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JSCOPE VIII

"MORAL BASELINES - THEIRS AND OURS"

A paper presented by Lieutenant Colonel J.R. Hensman, Royal Marines at the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics at the National Defense University, Washington, D.C. on 9 January 1986.

INTRODUCTION

Like everything else in life, morals and ethics are not as black and white nor as clear-cut as we would like. At the extremes of good and bad it is normally easy to see where our moral duty lies. Here, it is almost instinct which tells us what is right and what is wrong - right gives us joy, wrong is naturally abhorrent to us. In between of course are the grey areas where right and wrong, good and evil are apt to merge into a blurred morass of difficult decisions: an area where a choice is seldom between good and evil, but between the lesser of two apparent evils. ["Most of us still have a lingering belief that every choice, even every political choice, is between good and evil, and if a thing is necessary, it also is right. We should, I think, get rid of this belief, which belongs to the nursery.] In politics, one can never do more than decide which of two evils is the lesser, and there are some situations from which one can only escape by acting like a devil or a lunatic."□

Wars, like morals, are seldom clear-cut. Of course there are extremes, like unprovoked aggression by a powerful nation against a weaker neighbour; but nowadays world events seem to be characterized by a growing "intestinal" grey area between war and peace - revolution, insurgency, rebellion, revolt, coup d'etat, guerrilla war, terrorism. As you might suspect, I regard the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands as being an unequivocal act of war. In my mind (and I hope in yours) it offended mightily the United Nations charter of self-determination for its members, and was wrong. I would submit that such clear-cut circumstances are becoming increasingly rare, and more often we are faced with such dilemmas as Vietnam, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Nicaragua where large minorities or even majorities consider their existing regime to be evil and try to overthrow them. "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they may exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismantle or overthrow it."² Abraham Lincoln calls it "a right" to revolt against a government. So the picture becomes muddy, unclear as to whether events are disturbances or insurrections, or insurgencies, whether they are terrorism or wars of national liberation, or whether they are wars at all. The rights and wrongs of each event depend, like beauty and ugliness, upon the eye of the beholder.

[To complicate matters further, when we look into this morass of world conflict, we see that different ideologies or religions teach different motives, different constraints, and this is nowhere more evident than in the twilight world between war and peace.] In these grey areas of ethics, somewhere in the middle between war and peace, between right and wrong, where instinct does not naturally guide decisions, there is an increased need for a firm foundation on which to build a code of behaviour, and then clear guidelines on which these decisions may be made. [Without such foundation both personal and national action is liable to be inconsistent at best, nonexistent, or totally misguided at worst.]

I shall now seek to examine the thesis that in today's confused arena, western nations have rejected, or anyway debased the ethical foundation of their Judeo-Christian tradition.

I shall not catalogue examples of western misdeeds and our systematic "fall from grace" over the past decades. I shall attempt to underscore the vacuum which I believe exists in the western world, by comparing the effects of Islam and Marxism on the actions of their adherents. Before that, however, what makes me believe that the Judeo-Christian ethic has been debased?

THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC

Oh for the days when soldiers would charge into battle and "Cry God, for Harry, England, and Saint George!"^[3] Harry (King Henry the fifth) and England were fine and much loved; but it was the Patron Saint and God who gave such a certainty and feeling of righteousness to their endeavours. This feeling of certainty and righteousness is surely what we would hope and want to give to our soldiers when they do battle.

General Clay Buckingham contends: "Whether we like it or not, ethical reflection has seldom been carried out in isolation from theology. Ethical values generally reflect our views of human life as it is embodied in the teachings of the prevailing religion, because all human conduct, essentially, takes place in relationship to other human beings."^[4] He then explains that if we believe that human life has equal and infinite value, then our concept of right and wrong will reflect this conviction. If on the other hand, we believe that human life has limited value, then our concept of right or wrong conduct will reflect that conviction.

Those yeoman archers of England at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 knew that they could not separate their cause and their actions from their belief in God. Today our western values are still founded on the baseline of Old Testament laws, updated and amended by the teachings of Jesus (the New Covenant).

