

## WHY ARE THE CLERGY CONCERNED ABOUT VIETNAM?

by

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Sodom would have been saved had ten righteous men been found in the city. Maybe there were ten righteous men; only their righteousness wasn't relevant.

This is a disturbing thought to many clergy who too long have suffered from the blood brother of apathy -- an incapacity to give priority to what is important. How concerned we have been with free love and how indifferent to free hate! Now in a world threatened with a destruction as imminent and complete as that of Sodom our righteousness must become more relevant. Peace must become our major religious responsibility, and peace in Vietnam our most immediate one.

But what can we say? What competence have we to speak out?

While this article speaks only for its author, its sentiments are widely shared by rabbis, priests and fellow pastors. Let us concede immediately we may be wrong, but let us hope that those who disagree with us will think it right that we should state our views as forthrightly as possible.

What can we say?

In the first place we can say the obvious, that war has a face from which we have no right to avert our eyes. Yet how often we do just that! How often, for example, on TV news have we watched an American pilot being interviewed by a correspondent who asks not "How many did you kill today" but "How did it go?" To which the pilot, an obviously nice fellow with friendly wrinkles around his eyes, answers modestly, "I think we did a good job." Were it not for the uniform we would never have known that he had not just spent the afternoon cleaning out the garage.

Then we can and must say that though thousands of our boys die in this war these deaths will not make the cause one whit more sacred. For sacrifice in and of itself confers no sanctity. ("Though I give my body to be burned . . . , I am nothing.") Yet how difficult it is to accept this truth if one's own son is among the sacrificed.

We must also speak out against the herd mentality that always tends to dominate a people in wartime. It is a terrible thing when agreement takes

the place of mutual concern as the basis of human unity. For then "Play it safe," "Don't rock the boat," these slogans become as it were the eleventh commandment, the commandment on which are "hanged" all the law and the prophets. For it is the commandment that makes us turn the other cheek -- in order not to see the evil, that makes us hide behind our specialties, claiming insufficient knowledge. Wartime avoidance of controversial issues is often but a sophisticated version of unsophisticated Cain clubbing his brother to death.

Our leaders too we must question, but not their sincerity. On the contrary, it is their passionate conviction of the rightness of this war that concerns us. As any decent clergyman knows, in a divorce suit the term "innocent party" is a legal fiction. The same holds true in almost any war. Of all wars, holy wars are the worst, for they always lead to self-righteousness, hatred of the enemy, viciousness in tactics, and, as right and wrong admit of no relenting, to refusals on both sides to accept just compromises.

Our main concern however, is to question the very premise of our Vietnamese policy. Let no one say that separation of Church and State means the separation of Jews and Christians from politics. (I am sure that is what Pharaoh said to Moses!) Further, let no one say that anything as important as foreign policy should be left to foreign policy "experts" alone. In the civil rights struggle we learned that those furthest from the seat of power are often nearer to the heart of things. This can be true in foreign affairs, particularly in those areas of policy that relate to the underdeveloped areas of the world. The United States is today a conservative nation for the simple reason that it has much to conserve. But two-thirds of the world is revolutionary for the equally simple reason that no one is anxious to conserve poverty, illiteracy and disease. For a conservative nation to give relevant leadership to a revolutionary world is phenomenally difficult, and often a civil rights worker in Mississippi or a slum priest in Chicago will prove more sensitive to an explosion of human frustration in Latin America than a Rusk or a McNamara, and more sensitive also to the wrongness of a government like that of Diem, that conferred so little justice or self-respect upon the vast number of peasants it sought to rule.

In short, in international affairs many kinds of experts are needed to develop foreign policies that reflect broad political wisdom informed by moral sensitivity.

But more specifically, what is it about the war in Vietnam that troubles us so deeply?

One of the most discouraging features of the war is its apparently self-defeating character. Our bombing of North Vietnam, which rather patronizingly we assumed would cow the North Vietnamese, has by most accounts only served to put iron into their spines. Then our stepped-up defense of freedom in South Vietnam has produced a situation in which there is now practically no freedom to defend. Many Buddhists are now talking of the

evils of military rule not because they are against Ky but because they are for peace, and to talk openly of peace is to court jail or even death.

