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"...THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE"

Norman Cousins, Robert McAfee Brown,
Hermann J. Muller, Everett E. Gendler, and
Thomas Merton, on "Pacem in Terris,"
the encyclical of Pope John XXIII

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"...therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed." (Deut. 30:19)

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by Everett E. Gendler

As recently as ten years ago I can recall conversations among Seminary students who found themselves wondering if traditional religion had anything really to say to the modern scene. Was there, finally, anything in the Biblical and Rabbinic tradition which, applied today, was something more than a truism, a generality, a statement of the obvious? In those youthfully naive days, when nuclear delivery time was still measured in bomber-hours rather than ballistic-minutes, we had not yet realized how very penetrating and radical statements of the obvious and proclamations of truisms would soon come to be.

How should we have imagined then, not so many years ago, that a simple call to trust one another would sound so revolutionary? That to declare the mass killing of hundreds of millions of human beings "no possible instrument of justice" would sound so radical? That to assert men's basic rights and dignity should prove so critical of present social organization on this earth?

Yet all these things have come to pass, and it is now painfully clear to us: the once obvious is no longer obvious. Values once taken for granted, limitations once

readily assumed, are no longer to be taken for granted or assumed: this is the singular religious and ethical fact of our age. It was to this condition that the much loved and much lamented Pope John XXIII spoke in his encyclical, "Pacem in Terris," and it is to this condition that every one of us also must now speak. The reassertion of simple things is today a radical task which every tradition must again attempt, and it is one modest effort in its barest beginning that I would offer in appreciation and tribute to Pope John's stirring execution of his task. By such an approach I trust that some of the broad areas of agreement with emphases of the papal encyclical will become evident.

WHERE SHALL we begin? Clearly with our sense of cosmic purpose, for it is only within that larger scheme that our own limited place can be ascertained and appreciated. Two brief statements, one Biblical and one Rabbinic, help me, for one, to gain some idea of where we are and what it is all about:

> . . . the Lord Who created the heavens
> (He is God!),
> Who formed the earth and made it
> (He established it),
> He did not create it a chaos,
> He formed it to be inhabited![1]

> In the hour when the Holy One, blessed be He,
> created the first man,
> He took him and let him pass before all the
> trees of the garden of Eden,
> and said to him:
> See My works, how fine and excellent they are!
> Now all that I have created, for you have I created.

Footnotes for this paper appear on page 50.

Think upon this, and do not corrupt and desolate
My world:
for if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it
right after you.[2]

Of course, how simple and obvious! The earth is meant to be inhabited, cared for, and enjoyed by us! Can anyone, in tranquil moments of the spirit, not know this? Yet the lulling din of daily pursuits somehow drowns out the echo of this plain proclamation of planetary purpose, and it is only at moments of keen hearing that we re-awaken to the appalling fact that the military means by which we now seek to attain certain ends jeopardize the very existence of human life on this planet so precious to us.

It is true, of course, that violence was resorted to and war waged throughout human history, often with religious sanction. But neglected in such a statement is the fact that Classical Judaism, for its part, simultaneously with its sanction bounded the permissible range of destructiveness. In both individual and collective instances Judaism was quite specific in limiting the application of violence for human ends, for it was well aware, even in those technologically primitive times, of the frightening uncontrollability of weapons and the tragic tendency of violence to become indiscriminate and unbounded.

However mighty the man, once the arrow leaves his
hand he cannot make it come back . . .
However mighty the man, once frenzy and power take
hold, even his father, even his mother, and even his
nearest of kin he strikes as he moves in his wrath.[3]

It is well known and often asserted, for example, that Judaism recognized the preservation of one's own life as a primary duty. Less well known, however, is the

clear Rabbinic limitation set upon violations of the religious code in accomplishing this.

