

Two Meanings of Violence

647

by Stanley Windass

It has been generally accepted in recent years by strategists that the possession by each of the two Great Powers of nuclear weapons, of sufficient destructive power to cause unacceptable destruction to the opposing side, has constituted a deterrent to either side against the use of these weapons – and a deterrent also against aggression generally, whenever there was a fear that this might lead to the use of nuclear weapons. As long as the cold war seemed to be forming the world into two blocs of opposing nations grouped round the major nuclear powers, some calculation of the risk of nuclear war entered into the strategic calculations in most areas of conflict, thus restraining the use of violence and the spread of war.

For a time, there seemed to be some hope of stability in this situation. Of course there was always the risk of war by accident, and the danger of a technical breakthrough in the arms race which would destroy the symmetry of the balance; but if only these dangers could be overcome, there seemed to be some prospect of a stable bi-polar world. Consequently, all the attention of the politically involved peacemakers focussed on means of slowing down or stabilising the arms race between the major powers, and of improving safeguards against the risk of war by accident.

In the past two years, however, it has become clear that this situation cannot last. There was already a certain flaw in the bi-polar pattern, in Britain's pretence of an independent deterrent. Then France, showing no proper reverence for the sacred symmetry, acquired her own more independent bomb. Then China, who had been left out of nuclear as of other calculations, exploded her little device. India, Pakistan, Israel and the Arab States now begin to consider seriously the possibility of going nuclear, and other states appear on the nuclear horizon. The bi-polar balance gives way to the more chaotic pattern of nuclear proliferation, and it is not at all clear where the rot will end once it has set in. As more and more nations are tempted to acquire nuclear weapons, the danger of accidental war and of rash aggression increases; at the same time progress in disarmament and arms control becomes increasingly difficult to achieve, and we seem to be on a fast train out of control. For this reason, the focus of attention has shifted from the control of the arms race between the major powers to the conclusion of a non-proliferation agreement.

Essentially, any such agreement must have two parts; it must contain an undertaking by the nuclear powers not to transfer nuclear capability to non-nuclear powers, and an undertaking by non-nuclear powers not to acquire nuclear capability. Such a draft agreement, tabled by the United States, was the main focus of debate at the recently concluded Geneva disarmament talks, and another such agreement, tabled by the USSR, is at present before the United Nations.

It has been found, however, that in spite of the obvious logic of non-proliferation for the survival of mankind, it is extremely difficult to approach any agreement about this matter; and the reasons for this difficulty deserve close attention from anyone who is seriously concerned with international peace at this moment of crisis in human history.

One difficulty which loomed large in the early stages of the negotiations was the war in Vietnam. As long as the Americans are committed to an anti-communist war in South East Asia, it is obviously difficult for Russia to engage in a compromising agreement on arms control. China and Russia are involved in an ideological battle for the leadership of the communist world; in this battle, the main subject of controversy is the principle of coexistence. Russia maintains the position that peaceful coexistence is the appropriate means of furthering communist aims, and China maintains the more authentic Leninist line that war between communism and imperialism is inevitable. Already, the Russian position is prone to accusation of softness, weakness of principle, even of treachery, within the communist camp; this accusation gains much strength from the war in Vietnam, which seems to prove the Chinese case; and to make an agreement with the USA at this stage, an agreement which would exclude all powers other than the big two from developing the major weapons of defence and attack, would only add to the mounting evidence of the Soviet Union's treachery to the communist cause.

Another difficulty, more explicit, is the proposed Atlantic Nuclear Force. This is a device conceived by the United States, modified by Great Britain, to form a more coherent nuclear alliance in the West, with an arrangement for joint control by the NATO members of the nuclear weapons in their possession. Basically, the purpose of this proposal is to satisfy an insistent demand in Germany for a fuller sharing of nuclear weapons – a demand springing directly from the threat in the East, and the unwillingness to depend exclusively on America to counter that threat. Britain and the US argue that their proposals for an Atlantic Nuclear Force are not proposals for proliferation – they do not involve the handing over of nuclear capacity to anyone who does not already have it. The weapons are already on German soil; Germany would no more be able to fire them on her own initiative under ANF or MLF than she can already. They could not be fired without a consensus – perhaps a unanimous con-

sensus – among the NATO powers. In the catch phrase that sums up the Western position, there would be ‘more fingers on the safety catch, but not more fingers on the trigger’. Russia, however, is not convinced; the ANF, they maintain is a proposal to give access to nuclear weapons to Russia’s worst and newest enemy, an enemy still breathing threats and defiance. Access once given, it is impossible to say where it will end. Undoubtedly, this is proliferation; and it is impossible to conclude with the West an agreement against proliferation, when the West at the same time is openly plotting to break the proposed agreement. For this reason, the US draft agreement at Geneva was rejected by the Russians, who presented in its place a non-proliferation proposal containing an explicit prohibition of arrangements for nuclear sharing.

