly to the temporal order.

The application of this very pregnant summary of

the Christian law of human brotherhood to the field of international relations is, I think, patently, if not transparently, obvious. Father de Montcheuil refers to the necessity of creating whatever objective conditions are necessary to facilitate the application of the universal law of charity. Paramount among these objective conditions is an international organization charged with the responsibility and endowed with sufficient power, coercive power if necessary, to maintain order and peace in the world community of nations and to give flesh and blood to what would otherwise be vague and ineffective sentiments of human brotherhood.

If it be said by way of rejoinder that the United Nations as presently constituted is not such an organization, those of us who believe in the United Nations would be well advised, in my opinion, to concede the point as gracefully as possible without rancor or embarrassment. We can then go on to remind the critics of the United Nations in the name of political prudence, that the present United Nations, with all its admitted imperfections, is better than nothing and is certainly capable of being perfected as time goes on. This is the realistic attitude taken by the bishops of the Catholic Church in the United States. In their approach to the United Nations, they have been realistic in the best sense of the word—not susceptible to the attractions of the so-called linotype school of history. They do not believe that abstract disembodied moral principles will automatically or inevitably produce results if applied in a vacuum. They recognize the necessity of institutional reform side by side with individual moral reform, and they are sufficiently patient to bear manfully with the fact that institutional reform, in the nature of things, is almost inevitably a discouragingly slow process.

Father Thomas Gilby of the English Dominicans, a commentator of St. Thomas Aquinas, said of the greatest of the scholastic philosophers that “he was a moralist, not a moralizer. As his theology did not extinguish, but protected, profane value, and as his metaphysics acted like an umbrella under which the special sciences could shelter, so his moral science, while postulating the principles, did not dictate the procedure of politics.”

The same thing, it seems to me, can rightfully be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about the American bishops with reference to the position they have taken on the subject of world organization. They are moralists, not moralizers. They have refrained, in Father Gilby’s terminology, from attempting to dictate the procedure of politics. They have postulated certain moral prin-

principles designed to improve and strengthen the United Nations, but they recognize full well that politics, especially in the virgin territory of international relations, is the art of the possible and that statesmanship, as Father Gilby puts it, "cannot be treated as a mere prolongation of ethics, for it is a quasi-independent art, working in its own proper medium. . . ."

The position of the bishops with regard to the United Nations has been publicly stated several times but never more clearly than it was in their official statement of November 18, 1945, six months after the completion of the United Nations Charter:

Our peace program envisages a world organization of nations. The charter which emerged from the San Francisco Conference, while undoubtedly an improvement on the Dumbarton Oaks proposals, does not provide for a sound institutional organization of the international society. The Security Council provisions make it no more than a virtual alliance of the great powers for the maintenance of peace. These nations are given a status above the law.

Nevertheless our country acted wisely in deciding to participate in this world organization. It is better than world chaos. From the provision in the charter for calling a constituent assembly in the future, there comes the hope that in time the defects may be eliminated and we may have a sound institutional organization of the international community, which will develop not through mere voluntary concessions of the nations, but from the recognition of the rights and duties of the international society.

Charter revision, as recommended by the bishops in this statement, is the intelligent *via media* between utopianism on the one hand and cynicism or defeatism on the other. It would be a serious mistake, however, to center all of our attention on the political, technical, and psychological problems involved in bringing about an adequate revision of the charter. An effort must be made to dramatize the unspectacular but tremendously important accomplishments and potentialities of the specialized agencies of the United Nations, particularly those which are directly concerned with problems of social justice and economic betterment.

Many of those who are currently cynical about the United Nations considered as a purely political instrumentality, are highly sensitive to problems of human suffering and human misery whether at home or abroad. They are capable, however, of becoming cynical about the I.L.O., the F.A.O., the World Health Organization, UNESCO and other specialized agencies of the United Nations because they are not suffi-

ciently aware of the humanitarian work which these organizations are attempting to do. If they knew the facts of the case, there is reason to believe that their native generosity and their religious heritage would incline them to say amen to the encouraging message which the late Pope Pius XII addressed to the delegates attending the seventh session of the F.A.O.

The civilized world always looks with great sadness at the pitiful picture of hunger victims at a time when the earth is capable of feeding all men. To abolish such an evil once and for all is certainly worth sacrifices and justifies great devotion. Was not Christ careful to satisfy the hunger of the crowds which followed Him? Did He not teach His disciples a prayer that asks for daily bread?

In pursuing the goal which you have set for yourselves you are undoubtedly seeking an end dear to Him who consecrated Himself to the salvation of humanity. That is why we want you to go on with your work without faltering. It is without question only at its beginning, but you have already learned a great deal from experience. The tools with which you work are being improved and your prestige is increasing among governments who appreciate more and more the usefulness and the fruits of your activities.

If the final goal is not yet in sight, you can at least hope that a greater understanding and a more active cooperation will come to reinforce and multiply the results already obtained and to guarantee more rapid progress in the future.