> In every other law of the Torah, if a man is commanded, "Transgress and suffer not death," he may transgress and not suffer death, excepting idolatry, incest, and shedding blood. . . . Murder may not be practiced to save one's life. . . . Even as one who came before Raba and said to him, "The governor of my town has ordered me, 'Go, and kill so and so; if not, I will slay thee.' " Raba answered him, "Let him rather slay you than that you should commit murder; who knows that your blood is redder? Perhaps his blood is redder."[4]

It is also well known that Judaism recognized the right of a person to defend himself against an attacker, to the point of killing him if necessary. Not so often noted, however, is the strict limitation of means imposed even upon this plain act of self-defense.

> It has been taught by Rabbi Jonathan b. Saul: If one was pursuing his fellow to slay him, and the pursued could have saved himself by maiming a limb of the pursuer, but instead killed his pursuer, the pursued should be executed on that account.[5]

The same limitation, incidentally, applies also to a bystander who, witnessing such a murderous pursuit, is enjoined to intervene on behalf of the pursued. He too, if he needlessly slay rather than maim the assailant, is regarded as deserving execution because of that excess.

This same insistence upon limitation characterizes authoritative Biblical and Rabbinic rulings concerning the waging of war. Massive destruction of population and resources may have been thinkable, but it was clearly unacceptable to traditional Judaism.

When siege is laid to a city for the purpose of capture, it may not be surrounded on all four sides but only on three in order to give an opportunity for escape to those who would flee to save their lives . . .[6]

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you under siege? Only trees which you know do not yield food may be destroyed . . .[7]

Can one imagine such a tradition sanctioning modern nuclear warfare or even modern "conventional" warfare?

I cannot. Nor can I imagine it sanctioning the "mere" act of preparing for such modes of conflict. Genuine preparation, after all, is predicated upon the possibility of use in extreme circumstances, "credibility" being essential to a policy of deterrence. But if, as seems clear to me, the use is quite outside the bounds of permissibility in any circumstances whatsoever, the preparation itself is also illicit.

Resh Lakish said: He who lifts his hand against his neighbor, even if he did not strike him, is called a wicked man.[8]

Pope John found it "hardly possible to imagine that in the atomic era war could be used as an instrument of justice." Many of us in other traditions, basing ourselves on authoritative teachings of our own traditions, subscribe wholeheartedly to the finding that modern war together with its preparation no longer lies within the boundaries of religious permissibility.[9]

TO HEAR this is frightening. For millennia we have—perhaps reluctantly, but with much religious sanction, reasonably clear consciences, and reasonable expectations of survival—put our trust in armed might, at least as the ultimate arbiter of human conflict. And suddenly, almost in spite of us, it is removed from the scene as a possible instrument of life both by conscience and by consequences. Had we deliberately, through trust and intent, abolished war simply by moral effort and human growth, how glorious a prospect the future should present. But it really was not we who managed, gradually but persistently, to put an end to war as an agency of human arbitration. In fact, war as a life option *has been abolished*; it remains now only as a death option. But its abolition in this sense has been accomplished more by technology than by our own intentions. And so we find ourselves naked and seemingly defenseless in a world fraught with terror and enmity.

We are terrified, true, and understandably so. But we are also liberated; never before have we been quite so free. Until now we have acted on insufficiently generous assumptions about human beings, and we have failed. We now find ourselves free to try far more generous assumptions about both others and ourselves. In a sense, everything is now permitted: everything, that is, which flows from generosity and largeness of spirit; everything, that is, which flows from the love and appreciation of man and his Divine possibilities.

> Rabbi Shelomo asked: "What is the worst thing the Evil Inclination can achieve?" And he answered: "To make man forget that he is the son of a King."[10]

For centuries circumstances have permitted us to forget; they now require that we remember.

And by this remembering we shall come to claim with fuller awareness our membership in that universal human association, the Fellowship of the Beloved.

> Rabbi Akiba used to say: "Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God. Extraordinary is that love which made known to him that he was created in the image of God."[11]

We belong, and likewise all other human beings, though they may differ from us and our particular outlook.

