

Church, State and The Vietnam War

by Ian Linden

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'Our bishops have warned us: "There is a grave danger that the circumstances of the present war may, in time, diminish our moral sensitivity to its evils". We fear that this very danger has become actualized. We face a severe crisis of conscience within our Catholic community that arises from the incongruity between the moral principles enunciated by the Church and the uncritical support of this war by so many Catholics': from the Catholic Committee on Vietnam—Open letter to the clergy and laity of the United States.

Since the beginning of 1965, the Committee of Clergy and Laymen concerned about Vietnam, comprising distinguished figures such as Rev. Eugene Carson Blake, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, John C. Bennett, President of the Union Theological Seminary, Martin Luther King, Reinhold Niebuhr, together with Protestant bishops and many prominent rabbis, has maintained constant moderate pressure on the administration to bring about a non-military solution to the Vietnam conflict. Although it was reported in *Herder Correspondence* for September/October 1966 that Cardinal Cushing was on the committee, this report proved to be a misunderstanding caused by a priest from the Boston Diocese who did support the concern. None of the Catholic Hierarchy has supported the committee, though two of the bishops have found themselves able to give private help and encouragement. There has been a number of reports of attempts at dissuading clergy from associating themselves with public protests organized by the group. Apart from priests and laymen associated with the committee, the only other, and far more radical, form of protest has been centred on the Catholic Worker Movement, which was dedicated to pacifism and voluntary poverty long before Vietnam.

There is now no difficulty for a Catholic wishing to dissociate himself from the war by conscientious objection, provided he informs his draft board immediately, obtains written support from his pastor and claims to be an objector to all war, not just to the Vietnam war. It is also possible for agnostics to claim conscientious objector status since a ruling in a recent test case extended the meaning of 'religious' to cover all ethical and conscientious beliefs, even without specific reference to a God. Formerly, before this judicious stretching of the law, agnostics would have to go to jail for their moral scruples while Christians would not. Despite the pleading of John Courtenay Murray, S.J., the National Advisory Committee on Selective Service has

rejected the legality of selective conscientious objection, i.e. objection to a particular war rather than all war. Since Catholic or Quaker bodies advising draftees on conscientious objection are usually able to convince the selective objector that in the conditions of modern warfare his decision should be logically extended to all war, this ruling has not claimed any more young men for the courts. In its express aim to close the ranks during the Vietnam crisis, it does seriously detract from the individual's right to reach moral decisions on the strength of his assessment of the war's conduct. It rules out completely the Church's teaching on a just war and the need for personal moral responsibility based on an informed conscience.

The Catholic Worker Movement has refused to associate with this selective service procedure at all as a protest against the compulsory induction system and war in general. The symbol of this civil disobedience has been the draft card burning which was initiated by a Le Moines graduate, David Miller, on October 15th, 1965. This was followed on November 6th, 1965, by a massive draft card burning ceremony in Union Square attended by Dorothy Day and A. J. Muste. It was described by one clerical onlooker as 'an extraordinarily impressive piece of liturgy'. Since this time most of the movement have been in and out of jail or courthouse many times. The exact legal position of draft card burners is now almost impossible to disentangle after changes in the law and reversed appeals. Miller, for example, thanks to the American Civil Liberties Union has so far only served two weeks after staving off his sentence for two years; he is now on bail after a further appeal. Jim Wilson, serving a three-year sentence, saw his son for the first time this April. Tom Cornell, in charge of the New York section of the peace foundation, an ex-teacher, also with a young family, expects to serve a six-month sentence this Autumn. Fr Daniel Berrigan, renowned for his short trips to South America, poetry, and picketing St Patrick's Cathedral, has been the mainstay of the peace foundation, serving as an unofficial chaplain to the families about to be broken by jail. The witness of this small group of dedicated Catholics cannot be exaggerated.

