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 bloodbath 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 paper on this subject at this time is to gain greater clarity about our own interests in the subject so that the matter 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 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 Nagasaki 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'être in the same catastrophic events. There was an acute awareness then that every aspect of human life had been threatened and subjected to pervasive realignment by the power that had been unleashed. Heretofore 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 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 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 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 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 education was reassessed. Value questions, 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
made - radical and primary character of the change
be found -- given the fundamental realignments that had
occurred -- that the new strategies would prove successful.

Indeed, there was even serious questioning of strategy
itself, almost as if the forces that had been released,
too powerful to be tamed, were destined to run their own
courses, making virtually inconceivable scientific
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 perspec-
tive as this (more detailed, more specific, more
sophisticated, and more circumstantially-ordered) the
Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions
into being. The early documents give evidence of the
power of Hiroshima's influence. Clearly, the Center has
had a stake in the fate of our civilization, and, indeed,
in the future of corporate human life. It has been con-
cerned that those elements upon which life, and our
sense of life depends not be destroyed, shunted, or
left to neglect. "Hiroshima," it seems, had worked its
powers upon the founders' consciousness. 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 sensitivities.

I cite this correspondence as the basis for a number
of further 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 came. Second, the project on Vietnam, as it is being conceived under the Center's auspices, is linked to the originative interest in Hiroshima. Though the events have distinctive and differing 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 me, the other intermingled with the time of significant renewal. Thirdly, as I hope to demonstrate, the attitudinal aspects of "Vietnam" have their own origins or stimuli in "Hiroshima." Both became much more than events that could be isolated. "Vietnam" was not simply a war, and "Hiroshima" was not only a destructive nuclear blast. Neither can be understood in narrow senses, for each represents an event in human consciousness, a testing of 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 assessed by other kinds of criteria. The battlefield itself was the arena whereon other sorts of conflict were finding dramatic expression. Some of the sensitivities nurtured in response to "Hiroshima" found enunciation and challenge -- both at once -- for "Vietnam." By the time of the Vietnam War, Hiroshima's realignments had become self-conscious. They made it impossible to judge the outcome of the war in traditional terms. And they also lent a non-traditional cast to the war itself. The threat of infinite destruction was the regulative polar term by which 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 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 resources. These developments are so self-evident that
they need not be demonstrated. They are facts of modern religious, cultural, psychological, and 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 made available to the west by "Hiroshima." In making this suggestion, we are not invoking the simple-minded "influence theory," namely, that those westerners who went to Vietnam were exposed to Asia simply by being there, then returned, bringing one of their "treasures" with them. Some of this happened, of course. But the situation is more complicated. "Vietnam" was fought in the 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 western religious terms.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant German Protestant theologian who met his death on the gallows in a Nazi prison in 1944, may have missed the correspondence. In words not wholly comprehensible in his Letters and Papers from Prison, he suggests that the presence of two full-scale world wars in Christendom in less than half a century is a judgment against religion of the severest kind.
Bonhoeffer perceived that there was something intrinsic to the religious spirit itself which allowed and perhaps stimulated such conflict. This is to point to a dispositional factor, and not to overlook the injunctions within the religion of faith toward loving one's enemies, turning the other cheek, not responding in kind when one is despised, harmed, or wrongfully used. Christendom's emphasis upon love, peace, brotherhood, harmony, an emphasis which is exemplified in the lives of St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and a host of others lesser known.

But it is to recognize that the religions of the west are, fundamentally, not agential dispositional. They promote strategies of victory. They are intent upon resolving conflict by redressing, eliminating, or subduing. They believe it proper that right should conquer wrong, while providing considerable latitude regarding the mode by which the victory shall be achieved. 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 will be enunciated, and justice that will be enacted. They believe in judgment against wrong, and they expect such judgment to be expressed -- sometimes dramatically -- in historical events.

It is not to minimize, and not to overemphasize that the religions of the west are agential dispositional. They allow the promotion of their goals and may require a focus on conflict to achieve them. Yet, they are below to such things in motion, to be a door, 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, not inherent.