

IS AN ETHIC OF NON-VIOLENCE POSSIBLE?

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[Note: There will be three parts to the presentation. Part II is provided below. Parts I and III are provided here in outline.]

Part I: PRINCIPLES OF NON-VIOLENCE

The question in the title is a genuine one. I think the answer can be yes or no depending on some distinctions regarding the meaning of “ethics” and “violence.” The following principles need to be addressed:

1. An ethic of non-violence may be possible while a morality of non-violence may not be. I refer to usual connotations of “ethics” as a philosophical study concerned with human thinking, intention and decision. Morality, in contrast, involves behavior, external actions and unintended effects. If morality cannot be non-violent, then ethics will inevitably need to be accompanied by confession of fault and request for forgiveness.

2. One must distinguish violence (irrational, out-of-control explosiveness) from controlled levels of force. A force counter to violence may be allowable, even good, despite the possible causing of bodily injury. Modern medicine uses surgery and anti-biotics (“killers”) to counter the violence of disease though the body always suffers “collateral damage.” Urban civilization up to this point in history has been unthinkable without police and the threat of force against people who do criminal acts.

3. The premise of a non-violent ethic is: Do violence to no one. How far does “no one” extend? The natural processes of the life cycle involve constant killing. Eat or be eaten is the general rule. Humans kill when they wash, breathe or walk across the grass, as well as when they found settlements, eat meat or clothe themselves. If the intent in ethics is to avoid violence to all living things, then asking for forgiveness becomes part of morality.

4. No one can work through the anger, frustration, fear and other ordinary emotions that lead to violence unless one can diffuse this potential destructiveness through speech. One has to articulate one’s own feelings and communicate with the “other” who can always pose a threat. Non-violence and truth-telling are bedfellows. But truth-telling does not exclude a variety of forms of speech that are neither lying nor “bare facts.” Even deception can at times be ethically acceptable.

The phrase “non-violence” has usually been associated with one of two divergent paths. Either the individual tries to find a way to avoid the violence that seems endemic to civilized life or else non-violence is articulated as pacifism, an ideology that applies to international conflicts.

The first seems doable, at least to a large extent. The immediate environment of family, animals, work, leisure activity, eating habits can be controlled to exclude all or almost all violence. But is that attitude universalizable, that is, does it offer a pattern for human life? Is the indispensable job of using force assigned to someone other than the individual who wishes to avoid it?

The second path, pacifism, has the problems of any term ending in -ism, a set of ideas removed from immediate practice. It proclaims the desirability of peace rather than war. Nearly everybody would prefer peace but the vast majority of people see pacifism as unrealistic. Is there any way to close this gap?

The first step needed is to break out of the nineteenth-century language of individual ethics and social ethics. An ethics of non-violence to be realistic has to be at once personal and corporate. Every human action is a personal response to a corporate (or bodily) world. The corporate includes one’s own body, other human beings, nonhuman natural beings and human organizations of every kind. The (individual) person who is trying to be non-violent has to recognize the range of beings that are both the source of influence on the action and the recipient of reverberations from the action. Thus, for example, Tip O’Neill’s oft quoted cliché that “all politics is local” is a myopic and dangerous belief; all politics is both (located in the) personal and at the same time corporate in ways that are potentially world-shaking.

From the opposite direction, peace between nations can only happen with the awareness of other corporate structures that need reforming, such as ethnic, religious and economic organizations. In addition, the world has yet to build the corporate structures that are needed to mediate differences between nations. The United Nations, and associated institutions such as the International Criminal Court, may finally be the beginning of a pattern that has long been needed. After its paralysis of the first forty years, the UN has had a chance to be an active force in the last decade. But many nations - preeminently the United States of America - are reluctant to cede any power of national sovereignty to a trans-national organization.

Part II: A REALISTIC NATION STATE

For the past fifty years United States foreign policy has been dominated by a school of thinking that is called “realism.” The fact that the people who think this way have been able to appropriate the presumptuous self-description “realist” is evidence of their success in running the country. The two clear attempts to change direction happened after 1960 and after 1976. Everyone knows how these two attempts ended. John Kennedy’s proclamation that we would “bear any burden, pay any price, meet any hardship” for the success of liberty everywhere in the world ended in the tragedy of Vietnam. Jimmy Carter’s attempt to attend to human rights in South America, Africa and elsewhere ended in double-digit inflation and hostages in Iran.

After 1992 there were sporadic attempts by Bill Clinton to change the basis of foreign policy. Some fragile successes were achieved but there was a certain messiness in rethinking the way that the United States should interact with other nations. The messy results of the election in 2000 brought back the self-proclaimed realists who were going to dictate the way the world should act. The events of Sept. 11, 2001 upset their assumptions.

The “Realist” Premise

Beneath U.S. foreign policy lies a very clear ethical principle that is proclaimed to be “realistic”; anyone who questions it is by definition unrealistic or idealistic. Nevertheless, what is so confidently assumed to be realistic is a peculiar ideological doctrine that is theoretically thin and practically destructive. The principle I refer to is a belief that the world consists of individuals who are naturally selfish. Each of these individuals has a single self-interest: an unquenchable desire for power.