The sharp contrast between the official Catholic reaction to the war and the vigorous interdenominational clergy concerned, together with the apolitical Catholic Worker Movement, was accentuated this January by the absence of all Catholic bishops from the predominantly religious Washington Peace Meeting. Less than 10 per cent of the participants at the silent vigil held outside the White House were Catholics. On February 27th, *Commonweal* printed an anguished letter from the celebrated Presbyterian ecumenist Dr Robert McAfee Brown, revealing that 250 telegrams had been sent out inviting the Catholic bishops to the meeting, albeit at four days notice. He received only eleven replies. This degree of response is consistent with a survey carried out by the *National Catholic Reporter* early in 1966, when 225 bishops were polled for their views on

conscientious objection to the war and allied topics. Six bishops bothered to reply. The auxiliary bishop of St Paul, Minneapolis, Rev. James Shannon, replied to Brown's letter, intimating that the Catholic hierarchy would not be blackmailed into a form of witness alien to them. As the hierarchy had engaged in no form of public protest whatsoever, this reply left much to be desired; the next week saw Bishop Shannon heading a specifically Catholic list of over 800 signatures in a war protest advertisement—no plunge into ecumenism in this case.

The silence of the hierarchy was first broken in July 1966, when Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore issued a pastoral letter. Being the only one of its kind, it received considerable attention. Although overall it was restrained in tone, it contained one exceptionally pertinent and prophetic passage:

'Because citizens who enjoy representative government are especially answerable for the decisions of their leaders, these citizens have a moral right to know, insofar as national security permits, the truth about government decisions and operations which implicate the general public.'

The rest of the pastoral consisted of a balanced reiteration of the Church's teaching on war, patriotism and conscientious objection:

'Citizens should develop a loyal devotion to their country, but without narrowing of mind. In other words, they must look simultaneously to the welfare of the whole human family, which is tied together by the manifold bonds linking races, peoples and nations.'

Finally a stern warning was given against the 'hawks':

'If we are to resist such lethal appeals to our understandable impatience, we must constantly recall that only on moral grounds can our cause in Vietnam be just. If our means become immoral, our cause will have been betrayed. Let us also avoid the narrowness of supposing that all the vice and bad will lie on one side of any major conflict and that all the virtue and good will lie on the other.'

The value of this pastoral is becoming ever more evident as the war continues; at the time it was a brave and forthright act of leadership when moral leadership was at a premium.

On November 18th, 1966, almost two years after full-scale hostilities had set in throughout South Vietnam, and one year after US ground troops left their advisory capacity for active combat, the National Conference of Bishops issued a short statement on peace. The statement often verges on Michael Frayn's parody of Vaticanese in the April 23rd London *Observer*. Throughout, the reader gets the uncanny impression of meanings and values slipping through his fingers as they are qualified, generalized and finally lost altogether in pastoral jargon. In two places the pastoral clearly supports the American policies:

'While we do not claim to be able to resolve these issues authorita-

tively, in the light of the facts as they are known to us, it is reasonable to argue that our presence in Vietnam is justified.' Also:

'And what a nation can do to defend itself, it may do to help another in its struggle against aggression.'

It hardly need be added that if the allusion is to Vietnam—and the passage would be irrelevant otherwise—the bishops have, in fact, resolved the issue by choosing the administration's version of American involvement, i.e. to aid the people of South Vietnam to repel external aggression. The statement does follow Cardinal Shehan's pastoral in placing the war in a moral context:

'While we cannot resolve all the issues in the Vietnam conflict, it is clearly our duty to insist that they be kept under constant moral scrutiny. No one is free to evade his personal responsibility by leaving it entirely to others to make moral judgments.'

Unfortunately it does not appear from the statement that these judgments can extend to cover national, political and military decisions. The impression gained that political judgments are somehow morally neutral, is strengthened by a speech made by Fr John Cronin, speaking for Bishop Wright of Pittsburgh at the Washington Meeting. Since he was the only speaker for the hierarchy, it was widely felt that he passed on the official viewpoint when he said that the concern of the Church was moral judgments rather than 'political decisions cloaked in the guise of morality'. Calling a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam would be a political and not a moral issue and thus beyond the Church's competence.

Such a strictly Pauline indifference to the affairs of Caesar is, of course, perfectly valid in itself, but this has not been the attitude of the Catholic Church in America, which, on the contrary, has become deeply involved in political and social issues. Fr John Cronin, as assistant director of Catholic social action, could hardly disagree with the statement that the Church is now socially involved. This is equally true politically. The Church has successfully campaigned in many states against the liberalization of the abortion laws and is now putting pressure on congressmen to repeal the Blaine amendment which stops aid to parochial schools. The Catholic lobby is extremely powerful. It would be hard to find cardinals more involved in public life than Cushing and Spellman. Thus, when the Church wishes to act as a political force in its own interests or in areas of public morality in which it has traditionally taken a stand, it does so and it does so effectively. The American Church's opposition to marxism and its happy co-existence with capitalism is not a position of neutrality; it has become for better or for worse a commitment to a particular politico-economic system. It is, then, simply an illusionist trick to scuttle back into the presbytery and pretend nothing can be said for want of information.