But our special concern is for the peasants whose misery has long been the Viet Cong's chief ally. This misery is not alleviated by our bombing and burning of villages, by our destruction of crops, and our killing of at least as many civilians as Viet Cong fighters. In fact, this misery is growing as peasants now flee from our bombs as much as from Viet Cong terror, crowd into totally inadequate refugee camps, and increasingly send their daughters into Saigon to become mistresses for our soldiers, and cast their children into the streets to fend for themselves. As one Vietnamese teacher summed it up bitterly, "You Americans are making beggars of our children, prostitutes of our women, Communists of our men." Whether, as some claim, we have made more Communists in months by our bombs than Ho could have made in years by persuasion is open to question. But this we know for sure: last year 96,000 men deserted the Vietnamese army, and that is an awful lot of deserters.

What is our government's version of this war? According to the State Department the war is essentially a matter of aggression from the North which began seriously in 1960; and we are in Vietnam to prove that aggression does not pay.

We have trouble with this account for several reasons. The heart of the Geneva Accords was a promise of general elections to be held in July 1956. Until these elections took place, France was to maintain control of the civil administration in the South. The French, however, pulled out before the elections, and the Americans, behind Diem, moved in to forestall the Communist advance from the North. As President Eisenhower was candid enough to admit, it was a foregone conclusion that Ho Chi Minh would win.

Although we did not sign the Accords we agreed to respect them. But by helping to establish a separate state south of what was a temporary military line, not a permanent political one, we acted in defiance of the Geneva Accords. By repudiating the heart of the Geneva agreements, the United States must bear a major responsibility for the war. For when a civil war ends on the agreed condition that the competition will be transferred to the political level, then the side which repudiates the agreed conditions can expect the military struggle to resume.

In short, in 1956 our country helped to establish a government which neither had a legal nor a popular basis, and neither Communist atrocities nor our subsequent aid to South Vietnam can in our minds create the moral basis which our presence in Vietnam lacks.

But what happened after 1956? The pros and cons of Diem's regime no doubt will long be disputed. But regarding once again the peasants, two things seem clear: lands previously divided among them by the Viet Minh were re-

stored by Diem to their former landlords, and police were used to support the collection of up to five years of back rent. Secondly, the system of elected village councils -- one of the few really democratic features of South Vietnamese life -- was abolished in favor of a system of government officials appointed by the central government. By Saigon's own later admission, many of these officials were corrupt and oppressive, and appeared in the villages more to collect taxes than to provide services. (This is why their elimination by Viet Cong terror was neither all that surprising nor all that unpopular.)

At the same time repressive political measures in the cities forced hundreds into exile -- Paris is full of doctors and lawyers who were most reluctant to leave the fruits of victory -- and hundreds with less money, and perhaps more courage, moved into a growing resistance movement. This movement ironically was initially in large part not only anti-Diem but anti-Communist and anti-North as well. Unfortunately, however, instead of capitalizing on this anti-Communist sentiment and carrying through with what all writers at that time agreed were much needed reforms, Diem began to fill the jails. According to the government newspaper Tu Do (February 28, 1959) in the single province of Anxuyen in five months' time alone 39,909 people were jailed. When one considers that there are thirty provinces in South Vietnam, one no longer wonders why, at the end of March 1959, Diem could describe his country to a Figaro correspondent as "a nation at war."

As all this took place before 1960, the State Department account of things appears a bit simple. It would seem more accurate to say that the war in Vietnam is basically a civil war not only in terms of a united Vietnam, but also in large part in terms of South Vietnam alone. Furthermore, it seems accurate to say that, were it not for our intervention, Saigon would long ago have lost this war, and for the basic reason that from Diem to Ky its leaders have been able to talk of social justice, land reform and genuine nationalism far less convincingly than have both the Viet Cong and Hanoi. So while it is true that we are fighting Communists, it is more profound to say that we have been interfering in another country's civil war, and we have been suppressing a genuine revolution. In such a situation our anti-Communism in the long run can only amount to pro-Communism, and this is why to so many of us this whole war seems to be self-defeating.

Of the three basic alternatives now facing the United States -- withdrawal, negotiation, escalation -- we feel the last to be the worst. To seek military victory is almost certainly to assure political and moral defeat. Already we have driven the original opposition to Diem into the arms of the Viet Cong, and the Viet Cong into the arms of Hanoi, and increasingly, Hanoi into the arms of Moscow or Peking. We are torturing an already too-tortured country, asking our young men to die bravely in a bad cause, and we are running the risk of placing ourselves on a collision course with China. For all these reasons some of us favor immediate withdrawal, feel-

ing that nothing that could possibly result from our departure could exceed the horror of our continued stay.