My concern, and the subject for this paper is simply that this Christian baseline has become so eroded in our time, as to no longer give clear and unequivocal guidance on the ethical and moral behaviour of our peoples.

Two incidents have disturbed me greatly while I have lived in the United States. The first concerned the argument of whether school children should officially start their day with a prayer, and the other concerned the matter of whether shops should be allowed to play Christmas carols at Christmastime. The point in question for both arguments was "Is it inappropriate or insulting to other religions to do so?" Perhaps not earth shattering events, but nevertheless indicative of the dilemma of free religious choice, and also of the religious vacuum that we are wont to create for ourselves. When I look at a quarter and see "In God we trust"-what God are we talking about these days? Even our language has debased our Christian foundations. The word Love: think how that word has been polluted and corrupted, so that we may hardly dare use it. We speak of liberalizing abortion laws, which means facilitating more abortion: using a fine and honourable word to describe an act totally against our Christian beliefs. Or we talk of reforming our marriage laws, when we really mean, creating more facilities to break up marriage and even further abuse its Christian sanctity.(5)

In both your country and mine we have made a conscious point of separating church and state. As we shall see later, in other religions and ideologies the secular and the religious (or ideological) are inseparable. John Whitehead in his book The Separation Illusion points to a heated argument as to whether America was ever a Christian nation. The nub of such an argument is that the constitution does not mention Christianity. The counter argument is simple: there is no mention of Christianity because it never crossed the framers minds that there could ever be any doubt that the country was founded by and on deep Christian conviction.⁽⁶⁾ But even the fact that such argument exists, points I think to this debasement or disappearance of the traditional baseline for ethical and moral decision-making. With this in mind I will attempt to test, rather superficially I am afraid, the moral baselines underscoring the behaviour of our two greatest potential enemies, the Soviet Bloc and the Arab world. I refer of course to their adherence to the precepts of Marxism-Leninism and the Islamic faith. Let us start with what would generally be considered the lesser threat - Islam.

ISLAM

"Western civilization and its heritage, for which Europe and America fear so much, live only on the debris of the East and would not flourish if they had not sucked its blood. That is the astonishing truth"(7) This rather intemperate statement was made, not by an extreme militant shiite, as you might expect but by that paragon of moderation Anwar Sadat. [As always in such examinations, there is no point examining the present without first looking at the past and taking into account the Arabs' perception of their own history.] As someone once said of the Irish problem: "History in these parts is one long remembered yesterday." History, like religion, is a fundamental cornerstone of Arab life; and the two are inextricably intertwined. Mohammed born sometime between 570 and 580 AD promised the Arabs glory and dominion, and for hundreds of years they enjoyed just that. They achieved a great Islamic community spread across three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. They founded and developed a vast empire stretching from the borders of China to the Atlantic coast of Spain. At a time when western Europe was stagnating in its Dark Ages, Arabic literature, philosophy, mathematics and medicine were flourishing. Mohammed had declared that Arabs were the chosen of the nations and certainly up until the 12th Century (for some 800 years) this appeared to be the case. Then came the Renaissance of Europe and the emergence of Christianity as the known world's premier religion. As this rose, the Arabic empire and influence waned. By the early part of the 20th Century they were regarded

by the western nations as rather romantic figures, riding camels, wearing long robes and plotting in casbahs - very much a second-rate people. The establishment of the state of Israel gave the Arabs another stereotype as an enemy of the Jews, but the romantic, almost trivial image remained. In the eyes of the Arab, history had "turned wrong." Their past glories and the promises and desires of Mohammed for them, lay in ruins on the desert floor.