Even if it were true that the Church is uninvolved in society, politics and ideology, it would still be untenable to claim that the

politico-military decision to bomb, say, a cement factory in Haiphong is not also a moral decision for the men flying the planes who know how accurately they can place their bombs, and for the government authorizing these attacks. For example, the chances of hitting only a small complex of buildings in a heavily populated area can be calculated. It is immediately evident that a number of civilians will be killed, great or small, according to the weather conditions and the pilot's accuracy under ground fire. Therefore this is a moral decision concerning the killing of innocents. If this is an unprovoked act of aggression, such bombing is a violation of international law. Similarly the type of warfare waged in the South, blanket bombing of large areas prior to the movement of infantry in order to reduce American casualties, risks civilian lives for military. American casualties are a particularly critical factor for the administration. If, as the generals state, this is the only strategically practicable way of conducting the war, the war as a whole becomes questionable as to the means employed, let alone as to any violations of international law the American involvement may entail.

The use of these tactics involving massive fire-power in a guerilla war make it impossible for the individual to be discriminating at all times. It produces many situations in which innocents are slain inevitably, however careful a soldier might be. One cannot sensibly choose to hit only a pea if someone else has taken a prior decision to use a blunderbuss. Similarly the only choice in Vietnam has already been made at a national military level, i.e. to use a type of strategy resulting in eight civilian to every one military casualty. It is a misuse of words to say that the ground around the pea is 'accidentally' peppered with shot when the blunderbuss is fired. South Vietnamese civilians are not 'accidentally' killed; they are inevitably killed.

The assumption that the individual personal realm is the sole area of moral decision and that social-political choice is devoid of moral content results in a view of war expressed by Bishop Wright in a defensive letter to the *National Catholic Reporter*, that war is 'an impersonal structure of organized evil' but that the only sphere of controllable moral conduct is the individual. However, the only real choice for the individual is an entirely prior choice of conscientious objection or a decision to opt out of the situation by refusal to obey and subsequent court martial. The latter decision can be avoided altogether if available information on the conduct of the war has made the individual demand conscientious objector status from the outset. Unfortunately, as discussed above, this decision is now illegal. Therefore, either the bishops admit that socio-political and military decisions have moral import, or they tacitly condone the demise of the just war theory and with it hundreds of years of Christian attempts to restrain the barbarity of war. Either a war is immoral or it is not; if it is, praising the soldiers who fight it and re-iterating the Church's teaching on conscientious objection are mutually incompatible

attitudes. Only by pretending that the moral content of war is the sum total of the individual moral decisions can the bishop's attitude be sustained. But this asocial view of morality is ludicrous when the civil rights movement is considered. The colour problem, a moral issue, *par excellence*, was created by social, political decisions and is being solved by social and political decisions. The individual moral decision to give the negro janitor a fat tip because he was poor never has nor ever will get him out of his Haarlem slum.

The self-evident illogicality of this rationale of the hierarchy's attitude suggests that it ought to be excluded and some other solution sought. Regretfully, this means excluding the kindest interpretation of the bishop's silence. A less pleasant, though more plausible, explanation would be that the hierarchy, leading the largest unified religious group in the United States, had become identified with the establishment, and do not want to criticize it.

Either by conformity and identification or reaction and isolation, every Church *qua* social institution is determined by society as a whole. The mere possession of precise doctrines defining the structures of the Catholic Church is no guarantee that these structures will be expressed authentically in every milieu. It would be a form of naïve idealism to suppose that an institution the size of the modern Roman Catholic Church could maintain, as a whole, the rigour and purity of some of its members and communities. Yet it would ignore the mystery of the Church to deny that some of her members, a Pope John, a Dorothy Day, a Charles de Foucauld, did not somehow represent the whole Church as rigorous and pure. Such a movement between totality and individual member, however, passes over the entire question of the Church as institution, the problem of the Church in relation to society, the task of realizing structures anew in each culture, the need for rediscovery of community identity in every generation.

