

THE CHURCH AS ACCOMPLICE: REFLECTIONS ON MY LAI

Gordon Zahn

It is not an easy charge to make. But the facts are there for all to see. They have been there for quite some time, however few may be disposed even now to acknowledge them, and they lend themselves to a sad conclusion: that the Christian churches of America—and this applies with special force to my own Roman Catholic communion—have permitted themselves to become fully responsible accomplices to war crimes and atrocities that have been committed by our nation and her allies in Vietnam.

Past ignorance and timidity masquerading as prudence may explain but can no longer justify a posture of Olympian detachment. The awful facts are now a matter of public record. Murder has been done, murder of a kind and on a scale that cries for retribution. We have reached the point where silence for whatever reason is completely indefensible.

It is generally acknowledged that one who observes a crime in progress and persists in silence which permits the criminal to go unchallenged and unpunished takes upon himself a share of the guilt. Neither fear of the inconvenience or hazards that might result from speaking out, nor a personal relationship with the wrongdoer, can free him from his responsibility or the burden of his contributory guilt. The same rule, I would insist, must apply to the religious community, "the Church," and its responsible leaders.

Years before the massacre at My Lai, a German writer made what seemed to be an outrageously extravagant accusation: Lidice and Oradour, he said, are today villages in Vietnam. We know now that he was right. In fact we have known since 1966, when *Ramparts* first published Donald Duncan's account of his war experiences and Frank Harvey's report of our murderous air war appeared in the pages of *Flying* magazine. In 1968, *In the Name of America* presented a well-documented survey comparing the record of U.S. military behavior with the laws of war and revealing the extent to which atrocities

and war crimes had become a recurring pattern and not, as we are still so easily persuaded, rare and certainly unplanned excesses. Finally, the initial My Lai revelations forced a moment of shocked awareness and even brought into being the 1970 Congressional Conference on War and National Responsibility. It was a brief and passing moment, however, and the prevailing mood soon became one of "understanding" rationalization and, let us be honest enough to admit it, something actually approaching justification of that atrocity.

Now the brutal facts have been spelled out for us again in shocking detail in the testimony given at the various courts-martial convened to try the men involved. There is no longer basis for doubt that this event occurred, and men have formally admitted taking part in the killings. Still, one after the other of the men on trial have been acquitted or heard the charges against them dismissed. There is every reason to assume that this pattern, too, will be unbroken; if by any chance some defendant is found guilty, chances are that he will be spared any serious penalty for the crime.

There is no reason to be surprised, or even too disturbed, by this prospect. Surely only the incredibly naive could expect any court consisting of senior military officers (in many cases officers who had held command assignments in Vietnam) to declare that enlisted men, non-coms, or junior officers should have questioned orders passed down to them or, even more unthinkable, should have refused or disobeyed them. Thus the arrow of guilt that was first aimed at the men who actually pressed the triggers and then at Lt. Calley for giving the "on the scene" orders is now pointing at Capt. Medina and seems about to shift to his superior, the late Lt. Col. Barker—with every probability that it will stop there and the charges be dropped altogether. After all, a man who has died a hero's death and cannot defend himself is not likely to be posthumously degraded to the status of a war criminal. By the same token, since the nature and extent of Barker's responsibility is an essential link in the chain, the discontinuity makes it impossible to move beyond his part in the affair to the higher-ranking

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officers and civilian officials who developed the policies which made My Lai possible and, indeed, inevitable.

None of us, I suppose, should be entirely satisfied with an outcome which finds incontrovertible evidence of the brutal slaughter of non-combatant old men, women, and children going unpunished. At the very least, justice should demand that the individuals involved be given a dishonorable discharge for their willing cooperation in an act that will remain a permanent blot on the nation's record. Having said this, we should also be prepared to acknowledge that it would be unjust to put the full burden of the blame upon the immediate perpetrators of the crime and to exact the more severe penalties of prison or death sentences. In a very real sense, and we must never forget it, the men who held the guns in their hands at My Lai must be counted among the victims too. I, for one, give credence to the statements of former neighbors and friends that Lt. Calley was a quiet, well-behaved high school boy. What happened in between is the responsibility of the nation which took that high school boy, trained him, and—to apply the harsh but unanswerable indictment voiced by the anguished mother of another of these men—sent him back a murderer. It might be soothing to the national ego to “throw the book” at Calley and the others; but to do so would let the real culprits, the complacent and compliant Americans who sent them there to “do the job” and paid the bills, off the hook.

This, of course, is where the Church comes in. Sunday after Sunday they are there, the murderers of My Lai, and never once are they likely to hear a troubling word from the man in the pulpit. Massive organizational superstructures testify to the presence of Christianity on the American scene; yet, even though more than a year has passed since the Ridenhour disclosures burst upon the national consciousness, no official spokesman of any of our major denominations has seen fit to take public notice of the atrocity in the name of his church, no resolution has been passed by episcopal conferences to give voice to the outraged conscience of mankind. Individuals yes, but the usual, the “unofficial” individuals, the “troublemakers” who have made it their practice (at the cost of no little embarrassment to their respective communions) to “arrogate” to themselves the task of giving witness to the Christian mission of peace. Needless to add, their efforts have had no support or encouragement from the duly designated leaders of the Christian establishment.

