

Chapter 13

Fallen Humanity, Restraint, and Healing

Almost every society has included a religious tradition that witnesses to the potential of human beings for realizing what I have called “Human Essence” or “Spirit.” Those same traditions contain an equally strong witness that human beings and humanity as a whole have fallen far short of this Spirit potential. A Spirit-based social ethics faces the dual task of forming a society that assumes both a fallen humanity and a humanity with potential for realizing Spirit maturity. This maturity includes **trust** rather than suspicion, **compassion** rather than malice, **freedom** rather than bondage. These are the master glories of our Human Essence.

Those who are mostly optimistic about the state of humanity, tend to minimize the need for social restraints on human behavior. Some of these optimists argue for doing away with governmental restraints altogether. They are especially concerned to minimize or do away with the use of coercive force by police and the military aspects of government. The truth that these optimists support is that human beings are essentially “good” and that from this “goodness” the necessary functions of our living together can arise as simple practical outcomes that need no coercion. These optimists tend to believe that most difficulties in human life arise from the empowerment of huge governments with enforcement powers that tend to become oppressive.

At the other extreme are those who are mostly pessimistic about the state of humanity. They claim that without empowered governments, clear laws, and realistic enforcement powers, human life would become chaotic and brutish. Human beings, they claim, cannot be trusted to live together in peace and harmony unless there are penalties and punishments that limit humanity’s ingrown selfishness. They point to those times when governments have collapsed and when looting, revenge killing, cultural desecrations, and such things have taken over.

The whole truth is more complex than either simple pessimism or simple optimism encompasses. Even during those situations of governmental collapse when looting and revenge killing have taken over, there are those who act wisely and compassionately without the enforcement of law and order. These same persons soon see the need to support the reestablishment of a workable social order that enforces meaningful restraints. To this extent, the optimists are correct; humanity can access the inner resources to act compassionately and creatively. If this were not the case, no social order would express anything more than the crass selfishness of some ruling group of people.

Yet it is also true that the institutionalization of social power becomes a temptation to those who seek external power as a means of pursuing their own self aggrandizement and their conscious (or perhaps unconscious) dreams of unlimited wealth. When such motivations control the powers of government, we see the enforcement powers of the police and the military used as a means of oppression.

Nevertheless, doing away with police functions and military power is not a viable answer in the building of an optimal social system. The ethical tension in building an appropriate society is not between nonviolence and coercive force. Nonviolent actions are not always appropriate. And coercive actions are not always inappropriate. Nor is the use of coercive force simply a last resort. Coercive force is an ongoing part of human life. The use of coercive force is no less important than the use of rational persuasion. Every social establishment includes the threat of coercive force. Furthermore, the threat of coercive force and the judicious use of coercive force keeps social order in being. An appropriate social order does not outlaw all use of coercive force, rather it uses coercive force to restrain behaviors it deems unlawful. When the

Constitution of the United States speaks of domestic tranquility and the common defense, it is speaking of the lawful use of police and military coercion. Indeed, we need to affirm that the role of the policeman and the soldier is equally as noble and necessary as the role of the school teacher, nurse, doctor, farmer, and so forth. All these roles can be lived in a positive or in a negative manner. Any good thing can be misused, but the misuse does not discredit its goodness.

Writing Appropriate Laws

The valid ethical tension with regard to the use of coercive force has to do with who writes the laws that are coercively enforced and how this law-writing is done. Are the laws to be written by self-aggrandizing elites in order to advance their own obsessions with power and wealth? Are the laws written to force upon others some favored brand of idealism or prejudice? Or are the laws written to express our Essential Humanity of Trust, Compassion, and Freedom and to limit behaviors that arise from the absence of these essential qualities? The law of Moses was considered “holy” by Jesus and Paul and the entire New Testament community because that law was understood to be an expression of freedom from bondage to oppressive social and inner forces. It was also an expression of trust in the basic goodness of the whole cosmic drama, and it was rooted in the imperative to affirm the Infinite WHOLENESS with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and all finite beings with the same intensity that we affirm our own being.

Such law-writing is not impossible. It takes place every day. One reason we find it hard to see such law-writing taking place is that we expect “holy” law-writing to result in perfect laws that last forever. But there are no such laws. All laws, including those recorded in the Koran, the Bible, the Talmud, or any other religious or secular document, are finite creations authored by human beings for specific circumstances. When those specific circumstances pass away, new laws become necessary. It turns out to be the case that what is actually “holy” is not specific laws but a mode of law-writing that arises from humanity’s Essential Spirit Being.