The majority of us, however, feel differently. We are impressed by the fact that the United States in Vietnam is now working with many "collaborationists," with those who collaborated previously with the French and are now collaborating with us. Should we precipitously withdraw not only could the Viet Cong be counted on to initiate a blood bath, but collaborationists would be expected to kill other collaborationists in order to prove they had always, if secretly, been with Ho Chi Minh. We saw this sort of thing happen in France in 1944-45, and it could happen only on a much greater scale in Vietnam. To do everything possible to prevent this seems to us essential, and perhaps this is the only point at which we can speak legitimately of honor.

Thus, we too stand for negotiations, but now, preferably through the U.N. and with the Viet Cong. As we see it, the United States must negotiate with the Viet Cong for the simple reason that in war political settlements must reflect military realities. The military reality is that the Viet Cong occupy half the countryside. To refuse to grant the Viet Cong their place at a conference table, to refuse to allow them any part in the political settlement of the South is to ask them to accept a defeat they have not suffered. This, as government officials themselves privately concede, is a well-nigh impossible demand to make on them. Thus our "unconditional negotiations" has long meant to the Viet Cong "unconditional capitulation," and it is important that the American people realize that it is because of the Administration's position, as opposed to that of Senators Fulbright, Mansfield and Kennedy, not to mention U Thant -- it is because of the Administration's position that the doors to negotiation are now virtually shut, if at any time they were ever seriously open.

The fact that the United States seeks no territorial aggrandizement does not mean so powerful a nation is immune to the corruption of pride and power. Few clergy are today isolationists but many of us are troubled by the widespread assumption in America -- an assumption nourished by Administration pronouncements -- that American power is everywhere being used to promote American ideals, never to defend American interests.

In 1964 a State Department publication defined America's role as one of "world responsibility divorced from territorial or narrow national interest." It sounds fine, like a worthy transcendence of national interest, as if America were striving to be at the service of the world. But such a policy could also serve as a guise to universalize our national interests, to some degree to put the world at the service of America. For instance, Ambassador Lodge once announced that if the South Vietnamese wanted us to withdraw we might be justified in staying because, as he said, withdrawal could have "world consequences and would certainly shake our position in Berlin."

For instance, too, it is clearly more tolerable for most Vietnamese to live under Ho Chi Minh than for black Africans to live under Verwoerd or even Ian Smith. Yet while we bomb in Vietnam, have we not become almost morally pacifist in Rhodesia? And do we not actively, albeit indirectly, support apartheid in South Africa by our foreign investments? It is no surprise then that more and more people in the underdeveloped areas of the world are coming to the conclusion that to a large degree the business of America is still business, and that if a situation is tolerable for us it can be intolerable for them, and if it is intolerable for us -- then never mind how tolerable it may be for them.

In other words is it really freedom we are defending the world around, or is it not all too often the privileges which freedom has brought to us as Americans, and eminently to us? Albert Camus once said, "Freedom is not made up principally of privileges. It is made up especially of duties." If in our minds freedom's duties held sway over freedom's privileges, why were we not shouting bloody murder at Batista before Castro, at Trujillo and at the overthrow of Juan Bosch? Why are we not as a people deeply concerned over the fate of Africans in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea?

Our rather disdainful disregard also of the United Nations gives credence to the charge that America has gone from isolationism to interventionism without passing through internationalism. While the United States has turned to the United Nations for help in the Vietnamese conflict, never has it asked for anything more than help in negotiating according to American terms. Never has our government stated clearly or even suggested that it would accept the results of the arbitration of any international agency. Yet as we see it the war in Vietnam is now not an American but an international issue, and it is our contention that the time has gone by for any one nation to play the role of policeman when world peace is at stake.

For all these reasons then we are deeply concerned about American actions in Vietnam. But our primary question is still addressed to ourselves. Whether the churches and synagogues of America are going to help people to their dream of world peace is debatable; that they could make a difference is not. So what we ask is whether we shall continue to pick over old stones in comfortably self-limited fields, or whether, possessed by high excitement, we shall plunge into the task of fulfilling our own vision of a world in which "each shall live under his own vine, and his own fig tree, and none shall make them afraid."

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