So much for the objections to non-proliferation from the nuclear powers themselves. But there are also objections from the non-nuclear powers, who are being asked to renounce any pretension ever to acquire nuclear capability. India led the non-nuclear powers in making five conditions which the nuclear powers must satisfy before she would agree to a non-proliferation agreement. Two of these conditions have emerged as being of major importance: one is that the nuclear powers must conclude a total test-ban treaty – that is, they must extend the present partial ban to include a ban on underground testing; and the second is that some quite positive steps must be taken by the nuclear powers towards nuclear disarmament.

Finally, there is the objection coming from outside the circle of conferring states, the undebatable and intractable objection of the excluded great power, communist China, represented neither in the Disarmament Committee nor in the United Nations. And the objection is not only that China herself has expressed her complete disbelief in the current negotiations; it is that the presence of a potentially hostile nuclear power outside the whole scope of the negotiations gives them a certain air of unreality, and eliminates any prospect of significant disarmament as long as negotiations remain within the present limited circle.

All these obstacles in the way of a non-proliferation treaty, it would seem, come not from disagreement about the treaty itself, but from peripheral situations; and in all these peripheral situations there is a common factor, which, if we can only grasp its nature, will help us to understand the real nature of the dilemma which faces mankind.

Broadly speaking, there are two possible ways of approaching the nuclear ‘balance’. On the one hand, we can see it as the culminating expression of the evil and aggressive nature of man, the violent attack and the violent response frozen on a massive scale in a situation which is the archetype of all wars, now become as total as possible, and threatening the whole human race with annihilation – which would serve them right. This might be the attitude suggested by the early Christian protest against all forms of violence and participation in

the affairs of an idolatrous state – the attitude still maintained by some pacifists, and by many who base their international attitude on religious premisses.

On the other hand, it is possible to see the deterrent situation as the culmination of an evolving system, the system of the balance of power; a system which involves a kind of tacit cooperation, or at least one that has evolved a kind of cooperative meaning, whereby hostile groups neutralise each others' violence capacity, and ensure a kind of peace, albeit an uneasy one, out of the very materials of war. Within this balance there could even be discerned the elements of justice, for an equality of contending systems, though an equality based on fear is still more just than a universal empire founded on force.

There is little doubt that both interpretations are correct – that both express important aspects of the truth. There are individuals on both sides who still have a crusading mentality, who see no reciprocity in the opposing situations of the great powers, who consider only that they are defending themselves by the only possible means against the evil spirits of the outer darkness. There are others, an increasing number on either side, who see a joint structure in which they have a common interest. And, apart from the express intentions of these individuals, human history can develop meanings which are not fully explicit at the time of emergence in the minds of anyone; indeed, the whole mysterious process of the growth of the structures of human language is of this kind.

On the whole, this kind of development would seem to accord more with the general development of humanity than would an abrupt about turn into unconditional pacifism or disarmament. If war, as history seems to suggest, is an integral part of our activity, then progress may well lie in changing the meaning of this activity rather than in trying to discard it. Discarding 'evil' bits of ourselves, whether as individuals or as groups, is an activity which is increasingly discredited as a means of progress, for the 'discarded' bits are always still there. We have, however, the peculiar power to modify indefinitely the meaning of our behaviour, or to draw functional meanings out of baser matter – as when a child's gesture of aggression is changed imperceptibly into a simple refusal. For this reason, it is plausible to suggest that the human race is in some way trying to change the meaning of warfare, trying to work out a new non-violent function of violence, out of the very raw materials of aggression to forge the instruments of peace.

The situation however is still heavy with ambiguity. If there are new meanings emerging, the old meanings are still present. Progress to a new meaning is not automatic, and we can move as well in the direction of disaster as in the direction of progress. What is involved is a change in the whole significance of violent conflict in human history – a change which implies a complete reorientation of our institutions and our attitudes. Implied in this change is a change in our appre-

hension of the nature of evil and violence extending far wider than the field of international relations. It is precisely because so much is at stake that the problem of non-dissemination is proving so intractable.

The goal is to resolve the ambiguity of the present power situation in the direction of human solidarity and international peace. The ambiguity can only be resolved by political commitments, by international actions, for it is in these that meanings are embodied. The non-dissemination agreement is an attempt to institutionalise to a small extent the non-violent meaning of violence, the cooperative and stabilising nature of the nuclear situation; it is an attempt to achieve a kind of world consensus concerning the present structure as involving the joint interests of all members of the community of nations.