To most people in the west, the oil price war of the 1970's was a lever to force Israel to release land which the Arabs felt should belong to them; an attempt to influence Israel by hitting Israel's allies where it hurt most. But it was far more than that. The west had become dependent on oil for survival and was prepared to pay almost any price to keep the flow coming. The Arabs quickly discovered that we had no stomach for a fight; we were prepared to stoop, kneel or even grovel for the precious commodity. All of a sudden the unconquerable and imperialistic west had been brought to its knees. The shame and humiliation of centuries had been expunged and people again listened to and respected the Arab voice. This in effect illustrates the one major driving force behind the Arab mind: the determination to see the spread of Islam throughout the world. This was the mission of Mohammed, and one of the duties of the Caliphs (the successors of Mohammed) is to extend the faith and Moslem-ruled territory. That part of the world that is not Islamic is known in Islamic theology as "territory of war." Furthermore, Islamic

law does not recognize the possibility of peace with nonbelievers (or infidels). This may hold certain similarities with Christianity which also demands of its followers that we "preach the gospel to all men." The difference perhaps lies in the Moslems fervent belief that the ends will always justify the means, and that violence is an acceptable method of achieving conquests for Islam. This of course justifies the traditional call for Jihad, or a holy war.

In any analysis of the Arab personality, a study of violence and their historical adherence to it, must take a prime place. Even before Mohammed the Bedouins had always been a savage nation. Not only were they infamous for perpetrating savage acts but for the fact that they actually enjoyed it. Soldiers fighting the Arab, traditionally kept their last bullet for themselves such was the legendary brutality of the Arab (women as well!) towards their captives. If the Arab tradition was historically prone to violence, then Mohammed and the Koran which he delivered certainly encouraged and gave it a heavenly authority.

"Kill them wherever you find them ... if they attack you put them to the sword ... fight against them until Allah's religion is supreme." (Sura ii)

"Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked ... Allah has power to grant them victory." (Sura xxii)

"Fight for the cause of Allah with the devotion due to him."
(Sura xxii)

"If you should die or be slain in the cause of Allah his forgiveness and his mercy would surely be better than all the riches the infidels amass." (Sura iii)

Violence continued as part of the Islamic culture. Arab slavers were amongst the cruelist that the world has known. For hundreds of years a kind of holy war was waged by a murderous group of Syrian Moslems called "The Assassins," who of course gave our language a new word. They were truly the forerunners of todays terrorist. [The Assassins were ruthless and possessed a complex and well integrated system of underworld contacts and alliances. John Laffin in his Arab Mind Considered (8) relates an astounding story of the great Saladin himself: "Rashid al Din, the Assassin leader, sent a courier to Saladin and ordered him to deliver his message only in private. Saladin had the man searched but nothing dangerous was found, so the great man dismissed his assembly except for his two highly trusted Mamaluke guards. He then ordered the agent to deliver the message. He replied, "I have been ordered to deliver it in private."

"These two men do not leave me," said Saladin "Deliver your message or go."

"As you sent the others away, why do you not dismiss these two men?" the messenger asked.

"Because I regard them as my own sons and they and I are as one," Saladin said.

The messenger turned to the two Mamalukes.

"If I ordered you in the name of my master Rashid al Din to kill this Sultan, would you do so?"

They drew their swords and said, "Command as you wish."

While Saladin sat astounded, the messenger left, taking the two guards with him." Perhaps a rather frightening prerun of the death of Indira Ghandi at the hands of her two trusted Sikh guards some 750 years later.] Between 1948 and the present day there have been almost a hundred revolts in the Arab world, most of them bloodily violent. Thirty-eight were successful and twenty-six political leaders were murdered. In Iraq alone, 2,426 Iraqi were killed in a military revolt in 1959; up to 5,000 were murdered as a result of the 1963 revolution; 37 were executed after an abortive coup in 1973. Perhaps the most horrendous was the mass murder of 30,000 members of the El Ansar religious sect by Sudanese military forces in March 1970. And in the Yemen civil war, Egypt did something which the Germans, Russians, Japanese, Americans and Britons refrained from in World War II, they used poisoned gas against the Yemeni tribesmen. So for the Arabs, violence is a tradition, a habit, a legal imperative and a religious necessity. "Violence is the Moslem's most positive form of prayer." (9) So said a Libyan cabinet minister.

