Taking Bangla Desh in Stride: Selective Indignation in America

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The world community does not seem to care." This judgment appears in almost every analysis of the situation in Bangla Desh, formerly East Pakistan. North Americans know little about the politics of Pakistan, the geography of suffering, the moral issues involved. What is more, "compassion fatigue" has set in and our capacity for moral outrage is dormant, at least where the agonies of remote millions are concerned. Still we can, as Hugh McCullum, for example, does in the September, 1971, Canadian Churchman, make an effort to personalize the plea to help save the life of a Bengali refugee. ("One of the almost eight million driven from their homeland by soldiers of West Pakistan... the people... are systematically being destroyed culturally, politically and, in many cases physically by a repressive military regime from West Pakistan.")

McCullum knows that readers "don't want to be harangued again. You've seen it all. The old familiar scene from Biafra and the Middle East and South America and Vietnam. The naked child, the bloated belly, the wizened grandfather, the hopeless eyes." This tragedy is worse than Biafra, an earlier situation to which readers had eventually responded until compassion fatigue set in. "But this tragedy is a little worse." And it has political complications that were unrealized in Biafra. President Nixon is "playing with people's lives" in his leadership and in his encouragement of continued support of West Pakistan military ventures. On page after page, McCullum balances international political concerns with personal appeals: On a smaller scale, so have other editors. Their tone reveals one thing in common: They expect readers either to page rapidly past the articles on Bangla Desh or to have such a high threshold of resistance that very little will ever come of their reading.

Those who try to stave off the effects of that current version of "selective indignation" which overlooks Bangla Desh regularly ask: Why does one crisis reach a nation while others do not? The answer is not to be found in statistics. More Americans were roused to passionate support of one Lieutenant William Calley, declared by military courts to be a Mylai murderer, than were moved to indignation over the hundreds of deaths at Mylai—a fact demonstrable to anyone who observed the actions of the President after Calley's guilt was announced. Mr. Nixon had obviously been reading the public opinion polls. That larger numbers of people are involved in one crisis than in another makes little difference. Similarly, distance is not the critical factor; Bangla Desh is not much farther away than Vietnam, a nation which was eventually brought into the scope of American concern.

"The world community does not seem to care." Understanding why at least one part of that community, the United States, does not seem to care may not resolve the crisis, but it could be the first step. According to a New York Times editorial, the events in East Pakistan are "crimes against humanity unequalled since Hitler's time." It is hard to measure the accuracy of such a statement, but the editorial goes on to cite numerous now-eclipsed tragedies, some of which attracted American attention and others which did not. The butchery that followed partition of the Indian subcontinent, for example, probably registers not at all. When was that? Who were the parties, who the personalities? What was the loss of life, what was the reason given, what were the means? Public recognition is close to zero.

A second cited "crime against humanity" was Stalin's postwar crimes. "Selective indignation" in America picked that one up. America and Russia had been wary and uncertain allies during World War II; memories of earlier Red Scares in America and con-
sistent reportage of Stalinist atrocities had prepared the climate for outrage. Rejection of pro-Stalinist domestic Communists during the 1930's had built up public predispositions against Soviet leadership. Now a "cold war" had begun, most Americans had taken sides and were looking for confirmatory evidence. When news began to trickle out of Russia, the American public had no difficulty filling out its stereotype of Communist evil. Little could be done, of course, about an internal situation "behind the Iron Curtain," but people on this side could at least employ their indignation to shore up American defenses.

Then there was "the massacre of Communists in Indonesia"; an event that hardly blipped across the psychic radar screen of Americans. The same people who had justified the U.S. presence in Vietnam as an alternative to a potential "bloodbath" of anti-Communists should America withdraw, overlooked the anti-Communist bloodbath—worse than the Vietnamese one would appear to be in prospect—that had already occurred in Indonesia. Estimates of the dead vary from 250,000 to 500,000, yet the event received no more than a few paragraphs of newspaper space and was ignored by "prime time" television. After all, it was "our side" that was doing the killing, and anyway, Indonesia is far, far away.

Finally, suffering in Africa during two freedom decades must be listed in the catalog of comparative crises. Through the years, in part because of American blacks' identification with African causes and in part because of white America's fears, the African situations—including the morally and politically confusing Biafran scene—did begin to draw signs of recognition on the part of Americans.