To achieve this would be to achieve a great deal – once the world was over this hump it may well be much easier to make further progress towards a stable peace. But the old meaning of violence is still too much of a reality, still too deeply embedded in our history, our attitudes, our institutions, to make any such progress possible without a considerable struggle. It is the old meaning of violence, as an expression, in ‘the enemy’, of the evil in man, and as a means of defence, for oneself, against the forces of darkness, which is the major contestant against any progress in arms control or disarmament; it is the just-war and the holy-war myth which is the hidden common factor in all the obstacles which stand in the way of a non-dissemination agreement.

The United States and the Vietcong are engaged in something very like a holy war in Vietnam – involved now perhaps against their wills, but nevertheless publicly committed and unable to withdraw. Such a situation keeps the old meaning of international war alive – really alive, in the sense that this really *is* a holy and just war, this really is one of its possible meanings, from whichever perspective it is viewed, that of the US or that of the Vietcong; such were the concepts with which it was approached on either side, when the old meaning of war was more dominant than it is today. If this is the way in which conflicts concerning justice are to be settled, if this is the way in which peoples are to defend their rights, then non-dissemination does not make sense; the new meanings clash with old, where the old are still alive.

MLF and ANF raise the same problems. They are ambiguous plans embodying both the old and the new meanings of violence. From the German point of view, they are undoubtedly conceived within the framework of old meanings; their purpose is to strengthen, or at least to give the appearance of strengthening, W. Germany’s defences against the threat from the East. Since the motive for the original plan was to satisfy the demands of W. Germany, it is not unreasonable on the part of the Russians to see the plan in this light – as a strengthening, in fact, of the old meaning of violence, and therefore incompatible with the non-dissemination agreement. The UK

and the US, however, like to contend that this is a step rather towards a greater coordination and control of the nuclear balance, as a move towards the new meaning – and have even hinted that a complementary move by the USSR to organise a Warsaw Pact deterrent would not be objectionable.

The objections of India touch closely upon the same basic problem. The logic of her position is clear. If the nuclear powers are powerful because of their weapons, and if this is because these are the only means of defence against the aggressor similarly armed, then what right have they to presume to suggest that no one else should make any efforts to reach a similar position? What right have they to ask non-nuclear powers to renounce nuclear greatness, to renounce perhaps the only means of defence against the aggressor – in the Indian case, against an already nuclear China? In other words, if the old meaning of violence is still a reality in the world, how can the new be established? As long as the major powers refuse to reduce their weaponry, then they proclaim that the reasons for which they acquired them are still valid, that they are still the unique basis of their power and prestige – that the cooperative idea of the nuclear balance is nonsense, because they cannot cooperate in reductions. The only way to modify this meaning, and to make way for the new, is to do precisely what India asks – to reduce power bilaterally, and to ban all tests, thus making visible progress to the institutionalisation of the new meaning.

Finally, there is the problem of the exclusion of China; and here again it is the holy war concept which is at the root of the difficulty. The exclusion of China from the councils of the world is itself a direct legacy of the holy war mentality. If Chinese communism is an evil and aggressive force, then it is logical that it should be restrained, destroyed if possible, excluded certainly from the community of the just. The wish to exclude the enemy is inseparable from the wish to destroy the enemy – inseparable, that is, from the just war mythology, the old meaning of violence. Again, the attempt to make incarnate the new meaning clashes with a survival of the old, in an institutional and political commitment from which it is difficult to withdraw.

If the question is to move from the old meaning to the new, perhaps a first useful guide to action would be to recognise that the real 'enemy' is the old mythology which we must transcend.

It is a pleasant and in some ways a salutary exercise to give full vent to moral indignation. The activity of the US in Vietnam presents a good object for such an exercise, and the blasts of moral indignation have blown freely in both the US and Britain in the recent months. If there ever was 'fair game', the US policy seems to be it, whether we consider their desperate efforts to prove that the massive civil unrest in South Vietnam is primarily an aggression mounted by the North against the South or the belated and clumsy attempt of the army of so-called 'advisers' to win the 'hearts and

minds' of the people. There is ample scope here for mockery of 'big brother' America, which overshadows perhaps too darkly our own diminished nation – and which once preached so piously against the colonial powers the doctrine of national liberation.

