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INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS

MORALITY AND FOREIGN POLICY†

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I do not write this essay as an expert in foreign affairs, but rather as a pastor and bishop in the Catholic Church. In the 20th century, Catholic moral teaching has been particularly concerned with the moral dimensions of international relations. The involvement of the U.S. Catholic bishops in the public debates on war and peace, human rights and other issues confronting our nation is a reflection and extension of the teaching and practice of the church throughout the world.

Basing my reflections on the experience which my brother bishops and I have had in the foreign policy debate, I wish to address three topics: 1) establishing the links between moral analysis and foreign policy, 2) examining illustrative cases of moral discourse about policy and 3) exploring the role of religious institutions in the debate about morality and policy.

I. SETTING THE THEME: MORALITY AND POLICY

The subject of moral purpose and American foreign policy has been a persistent topic in American history. The content of the debate has varied from the idealism of Wilson to the realism of Morgenthau, but the desire to provide moral direction for American policy has been a continuing theme of our national political life. There have always been critics of the theme. In the 1960s Dean Acheson quipped that there are two kinds of problems in foreign policy: real problems and moral problems. But Mr. Acheson took the subject seriously himself and, if anything, the salience of moral argument in the policy debate has increased in recent years.

The 1970s saw a resurgence of interest in human rights issues, and the 1980s find much of the country involved in a

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spirited and serious discussion of morality and nuclear policy.

Both issues—human rights and nuclear policy—illustrate the complexity of moral debate about the ends and means of foreign policy. Both issues highlight, nonetheless, that the exclusion of moral factors from the policy debate is purchased at a high price not only for our values but also in terms of our interests. One of my purposes this evening is to argue the case for the necessity and the possibility of constructing a coherent linkage of moral principles and policy choices.

The necessity of moral analysis in policy debate is rooted in the character of the issues we face in the last two decades of this country. These major contemporary issues are not purely technical or tactical in nature. They are fundamental questions in which the moral dimension is a pervasive and persistent factor.

We live in a world which is interdependent in character and nuclear in context. Interdependence means we are locked together in a limited world. The factual interdependence of our economies raises key questions of access to resources for the industrial nations, but also justice in the economic system for the developing nations. The nuclear context of the age brings sharply into focus the problem of keeping the peace in an interdependent world governed by independent states.

The U.S. Catholic bishops in their pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response" spoke of today’s dual challenge: building the peace in an interdependent world and keeping the peace in the nuclear age. Both tasks exemplify the necessity of shaping our factual view of the world in terms of the demands of the moral order. The absence of moral vision can erode both our values and our interests.

The possibility of meeting the moral challenge in our conception of foreign policy is rooted in two resources of our country and our culture. The first is the religiously pluralist character of the nation. The purpose of the separation of church and state in American society is not to exclude the voice of religion from public debate, but to provide a context of religious freedom where the insights of each religious tradition can be set forth and tested. The very testing of the religious voice opens the public debate to assessment by moral criteria.

The second resource is part of the constitutional tradition, itself a bearer of such moral values as respect for life, reverence for the law, a commitment to freedom and a desire
to relate liberty to justice. To ignore the moral dimension of foreign policy is to forsake both our religious and constitutional heritage.

The participation of the Catholic bishops in foreign policy discussion is rooted in our conviction that moral values and principles relate to public policy as well as to personal choices. It is also rooted in a belief that we honor our constitutional tradition of religious freedom precisely by exercising our right to participate in the public life of the nation. These convictions are shared by all major religious institutions in the United States. I am using the Catholic Church as an example because I know its involvement in detail.

If the linkage between morality and policy is both possible and necessary, it will be useful to move from a discussion of this general theme to specific analysis of issues where the moral analysis of policy has special relevance.

II. Examining the Cases: The Intersection of Morality and Policy

I have already argued that certain issues of foreign policy are so laden with moral content that wise policy must also be ethically correct policy. To ignore the moral dimensions of these questions is to miss crucial aspects of the policy challenge. Two cases where this proposition is well-illustrated are the Nuclear question and human rights.

A. The Nuclear Question

We are now in the 40th year of the nuclear age. Nuclear arsenals and strategies of the superpowers present a political and moral problem of unique dimensions. Speaking at Hiroshima, Pope John Paul II specified the moral challenge of our age when he declared:

"In the past it was possible to destroy a village, a town, a region, even a country. Now it is the whole planet that has come under threat."