So the Islamic faith endorses violence - in support of the cause - and motivates all Moslems to continue Mohammed's mission of extending the borders of Islam. It might be profitable at this stage to make one important comparison between Islam and Christianity. Jesus Christ was born into a country, occupied by a mighty foreign power. His followers were a persecuted minority,

disclaiming vociferously any intent to overthrow their rulers by force of arms. Mohammed founded his own state, established its policies and set about conquering not only souls but lands as well. Islam was, and is, a religion of pride: humility is almost an insult to its very being. Christianity is a religion of humility, and hurt pride, whilst not nonexistent, is certainly discouraged. It is not hard to see which religion offers the clearer encouragement to fight, and which religion offers fewer constraints on the methods used.

An added bonus for its followers, is the totality of Islam. "Islam is not a religion in the common, distorted meaning of the word, confining itself to the private life of man. It is a complete way of life, catering for all fields of human existence. Islam provides guidance for all walks of life - individual and social, material and moral, economic and political, legal and cultural, national and international."⁽¹⁰⁾ Consequently, Moslem leaders like Qaddafi can say in all truthfulness "There is no contradiction between religious consciousness and political decisions."⁽¹¹⁾ The two facets of life are indistinguishable. President Bhutto of Pakistan "The life and teachings of the Holy Prophet have been the cornerstone of my government's foreign policy, and our land, labour, law, education and other numerous reforms."⁽¹²⁾ In the Christian west, so far from attempting to interlock our spiritual and secular aims, we have made legal provisions to separate church and state. As a baseline for moral decisions, both personal, and national, I would submit that Islam in the 20th Century provides clearer guidance for action, than does Christianity or indeed any other ideology espoused by the west.

MARXISM-LENINISM

My second comparison involves an ideology not a theology, but is a dangerous threat, nevertheless.

"Those who have no religion are particularly liable to bring a religious fanaticism to problems of mundane organization which ought to be matters for transaction and negotiation."(13)

[It is perhaps profitable, since they are our greatest potential enemy, to take a look at what drives the Soviet mind; what ethics or moral imperatives govern their actions.] When considering Communism alongside Islam, one cannot help but be impressed by the similarities between them: their beliefs in the inevitability of war; the conviction that ends always justify the means; the evangelical fervour to destroy western imperialism; the totality of their ideologies.

Perhaps, unlike Islam, there is no necessity to delve back in history and uncover national traits of the Soviet peoples which explain their behaviour in today's world. It is however worth noting that, if there is a generalization about these diverse peoples, who comprise the USSR, it is that they have all been accustomed, throughout history, to ruthless, violent and extremely autocratic leadership. A history festooned with such names as Tartars, Mongols, Genghis Khan, Rasputin, Ivan the Terrible, is hardly likely to produce people too concerned about the morality of present day Communist leadership. One might go so far as to claim that it could also produce a hard and violent people; or at least a people not too squeamish in their relations with the rest of the world.

[In my introduction I have continually referred to the "grey" area between good and evil or between war and peace. This admission of imprecision would, I think, be unacceptable to the Communist mind. By contrast with the often open-ended approach of western thought, the Marxist-Leninist will insist on a clear-cut single-track theory, even on such a complex and many-sided phenomenon as war. They believe that only Marxism-Leninism offers a key to war's understanding, as well as to its abolition. "War is a social phenomenon whose essential meaning can be revealed solely by using the only scientific method: Marxist-Leninist dialectics"(14)] Marx's studies were basically and initially into capitalism and the evils of capitalism. Building on this foundation his belief was that all social events and activities, including war, derive from the relationship between the classes and [this relationship is bound to be antagonistic because private ownership owns the means of production and seeks to serve its own economic interest by exploiting the working class. To progress the argument still further Lenin himself says "War is a continuation of the politics of particular classes in pursuit of class goals."(15) This explanation of the cause of war naturally points the accusing finger towards capitalism, because it is in capitalistic systems that the class society exists.] [Then follows the Marxist-Leninist contention that war is a product of class society, inseparable from capitalism (or colonialism) and] "will cease to exist only with the destruction of capitalism, and the victory of the socialist order in the whole world."(16) Therefore, like Islam we are seeing an

ideology that teaches that wars are inevitable and that capitalism or imperialism is the major enemy; not only that, it almost imposes an obligation to fight against it and a "right from above" to indulge in such wars.