The exercise of moral indignation however has its dangers. The holy war is a greater enemy than the United States or China. If moral indignation is nothing other than a spiritual participation in what we have judged to be a just and righteous war – whether of the US or of the Vietcong – we may well be neglecting our greatest responsibility, which is that of remoulding the myth of the crusade. It would be more appropriate to argue that in this, as in other cases, war is neither just, holy, nor successful as an instrument of justice. When we think of the children burnt by napalm, or murdered in their huts by American mortars, we will also remember the terrorist activities of the Vietcong, the countless village headmen, not all hated quislings, beheaded because of their hostility to the 'revolution'. In our enthusiasm for the ideal of national liberation, we have no right to ignore the meaning of the masses of refugees pouring from the liberated North to the US dominated South. Total victory for either side in this contest is neither a realistic possibility, nor in the interests of world order and justice. The massive stalemate of violence which broods over the world has spawned in this as in other regions, making war increasingly ineffectual and futile.

The same refusal to go along with the old myths should characterise our attitude to the other obstacles to a non-dissemination agreement, and indeed to all lapses into primitive violence. The ANF project should certainly be abandoned if necessary in favour of a non-dissemination, for although it can plausibly be argued that ANF is a move towards the new meaning, it is much more ambiguous and open to misinterpretation than the other. The inclusion of China in the councils of the world must remain a first priority in any negotiations, and it must be realised that the UN is in danger of degenerating into another military alliance, consecrating the old meaning of warfare, as long as it wilfully excludes the largest nation in the world and one of its major civilisations.

We must beware, however, of a merely condemnatory attitude to violence. To do this is simply to reject the old meaning, to ignore what was valid in it; and the new grows not by a rejection of the old, but by a development and a modification of it. This is perhaps the hardest lesson for the pacifist to learn. To refuse to go along with the myth of the holy war does not mean to reject the violence as being without cause, without meaning, or without a certain positive function in the history of man. To condemn either India or Pakistan for their warfare over Kashmir, to condemn either the Vietcong or the Americans for their war in Vietnam, would be a failure to resolve the ambiguity of the situation in the direction of peace. The outright condemnation of violence is itself a kind of violence, a kind of con-

signing to the outer darkness an uncontrollable or unacceptable part of the human situation. If wars are just 'evil', then there are only two possible policies; to subscribe to the traditional 'power-politics' school of thought, and balance one evil against another, hoping for the best, but expecting the worst; or to say that the only moral policy is to have no policy – that we should leave the world to stew in its own immoral juice, while those with clear consciences go free. Both attitudes spring from an unwillingness or inability to understand – in a sense from a failure of forgiveness. Both attitudes are static, without hope of growth towards greater fellowship, for both fail to seize the ambiguity of human actions, which is the very principle of progress, and by virtue of which we can always seek to draw good out of evil.

It may be true that some nations are threatened by hostile and aggressive powers, and that often pairs of nations appear in this light towards each other; but it is important to ask to what extent their expectations have themselves contributed to the establishment of this situation. In the area of Asia, traditional expectations of aggression have led to policies which appeared to be aggressive to both Communist and Western leadership. There were actual confrontations, and expectations of aggression became self-supporting. In Vietnam and Laos, in Formosa and Korea, Western support for unpopular and sometimes repressive regimes has had the appearance to the Chinese of a deliberated encirclement, and aggressive intents have been deduced from frequent, though unofficial and irresponsible statements, emerging from the United States. Chinese responses in each of these areas have in turn appeared to be aggressive, and have seemed to justify Western policies. It still has to be decided to what extent the aggression of Nazi Germany, the diabolical archetype which forever dogs our thinking, was itself a response to a condemnatory judgement of Germany embodied in the Treaty of Versailles.

This is not to say that the problem of aggression can be dissolved; but only to call attention to man's responsibility for the spiritual environment in which he works, and for the mythology within which his temporal experience is situated.

What then can be meant by a more positive approach to the problem of war? First of all it is vital to take seriously the positive values which are being asserted, often on both sides, in an international conflict – values which often, because of the defects in international organisation, can only be defended in this way. It is a commonplace that people always go to war with the noblest of alleged motives; before we ridicule these motives, it might be wise to listen and take them seriously. Sometimes such an approach would reveal a surprising degree of unanimity between opposing sides on certain basic principles.

In Vietnam, for instance, both sides assert, or claim to be asserting, the right of the Vietnamese people to choose the form of government under which they will live – their right, that is, of self-determination.