The cosmic threat posed by nuclear weapons forces us to review our basic principles about war and politics. The classical formulations which guided foreign policy prior to the nuclear age came from Clausewitz and St. Augustine. Clausewitz, the preeminent theorist on war in the Western world, argued that war should be an extension of politics. War, for him, was a rational, purposeful activity which could be used to achieve political objectives. St. Augustine had argued that
war could be, under certain restricted circumstances, a morally defensible activity.

Nuclear weapons challenge both of these propositions. The destructive capability of these arsenals threatens to destroy the very political values which are used to justify warfare. The same destructive capacity radically challenges the "just war ethics" contention that any legitimate use of force must be a limited application of force.

For four decades we have lived with this basic challenge facing us, and there are no signs that the dilemmas of the nuclear age will slip away. One of the characteristics of the 1980s, however, is an increased public awareness of the nuclear danger and a series of policy proposals running from a "no first use" policy to the Strategic Defense Initiative which challenge the accepted premises of U.S. policy for most of the past 40 years.

Moral factors have played a major role in the public debate and policy discussions of this decade. The president defends his SDI proposal on moral grounds, and his critics launch moral as well as technical arguments against it. The Catholic bishops' pastoral letter has served as a framework of moral argument about a whole range of nuclear issues: from the strategy of deterrence to patterns of targeting to evaluations of arms control proposals. It is impossible to enter the nuclear debate in the United States today without some moral foundation for a proposed strategy. This visibility of moral argument in the policy debate has not always been so evident.

How does moral arguments speak to the policy debate? Using themes from the bishops' pastoral letter, let me indicate some examples. First, moral arguments leads, in my view, to a basic proposition: The central moral and political truth of the nuclear weapons under any circumstances. If this is really established as a primary goal of policy, then specific conclusions follow from it. There should be a conscious effort in both declaratory and deployment policies to build a political, strategic, technological and moral barrier against resort to nuclear weapons.

It was in pursuit of this objective that the Catholic bishops supported a "no first use" policy. It was also why we recommended against deploying weapons systems like the MX, which can easily move either superpower in the direction of first-strike nuclear policies in moments of extreme crisis. Each of these conclusions should be argued through on both political and moral grounds but, in the brief compass of this
essay, I am merely trying to illustrate how the primary moral objective of preventing the use of nuclear weapons leads to a series of more specific policy proposals.

A second major theme in the bishops’ pastoral letter is the relationship of technology, politics and ethics in the nuclear age. Unfortunately, much evidence indicates that the technological drive of our age at key moments directs our political vision rather than having both political vision and moral assessment control technological development.

The decision to deploy MIRVed nuclear systems in the 1970s was a technological leap of enormous significance for our age. Many have argued, persuasively I think, that MIRVing has mortgaged nuclear arms control in the 1970s and 1980s. But my point is that this momentous decision was made without sustained political or moral argument in the public debate.

Now we face a proposal — the SDI — to move in an entirely new technological direction. I mentioned earlier that it is both defended and opposed on moral and strategic grounds. The fact that we are now having a major debate is a significant improvement over the MIRVing decision. Without attempting to resolve the SDI question here, I wish to express my profound misgivings about projecting the arms race on a new frontier in space, even when the motivation for the proposal has entirely defensible moral intentions. Moral arguments are almost always multidimensional. One has to test not only the intentions of a policy but also its consequences. While I understand the motivation behind the SDI, I am very skeptical of its consequences on the arms race.

B. Human Rights

The tension between intentions and consequences is also visible in a second area of policy — human rights. If the moral debate of the 1980s has been focused on the nuclear question, the moral argument of the 1970s was cast principally around the topic of human rights and U.S. policy. First the U.S. Congress and then the Carter administration gave new weight and significance to the human rights component of U.S. foreign policy.

But the intention to pursue a human rights policy and the specific steps needed to include human rights systematically in our policy are not identical. Looking at human rights policy of the 1980s, two comments see appropriate. First, in the 1970s it quickly became clear that trying to fuse the
moral and empirical demands of a human rights policy was a more complex task than most believed at the time. Second, the dramatic decline in the priority of human rights during the 1980s illustrates a major problem: Without sustained public and policy support for an objective as complicated as this, we will not make a difference in the long run.