We cannot say, then, that Bangla Desh is more overlooked than any of the other post-Hitler tragedies. It is safe to say that it is far down on the scale of neglect, rarely a subject of outrage, and clear evidence that "selective indignation" is operative. Selective indignation suggests that people respond to crises, threats, or events in no way proportionate to the quantity or quality of human misery involved. Other factors are determinative.

To begin to understand comparative crises and responses, a framework of inquiry designed by phenomenologist Alfred Schutz may be useful. Much of this framework is stated in formal philosophical terms and its detail does not concern us here; I shall freely pirate and translate his ideas as a background to understanding selective indignation in the case of Bangla Desh.

In his book On Phenomenology and Social Relations, Schutz speaks of "zones of relevance," describing four regions of decreasing relevance. First, "there is that part of the world within our reach which can be immediately observed by us and also at least partially dominated by us—that is, changed and rearranged by our actions. It is that sector of the world within which our projects can be materialized and brought forth." Cancer in my family is a matter of "primary relevance" as disease in Bangla Desh is not. Vandalism in my neighbor's house is so close to home that I respond out of fear for my own property or care for him in ways different from my response to property-destroyers far away. The burning of Watts, Detroit, Newark, are matters of primary relevance to citizens of those metropolitan areas as the burning of villages in Bangla Desh is not. The first rule of comprehension, then, would be that we expect less response to problems outside the zone of primary relevance.

Schutz speaks next of "fields not open to our domination but meditatively connected with the zone of primary relevance because, for instance, they furnish ready-made tools to be used for attaining the projected goal or they establish the conditions upon which our planning itself or its execution depends." One becomes familiar with these "zones of minor relevance," becoming aware of possibilities, chances, or risks contained in them "with reference to our chief interests."

The election of a Socialist premier in a Western Hemispheric nation, Chile, draws intermediate-range "selective indignation" responses. Our chief interests may be threatened and we begin to be alert. The Cuban revolution, "ninety miles away," was perceived as an immediate and direct threat—hence, the Bay of Pigs. It has been more difficult to dramatize the Chilean situation because of distance and the way in which the threat became present—the approved method of the ballot box as opposed to violent revolution. Bangla Desh has not fallen into this mediate zone.

Third, says Schutz, there are "other zones which, for the time being, have no such connection with the interest at hand." We call them "relatively irrelevant, indicating thereby that we may continue to take them for granted as long as no changes occur within them which might influence the relevant sectors by novel and unexpected chances of risks." Even though Bangla Desh might lead to war between populous India and Pakistan—over what, by the way, would become the eighth most populous nation in the world if it were granted independence—the situation remains "relatively irrelevant." We can picture the conflict moving from the third to the first zone were Americans suddenly able to see China, Russia, and the United States being drawn into war in that area, however.

Finally, there are "zones which we suggest calling absolutely irrelevant because no possible change occurring within them would—or so we believe—influence our objective in hand." Jacques Ellul, in his book called Violence, scorned Western radicals for their "selective indignation." They expressed rage at the U.S. presence in Vietnam because in embarrassing America they might further their own interests.
They did not seem intrinsically interested in human suffering as such; they could conveniently overlook comparable misery in the Sudan. Why? Because, says Ellul, the outcomes there seemed "absolutely irrelevant" to those radicals' political objectives.

While Bangla Desh is not being dismissed as "absolutely irrelevant," it hardly represents anything closer than the third zone.

Schutz reminds us that "interest at hand" does not represent an integral, static, closed system of phenomena. There are pluralities of interests, neither constant nor homogeneous. Further, these are imprecise and intermingled. Last, and most important, there are "intrinsic" and there are "imposed" relevances.

Intrinsic relevances "are the outcome of our chosen interests, established by our spontaneous decision to solve a problem by our thinking, to attain a goal by our action, to bring forth a projected state of affairs." We are free to choose what we are interested in, but an established interest determines the system of relevances. We then have to put up with this system as established. Thus, Americans have come to regard the racial crisis as established and thus fit new responses within an intrinsic and almost automatic framework. Most have taken sides for black or white, for militant or moderate, for backlasher or reconciler. Stereotypes can then readily be filled. Not so with a situation such as Bangla Desh, where neither West nor East Pakistan is yet part of a national mind-set here.