Nor is this merely a matter of innocent oversight. In one case, at least, it must be seen as a distinct

refusal to make even a minimal gesture of awareness and concern. For on November 1, 1969, I made what I still regard as an extremely modest proposal to Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit: that, acting in his capacity as President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, he issue a call for a national Day of Reparation on which Masses would be offered for the victims of My Lai and similar excesses committed by our armed forces in our name. This would also be the occasion for sermons warning the faithful against the spiritual danger of permitting their nationalistic prides and loyalties to blind them to the enduring demands of Christian moral values. A year later I repeated the suggestion, this time noting the fact that the testimony being put on public record in the My Lai courts-martial verified that the horrible crime did in fact take place. On both occasions I noted that the Feast of the Holy Innocents would seem to be a most appropriate day for such a public and official ceremonial observance. The result? Neither letter received the courtesy of a response from the Cardinal; nor is there anything to suggest that the suggestion was brought before his fellow members of the hierarchy for their consideration. (The Feast of the Holy Innocents, however, was appropriated for the latest episcopal crusade against abortion!)

This illustrates the extent to which the official spokesmen of the Church (and, let me insist again, this applies to all the major Christian churches) have abandoned their responsibility to speak the prophetic word when dealing with issues of war and peace. This is nothing new of course. In past researches and writings I have documented the scandalous failures of the Catholic Church in Nazi Germany to give witness against the immorality of the Hitler regime and the injustice of its wars. The same scandal, the same failure is now ours. If we have now been forced to confess the parallel between My Lai and Lidice, we must also confess that it has its match in the refusal of our American bishops to protest the former, just as their German counterparts turned their eyes away from the latter. Actually, if we are honest, the American hierarchy suffers by comparison on two counts. First, at Lidice only males were “executed,” whereas at My Lai the killing was indiscriminate so that even infants in their mothers’ arms were not spared. Second, the German bishops knew that they and their flocks would face certain Gestapo retaliation had they chosen to protest; our American bishops cannot claim even that much “justification” for their silence.

By this silence they have fastened upon their Church the role of accomplice after the fact of murder. But one must go further and present the charge of accomplice *before the fact* as well. Though I have not checked the religious affiliation of the men who were involved in the massacre, it can be said with full confidence that the Christians among them (except for the extremely unlikely possibility that any were members of one of the traditional peace churches) were prepared for their part by their early religious training. At some time or other all Christians are exposed to very literal applications of the Pauline instruction concerning obedience to duly designated superiors. To the extent that these teachings are effective and do take hold, the individual Christian will be predisposed to accept and obey all orders passed down to him by his superiors. To this extent, too, the all too familiar cliché which holds that "the good Christian is always the best soldier" is probably more truth than exaggeration.

The acquittal of Sgt. Hutto (and the dismissal of charges against several others which soon followed) assumes special relevance in this context. In his case there was a public admission that he had indeed accounted for the shooting of some of the victims; and the court went so far as to admit that he knew that what he did was wrong. Their decision to acquit rested on the finding that he was mentally unable to decide for himself that it would be right to disobey an order to commit that wrong. Lt. Calley has now undergone psychological tests to learn whether he, too, suffered from the same mental incapacity. Assuming he were to win acquittal on these grounds, the question would then have to be raised in the case of Capt. Medina, the man who briefed the unit and allegedly gave the order to kill everything that moved.

Sociologically as well as psychologically, that defense makes good sense. After all, the whole purpose of the intensive training and indoctrination to which all men in the armed forces are exposed is to instill in them patterns of obedience to commands that work as automatically as possible. And in the moral formation of every Christian soldier, acting now to reinforce the training program and its objectives, we will find reliance upon the same Pauline injunction which encouraged millions of devout German Christians to perform their military duty to "Folk and Fatherland" in what most Americans at least will agree was a patently unjust and immoral war. It is a troubling thought that the reasoning behind the Hutto verdict, if we were to transport it back in time, could have "acquitted" the members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, whose program of "pacification" of

hostile and potentially hostile areas was one of the war crimes brought to judgment at Nuremberg. It is sobering, too, to reflect that however thorough and efficient these infamous actions proved to be, they never quite aspired to the "everything that moves" scale of liquidation.

The churches' traditional emphasis upon obedience to authority and the whole host of associated patriotic virtues limits the mental capacity, or freedom, of the individual soldier suddenly faced with an order to do something he considers wrong. True, we have all sorts of sophisticated theological analyses which place limits upon obedience, but it is my observation that these seldom, if ever, trickle down into the education of young Catholics in parochial and high schools, in Catholic colleges, even in Catholic seminaries. The same can be said, I am sure, for the other Christian communions as well. Thus, when a My Lai does occur, the public silence of church leaders assumes special significance and becomes a double involvement in the crime itself. The failure to protest where protest is needed is bad enough; taken in the context of the Pauline tradition, it sets the example of acquiescence that the faithful are only too willing to follow. The silence, then, is not silence at all. It becomes a behavioral sermon quieting troubled consciences at the very time the Church should be stirring them up.

