15: Christian Perspectives in World Crisis

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It should be clear from the moral and mental confusion of our time that the present world crisis is something far worse than a merely political or economic conflict. It goes far deeper than ideologies. It is a crisis of man's spirit. It is a completely[1] moral upheaval of the human race that has lost its religious and cultural roots. We do not really know half the causes of this upheaval. We cannot pretend to have a full understanding of what is going on in ourselves and in our society. That is why our desperate hunger for clear and definite solutions sometimes leads us into temptation. We oversimplify. We seek the cause of evil and find it here or there in a particular nation, class, race, ideology, system. And we discharge upon this scapegoat all the virulent force of our hatred, compounded with fear and anguish, striving to rid ourselves of our dread and of our guilt by destroying the object we have arbitrarily singled out as the embodiment of all evil. Far from curing us, this is only another paroxysm which aggravates our sickness.

The moral evil in the world is due to man's alienation from the deepest truth, from the springs of spiritual life within himself, to his alienation from God. Those who realize this try desperately to persuade and enlighten their brothers. But we are in a radically different position from the first Christians, who revolutionized an essentially religious world of paganism with the message of a new religion that had never been heard of.

We on the contrary live in an irreligious post-Christian world in which the Christian message has been repeated over and over until it has come to seem empty of all intelligible content to those whose ears close to the word of God even before it is uttered. In their minds Christian is no longer identified with newness and change, but only with the static preservation of outworn structures.

But why is this? Is it merely that the spiritual novelty of Christianity has worn off in twenty centuries? That people have heard the Gospel before and are tired of it? Or is it perhaps because for centuries the message has been belied and contradicted by the

conduct of Christians themselves? Christianity is essentially the revelation of the Divine Mercy in the Mystery of Christ and His Church. Infinite mercy, infinite love are revealed to the world, made *evident* to the world in the sanctity of the Mystical Body of Christ, united in charity, nourished by the sacramental mystery of the Eucharist in which all participate in the divine *agape*, the sacrifice of the Word made Flesh. To say Christianity is the revelation of love means not simply that Christians are (or should be) nice charitable people. It means that love is the key to life itself and to the whole meaning of the cosmos and of history. If Christians, then, are without love they deprive all other men of access to the central truth that gives meaning to all existence.

"By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). "That they all may be one in us, as thou Father in me and I in thee; so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me" (John 17:21). "My peace I give unto you... I do not give peace as the world gives it" (John 14:27). "The wisdom that comes from above is marked chiefly indeed by its purity but also indeed by its peacefulness... It carries mercy with it and a harvest of all that is good; it is uncensorious and without affectation. Peace is the seed ground of holiness and those who make peace will win its harvest. What leads you to war, what leads to quarreling among you? ... The appetites which infest your mortal bodies. Your desires go unfulfilled and so you fall to murdering" (James 3:17-4:2).

It must be admitted therefore that if the Gospel of Peace is no longer convincing on the lips of Christians, it may well be because they have ceased to give a living example of peace, unity and love. True, we have to understand that the Church was never intended to be absolutely perfect on earth, and she is a Church of sinners, laden with imperfection. Christian peace and Christian charity are based indeed on this need to "bear one another's burdens," to accept the infirmities that plague one's own life and the lives of others. Our unity is a struggle with disunity and our peace exists in the midst of conflict.

But the fact remains that a warring and warlike Christendom has never been able to preach the Gospel of charity and peace with full conviction or full success. As Cardinal Newman so rightly said, the greatest victories of the Church were all won before Constantine, in the days when there were no Christian armies and when the true Christian soldier was the martyr, whose witness to

Christ was nonviolent. It was the martyrs who conquered Rome for Christ with a conquest that has been stable for twenty centuries. How long were the crusaders able to hold Jerusalem?

This should teach us that though the words of the Gospel still objectively retain all the force and freshness of their original life, it is not enough now for us to preach and explain them. It is not enough to announce the familiar message that no longer seems to be news. Not enough to teach, to prove, to convince. Now above all is the time to embody Christian truth in action even more than in words. No matter how lucid, how persuasive, how logical, how profound our theological and spiritual statements may be, they are usually wasted on anyone who does not already think as we do. That is why the serene and classic sanity of moralists exposing the traditional teaching of Christian theologians on the "just war" is almost a total loss in the general clamor and confusion of half truths, propaganda slogans, and pernicious clichés, many of which are preached and disseminated by Christians themselves, not excluding the clergy.

What is needed now is the Christian who manifests the truth of the Gospel in social action, with or without explanation. The more clearly his life manifests the teaching of Christ, the more salutary it will be. Clear and decisive Christian action explains itself, and teaches in a way that words never can.