So an appropriate society, including “good” law-writing, comes about not through imposing upon human life some ideal of nonviolence or some ideal of coercive force or any other ideal. Appropriate society is never ideal. Appropriate society is only a fragile, finite, human creation, appropriate for the time being in restraining the human flight from our foundational Essence and in encouraging that Essence to be manifested in an ongoing and creative fashion.

Restraint through the judicious use and threat of coercive force is one of the ways that an appropriate society functions to encourage the living of our Essence. Such compulsion does not restore us to our Essence. It serves only to teach us wherein we are fleeing from our Essence. An appropriate society interrupts our flight from Essence and calls to our attention our lack of Compassion, Freedom, and Trust. But no society can restore humanity to its Essence. Human Essence is restored in another manner. Our loss of Essence is healed not by force or by any human effort but by the gracious operation of that WHOLENESS within which we are inescapably embedded.

Healing Humanity

The role of humanity in its own healing is the simple act of noticing our inauthenticities and letting go of them. REALITY provides the Spirit health. We can notice these dynamics or steps in the healing process: (1) the awareness of estrangement and its deadening, despair-producing consequences; (2) the dawning of the graciousness of REALITY in welcoming us home to our Essential Humanity, and (3) the surrender to this welcome and thereby commencing the long process of letting go of the habits of estrangement.

An appropriate society protects and encourages all those organizations within the society that assist people in accessing this healing. In medieval Western thought, this protection and encouragement of healing ministries was expressed as the responsibility of the state to protect and encourage the work of the Christian Church. But today such thinking needs to be restated as the responsibility of secular governments to protect and support any religious or secular, spiritual or psychological organization that takes up this task. Furthermore, it is not appropriate for governments to oppose any law-abiding group dedicated to human healing. It is not necessary for any society to have only one religion or one psychology or one means of human healing. We now live in extensively pluralistic societies in which many different religious and secular self-care practices are taking place. Our only realistic option is to allow all these groups to rise or fall on their own merits. If the powers of governmental coercion are used to deny protection or encouragement to any of these groups, needless suffering will result, and the overall effect will be to weaken not strengthen the healing agencies of the society. Operating in this manner would be a far-reaching change in many sectors of the world. Nevertheless, I want to state this strongly: there need no longer be anywhere in the world Christian nations or Jewish nations or Islamic nations or Hindu nations or Buddhist nations or any other religious-flavored governmental authorities. All governmental authorities from now to the end of life on this planet need to be strictly secular authorities granting protection and encouragement to any subgroup whatsoever that feels it can give assistance to human beings in the never-ending drama of recognizing and ending our flights from Essential Goodness and thereby allowing healing by the WHOLENESS of BEING to flower.

A New Ethics on War and Peace

On this side of the advent of nuclear weaponry as well as horrific chemical and biological weapons, a new ethics of warfare has become imperative. Nevertheless, human societies will continue to need to protect themselves from neighboring societies who may be willing to satisfy their greed by conquering more land, resources, and people. Such real threats make military forces and/or military alliances necessary. To deny altogether the necessity of military processes on the basis of a pacifist ideal avoids an examination of the whole picture. Pacifist practices work in many limited circumstances. In times of war, neutral nations have sometimes avoided needless bloodshed. When operating within a social environment of law and order, nonviolent protests of bad laws and business practices have proven to be effective. But when the whole picture is viewed, defending social wholes with coercive means has never been absent from human affairs and never can be absent.

For ancient tribal groups, warfare was basically a border-protecting ritual. While our Cro-Magnon tribal ancestors kept expanding their borders in ways that caused the eventual extinction of Neanderthal tribes and other humanoid groups, tribal people never engaged in the style of all-out warfare that became the norm for settled civilizations. Civilizations have typically had huge standing armies that were used both to keep the lower classes and slaves in line as well as to protect the overall society from its neighboring civilizations. In our time, we are experiencing the imperative to do away with all-out warfare. All-out warfare now destroys not only the "enemy" but the home population as well. We need to alter our manner of protecting the overall society and resolving conflicts between societies.

Though the United States currently possesses an enormous military advantage in its stockpiles of nuclear and other deadly weapons and in the number and abilities of its trained military personnel, the United States can no longer depend on military power alone to protect itself or to advance its aims. What good are weapons that are too horrific to use. During the so-called "Cold War" period, these weapons did serve the purpose of deterring other such weapon-

holders from using them. Now that period is over; we live in a world in which small groups of dissidents can threaten whole cities. And these groups have no home location that can be threatened by devastating counterattack. So nuclear weapons have become useless for defending against such threats. Nuclear weapons are only useful for doing the unthinkable by people who are so desperate that they see no other means of action.

