

Christianity's Vocation in the Nuclear Age

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If the question whether it is better to be red than dead or *vice versa* is stultifying, the reason is not so much that it poses a false alternative as that it masks what may be the true nature of the critical problem that mankind, and Christians specifically, face at the present moment of man's time. When the atomic bomb was dropped over Hiroshima, the magnitude of the explosive power or the extent of personal and property damage did not materially change the nature of modern war, though its magnitude and that of even more powerful, later weapons has served to bring to consciousness the *qualitative* difference between modern and traditional war. Of course, no one will argue that it makes no difference whether to the arsenals of World War II we add the refinements of fusion warheads and ballistic missiles, not to speak of the bacteriological and chemical weapons to which we pay little attention in our fascination with the quantity of heat liberated by a nuclear firestorm. But one could become so entranced with the terrors of nuclear war that one might spend all one's efforts in the de-nuclearization of war; just as one could become so pragmatic about legitimate spiritual values that one might squander all one's conscience in the justification of an unjustifiable war. I would suggest, against both, that nuclear weapons are the effect of nuclear war and, in sum, that nuclear war is not evil because it is nuclear but, on the contrary, that nuclear war is nuclear because it is evil in the first place.

Less epigrammatically, the point is that we might consider very seriously whether any modern war can be just. One may grant that, in principle, defensive war can be justified and yet question whether any *total war*, nuclear or conventional, can be but essentially offensive. Under the conditions of total war even war preparations could be immoral, for their deterrence value is no longer given by the enemy's realization that he cannot destroy us, but exclusively by his realization that his attack means mutual destruction. When the only means to save our lives is to commit genocide the time may not be unripe to begin to consider whether we must not risk our existence, if need be, rather than

to entertain the thought of saving it at the cost of committing total war.

One might wish to call this a pacifist position. This denomination need not be objectionable to the Christian if the connotations stipulated above are granted to the term. Pacifism is not generally espoused by contemporary Catholics partly, perhaps, for bad reasons, but at least partly because of a fifteen-century long Catholic tradition that admits the possibility of just war grounded on the natural right of self-defence and self-preservation. No one suggests that this tradition be ignored, but one may suggest that we do not use it as a veil under which to hide contemporary realities. In the Catholic faith the natural rights of self-defence and self-preservation are not absolute since, as creatures, we do not have an absolute right to exist: that is why we also believe that there are many values for which we must, if need be, sacrifice our liberty and our existence. Indeed, the right to self-defence could not be absolute except, perhaps, for a crude ethics of biological evolution in which biological survival were held as the highest value.

Catholics commonly realize that many advocates of 'nuclear sanity' and of 'survival' appear to subordinate higher values to mere life, that 'survival' really means 'survival at all costs'—instead, they say, one must stand on principle. What we do not so often realize is that the advocates of 'total victory' repeat exactly the same mistake by subordinating higher values to 'national security' and to 'the safety of the free world'. There is little difference between standing on principle, if the principle on which one stands is survival, and advocating survival, if one advocates it as a matter of principle. Perhaps what we should adopt, as the principle to guide all Western foreign policy, is the principle that all things, including personal safety, national security and physical freedom must be subordinated to our right action and human conduct. Like both the survivalists and the chauvinists one may believe that nuclear destruction must be risked, if necessary, but not for the paradoxical sake of security or safety—rather, for the sake of integrity. For a much greater tragedy could befall us than to suffer nuclear destruction, whether because we were unprepared for war or because we unloosed it: much worse than to lose a nuclear war would be to win one.

There are, of course, pertinent and intelligent objections that could be registered against such a Christian pacifism, but one is particularly important. Surely, it might be argued, the problems of peace and war are not of our own making, and we are not free to choose how to pose them. The dilemma is created by Russia (predominantly, anyway) or,

at least, by Communism. Even if what you say were true it would be useless. All you provide is self-righteous consolation in the afternoon of deathtime. All you give us is a reason to die self-satisfied—and the advocates of either holy war or nuclear quietism can do that more successfully than you can.

Actually I find little consolation in my conclusions, and my own emotional reaction to the present state of world affairs is closer to anger than to resignation. I concede, of course, that I have merely suggested a very broad principle to guide our foreign policy as an alternative to the principles of either national or individual survival as an absolute value. But the objection, I take it, is not that instead of a blueprint I can, as a Christian philosopher, suggest only a principle, since it is precisely in the order of principles that I think the re-orientation of our foreign policy should take place. The objection has to do, rather, with whether we are justified and prudent if we react to Communist Russia except insofar as she may present a threat to our biological, social, cultural and political life and even, though in a different sense, to our religious life.

In reply one might remark that perhaps behavioural problems, even on an international scale, are not the result of confronting a stimulus which is their cause, nor are posed by an *other* which lies beyond oneself. Perhaps we should question whether in fact our present international problems, insofar as they may pertain to the order of political morality, are formally defined by 'circumstances beyond our control'. When I say this I do not primarily have in mind the fact that the present world, Communism and all, is entirely of our own making, for it is a world that has issued wholly and exclusively out of Christendom—though much that is relevant could be said on that theme. Nor do I wish to suggest that a problem of conduct arises out of the interaction between subject and circumstance, as if in the dialectics of history the groan of mankind in pain should be accounted for as the noise from God's sporting room as he amuses himself with the clash of his playthings, civilizations. We might consider instead whether a problem of conduct is not always an inner problem, a problem of conscience, a problem essentially defined by the fact that what we are trying to determine is how *we* must behave, how *we* must bring into being our human existence; is this not the dignity of Christian morality, that it is grounded on the *exercise* (and not merely the possession) of human freedom?