Christians must not only assert the existence of a moral order and of natural law in the midst of a world where law and order are questioned or even completely forgotten. Christians above all must act in all things, in their work, their social relations, their political life as if justice and objective right were to them vital and essential realities, not just consoling ideas.

Pope John XXIII said in *Mater et Magistra*:

> Let men make all the technical and economic progress they can, there will be no peace nor justice in the world until they return to a sense of their dignity as creatures and sons of God, who is the first and final cause of all created being. Separated from God man is but a monster, in himself and toward others, for the right ordering of human society presupposes the right ordering of man's conscience with God, who is Himself the source of all justice, truth and love (215).

And Pius XII said in his Christmas Message of 1955 that Christians have a most serious obligation to help build a society based on genuinely Christian principles:

> If ever Christians were to neglect this duty of theirs by leaving inactive insofar as in them lies the guiding force of faith in public life they would be committing treason against the God-Man.[2]

What is wanted now is therefore not simply the Christian who takes an inner complacency in the words and example of Christ, but who seeks to follow Christ perfectly, not only in his own personal life, not only in prayer and penance, but also in his political commitments and in all his social responsibilities.

We have certainly no need of a pseudo-contemplative spirituality that claims to ignore the world and its problems entirely, and devotes itself supposedly to the things of God, without concern for human society. All true Christian spirituality, even that of the Christian contemplative, is and must always be deeply concerned with man, since "God became man in order that man might become God" (St. Irenaeus). The Christian spirit is one of compassion, of responsibility and of commitment. It cannot be indifferent to suffering, to injustice, error, untruth. Precisely for that reason then a genuine Christian spirituality must be profoundly concerned with all the risks and problems implied by the mere existence of nuclear stockpiles and biological weapons.

In the presence of an international politic based on nuclear deterrence and on the imminent possibility of global suicide, no Christian may remain indifferent, no Christian can allow himself a mere inert and passive acquiescence in ready-made formulas fed to him by the mass media.

Still less can a Christian conscience be content with an ethic that seeks to justify and permit as much as possible of force and terror, in international politics and in war. The Christian is formally obliged to take positive and active means to restrain force and bring into being a positive international authority which can effectively prevent war and promote peace. The whole world faces a momentous choice. Either our frenzy of desperation will lead to

destruction, or our loyalty to truth, to God and to our fellow man will enable us to perform the patient, heroic task of building a world that will eventually thrive in unity, order and peace.

In the present crisis, Christian action can be decisive. That is why it is supremely important for us to keep our heads and refuse to be carried away by the wild projects of fanatics who seek an oversimplified and immediate solution by means of ruthless violence. Power alone is not the answer.

In a world that has largely discarded moral imperatives and which indeed no longer seriously considers the violent death of one hundred million human beings as a moral issue, but only as a pragmatic exercise of power, the Christian must regard himself as the custodian of moral and human values, and *must give top priority to their clarification and defense.*

This implies first of all, the duty of unremitting study, meditation, prayer and every form of spiritual and intellectual discipline that can fit him for so serious a task. Obviously this responsibility is first of all binding on the clergy and religious, and above all on those entrusted with their education and spiritual formation.

In this all-important matter we have to rediscover the sources of Christian tradition, and we must come to realize that we have to a great extent abandoned the early Christian ideal of peace and nonviolent action. Surely it is curious that in the twentieth century the one great political figure who has made a conscious and systematic use of the Gospel principles for nonviolent political action was not a Christian but a Hindu. Even more curious is the fact that so many Christians thought Gandhi was some kind of eccentric and that his nonviolence was an impractical and sensational fad.

Christians have got to speak by their actions. Their political action must not be confined to the privacy of the polling booth. It must be clear and manifest to everybody. It must speak loudly and plainly the Christian truth, and it must be prepared to defend that truth with sacrifices, accepting misunderstanding, injustice, calumny, and even imprisonment or death. It is crucially important for Christians today to adopt a genuinely Christian position and support it with everything they have got. This means an unremitting fight for justice in every sphere—in labor, in race relations, in the "third world" and above all in international affairs.

This means reducing the distance between our interior intentions and our exterior acts. Our social actions must conform to our deepest religious principles. Beliefs and politics can no longer be

kept isolated from one another. It is no longer possible for us to be content with abstract and hidden acts of "purity of intention" which do nothing to make our outward actions different from those of atheists or agnostics.

Nor can we be content to make our highest ideal the preservation of a minimum of ethical rectitude prescribed by natural law. Too often the nobility and grandeur of natural law have been debased by the manipulations of theorists until natural law has become indistinguishable from the law of the jungle, which is no law at all. Hence those who complacently prescribe the duty of national defense on the basis of "natural law" often forget entirely the norms of justice and humanity without which no war can be permitted. Without these norms, natural law becomes mere jungle law, that is to say crime.