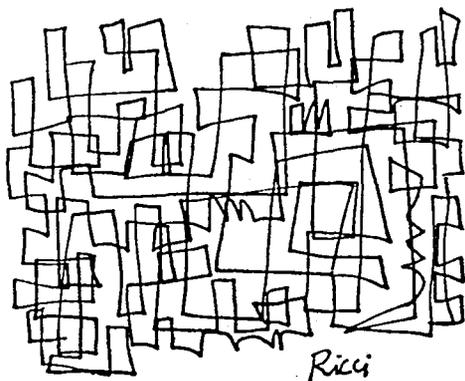
What Pope Pius XII was saying, in effect, and what Pope Paul VI said even more emphatically in his recent address on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of I.L.O. was that the specialized agencies of the United Nations working in related fields of human welfare are a very important, if not an indispensable means of carrying out the corporal works of mercy in the spirit of the Gospel under twentieth-century conditions.

Their emphasis on the spiritual aspects of the United Nations and their unflagging spirit of Christian optimism in the face of many discouragements should serve to dispel the fearful misgivings of many religious-minded men and women who, with the best of good will, have ironically, but let us hope only temporarily, become cynical about the United Nations in the name of abstract disembodied moral principles.

In this connection, it will be appropriate to add a word of sincere congratulations to all of those who participated in the time-consuming and often very frustrating negotiations which resulted in the General Assembly's overwhelming vote in favor of a far-reach-

ing treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. On July 1, 1968, representatives of some fifty nations signed this treaty at a White House ceremony to which I had the good fortune to be invited. In the course of this ceremony, President Johnson, Secretary Rusk, Ambassador Dobrynin of the Soviet Union and Ambassador Dean of Great Britain delivered impressive talks about the historic significance of the treaty. They said all of the appropriate things and said them very well indeed. For my own part, however, I wish that time had permitted them to pay tribute by name to all of the skillful, patient negotiators and diligent seekers after peace whose perseverance brought the treaty into being.

These men—together with the leaders of their own nations, the men who appointed them to their sensitive posts—deserve the sincere thanks of a world which is sick unto death of war. They haven't been able to eliminate war or to bring about instant peace, but, as the Vatican Council's pastoral *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* points out, their "efforts . . . to eliminate the danger of war are not to be underrated." On the contrary, they deserve our fullest support, for "though burdened by the enormous preoccupations of their high office, [they] are none the less motivated by the very grave peace-making task to which they are bound, even if they cannot ignore the complexity of matters as they stand . . . [theirs] is a suprême work of love for mankind."



Other men, working for the same cause in a more spectacular way, will continue to receive the lion's share of publicity. So be it. In my judgment, however, the real heroes of the peace movement are the William Fosters of this world who are willing to devote all of their time and energy and talents to the cause of peace, not in dramatic fits and starts, but around the clock, year after year, with the realistic understanding that while their efforts will not eliminate war in one fell swoop, hopefully they will bring us just a little bit closer, one step at a time, to the cherished goal of international peace.

Permit me to quote from an article by Walter Lippmann which took the form of a commentary on the address which many considered to be the most discerning and perceptive American commentary on the Holy Father's historic message. Mr. Lippmann wrote, in part, as follows:

No one who heard him attentively, or will read him now, can fail to realize that he was speaking a different language from that which is current and conventional. In fact, the Pope, who is without pride and has nothing to fear, was thinking what is unthinkable for so many, and he was saying it out loud. His conception of the secular world is quite different from the conception which underlies public discussion—be it in Peking or in Washington. The crucial difference is that in the Pope's address the paramount issue is not the cold war or hostile ideologies. Although religion in general and the Roman Church in particular have been treated as the chief enemies of the Communists, the Pope said that the paramount crusade of mankind is the crusade against war and for peace. This is a different set of values than are accepted as righteous in the public life of the warring nations. The Pope was, of course, intending to make this known, and he reached the climax of his message, so it seemed to me, when he declared that the root of evil in this angry, hostile and quarreling world "is pride, no matter how legitimate it may seem to be." . . . We shall have heard the Pope's message when we have taken those words to heart.

Mr. Lippmann's basic point was extremely well taken. Pride is, indeed, "the root of evil in this angry, hostile and quarreling world . . ." It would be utterly naive, thus, to look upon any institution or organization—including the United Nations or any of its specialized agencies—as a panacea for the ills of the world. I have sounded this warning, not to qualify, much less to retract, Pope Paul's "moral ratification" of the United Nations as the world's "last hope of concord and peace" but simply to emphasize, in the Pope's own words, that the United Nations "does not rest upon merely natural foundations . . . [but] must be built upon spiritual principles; the only principles capable not only of supporting it but also of enlightening and animating it. And these indispensable principles of higher wisdom can rest only—and you know that this is our conviction—upon faith in God; that unknown God, of whom St. Paul spoke to the Athenians in the Areopagus; unknown by them, although without realizing it they sought Him and He was close to them, as happens also to many men of our times."