The easy way in which this critical issue facing the Church in American society can be sidestepped is nowhere better seen than in the euphoric plunge into ecumenism and piecemeal liturgical renewal after the last Vatican Council. Furthermore, without a basis of radical analysis to clarify the meaning of the Church in the modern world it is hard to resist a temptation to withdraw from the real Church of struggling laity, religious and bishops, into the painless realm of an invisible antiseptic *ecclesia* in which there is neither doubt nor development. This withdrawal, if taken to extremes, can result in a form of corporate schizophrenia. Symptoms of this illness have been all too easy to find: the common preoccupation with the public image of the Church, an unwillingness to dispense with a façade, behind which preservers of the *status quo* and ecclesial demolition experts can take off their coats; the flourishing of movements of Troeltsch's sect-type alienated from the bourgeois Church. Although the great post-Tridentine façade is maintained to avoid

scandalizing the faithful, it has tended ironically to produce the opposite effect. Too often deliberations have been wrapped in an ineffective secrecy and outrage expressed when the press cries 'wolf'. An ecclesiastical 'credibility gap' has the same undermining effect as that of the administration of the country.

The Church cannot speak to the world in a mysterious official jargon and then lament when the world takes no trouble to understand. While it has become commonplace to use theological code words for identity such as 'a Church of sinners', phrases worn smooth by usage, if someone says baldly that the Church is corrupt, since the word is harsh and feelings hurt, let him be anathema. The chances of a genuine rediscovery of identity for the American Church are greatly reduced by comforting self-deception and withdrawal into the presbytery at a time of challenge.

The crisis of the civil rights movement followed by the Vietnam war has forcibly dissipated many of these corporate illusions. Unlike the Protestant Churches, whose flexible ecclesiology had proved responsive since Bonhoeffer to the problem of identity and identification in 'a world coming of age' and was prepared for challenge, the Catholic Church here found itself unprepared to deal suddenly with the very problems it had officially recognized in the council schema, only a few months earlier. The flexibility of Protestantism entails, of course, its own tensions. The Vietnam conflict provided an opportunity for resolving in action, or at least forgetting, the tensions inherent in Protestant ecclesiology. For the Catholic Church in America, it put a second spotlight on the real role of the Church in society, on what the Church had actually come to represent. The common front of Church and administration that this spotlight revealed cannot easily be ignored. Almost nine months have passed since the statement by the National Council of Bishops, months of increased escalation and slaughter in Vietnam. Any mention of the war was studiously avoided at a recent Chicago meeting of the hierarchy. It is scarcely credible that there is still inadequate information for a moral decision. Legislation doing away with the Catholic doctrine of a just war has not aroused a single voice of episcopal protest.

The recognition that the just war theory is inapplicable, far from bringing forth a re-evaluation of Christian responsibility during wartime, has resulted in further reticence and withdrawal from reality. While over a thousand seminarians protested against legislation designed to stifle the individual conscience and maintain solidarity in wartime, Archbishop Robert Lucey of San Antonio brought Catholics to their knees in a special sermon for President Johnston's visit to San Fernando Cathedral, Texas, by describing the Vietnam war as 'a sad and heavy obligation imposed by the mandate of love'. The same Orwellian doublethink is contained in General Westmoreland's claim that the peace movement is causing the war to

continue while his bombers are trying to stop the conflict. The international outrage at Cardinal Spellman's call for total victory at Christmas ought to be tempered by an understanding of his emotional involvement in Vietnam after unfailing support for the corrupt Diem régime until its natural conclusion in 1963, his position as military chaplain, and, by contrast, his remarkable tolerance of the witness of the Catholic Worker Movement in his own diocese. There is no evidence that this form of extremism is typical of the hierarchy as a whole, but apart from these extremes and the imaginary clang of chancery doors being shut, silence reigns.

This silence is the background to a growing secular and religious protest throughout America, of many devout Catholics awaiting trial for their faith, of Quakers forbidden to send medical supplies to the North, of a disproportionate number of negroes serving and dying in the South, of the *Terre des Hommes* desperately salvaging some of the human wreckage, of a nation slowly being destroyed. A remark made to me by a cynical American cleric gets less and less funny as time goes on: 'In the U.S.A. the generals talk like cardinals and the cardinals talk like generals. Church and State are one. We've never looked back since Constantine.'

THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF BELIEF

They taught me when I was a kid
That two and two made four;
But from me all the time they hid
That there is something more.
For if I have fidelity,
From Dewart's book I know
That two and two may well make three,
But more intensely so.

G.A., O.P.