> A gentile who occupies himself with the study of the moral law equals in status the High Priest.[12]

Nor is membership confined to the righteous alone.

> Whenever destruction of the wicked takes place, there is grief for them above.[13]

It is no simple matter to take such a teaching to heart and live by it. It requires, for example, that we stop playing the outmoded game of "friend-foe" in which the object is to defeat or destroy the "foe." We shall have to enlist all our religious and educative forces in freeing us fully for a radically different game.

> There were once some lawless men in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. Rabbi Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His wife Beruria said to him: "How can you think that such a prayer is permitted? . . . When sins will cease there will be no more wicked men! Rather pray for them that they turn from their ways, and there will be no more wicked." He did pray on their behalf and they did turn from evil.[14]

There are many ways in which we are already free to help men turn from evil.

When Aaron would walk along the road and meet an evil or wicked man, he would greet him . . .[15]

For the sake of peace, one greets idolators and inquires after their welfare.[16]

Direct communication must not cease among men, however greatly they may differ in outlook.

And knowing that all of us are members of that Fellowship of the Beloved, we should neither scorn nor despair of that mediation which, appealing to the not-yet-actual but in-principle-possible, brings about the actuality of that generously sought.

When two men had quarreled with each other, Aaron would go and sit down with one of them and say to him: "My son, mark what thy fellow is saying! He beats his breast and tears his clothing, saying 'Woe unto me! how shall I lift my eyes and look upon my fellow! I am ashamed before him, for it is I who treated him foully.' " He would sit with him until he had removed all rancor from his heart, and then Aaron would go and sit with the other one and say to him: "My son, mark what thy fellow is saying! He beats his breast and tears his clothing, saying, 'Woe unto me! how shall I lift my eyes and look upon my fellow; I am ashamed before him, for it is I who treated him foully.' " He would sit with him until he had removed all rancor from his heart. And when the two men met each other, they would embrace and kiss each other.[17]

Neither should we forget our unusual freedom to contend with that source of strife so succinctly portrayed in the Talmudic proverb.

When the barley is gone from the pitcher, strife comes knocking at the door.[18]

We are blessed with unprecedented resources which can be devoted to this aspect of peacemaking; the traditional pittance for poverty will no longer do.

> Rabbi Simeon used to say: "Note how different from the ways of God are the ways of men. When a human king goes to war he goes with multitudes and legions, but when he goes on a peaceful mission he goes alone. Not so the Holy One, blessed be He. When He goes on a mission of peace, He goes forth with multitudes and legions."[19]

It would be tragic indeed if we failed to make full use of our exceptional freedom to "imitate God" by allocating a generous share of our world's resources for the alleviation of world-wide poverty.

BY REMEMBERING that all men are sons of The King, we should also find some terrors diminished. There are certain representations of "the enemy"—spectres of unmitigated, monolithic evil—which are more caricatures than portrayals of reality. Yet these distortions of perspective haunt us severely.

> "He stood, measured the earth, and beheld . . ."
> What did He behold? He beheld that the seven [basic moral] commandments were accepted by all the descendants of Noah . . .[20]

Though these natural intuitions of morality have often enough been disobeyed by all peoples (the "good" also, not only the "wicked"), the fact remains that in all men is planted that from which decency may spring forth. To see this is to see in some small measure as He sees; to see this is to see that from within the worst of tyranny goodness may arise—if there but be life.

Remembering that we are sons of The King, members of the Fellowship of the Beloved, should not, of course, blind us to another fact all too evident: we simultaneously find ourselves members of that equally universal human society, the Fellowship of the Imperfect.

> In Thy sight no man is wholly righteous . . .
> We have all sinned.[21]

Hence honest criticism is very much in order, toward ourselves as well as toward others. The great freedom, nay, the great demand to criticize the sacred power centers and politics of one's own nation, felt so keenly by the Prophets of Israel, should now be felt by every man.