This may be lip-service; but lip-service is often the beginning of dialogue, the beginning of justice; a tribute paid by vice to virtue, but tribute is the beginning of allegiance. The US claims that it is protecting the South against violent subversion from the North; this indeed is the sole basis in alleged justice of the US position, to such an extent that if infiltration from the North could with certainty be excluded, the US would, according to its own many times repeated position, have no right whatsoever to retain any military presence in the South. The Vietcong, for their part, claim that it is they who represent the real wishes of the Vietnamese people, that the war they are fighting is a war of national liberation. In this case, there is no need to wait for a cease fire to begin this dialogue. Both sides must make explicit, in terms not totally unacceptable to the other side, the principles upon which they have taken their stand. Agreement may then be in sight on the basis of a South Vietnamese Government based on the manifest will of the people, a government unhampered by foreign troops, and free to negotiate reunion with the North in its own way. The US will swallow the bitter pill that a nation might choose to be communist; the North Vietnamese will accept that no formulation of the principle of self-determination can be effective as a basis for world order which does not include effective guarantees for minority rights.

In the case of India, the conflict of principle was and is in a sense more acute. Here it was Pakistan, and Pakistan alone, which claimed to be fighting for the principle of self-determination; and India, though she owes her own independence to this very principle, was concerned more to preserve her insecure national unity, feeling that if a brick were removed the whole structure might fall. The conflict here is between the principle of self-determination and the principle of national coherence – a universal debate, in which we are all involved.

In both these cases there are questions involved of vital importance to the evolving structure of international society; no approach to either problem has any validity unless it takes these issues seriously, neglecting the justice on neither side. Ceasefires at the best are purely emergency measures, and could well do more harm than good if they are not followed by constructive proposals or constructive debate – a debate through which stable principles of world order will gradually be established.

Taking seriously the explicit motives of international conflict is only one aspect of the positive, non-condemnatory approach. Equally important is to understand more clearly the underlying sociological causes, which may or may not be closely related to the explicit and conscious motivation. As with personal conflicts, international conflicts can only be resolved by this double approach – we must take seriously *what* our opponent says, and also try to understand his underlying reasons for saying it.

With the substitution of this more positive understanding for the old mythology, it becomes increasingly evident that wars must be metamorphosed in debates, and debates point directly to the need for international mechanisms of change in accordance with the emerging norms of justice.

But it is precisely at this point that we have to accept the paradox, that these emerging norms are themselves intimately related to the violent conflicts which have preceded them, for the violent conflicts were themselves already instinct with an assertion of justice; and the increasing pressure towards resolution by debate arises directly from a stalemate which has rendered ineffective the use of arms, and which has forced the great powers to withdraw increasingly from direct involvement in areas where they might clash. The very etymology of the word 'debate' suggests that this progress from blows to words is woven into the very fabric of our language.

Thus a certain acceptance of the positive function of violence, both in minor conflicts and in the general balance of power situation, is a very condition of progress towards stable peace. This is the ambiguity of the situation which must be accepted if the real potentialities of growth are to be realised.

In practical terms, this does not mean that the problem of disarmament or non-dissemination is any less urgent; on the contrary, this remains the crucial issue, the test of whether we are able to take possession of human history at this moment and overcome the enormous danger which our lack of comprehension has led us into. It does mean, however, that the problem of arms control and non-dissemination cannot be resolved unless they are seen in the general context of the changing meaning of war: and above all, that they cannot be resolved in detail without the cooperation of strategists trained in war and defence – strategists, that is, who are able to comprehend so fully the old meanings which are incorporated in the present situation that they can see how the situation can be transformed without doing violence to human history, without advocating an unrealisable jump into a world of make believe.

It is the men of war who must make the peace. In short, if we in Britain are to take the problem of war seriously, we cannot afford to have antagonism and division between the Disarmament Department and the Ministry of Defence. As long as the disarmers are marching one way, and the defence experts marching another, we shall never resolve the ambiguity, for the old and new meanings will never come into contact with each other. It is only when defence and disarmament are seen as both vital aspects of the one integral function of overcoming war, only when NATO chiefs are all trained and actively concerned in problems of world disarmament, that the possibilities of growth will begin to be realised.

The experts, however, will not resolve these problems alone. The problems on the control of violence and the nature of evil which

confront us in the macrocosm of international politics have their counterpart in the microcosm of man; they are related to problems which face us in every aspect of our lives. The layman's role is to try to understand in depth the nature of the challenge which faces us – it is the role of the prophet, and in this matter it is society itself which must become prophetic – and provide the creative force which will enable new meanings to be brought forth out of old.

What I Believe

'Questions about life and its purposes answered by some of the liveliest minds of today, including Lord Boothby, Jacquetta Hawkes, Malcolm Muggeridge, Barbara Wooton, John Wren-Lewis.

The book becomes, as one reads it, a growing revelation of how men and women find meaning in life and successfully 'challenge and dominate the shameless dark'. **25s.**

GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN