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THE VIETNAM WAR AND AMERICAN RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY

by

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The inability of the Americans to impose their will on Vietnam had been answered in 1968, yet the leadership of this country had not been able to adjust to that failure. And so the war went on, tearing at this country; a sense of numbness seemed to replace an earlier anger. There was, Americans were finding, no light at the end of the tunnel, only greater darkness.

-- David Halberstam

Despite what seemed like the interminable blood-bath of Vietnam, and because of it, the great changes of the war's decade were ones of sensibility, awareness, and attitude, not of institutions.

-- Morris Dickstein

At the same time, the war was relying on inherited myth, it was generating new myth, and that myth is part of the fiber of our own lives.

-- Paul Fussell

This is intended as a starter paper. Its goal is to serve as background to the project we are launching on the religious implications of the Vietnam War, and to identify some of the project's areas of interest. Our motive in having a ^{starter} paper on ~~this subject at this time~~ is to gain greater clarity about our own interests in ~~the subject~~ ^{this area} so that the ~~matter~~ ^{subject} can be approached systematically and comprehensively in the weeks and months ahead.

Apart from its more intrinsic worth, the subject has a symbolic significance that I ~~believe~~ ^{at the outset.} is worth noting. Genetically

speaking, the project was conceived through a series of conversations, across the years, with Eulah and Irving Laucks. Much of this discussion has focussed upon the roles religious influences might assume in helping increase the modern world's capacities for peace. Irving Laucks had turned his attention toward developing peace strategies following the atomic bomb attacks upon Hagasaki and Hiroshima in the final days of World War II.

The record also shows, and Norman Cousins' address of several weeks ago confirms, that the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions found a portion of its own raison d'etre in the same catastrophic events. There was an acute awareness ^{at the time} ~~then~~ that every aspect of human life had been threatened and subjected to pervasive realignment by the power that had been unleashed. Heretofore ~~a~~ war, while tragic, could be ~~limited war because warfare was restricted to finite proportions.~~ But the nuclear capability changed the meaning of war, and, through it, as Robert Lifton has pointed out, it has altered perceptions of life. Lifton noted in Boundaries (1970) and in Death in Life. Survivors of Hiroshima (1968) that the fundamental sets of patterns by which human life is approached and mediated underwent radical change. Heretofore, life had been the comprehensive ^{in that fundamental polar relationship,} term and death had been comprehended by life. Following Hiroshima, particularly for those persons who experienced its ravages directly and immediately, death became the dominant ~~polar~~ term, and life was conceived in terms of

death. With this followed changes in ^{the ways human beings understand} patterns of personality formation -- from more or less fixed models to a protean style -- as well as in religious and philosophical orientations. Human beings had come to conceive life differently. And the ramifications were to be felt in the ways in which persons related to persons and nations to nations. They were also to be sensed in attitudes toward government, toward leadership, toward the role of the military, toward all forms and reservoirs of power, to authority ^{itself} in general. From this point forward, all instruments of power, in degrees never possible before, would be approached with suspicion. For power, ex hypothesi, carried the threat of destruction, and destruction spelled extinction.

Sensitivities nurtured by such realizations called for an urgent and thorough reconsideration of everything upon which sustainable human life depends. There was a new examination of the function of our dominant ^{political, social, and} institutions, cultural, social, and political. Serious attention needed to be given to the dynamics of world order, particularly as these had been redressed by the cataclysmic event. The function of ^{and value} education ^{had to be} was reassessed. Value questions, ^{some of them} previously understood to have been settled long ago, were opened to fresh examination. There was deep recognition that the survival of the species required a new (or at least deliberately and freshly conceived) strategies. Further, no assurance could

both themselves and the world in which they live. Pattern of personality function changed from fixed to a protean style. The bases of leadership and authority were altered. Profound adjustments had to be made in religious and philosophical orientations.

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~~made~~ ~~be found~~ -- given the ~~fundamental realignments~~ that had ~~that had~~ ^{radical and primary character of the change} ~~competitiveness~~

occurred -- that the new strategies would prove successful.

Indeed, ~~there was even serious questioning of strategy~~ ^{strategy itself eventually came under} ~~itself, almost as if the forces that had been released, were~~ ^{Do was} too powerful to be tamed, ^{they} were destined to run their own ^{along the way, they would make} ~~courses, making~~ virtually inconceivable scientific ^{But they would also make} advances, and the prospect of all out destruction more immediate and imminent.

I have portrayed the situation this way, following Lifton's lead, to dramatize that from some such perspective as this ~~it~~ (more detailed, more specific, more sophisticated, and ~~more~~ ^{circumstantially-ordered}) ~~in~~ the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions ~~came from a portion of~~ ^{into} being. The early documents give evidence of the power of Hiroshima's influence. Clearly, ^{following Hiroshima} the Center has had a ^{fundamental} stake in the fate of our civilization, and, indeed, in the future of corporate human life. It has been concerned that those elements upon which life, ~~it~~ and our sense of life, ~~it~~ depends not be destroyed, shunted, or left to neglect. "Hiroshima," it ~~seems~~ ^{is clear,} had worked its powers upon the founders' consciousnesses. And the Center itself was a product of the response to that awesome, tragic, and paradoxically catalytic event. The Center was born, at least in part, via Hiroshima ^{is inspired} sensitivities.

I ~~cite~~ ^{can be made} this correspondence ~~as~~ the basis for a number of further ^{interrelated} ~~related~~ preliminary observations. First, the

portrayal I have sketched, with some necessary additional details, describes the situation from which Irving Laucks' compulsions for world peace ^{also} came ~~was~~. Second, the project on Vietnam, as it is being conceived under the Center's auspices, is linked ~~to the~~ ^{substantively to that} originative interest in Hiroshima. Though the events have ~~a~~ ^{varying} distinctive and ~~differing~~ ^[varying] forces, they both possess eloquent formative power, the one coming at the beginning of the Center's history, and, if it is not presumptuous, ~~of~~, the other intempered with the time of significant renewal. Thirdly, as I hope to demonstrate, the ~~attitudinal aspects of~~ ^{attitudes that were uponed in} "Vietnam" have their own origins or stimulæ in "Hiroshima." Both became much ~~more~~ ^{larger} than events that could be isolated. "Vietnam" was not simply a war, and "Hiroshima" was not only a ~~destructive nuclear blast~~ ^{massively} ~~explosion~~. Neither can be understood in narrow senses, for each ^{also stands as} ~~represents~~ an event in human consciousness, ~~an event~~ ^{an occasion for} a ~~testing of~~ ^{challenge to} fundamental human assumptions, and an eventual redressing of those sets of connections through which human beings define themselves. ¶ In a multiplicity of respects, "Hiroshima" created "Vietnam." The revised understanding of the implications of warfare affected the way the war was perceived, interpreted, portrayed, and fought. Because the stakes were conceived differently, the war itself was regulated by a new agenda. "Winning" and "losing" couldn't mean what they meant before. Neither ~~unlike previous~~ ~~situations~~, could be determined on the basis of the acquisition

of territory, the winning of battles, the killing of enemy soldiers, the bombing of enemy establishments, the plundering of enemy strongholds, etc. For the battles that were waged ~~were being~~ ^{had to be} assessed by other kinds of criteria. The battle-

field itself was the arena whereon other sorts of conflict were finding dramatic expression. Some of the sensitivities nurtured in response to "Hiroshima" ~~found~~ ^{It wasn't ~~the~~ battle simply, but it was also} enunciation and challenge -- both at once -- ~~in~~ ^{could not find} "Vietnam." By the time of the Vietnam ^{adjustment} ~~war~~, ^{of human} "Hiroshima's" realignments had become self-conscious. They made it impossible to judge the outcome of the war in traditional terms. ^{primitives:} And they ~~also~~ ^{they gave a} ~~lended~~ a non-traditional cast to the war itself. The threat of ^{destruction of} ~~infinite destruction~~ ^{infinite} was the regulative polar term by which ^{proportions} ~~all finite events were given a corresponding place.~~

Signs of this transposition appear in American religious sensitivities. The past years have seen the phenomenal growth of interest in Asian religions in the west. For the past several years (until the shift that may be occurring now) students have resonated towards the religions of the east, with the capacities they hold for the cultivation of meditative practices and introspective knowledge. Yoga, transcendental meditation, transpersonal psychology, trans-normal experience, psychic disclosures, the attraction of eastern gurus, and ^{most especially, the accompanying} ~~the~~ development of simpler less conflicted attitudes and responses to human life have all been nurtured-by the permeation of western culture by Asian religious ^{currents,} ~~resources.~~ These developments are so self-evident that

they need not be demonstrated. They are facts of modern *religious,* cultural, psychological, and *sociological* ~~religious~~ life.

But the linkage between this religious transformation and "Vietnam" has not been examined thoroughly. The linkage is direct, profound, and multi-layered. "Vietnam" gave occasion to Asian religious sensitivities. The latter

were one set of self-consistent religious and attitudinal options *to which the West had been made susceptible by the war* made available to the west by "Hiroshima." In making this suggestion, we are not invoking *any* simple-minded "influence theory," *We do not mean* namely, that those westerners who went to Vietnam were exposed to Asia simply by being there, then returned, bringing one of their *"treasures" back* "finds" with them. Some of this happened, of course. But the ~~situ-~~ *Linkage*

specific for ~~tion~~ is more complicated. "Vietnam" was fought in the *Occident, as well as in the Orient. And the terms* west too, and ~~the stakes~~ were as much mental, psychological, and spiritual as they were geographical and militarial.

"Vietnam" stimulated Asian religious sensitivities in the west because it was an event that could not be adequately or satisfactorily comprehended in *the standard western ideational* ~~western religious~~ terms.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant German Protestant theologian who met his death on the gallows in a Nazi prison in 1944, *world* ~~may~~ *understood the connections.* have ~~sensed~~ the correspondence. In words not wholly comprehensible *from* in his Letters and Papers from Prison, he suggests that the *occurrence* ~~presence~~ of two full-scale world wars in *Christians Europe* ~~Christendom~~ in less than half a century is a judgment against *the Christians* religion of the severest kind.

growing, self-developing experiences

Bonhoeffer perceived that there was something intrinsic to the religious spirit itself which ^{of the religion - and not simply to Christianity alone. but} allowed and perhaps ^{also to} encouraged ^{Judaism} stimulated such conflict. This is to point to a dispositional ^{and Islam -} factor, and not to overlook the injunctions within the ^{religions} ~~Christian~~ faith toward loving one's enemies, turning the other cheek, not responding in kind when one is despised, harmed, or wrongfully used. ^{Neither is it} ~~It is not to~~ ^{gainsay minimize} Christendom's emphasis upon love, peace, brotherhood, harmony, ^{qualities that are vividly} ~~an emphasis which is~~ exemplified in the lives of St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and a host of other ^{persons} lesser known.

But it is to recognize that the ~~xx~~ religions of the west ^{sanction a fundamentally} ~~are xxxxxxxx~~ agential dispositionally. They ^{It allows the promotion of} ~~promote~~ strategies of ^{to that end might} ~~victory~~. They are intent upon resolving conflict by ~~redressing, eliminating, or~~ ^{conquer evil.} ~~subduing.~~ They believe it ~~xxx~~ proper that right should ^{vanquish} ~~conquer~~ wrong, while providing considerable latitude regarding the mode by which the victory shall be achieved. ^{all of this belongs to an affirmation} They ~~affirm~~ that there is a basic propriety, a fundamental harmony and justice to human life, a propriety that ~~will~~ be exercised, a harmony that ^{much} ~~will~~ be enunciated, and justice that will be enacted. They believe ^{it} in judgment against wrong, and ~~they~~ expect ^{it} such ~~judgment~~ judgment to ~~bx~~ be expressed -- sometimes dramatically -- in historical ~~events.~~

They are allowed to see things in motion, to be a lever, to work for a particular end. Only with large reluctance will they accept things as they are. They work instead to make things better. They are instrumental. They are channel and regulate power. They are souls that

It allows the promotion of to that end might

will be to be
This is a great disappointment that
disappointment
None appropriate to be an ultimate victory.
I have not yet been shown for souls that