We have, however, learned some valuable lessons from the 1970s, and these should be emphasized and kept alive for future use. Sustained moral argument about human rights and U.S. policy should, I submit, involve three steps.

First, we must make a commitment to include the human rights factor at the outset of policy-making and recognize the need to sustain this factor throughout the development of policy in regard to a nation or a region. If we conceive of policy initially only in terms of our political, strategic and economic interests in an area and afterward attempt to factor in human rights, we will never give the latter sufficient leverage.

Second, although human rights should be systematically included in the policy equation, they have to be weighed against other factors. Foreign policy is too complex to have simply a human rights policy divorced from other considerations. This weighing of human rights objectives in a given region or case against other objectives is an exercise of moral reasoning as well as of political judgment. Our episcopal conference, for example, has been especially stringent in measuring military assistance to countries in light of human rights criteria. We have been less inclined to recommend cutting off economic aid for human rights violations.

Third, there should be some public understanding about the reason why a seriously pursued human rights policy will often seem as though we are criticizing our “friends” more than our “foes.” Surely we should have and use human rights policies for Eastern Europe, Cambodia or other communist-controlled states. But our relationship toward those governments is basically adversarial.

When we are considering a Latin American or East Asian country with which the United States has close ties and which it is supplying with substantial amounts of military and economic assistance, human rights violations in these situations place us in a different setting. If the receiving government is an ally accused of human rights violations, there is a certain way in which we are implicated in the action by our support of that government. In this sense human rights criteria for U.S. policy speak as directly to the U.S. government as
III. Religious Institutions and Foreign Policy: The Moral Dimension

The advocacy of moral argument in the public policy of the nation is not uniquely a religious task. It is incumbent upon all citizens and every social institution to feel a sense of moral as well as political responsibility for national policies. But religious institutions would surely be culpable if they failed to provide leadership in fostering moral analysis of policy. They should bring their resources to the foreign policy debate: a disciplined moral tradition, a significant constituency and a sense of transnational responsibility. I will comment briefly on each of these.

I have tried to illustrate above that joining moral and policy arguments is not a simple task. To take the moral dimensions of policy seriously is to be willing to take the discipline of moral argument as seriously as we do strategic theory of moral or economic analysis. Religious traditions are schools of serious moral analysis. In both their formal teaching and their pastoral care, religious communities use moral analysis on a sustained basis.

I think the primary accomplishments of the bishops' pastoral letter were to create space in the public debate for moral analysis of nuclear policy and then to provide the concepts, principles and arguments which could be used to debate the moral quality of policy. In this sense the tradition of moral argument which we offer the wider public is more important than the specific conclusions we draw from that tradition. Religious communities should facilitate moral argument about policy at least as much as they take specific positions on policies.

Second, religious institutions can facilitate this moral scrutiny very directly within their own constituencies. I stressed earlier the importance of public opinion in the policy debate. Religious institutions have both the communities and the channels of access to press the moral questions of policy with a broad sector of the U.S. public. I do think we should make a very special effort within them.

In a complex democracy like ours, public opinion will not dictate specific policy choices, but it can set certain directions for policy which elected officials will oppose only with much difficulty and at some risk. Setting a moral framework
for policy direction should be a permanent part of the teaching of religious bodies.

Third, religious institutions, because of their teaching and frequently their structures, have a sense of transnational responsibility. In an interdependent world governed by independent states, this transnational perspective on what our policy should be can make a decisive difference. While this is true for any nation, it has a specific relevance for the United States. We remain the most significant single political, military and economic power in the world. Our status is not that unique. This means, in moral terms, that we carry very specific responsibilities because of the decisive impact our policies have on the lives of others.

I have recently returned from a visit to El Salvador and Nicaragua and from consultations with bishops from several Central American nations. Without entering the specifics of the Central American debate, let me simply say that one of the dominant impressions of the visit is the daily impact of U.S. policy on even the most local details of Central American life.

But our influence is not confined to that region. From nuclear strategy to monetary policies to food supplies in a hungry world, U.S. policies are life-and-death issues for many people. The role of moral argument in foreign policy is to call us to face our responsibilities squarely and to respond generously and wisely to them. Acknowledging this fact is a challenge which goes beyond religious institutions, but they should meet it in a way which calls the wider American community to the task of building the peace, sharing just relationships among nations, and enhancing the life of the people of this interdependent world.