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Where, one must ask, were the chaplains assigned to Charley Company, and why have they not been heard from in the almost three years that have passed since the dreadful slaughter took place? I put the question though I think I know the answer. Based on research interviews conducted with R.A.F. chaplains in England some time ago, the following would probably hold true: The chaplains of Task Force Barker and Charley Company either accepted what happened as a tragic "military necessity" or, even more likely, avoided involving themselves in what they would regard as an intrusion into the commander's sphere of authority by even raising the question. A chaplain exceptionally sensitive about such things as murder might have gone further and voiced a personal protest, but it would have been a cautious protest and kept "within channels." Only the rarest of chaplains would even consider bringing the matter to public attention—a conclusion fully supported by the fact that it remained for a discharged serviceman to expose what was a topic of general conversation among the men in Vietnam!

An even more appropriate question: How has Cardinal Cooke, Roman Catholic Bishop to the

Armed Forces, defined his role in all of this? The answer here, too, is obvious enough. Like his fellow bishops, and despite the additional and specific responsibilities imposed by that office, he has been silent. Twice now since the facts first came to light he has made his ritual, morale-boosting Christmas excursions to Vietnam. It would have been a simple enough matter to visit the scene of the atrocity and offer his own Mass for the victims as an act of penance and reparation for the evil committed there by men in his spiritual charge. Instead, silence.

To charge the churches with complicity in this atrocity carries implications that extend far beyond the criminal acts that took place at this particular time and place. We must recognize that a failure of this dimension brings into question the credibility of their religious teachings as well as their professed commitment to the moral and spiritual values they proclaim. Many Christians today are concerned, and with good reason, about what appears to be an accelerating "leakage" of young people, especially those young people who have demonstrated their acute moral sensitivity and concern for social problems. Those who have "fallen away" from the institutional churches have made it clear enough. They are leaving because what passes for the Christian church in their experience has given ample evidence that it has little or nothing to say to them about such things as war, racism, and the extremes of affluence and poverty both at home and in the world at large.

The loss of credibility for the churches in the eyes of the young may not be the most immediate threat we must consider. Those who occupy the seats of temporal power are also well aware of the gap between stated principle and effective follow-through, and this could lead to even more destructive consequences. For many years now, moralists and magistrates have carried on a probing dialogue in which they have sought to establish guidelines and relationships between national security imperatives and ethics. The spokesmen for religion, sometimes official and other times not, have always assumed, as did their partners in the dialogue, that the churches were represented there because they were, in a sense, the keepers of the nation's conscience. What we should have suspected we now know from experience: This assumption, so logical in statement, is almost entirely without substance in fact. The failure of the churches to give voice to that conscience in the face of unassailable evidence of actual war crimes and morally questionable military policy has made it clear that the magistrates and their strategic experts have nothing to fear from that quarter; they are free to revise sharply downward whatever weight they may

have given to organized religion as a possible source of opposition and restraint.

Even Vatican II's condemnation of area-bombing has not been translated into official denunciation of napalm blankets covering 50-square-miles of territory or designation of "free-fire" zones open to indiscriminate aerial strafings and similar forms of wanton destruction. Nor has the established policy of spraying agricultural areas with chemical defoliants reminded ecclesiastical spokesmen of those old moral theology teachings which included "starvation blockades" among the immoral acts of war. And now we have My Lai, tying it all together in one bloody bundle, with its frighteningly simple lesson and its even more frightening implications for the future: A church which can be a silent accomplice to these crimes committed today is almost certain to find itself accomplice to crimes infinitely worse tomorrow.

J. EDGAR HOOVER BROUGHT US TOGETHER

Rosemary Ruether

On November 27th, F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover charged a group called The East Coast Conspiracy to Save Lives, which he alleged to be led by Philip and Daniel Berrigan, with a conspiracy to blow up heating units in Federal buildings and kidnap presidential advisor Henry Kissinger. From the beginning these charges evoked incredulity from those even faintly acquainted with the persons involved. It was apparent, for example, that Mr. Hoover did not know either the number or the composition of the group which he named and was using it as an omnibus term for anyone related to the Catholic Resistance. Then, in mid-January, the indictments on this charge were handed down by a grand jury meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Only one member of the East Coast Conspiracy to Save Lives, the Reverend Joseph Wenderoth, was even named in the indictment. The indictment charged six defendants and seven "co-conspirators," and the list had all the earmarks of a dragnet of the religious-oriented peace movement on the East Coast. Some of the people named did not even know each other, others were involved primarily through friendship or support of those who had been involved in draft actions, rather than through any-