To any objection by an individual that he or she does not think that way, the “realist” readily acknowledges that an individual can - and often should - mask the selfishness. Codes of morality have been established to restrain selfishness. Religions, it is thought, especially Christianity and Buddhism, preach selflessness. To the limited extent that religions are successful, the world is a kinder place. In contemporary writing, morality is equated with “altruism,” that is, sacrificing oneself for the other person.

Political “realists” maintain that although altruism can sometimes work at the level of individuals, it is impossible for nations. To invite a nation to act unselfishly would be suicidal. A nation state that thinks it is acting altruistically

has deluded itself and lost sight of national self-interest. A nation can have only one interest, the accumulation of power. In this way of thinking, morality is a term that should not intrude upon discussions of international politics.

In the United States of the twentieth-first century, the immediate source of “realism” is a secularized version of Christianity. What is thought to be realistic is a Christian doctrine of “man the sinner” without any doctrine of grace or redemption. It is difficult to imagine a more depressing view of the human situation than belief in original sin but no belief in God. And yet, U.S. foreign policy since World War II has been built on that premise.

A key figure in developing this way of seeing things was Reinhold Niebuhr who had astounding influence on government thinking during and after World War II. Niebuhr himself believed in a God of grace and redemption, as well as a world of sin. Unfortunately, he was far more successful in convincing government leaders that this is a world wracked by original sin.

Niebuhr had attained prominence with his 1932 book, Moral Man and Immoral Society. Government leaders loved that title. Morality is necessary and good for “man.” Individuals should be generous, compassionate, self-sacrificing. These qualities will create a morally good citizenry, a nation worth defending by government officials who operate in the amoral or immoral world of “society” or nation. George Kennan, speaking for political “realists,” called Reinhold Niebuhr “the father of us all.”

I think that in the last decade of his life, before his death in 1971, Niebuhr had some sense of the monster he had created. He acknowledged that his view of “man” was too narrowly Augustinian. He wished he had paid more attention to Jewish and Catholic thought. He wanted to “soften” his realism or apply it “less consistently.” But there was no way out from within the categories he still assumed. He was writing in the midst of the Vietnam fiasco which provided powerful evidence that national idealism does not work. For Niebuhr, “realism” remained the only alternative.

That the United States got into Vietnam by misplaced idealism is largely true. It should not be forgotten, however, that the last six years of the war were fought by “realists” in the White House. Henry Kissinger, a dedicated “realist,” tried to extricate the United States on the basis of self-interest and not morality. In The White House Years, Kissinger writes that “Cambodia was not a moral issue...what we faced was an essentially tactical choice.” Kissinger is right on one point; Cambodia is indeed not the name of a “moral issue,” but the name of a

country whose people were devastated by the needs of Kissinger's "tactical choice."

Until 1989, the United States's narrow vision of the world could be excused on the basis that it was confronted by a power that was seeking world domination. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a crucial moment for the United States to rethink its position vis-a-vis other nation states and to move away from its crude view of power. It is difficult to remember the quaint phrase "peace dividend" that was so common a decade ago.

The present situation is where realism gets a country when its military budget is more than the next six countries in the world combined and it does 80 percent of the world's development of weapons. If you begin by assuming that everyone is your potential enemy, then it is not surprising to discover that everyone is a potential enemy. And in order to "defend" yourself in a world of immoral nations, no amount of military hardware will ever be enough.

The Alternative to "Realism"

Can the United States rethink its outlook on the world? That was unlikely to happen without a drastic change in the world's situation. The change initiated by the events of September 11 is the kind of thing that has the potential to bring about a fundamental change in thinking. One can hope that the present crisis will lead to a less arrogant, more moral country. But a crisis is just as likely to drive the United States further into paranoia.

There are cooperative ventures that U.S. citizens and companies engage in. Along that route some basis of mutual respect may be built. Artists, athletes, missionaries, overseas volunteers and business people often have a saner view of the world than political "realists" in the government.

A rethinking of the ethical basis of foreign policy would require a fundamental change in language. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1964 that a friend had said a better name for his book would have been Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities. That would have been an improvement. One should indeed be realistic about the struggle between good and evil in the world, as Niebuhr was trying to warn. But the struggle runs through the middle of each person and each community.

The phrase "self-interest" is a near contradiction. "Interest" (inter-est) is what is between. A person does not have an interest; a person in interacting with

other persons discovers a multiplicity of interests within the self. The moral struggle is to discover which interests of the self should be given first place; that will determine what kind of self the person becomes. Undeniably the person needs power to survive and prosper but there are many kinds of power. The power "to dominate the last man" is one crude form of power. Receiving or giving affection can also be powerful - is in fact close to the root meaning of power as receptiveness.

Morality regulates persons in their dealing with other persons in a variety of communal and corporate structures. If one starts with the language of "individual/society," then there is a dichotomy whenever morality is discussed. But continuity exists between persons acting in small communities and persons acting as business and political leaders. Both persons and nations always have one or more interests at play in decisions. But the interests of others can and should be integral to the actions.