I have alluded throughout this paper to the present day propensity for conflict in the twilight zone below all-out war. Arguably the most regular feature of Low Intensity Conflict has been Revolutionary War. [Although of course there are other forms of revolution, the most frequent (and most successful) has been the Communist model. It is this model that we have seen in China, Vietnam, Cuba, Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and of course in Russia itself.] The revolutionary creed of Karl Marx is simple enough: "All philosophies have sought to explain the world; our business is to change it."⁽¹⁷⁾ [The Oxford Dictionary definition of Revolution is "A complete change such as that caused by the overthrow of a government or political system."] Marx's own thinking indicated two possible ways of achieving such change: peaceful evolutionary transformation, or violent revolutionary change. [In practice the ruling or exploiting class has always resisted being dislodged, thus making the peaceful evolution almost a nonstarter]. Lenin, to whom fell the opportunity to put Marxist theory into practice, soon discovered that the overthrow of capitalism could not be accomplished without violence. He rejected Marx's evolutionary path and declared "The overthrow of capitalism is impossible without violence, without armed uprising and wars of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie"⁽¹⁸⁾ This

concept not only justifies violence, but it does the same for revolutionary war. It gives it an acceptability and an almost divine authority.

This is also an appropriate time to talk about the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, because it is this doctrine which, above all, justifies intervention in other countries' "revolutionary" affairs. We in the west, must understand that, although our western morality will often restrain us from interfering in another countries internal problems, no such constraints apply to Marxist-Leninist countries. The ideology of COMINTERN regards the defense of socialism as the highest international duty.

["There is no doubt that the progress of the socialist countries and the Communist parties have, and must have freedom to determine their country's path of development. However, any decision of theirs must damage neither socialism in their own country nor the fundamental interests of the other socialist countries, nor the worldwide worker's movement, which is waging a struggle for socialism."(19) This goes some way to explaining Hungary, Czechoslovakia and even Afghanistan. It is equally relevant to any counter revolutionary movements in the Caribbean or Central America.] In Brezhnev's own words:

["... The socialist states stand for strict respect for the sovereignty of all countries. We emphatically oppose interference into the affairs of any states, violations of their sovereignty.

"At the same time the establishment and defense of the sovereignty of states, which have embarked upon the road of building socialism, is of particular significance for us, Communists. The forces of imperialism and reaction seek to deprive the people now of this, now of that socialist country of their sovereign right they have gained to insure the prosperity of their country, the well-being and happiness of the broad mass of the working people through building of a society, free from any oppression and exploitation. And when encroachments of this right encounter a harmonious rebuff by the socialist camp, bourgeois propagandists raise a clamor around 'defense of sovereignty' and 'non-intervention.'

"However, it is known, comrades, that there also are common laws governing socialist construction, a deviation from which might lead to a deviation from socialism as such.] And when the internal and external forces hostile to socialism seek to revert the development of any socialist country toward the restoration of the capitalist order, when a threat to the cause of socialism in that country, a threat to the security of the socialist community as a whole, emerges, this is no longer only a problem of the people of that country but also a common problem, concern for all socialist states."(20)

[We may not like this particular doctrine or ideology but one cannot deny that it is fairly unequivocal and gives indication to both fellow travellers, and to the rest of the world, how a country and its military forces are likely to react. As a soldier I sometimes hanker after such unambiguous guidance, from my own political masters.]

Like everything else in Marxism-Leninism, morals and ethics are clear cut: everything that pertains to capitalism is immoral, and anything which supports the revolution or assists in the destruction of capitalism is moral. As an official Russian publication on the capitalist system states:

"From the point of view of Communist ethics only what aids the destruction of the hated features of the bourgeoisie, of the old capitalist world of exploitation and poverty, only that which goes to build the new Soviet, Socialist order is moral and ethical. [Soviet patriotism is the most profound manifestation of a new ethic, a Communist ethic, a new psychology of man. Soviet patriotism is the highest stage of moral behavior and ethics in man and society. Purging the mind of man of vestiges of capitalist ethics, the Soviet, Socialist system has formed and developed new ethical values in the human character; loyalty to the leader, to the Soviet homeland, loyalty to one's native party, and loyalty to the Party and the Government."(21)]