Schutz speaks also of "imposed relevances." We are not centers of spontaneity, "gearing into the world and creating changes within it." "Imposed upon us as relevant are situations and events which are not connected with interests chosen by us, which do not originate in acts of our discretion, and which we have to take just as they are, without any power to modify them by our spontaneous activities except by transforming the relevances thus imposed into intrinsic relevances." While that remains unachieved, says Schutz, "we do not consider the imposed relevances as being connected with our spontaneously chosen goals. Because they are imposed upon us they remain unclarified and rather incomprehensible." In those few words, Schutz has written an abstract history of the Vietnamese war and American consciousness. During the early 1960's, the man on the street could not have located Vietnam on the map. From his youthful stamp-collecting days he may have known about French Indochina; but Vietnam partitioning, Geneva accords, and the profiles of Southeast Asia remained unclarified and incomprehensible. Some Pentagon and State Department people who, no doubt sincerely, believed that Vietnamese destinies were closely connected with our national self-interest ("domino theories," "cold war enemy expansiveness," "fight them there or on the shores of California") tried to bring Vietnam from imposed to intrinsic relevance. Nothing like that has happened in the case of India or Pakistan. Surely the situation is now being brought to our attention but, as editors and media managers know, their audiences do not connect the issues "with our spontaneously chosen goals." The Schutzian framework can be tested on numerous events in American life and reveals something less than a rational pattern of national action and reaction.

"Remember Pearl Harbor" and "Remember the Maine" are two slogans which helped motivate American involvement in wars. The wars were on different scales, as were the threats implied, yet both slogans were sufficient to achieve their purpose. In the case of the Maine, the American public mind had been shaped by nearly a century's promotion of the ideas of Manifest Destiny and redemption. The Spaniard stood in the way of an expanding Protestant empire, in the way of America's fulfillment of its divine mandate to world service. While the military details may have been meagrely perceived before the Maine went down, the nation's "spontaneously chosen goals" were being frustrated. The slogan enjoining remembrance of the Maine reinforced preconceptions and belonged to the already existing pattern of intrinsic relevance.

Pearl Harbor also belonged. As enemies of Franklin D. Roosevelt have contended for a quarter century and more, the American public was on the verge of intervening in war and only needed a dramatic act. The conspiratorial theory argues that Roosevelt, a master of cosmic stage-managing and the use of media, lured Japan into catching America off guard. Thus he discovered a new congruence between his goals and the nation's "spontaneously chosen goals," which in this case included national survival. The scale of stimuli, then, may differ so long as the new incidents fit into the existing goal pattern.

The threats to security involved in the Mexican War of 1847 and the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861 are hardly comparable, yet both fit the intrinsic relevance scheme. In both wars, leaders on both sides faced internal opponents, foot-draggers and reluctant participants, but they were able to prosecute the wars because triggering incidents had fulfilled certain expectations. Similarly, American Presidents know they can gain support for economic actions if they can rouse the nation to "selective indignation" about economic patterns (e.g., inflation) which remind the people of the Great Depression of the 1930's. People bear a bundle of memories and received traditions; they fear another depression and will find immediately relevant any step that seems plausibly related to avoiding such a development.

In all of this, some analogy to the individual human organism is appropriate. A knife at my throat, for example, or an open prison gate will, to say the least, be perceived as immediately relevant by me or
by a prisoner. Bangla Desh offers neither threat nor opportunity in that same sense. Vietnam eventually did come to be seen—by perhaps a slight majority of Americans—as an actual threat to American survival in a world of falling dominoes; “victory” there was portrayed by coonskin-nailers-on-the-wall and the John Waynes among us as promising a generation of peace and the beginning of the end of Sino-Soviet expansion. But what do Americans gain from one side or the other in Bangla Desh?

One may compare a relatively trivial entity in our national history, the “Red Scare” following the Russian Revolution, with the “Red Coats” of the American Revolution. The Red Scare provoked the nation to hostility toward communism, even though, as it turned out, few citizens of the United States were active agents of Soviet communism. Yet, after World War I, the nation was so uncertain of its power and purpose that it could not tolerate internal dissent. Something similar occurred in the McCarthy era following World War II. Through that bitter time, many thoughtful citizens knew that the actual internal Communist threat was small, but enough of their contemporaries believed that national survival was at stake, and McCarthyism became a matter of intense concern.