What does all this mean for the ethics of war and peace? It means that the military means of settling disputes has become far less important than other-than-military means. Military means have always been a last resort for most ethical thinkers, but now military means are even more of a last resort than ever before. This does not mean, however, that no need for military capability remains. The international community still needs the capability of restraining by force those pockets of social practice that still choose to use all-out warfare as a primary mode of pursuing their aims. We have seen the international community through the structures of the United Nations and NATO struggle with these issues in the Balkans. However mixed and confused various motives may have been, the international community basically decided that a brief surgical war against the Serbian authorities was the least of evils. We can cogently argue that this action has proved to be a relatively valid choice. In the second Iraqi war, however, the international community was deeply divided over the advisability of using military means in dealing with the issues that Saddam Hussein's regime presented. Never before in the history of this planet has such widespread international resistance to a proposal of war been assembled. Even though the war was not avoided, the opposition to a specific war has never been stronger.

The meaning of this resistance needs to be carefully explored. Some of the resisters were opposed to all warfare for any reason. But this was not the majority view. The majority held that every effort to resolve this conflict without using military means had not been exhausted. Furthermore, there was resistance to the perceived motives of the United States in choosing this particular time to root out this particular dictator. Almost none of these resisters supported the qualities of the Iraqi regime, but they did not trust the United States either. Rightly or wrongly, they perceived a U.S. administration who were willing to use its vast military and economic power to establish a new world empire through winning more control over the oil wealth of the Middle East.

Though U.S. conservatives have not wanted to hear their motives put so crassly, many of the statements they have made give credence to the accusation. It is not surprising that many people have concluded from U.S. conservative rhetoric that controlling the oil wealth has been and still is a primary item on their agenda. In fact it has been plainly stated by some U.S. conservatives that "Whoever controls the oil of the Middle East controls the world." We have also heard it said that "Iraq is only the beginning," or that, "A democracy in Iraq will be an example for others." Many wonder what "democracy" means to an administration which is so completely aligned with the interests of oil companies and other transnational corporations.

Whatever be the exact nature of current U.S. foreign policy, it remains interesting that a vast swath of the international community, including about half the citizens of the United States, have profound suspicions about this foreign policy and are still assembling themselves to do whatever it takes to oppose it. This represents a new day in the ethics of war and peace.

The essence of this new day is this: deciding for war will no longer be the prerogative of an empowered minority or even a majority of one nation. History is unpredictable, but we can realistically imagine a scenario in which the international community finds a way to assure that any national government who chooses to go to war without a broad consensus of the international community will pay a huge price for their choice. Though the United Nations may, at this time, be a weak vehicle for enforcing such an international consensus, the U.N. represents

a strong tradition that can be built upon. Eventually, we may see the emergence of an effective World Court that can render decisions on crimes against humanity and have those decisions enforced by whatever coalition of economic power and military forces are needed. A wise and compassionate United States would find it befitting to be a supporter rather than an opponent of such international formations.

Assuming that we will some day have an international structure that can state an international consensus and have it enforced, how might our Essential Humanity express itself through such structures? How might decisions about the international use of military force be decided? First of all, it seems quite clear that we have an emerging international consensus that strongly opposes the building of another world empire ruled by some narrowly controlled assembly of military might. Colonialism of any sort will not be tolerated if most of the people on this planet are part of the decision-making process. We also have an emerging international consensus that genocide, mass slaughter, and other crimes against humanity such as we have seen in Africa, the Balkans, Iraq, Haiti, Chile, Laos, Sudan, and many other places must not be tolerated. It can, I believe, become international policy that any group of people who initiate such actions should be stopped and punished. All-out warfare, though it has been the reigning style of social protection (as well as aggression) for at least 6000 years, is now obsolete. Paradoxical as it may seem to nonviolent idealists, we need the following guiding principle in world affairs: whenever all-out warfare crops up in local places, the international community will respond, and respond militarily if need be, to stop it.

I do not suppose that in one chapter I have said all that needs to be said about the topics of war and peace, responsible restraint, or the healing of fallen humanity. Hopefully, I have introduced some of the core questions that need to be discussed in a viable Spirit-based ethics. A simple continuation of our old views and modes of warfare and police action is not responsible. And a complete discontinuation of the use of coercive force is also irresponsible. A Spirit-based ethics must face up to the ambiguities rampant in this arena and advise compassionate choices on a case-by-case basis.