Many Christians will with complete docility accept opinions and decisions that bear the stamp of jungle law rather than that of the Gospel. They will submit without protest to such directives, and they will feel little or no uneasiness of conscience, even though someone who has lost his faith in God may be shocked by such insensitivity and scandalized by this apparent perversion of the moral sense.

It is unfortunate that a spirit of minimalist legalism has in the past distorted the Christian perspectives both of the laity and the clergy. Hence we have sometimes allowed our consciences to be content with pharisaism and spiritual trifling, "straining [at] gnats and swallowing camels." Undoubtedly one of the most important objectives of John XXIII in calling the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is to favor and encourage the great movement of renewal that is making itself felt in the Church today. The Holy Father obviously feels there is a real hope of the Church turning the tide of secularism and violence by

taking the perennial, vital divine power of the Gospel and injecting it into the veins of the human society of today which glories in its recent scientific and technological advances at the same time as it is suffering damage to its social order. (*Humanae Salutis*, Dec. 25, 1961)

But at the same time this will not be possible, says Pope John, unless the grave dangers of the time "point up the need for vigilance *and make every individual aware of his own responsibilities.*" In par-

ticular the Pope refers specifically to questions of social justice, international relations and the whole climate of secularism and materialism in modern thought.

Nuclear war is certainly a case in point. It is quite certain that many Catholics who are spontaneously revolted by the natural injustice involved in the threat to answer "intolerable political provocation" with the annihilation of enemy cities, may swallow their repugnance and accept the prospect with docility, believing that "the leaders know best" and that in this case, as well as in any other case, it is always more Christian to suspend judgment and leave the decision to someone else. But how can this be true if the decision is left in the hands of men without firm moral standards, or compassion, or humanity? Worse still if it really depends on men of whom we know nothing, and who determine the policies and decisions of leaders we hopefully trust?

Lloyd George said that if the Churches had resolutely refused their blessing and cooperation, the First World War would never have been fought. It is quite true that the Popes and other religious spokesmen have come out tirelessly with clear, uncompromising directives to avoid violence: but these directives have either been minimized or set aside as inopportune by Catholics in countries that were actually at war. One can certainly appreciate the difficult position of the Churchmen, for instance in Nazi Germany during World War II. The fact remains that their cooperation with Hitler's unjust war effort is something of a scandal.*

The Popes have repeatedly pleaded with Christians to show themselves in all things disciples of Christ the Prince of Peace, and to embody in their lives their faith in His teaching. "All His teaching is an invitation to peace" says Pope John XXIII in the 1961 Christmas message. Deploring the ever increasing selfishness, hardness of heart, cynicism and callousness of mankind, as war becomes once again more and more imminent, Pope John says that Christian goodness and charity must permeate all the activity, whether personal or social, of every Christian. The Pontiff quotes St Leo the Great in a passage which contrasts natural ethics with the nonviolent ethic of the Gospel: "To commit injustice and to make reparation—this is the prudence of the world. On the contrary, *not to render evil for evil, is the virtuous expression of Christian forgiveness."* These words, embodying the wisdom of the Church

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* See Gordon Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962)[Merton's footnote].

and the heart of her moral teaching, are heard without attention and complacently dismissed as if they could not seriously apply to the present international crisis.

Here we come face to face with a serious ambiguity, which is very near the heart of the problem.

It is quite true that the blunt, unqualified statement that one "must not render evil for evil" seems disconcerting and hopelessly impractical when it is brought face to face with any concrete political problem, here and now. What possible relevance can such a principle have, we ask, when Khrushchev is threatening to rain down H-bombs on western Europe and America?

To say that we must not "render evil for evil" seems to mean that we must placidly fold our hands and allow ourselves to be enslaved or destroyed. But this is not the meaning of this basic Christian principle, otherwise how could such a principle ever be applied in politics? To take the principle as if it meant that alone is to understand it in an absurd sense.

It is obvious, too, that appeals to nonviolent action or even to unilateral disarmament tend to create the same false and absurd impression. It is certainly neither practical nor even sane to expect that thousands of military bureaucrats who people the Pentagon will suddenly have a change of heart and listen to the message of nonviolence one fine day, close down all their offices, cancel all the orders for new missiles, tear up all the defense contracts, and retire to *ashrams*.

Of course the "realist" who has finally discarded the thought of "not rendering evil for evil" as purely meaningless has perhaps something to be said for him. He has simplified his life. He has abolished the need to make his practical action conform to deep spiritual norms of morality. He has abolished a definitely uncomfortable and frustrating state of inner contradiction. When the enemy threatens him with a thousand megatons he can reply with a threat of ten thousand, and no nonsense about good and evil.