In the American Revolution, many of the slogans warned of a threat to survival, but careful study shows that it was more a time of promise and opportunity. By any objective standard, the colonists were not oppressed as most of the revolutionary peoples of the world are. But there had been just enough taxation, non-representation and delay in the enlargement of liberties to permit leaders to rally the troops against England. The conflict had more to do with seizing the possibility of full self-government than with resisting tyranny. “Selective indignation” against relatively trivial events (the Boston Masacre or selective support of ambiguous acts (the Boston Tea Party) came easily because they were positive reinforcements of “spontaneously chosen goals.” Whether chosen goals were expressed in terms of resistance to tyranny, Manifest Destiny or, as more recently, Defending the Free World, crises must first be related to the goal pattern before they are popularly recognized as critical.

A number of other factors should at least be explored as possibly enhancing the “zones of relevance” explanation. For example, it seems that scale and scope have something to do with response to crisis. “The death of one person is a tragedy; the death of a million people is a statistic” (Stalin). Americans cannot hear enough about the suffering of one American prisoner of war in Vietnam or one imprisoned bishop anywhere in “the Communist World.” They may even be able to respond positively to one Southeast Asian child flown to the U.S. for heart surgery. But the forced flight of 9 million people from Bangla Desh, who become a festering presence among hundreds of millions of Indians, is unimaginably gross and has to be reduced to abstraction and mere statistics. Perhaps Biafra was just enough smaller. Perhaps it represented a “conceivable” situation, one where American voluntary aid might make a difference. It is easier for American churches to raise funds for one graphic need—as when a local high school student needs kidney surgery—than it is to gather funds to keep alive hundreds of children in India’s refugee areas.

Next, there must be some base in an already approved moral community. Richard L. Merritt shows in Symbols of American Community 1735-1775 how American colonists in the middle of the eighteenth century began to see a common destiny and to be able to communicate with one another. During that period, events such as the Stamp Act or the almost inconceivably trivial threat that Anglicans might establish a bishop in the American colonies served to reinforce the resolve to work for independence. Americans have no network which picks up signals from Bangla Desh or many other parts of the world. Little “moral community” exists in a nation which supports the very regime that is the agent of most of the misery.

The timing of a tragedy also affects the response to it. “When” matters. Sebastian DeGrazia’s The Political Community: A Study of Anomie suggests that there are moments when the leadership of a community projects such competing and confusing symbols that the followers, the masses, are lost and lapse into anomie. (For example, should one compete or cooperate, since the American system enjoins both? Yet they are logical opposites.) The government supports the regime that causes the suffering (in Bangla Desh, Spain, Greece, etc.) yet calls for a compassionate response to the victims. The resulting anomie dissipates any public sense of obligation.

A decade of war in Indochina, racial turmoil at home, confusion over student dissent, hippie counter-culture, and many “cry wolf” crises mixed in among authentic threats have led people to lapse into nostalgia, amnesia, apathy and dulled consciousness. In a different decade and a different context, Bangla Desh might have aroused more sympathy and support. Unfortunately for the starving, they did not get to choose their moment in the world community’s psychic history. They are hungry now.

A local embodiment of distant realities helps international incidents become part of the scheme of intrinsic relevances. The movement of American blacks from marginal status to a zone of immediate relevance in national consciousness makes it easier for African incidents to be seen as vital to American interests. This is true in part because American blacks have stressed their ties to African roots, and more, no doubt, because they are a local embodiment of “black” threat and promise. Bangla Desh has no such
embodiment in most of the world community.

The Arab-Israeli situation is seen as threatening because it may draw Russia and the United States into confrontation. It may be no more volatile than the Asian situation, which could similarly involve Russia with China and thus, inevitably, the United States. But the Middle East has American Jews as effective communicators of emergencies. The suffering of relatively smaller numbers of people there is more vivid to Americans than is the suffering of Pakistan's millions.

Selective indignation is obviously most operative where the line between "good guys" and "bad guys" is clearest. The difficult task of the U.S. government regarding the war in Vietnam is to convince Americans that they really are backing a more free, enlightened and promising regime than that of Hanoi. It is clear that our government has failed. The Green Berets on film attracted the already convinced, but few slogans, songs, heroes or legends emerged to support this war. The United States government was thrown back to depend upon the sheer authority of government itself, and it is only on this basis that it has been able to claim the cooperation of most of its citizens. In the case of Bangla Desh, however, the authority of the U.S. government is on the side of the "bad guys," of West Pakistan, and there is little reason or possibility for citizens to sort out the signals received from that part of the world.