[The strength of this new morality is well illustrated by looking at the Stalinist purges, which perhaps accounted for some two million lives. The word "purge" is used on purpose, since it has a clinical connotation, implying that the treatment will ultimately enable the body to regain its health. In other words, it is a surgical operation, necessary for removing something evil like a gangrenous growth, and necessary for the sake of producing the perfect society. "The final criterion is the safety of the people."] This Communist ethic inherently supports the doctrine that ends will always justify means, that element of philosophy so completely at variance with Christianity, and yet so in accord with our other example, Islam. With this frightening and unloving new morality comes the sine qua non that those who do not like it must be forced to like it, or be liquidated.

[I think that to embark on some form of comparison between Communism and Christianity would be redundant, if not, downright heretical. It is contrary to our whole culture and way of life: it is uncaring, harsh and totally unmindful of the rights of the individual: but for the purposes of this paper, it does provide a clear form of guidance on the sort of morality that it expects its adherents to follow. That guidance is clearer than ours.]

CONCLUSION

I am aware that, in arguing my thesis, I have fallen headlong into the Marxist trap. I have painted my picture, using only the stark colours of black and white. I have used the single-track method. Communism and Islam provide all the answers: Christianity has lost its teeth. I have done this of course because I wish the contrast to underscore my argument, and in order to draw your attention to three paramount facts.

ONE, that in an increasingly complex world where the edges of morality are becoming blurred and indistinct, there is a shrieking need for clear moral guidelines.

TWO, that Christianity, either by design or by gradual degradation, no longer provides such moral guidelines, and

THREE, that the greatest potential threats to our western world - Communism and Islamic Fundamentalism - provide their adherents with an unambiguous baseline for their behaviour, individual, national and international.

Of course I realize that life is not as clear-cut as that. Things are seldom what they seem, and we in the west are not blundering around in a darkened world of total moral anarchy; no more are all Arabs and all Russians living lives of controlled moral purpose. For example all is not sweetness and light in the Arab world. There is no single world view, no one Moslem way of regarding life, statecraft or international relations.

Qaddafi claims to be running an Islamic state, but Saudi religious leaders regard him as a heretic. The Ayetollah Khomeini maintains he is the arbitor of Islamic values, but Sadat denounced him as an apostle of hatred who betrayed the spirit of Islamic justice and mercy. Iran and Iraq are Moslem countries but they have been at war since 1980, and the Kurds, who are also Moslems rise up periodically against both Iran and Iraq because they seek a state of their own based on ethnic, not religious foundations.(22)

Likewise, however vociferously and with whatever conviction, the Communists may state their beliefs on the world stage, it still does not seem to work in practice, in feeding, unifying or even apparently making happy its followers. Any economic comparison between Communist nations and the capitalist west are but sick jokes; it is the evil capitalist west who must go to the help of Ethiopia, because its Communist overlords cannot even manage their own harvest; the two main Communist powers, Russia and China, are still undisguised enemies. The Soviet Union has higher rates of suicide and alcoholism than any other country in the world, and perhaps most telling of all, in the darkest days of World War II Stalin had to invoke the support of the Russian Orthodox Church in order to galvanize and unify the people against the German threat. Furthermore, he had to release them from gaols and prison camps in order to do so.

Your own Thomas Jefferson, not if I may say so, the most committed Christian to have held office in the United States, asked:

"Can the liberties of a nation be sure when we remove their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?"⁽²³⁾

In the western world where we have achieved so much, and have so much to be grateful for, let us not use other nations problems as a cloak for our own shortcomings. Rather, let us look at our enemy's strengths, and reflect on our own weakness. This is a wiser philosophy, and this is what I have tried to do in this paper.

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Note:

An annotation following a passage without parenthesis means that I have drawn heavily on the ideas of another author but have not quoted him directly. During my research for this paper I have also found much of background interest from the following sources:

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