The sincere Christian cannot have it that easy. He is bound by his religious commitment to live with this inner conflict between seemingly irreconcilable extremes. Yet he is also bound to attempt, as far as he can with the grace of God, to reconcile them.

In reality the plea not to render evil for evil must retain some meaning even for a General in the age of nuclear war. What can that meaning be? Obviously it is not that one who has all his life lived in and for and by war and threat of war, should suddenly

renounce all thought of retaliation when he is threatened. But nevertheless the principle is there, and one has to begin somewhere to observe it.

The point at which even a military strategist should consider himself bound not to render evil for evil is at least this: that an evil which takes the form of a political or military *threat* and which is most probably a bluff, is not to be met, ethically, *with the evil of actual force*. Not only that, but he should strive, if possible, to refrain from meeting it with an equally sinister or even more sinister political threat, and, while maintaining his defensive capacity, he should do all that he can to reduce tensions and to work for an eventual elimination of this evil altogether, by other than violent means.

This is certainly not unreasonable, and though it may not measure up to the perfection of the Gospel, it is at least a good start and one who can do this in our time has no reason to be ashamed.

But in actual fact politicians and military strategists in general tend to reject the uncomfortable principle of "not rendering evil for evil" altogether. They can do so quite easily by *simply refusing to take it in any other than an absurd sense.*

It is a tragic fact that one of the effects of the "Cold War mentality" is precisely this. Not only militarists but also theologians, priests and bishops have come to the point where, in the context of the Cold War crisis, they are *practically unable to take this basic principle seriously.* As Christians they will give it a formal nod of assent, but in a concrete political situation their complete obsession by Cold War phobias makes it *morally impossible for them to take the principle in any sense which is not absurd.* In a word, they cannot see it in any light that makes it worth considering, and hence they reject it from their practical judgments. It may end by having no influence whatever in the decisions of their conscience regarding nuclear war.

That is why, in practice, we tend to assume that the teaching of Christian forgiveness and meekness applies only to the individual, not to nations or collectivities. The state can go to war and exert every form of violent force, while the individual expresses his Christian meekness by shouldering his gun without resistance and obeying the command to go out and kill. The state need never forgive. The state can hate with impunity. The state can render evil for evil, and indeed even evil for good! This is not Pope John's idea at all. He utters a solemn warning to rulers of nations:

With the authority we have received from Jesus Christ we say: *Shun all thought of force; think of the tragedy of initiating a chain reaction of acts, decisions and resentments which could erupt into rash and irreparable deeds.* You have received great powers not to destroy but to build, not to divide but to unite, not to cause tears to be shed but to provide employment and security. (Christmas Message, 1961)

On the contrary, Pope John insists that peace must be based on an

appreciation of true brotherhood, for a resolution of sincere cooperation that stays clear of all intrigue and of those destructive factors that we will once again call by their proper names without any disguise: pride, greed, callousness, selfishness.

In this same Christmas Message the Pope says that the mentality of suspicion and hatred is unfortunately encouraged and strengthened by those who possess the art of forming public opinion and have a partial monopoly over it! In very serious terms he warned these men "to fear the stern judgment of God and of history and to proceed cautiously with respect and a sense of moderation."

He added, "We say this regretfully but frankly—the press has helped to create a climate of hostility, of animosity, of sharp division."

Notes

1. Although the term "a completely moral upheaval" may seem ungrammatical, there is a reason why Merton expressed himself in this way. The paragraph is one which appeared in a slightly altered form in the essay "Christian Action in World Crisis," reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 83. In the original essay, Merton had written "a great religious and moral upheaval." The change to "a completely moral upheaval" indicates that he was trying to focus on the problem as a question of morality, not introducing at this point the question of religion. The paragraph, and indeed the book itself, tries to address the moral question to the widest possible audience of readers who, in being "post-Christian," feel the necessity to address moral questions

even if they subscribe to no particular religious group. The word "entirely" might have made the sense clearer. The expression may seem inelegant, but the meaning is there.

2. Pope Pius XII used the term "God-Man" to refer to Christ. The complete text of the sentence is "If ever Christians neglect this duty of theirs by leaving inactive the guiding forces of the faith in public life, to the extent that they are responsible, they would be committing treason against the God-Man Who appeared in visible form among us in the cradle of Bethlehem." See Vincent A. Yzermans, ed., *The Major Addresses of Pope Pius XII, Vol II: Christmas Messages* (St. Paul: Northern Central Publishing Co., 1961), 205. This is a slightly different translation than Merton was using.