The scheme I have mapped out does not preclude the role of the agitator or of mass media in stimulating response. Unfortunately, Bangla Desh has no agitators in most of the world community. The agitator can take a dormant issue and make it live, can discern factors at the edge of one zone of relevance and use them to bring the issue home. Colonists expressed "selective indignation" against potential Anglican bishops in the eighteenth century not because the bishops would have threatened American lives but because their presence collided with certain existing interests, particularly those of Congregationalists and other free churchmen. Throughout the nineteenth century, spokesmen for a "Protestant Crusade" against a "Catholic Conspiracy" could agitate and draw response out of all proportion to Catholic presence and threat—because they were able to persuade others that the Crusade was defending the American fabric of government from internal and external foes. Of course there were few occasions when such a threat might conceivably have existed, and of course the crusaders were merely defending Protestant churches and interests. But the genius of the agitator is in creatively exploiting one set of interests to force a redefinition of the whole society's interests.

Repressive governments struck back at "anarchists" at the nineteenth-century Haymarket Square "riot" in Chicago and more recently, also in Chicago, at the "Hippie-Yippie" revolutionists of 1968, knowing in both cases that they could depend on positive public responses. After the "Cambodia-Kent State" incidents and the resulting widespread but largely non-violent campus demonstrations, polls showed the American people locating "campus unrest" and youth rebellion as more critical public issues than either the Vietnam war or racial unrest. Vice-President Agnew and Attorney-General Mitchell demonstrated their skill as agitators by over-dramatizing these "anarchist" moments, by appealing to the tastes, interests and fears of the American people.

To convince Americans that their national survival relates to the choices they make in Bangla Desh is incomparably more difficult. Not until a further move is made, not until some Communist power makes gestures of apparent threat, will most Americans even know which side to choose.

While the role of the media could be an important factor, so far as is known the media reinforce existing opinion more than they convert to new opinion. Scores of empirical studies show that media have to rely, "all things being equal," on the predispositions of audiences or parts of audiences. Those who favor Ronald Reagan or George Wallace or Spiro Agnew find themselves more drawn to their heroes after televised performances; those who are repelled find these people even more repulsive after media exposure. So far, the Bangla Desh situation is so blurred, remote and confusing that portrayals of misery there fall into no pattern of reinforcement. McCullum is correct: We've seen all the bloated bellies before. We have to get closer to people's ego than mass media can, to predispose citizens to take seriously the signs of human exploitation and despair.

Although people's ego-formation goes on in the intimate circles of home, school, church and conversation groups, a symbolic national leadership is necessary to shape even these exchanges. Without such national leadership it is difficult to picture the nation coming alive to the problems of India and Pakistan. The name-giver, the eponym-fashioneer, the locater of issues and symbol-creator is essential. "Charismatic" is the term usually applied to such leadership. Pope John XXIII took unnamed, ill-defined yearnings for human concord and in five years enforced the themes of ecumenism as other people had not in fifty years. While the Kennedy brothers brought hitherto-buried issues to public life. A Martin Luther King with very little power based on bus-rides, demonstrations and non-violent action sensitized a nation to the struggle for racial justice.

A leadership that offers no clear path or clean imagery can hardly bring about the conversions which can then be reinforced by the media. Arms for West Pakistan and concern for Bangla Desh will strike most citizens as incompatible interests; one or the other might make sense, but compassionate response is crushed between the two.

Religious institutions are using their residual power
in a minor way to change the situation. The appeals in religious publications, the fund drives of various denominational and ecumenical agencies, the occasional reports of visitors to the scene—all this may be of some modest help. While "crash programs" and "crisis responses" from small corners of the private sector strive to fill the void, agencies involved must also war against apathy. The dulling of human sensitivity is the greatest threat at the moment. Those who deal with religious symbols and theological interpretations are poised to effect some change, at least. Not much is likely to happen if they support the very governmental policies that contribute to the misery against which they profess to be contending. Nor is much likely to happen if they fall into apathy or cynicism themselves.