Christian and Jewish morality does not say love your neighbor instead of yourself. Rather, it says love God and the love that is received makes it possible to love your neighbor as yourself. Contemporary writers who equate morality and altruism seem unaware that morality had been discussed for thousands of years before the invention of the term altruism in the 1850s. Only if one assumes that the human being is "naturally selfish" does altruism become the hopelessly idealistic alternative.

The alternative to selfishness/altruism is mutual pacts in which persons and nations strive to find common interests. The United Nations represents a fragile structure of pacts between nations. It is tempting to be cynical about the United Nations and its inefficiencies. But the United States's foot-dragging on everything from signing treaties to paying its dues can only worsen the condition of the United Nations. The only present alternative to cooperation at the United Nations is the United States deciding what will be done militarily, diplomatically, economically.

Even if the United States were being run by very wise people, that unilateral attitude would be outrageous. The United States is being run by people who are not evil but who rely on their own narrow view of what is the "national interest." For example, one of the few references that George W. Bush made to Africa during the presidential campaign in 2000 was: "Africa may be important, but it does not fit our strategic interests, as far as I can see them." To say that the greatest health crisis since the middle ages is not part of our "strategic interests" is staggering. Mr. Bush has had to rethink his seeming obliviousness of other

nations, although Africa's problems still seem to be off the U.S. government's map.

I think the tragic misunderstanding of morality by advocates of "realism" can be seen in George Kennan, whose attempt to state his position is strangely contorted by his assumption of what "morality" means. At the beginning of his essay "Morality and Foreign Policy" (Foreign Affairs, 1985), Kennan says that he wishes to correct the misconception that he has advocated an amoral or even an immoral foreign policy. He then proceeds to say that morality should be kept out of foreign policy. If there is another possibility than amoral, immoral and moral, I am at a loss to know what it could be. Despite his insistent protest to the contrary, Kennan's views in that essay can be called deeply moral. For example, he writes: "It seems to me that our purposes prosper only when something happens in the mind of another person, and perhaps in our own mind as well, which makes it easier for all of us to see each other's problems and prejudices with detachment and to live peaceably side by side." How can that possibly be done except by people who, with their own moral convictions, see other people and other nations as moral agents?

One of the most revealing statements by Kennan comes at the end of the essay where he reflects on morality's relation to religion. He asks "whether there is any such thing as morality that does not rest, consciously or otherwise, on some foundation of religious faith, for the renunciation of self-interest, which is what morality implies, can never be realized by purely secular and materialistic considerations." He raises an important question about the ultimate basis of morality. But in asking the question he manifests confusion on two points: 1) the assumption that religion is the renunciation of self-interest 2) the belief that morality implies the renunciation of self-interest.

Kennan is caught where Augustine was when he wrote The City of God and pitted the love of God against the love of man. But Augustine came to realize that the earthly city contains relatively just and relatively unjust regimes. The love of human beings, including oneself, is a love of God's creation. Ironically the United States's foreign policy is guided by The City of God; the irony, of course, is that the United States's city of God is lacking God. Into that vacuum goes the national interest as defined by "realism." And while the United States worries over the niceties of "church-state separation" its foreign policy is built upon a badly digested Christianity.

Nowhere is this fact more evident than when the United States engages in war (even metaphorical wars). It was not a slip of the tongue when George W.

Bush used the term “crusade.” In this instance, however, even government leaders recognized the danger of the term. They had some historical sense and Muslims reminded them that “crusade” (fighting under the cross) is forever tied to the bloody medieval wars against Muslims. But the problem goes deeper and is not just a case of Muslim sensitivities.

The United States fights wars but America launches crusades. When the nation with the peculiar name of United States disappears into “America,” then its wars become holy wars. “America” is a term that since its invention in 1507 has carried religious (more specifically Christian) meaning. Thus, America is always on a crusade. Dwight Eisenhower’s “crusade in Europe” may seem a justified use of the term but it was the wrong language even in a war against Hitler. John McCain in regularly talking about a crusade during the 2000 election campaign seemed oblivious of the term’s history and its inappropriateness. In October, 2001, the government suspended the term “crusade” (along with its other spectacular choice of “infinite justice”) but with God Bless America and America the Beautiful ringing on all sides I suspect we are still on a crusade.

Part III: ARE THERE RULES FOR CONFLICT?

1. Plato’s distinction between war and civil strife
2. Augustine’s distinction between the willingness of the Christian to be killed rather than kill; and the duty of a Christian to come to the defense of a vulnerable third party who is being attacked. Can that principle or analogy be transposed to war between nations?
3. Thomas Aquinas’s distinction between war and rebellion
4. Erasmus and the need for international organizations
5. Is the nation state inherently violent? Are we seeing the collapse of the system that originated in the 17th century?
6. Do the phrases jus ad bellum and jus in bellum make any sense? The phrase “just war” in English has always seemed preposterous. What is one to make of rules to restrain violence within the violence of war?
7. What can be learned from “truth commissions” about accomplishing an admittedly imperfect justice?