> Would that all the Lord's people were prophets![22]

The sobering awareness of our common imperfection also makes clear the fact that struggle will continue to be a necessary part of human existence. But by the same token we must make certain that the instruments of the struggle are appropriate to our imperfect state. Modern weapons of mass destruction are plainly not. And so, freed as never before from the constraints of traditional military strategy, we must now investigate thoroughly the power of non-violence as a means both for the defense and for the attainment of human values. The accomplishments of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. suggest that Isaiah's dictum is not so much sentimentalism as it is "realpolitik" of the spirit:

> For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel:
> In turning and stillness shall you be saved,
> In tranquillity and trust shall be your strength . . .[23]

There is, let us grant, a tone of muted Messianism in these brief remarks. But why should there not be? How

dare there not be at this stage of human history? Read dispassionately and from a distance, the emphases of "Pacem in Terris" on co-existence, disarmament, trust, and world fraternity also sound somewhat Messianic. They are. And precisely there, in that muted Messianism, lie the power, the strength, the realism, and the relevance of that stirring encyclical.

> If you see the great powers contending with one another, anticipate the footsteps of the Messiah.[24]

Here too the once fanciful has become hard fact, and the world will long admire and cherish the late Pope John XXIII for enunciating it that all the world might hear.

Not, of course, that one expects that full personal perfection from which peace would automatically result; nor that one anticipates that full knowledge of the Lord which would banish all hurt from among us.[25] But to expect and insist that our unprecedented situation today be recognized and responded to in unprecedented and daring ways — that is both our privilege and our mandate!

> I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed.[26]

1. Isaiah 45:18. 2. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7. 3. Mechilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate "Shirata," Chapter 4. 4. Sanhedrin 74a. 5. Sanhedrin 74a. Cf. Maimonides *Code,* Laws of Homicide, Chapter I, Law 13. It is hardly necessary to add that the Rabbinic reluctance to execute, resulting in a very early *de facto* abolition of capital punishment, applied to this case as well. 6. Maimonides *Code,* "Treatise on Kings and Wars," Chapter VII, Law 7. 7. Deuteronomy 20:19-20. 8. Sanhedrin 58b. 9. Cf. in this respect that thoughtful and learned "Rejoinder" of Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought,* Volume 4, No. 2, Spring 1962, pp. 196-205. Cf. also the incisive comments of Rabbi Steven S. Schwarzchild in his brief essay, "Theologians and the Bomb," pp. 22-25 in *The Moral Dilemma of Nuclear Weapons* (Essays from *Worldview,* 1961), William Clancy, editor. 10. Martin Buber: *Ten Rungs.* 11. Abot III:18. 12. Baba Kama 38a. 13. Zohar I, 576. 14. Berachot 10a. The basis of Beruria's opinion is the possibility of reading Psalm 104:35 in two different ways. 15. Abot de Rabbi Nathan XII. 16. Mishnah Shevi-it 4:3. 17. Abot de Rabbi Nathan XII. 18. Baba Metzia 59a. 19. Numbers Rabbah II. 20. Baba Kama 38a. According to the Rabbinic tradition, the seven universal or Noachian commandments, six enjoined upon Adam and one added after the Flood, are the following: *(1)* not to worship idols *(2)* not to blaspheme the name of God *(3)* to establish courts of justice *(4)* not to shed blood *(5)* not to commit incest *(6)* not to rob *(7)* not to cut flesh or limb from a living animal. 21. High Holy Day Liturgy. 22. Numbers 11:29. 23. Isaiah 30:15. Cf. also the important volume edited by Mulford Q. Sibley: *The Quiet Battle, Writings on the Theory and Practice of Non-Violent Resistance,* New York, 1963. 24. Genesis Rabbah 42. 25. Isaiah 11:1-9. 26. Deuteronomy 30:19.