Of course, we exist *in* a world, we exist *against* circumstance: we exist *with* one another. The sort of being that *behaves* and, therefore, experiences the perplexities of moral alternatives, is not simply a being,

an object, but an existent, a subject. Only if subjectivity were to depend upon a prior alienation from one another would problems of conduct be created for us by another or arise out of our interaction with others. In other words, human society could formally create moral quandaries only if man were essentially asocial. If a morally good social life and a peaceful world are possible to free agents the reason is precisely that their problems of conduct arise out of their subjectivity rather than against society. Therein lies the radical freedom of man. We are truly responsible for our conduct, and no one else, no other group, can totally do away with our moral liberty. I suggest, in brief, that perhaps we might profitably re-think our foreign policies (and particularly, as Catholics, all our relations to Communism) in the light of the consideration that what we are trying to determine is not how to manage the Russians but how to manage ourselves.

Such a reformulation might be facilitated if by way of illustration of the role of autonomy in international politics one were to recast David Riesman's typology of *The Lonely Crowd* to fit the history of international relations. Very schematically, I would say that the foreign policy-making of the classical world was tradition-directed. It was largely unreflective, non-calculating, primitive, non-Machiavellian and ordered towards the preservation of traditional values and the avoidance of disruptive change. This is the heroic and epic moment of war, which continues beyond the dissolution of Greece and Rome into the earlier stages of the Christian world. In Western civilization, however, foreign policy gradually became inner-directed, that is, oriented towards the achievement of inner, national needs. Machiavellism is its climax, and it results in the emergence of a fragmented Europe in which, paradoxically, as principalities coalesce into nations, the feudal bonds expand into the wider loyalties to an impersonal fatherland while nations, more radically than ever before, become mutually alienated by the concept of national sovereignty. This is the strategic, dramatic moment of war. With increasing rapidity this stage had to give way to an other-directed type of policy to guide international relations, that is, a policy directed towards the achievement of a *modus vivendi* with the complex interests and many parties that Machiavellism itself, no less than the natural growth of civilization and the accumulation of knowledge, had brought about.

It was then that the world began to become too small for a mankind with a history such as ours, and the problem of having to re-orient the course of history began to emerge. Instead we produced high diplom-

acy. War, in the well-known maxim of von Clausewitz, was simply the extension of that diplomacy by extraordinary means—conversely, the modern standards of conduct of international relations are but the less violent form of modern war. Thus arrived the tragic, baroque moment of war. We would be wrong to think it had not passed away long ago. For 'balance of power' is no longer possible in a world in which 'capability' is enough and 'superiority' is superfluous. If one nation alone could, in principle, strike at any alliance, no effective *modus vivendi* can be achieved by any realignment of powers. Thus, the accelerated political polarization of the world in our days is not at all the cause but, rather, a symptom of the obsolescence of balance of power techniques and of inner-direction in the formulation of international policies. Perhaps, then, we need to guide ourselves in the solution of international problems by *autonomy*, otherwise we shall bring about the ultimate, irrational, suicidal moment of war.

For these reasons I suggest that it is important that we do not allow either the danger from Russia or, least of all, the evils of Communism and atheism, to dictate the first principles of international politics. We cannot any longer avoid ruling ourselves except reasonably, humanistically and autonomously. On the other hand, it should be stressed that there is no way of forecasting to what extent the adoption of autonomous political principles would incidentally secure safety. It certainly would not secure the *feeling* of safety. As in every other respect, freedom of autonomy in international relations must be paid for in the coin of anxiety, insecurity, unpredictability yet not with any tax on happiness, nor exultation, nor serenity nor joy. To adopt autonomy now would be to choose heroically. History has inexorably and, perhaps, providentially brought us to the juncture where we are faced with a challenge to which we cannot respond with any self-concern, but only with a radical resolve to pursue and purify social and political justice, domestically and internationally, regardless of consequences. On the other hand, to seek justice *à outrance*, passionately and foolishly, as the very purpose of civil society and without any of the wisdom of the worldly-wise, may well be not only reasonable but also most prudent and safe. For though we are called to no less arduous and grandiose and unlikely a task than to reverse the course of history, one may suspect that, granted our history, to reverse its course may be an eminently sensible thing to do. It may, indeed, be the only source of long-range safety for our world.

If so, one cannot at this point do less than to hint at the question how

that fraternity of persons professionally committed to a faith called Universalism could easily be, but sadly is not, one of the most powerful agencies to co-operate in such a reversal of political history and to help fashion the first universal civilization of mankind as such. It may well be, in any event, that to attempt less than this task is to fall short of the intrinsic requirements of the world situation in which we find ourselves today.

Note, finally, that the conditions that have made international justice indispensable to the continuation of human life demand a somewhat broader conception of the right order among human beings than was possible at a time when, for instance, international justice and some type of war were not altogether incompatible. If today there cannot be just wars, it is because the conditions in which we live demand the full recognition of the unity of the human race. Let us say, then, that justice today cannot obtain *among* nations unless it take place *within* the unity of mankind and that, indeed, the concept of political justice such as is needed today must be recast in such a way that it should be better described as *human fraternity*.

In this sense, therefore, it seems to me that any prospective war with Russia would be a civil war, a fratricidal and abominable war. That Russia is Communist changes this not at all. We can no longer be guided, as by first principles, by a provincial desire to survive at all costs, nor by a national desire to 'prevail'. We can only be guided by the wider loyalty to the whole of mankind. We have, willy-nilly, become one world. What we need to do for our own good, collectively and severally, is to recognize it and to act upon it. I suggest that this is the political vocation of Christianity in our century. Only time will tell whether the unlikely will come to pass.