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War, Human Rights and the Politics of Personalism

By Harrison Samphir
February 26, 2016

There is a familiar aphorism that says “violence begets violence”; from the origin of one destructive act stems more and different forms of brutality, provoking an unremitting cycle of suffering. The phrase is rooted in biblical scripture – the Gospel of Matthew, to be more specific – but has seen contemporary adoption by renowned humanists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His message of nonviolence and compassion inspired the philosophical underpinnings of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and ended segregation in the United States.

“The ultimate weakness of violence,” he said, “is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.”

Though the Civil Rights Movement was punctuated by violence, it was shaped by an understanding of shared history and brotherhood, tolerance and compassion. King may have been a pious man, but he was a trained philosopher and humanist first. He advocated the separation of church and state, and denounced organized religion for its support of war. Inevitably, he thought, the cycle of racial violence in America could be broken only by an acceptance of love – that enduring feature which pulls us together as a common species.

The intellectual and philosophical framework of King was greatly influenced by his study of personalism at Boston University. He rejected a materialistic view of man who placed money and property above people. Personalists believe human beings, their experience, reality and dignity, should be the starting point of any philosophical inquiry. In the words of Warren Steinkraus, King believed “abstract laws, the state, property, and other institutions are all to be judged in light of their effect on persons.”

Indeed, King recognized that “person-centered” thinking could reorder the set of values used to justify racism, poverty and militarism in Western society. He maintained the government must depend more on its moral than military power. Violent action against one group on behalf of another, therefore, perpetuates a culture of violence and wanton retribution. Destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends; humanity and justice are *indivisible*.

In a phrase, King believed oppression always bred counter-oppression. Those who use violent means to vanquish their oppressors hasten their own demise. In order for suffering to end, it must be endured, not enflamed. This principle was fundamental to the Civil Rights Movement, and though it faced criticism from its more radical sectors, it worked: confronted with its own intolerance and contradictions, American society bent to the demands of black self-determination.

It cannot be understated King’s contributions to ideas of tolerance, human rights and compassion, nor to nonviolent activism and anti-imperialism in the twentieth century. Nor should anybody forget the late reverend’s fervent opposition to US wars in Vietnam or Latin America, arms manufacturing and resource exploitation in the South. Yet does his philosophy based on personalism have a lasting relevance to contemporary foreign policy and the presently unfolding humanitarian crises in Iraq, Syria and much of the Middle East? Might leaders consider employing rhetoric and policy based on aid and diplomacy to solve international disasters and confront tyrannical regimes like ISIL?

A common objection to King’s thinking arises indirectly from what Tony Blair called the “doctrine of the international community”, or the law of humanitarian intervention – *une loi d’ingérence*. It declares, rather axiomatically, that states are qualified under some circumstances to intervene militarily in the internal affairs of other nations to prevent serious abuses of human rights. The UN’s associated initiative, Right to Protect (R2P), is an extension of this concept. In 2011 it was used to precipitate regime change in Libya and the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi. The result was an unmitigated disaster. Libya is today a failed state and ISIL training ground.

The contention, however, remains: *how can societies stand idly by while atrocities are committed against innocent people?* Choosing not to intervene, so the thinking goes, equals complicity in the death and suffering of others. Using military force against a group like ISIL, then, is recast as a form of utilitarian altruism. Who, after all, would seriously suggest negotiating with members of that group, or engaging in a diplomatic settlement with them? Certainly not Barack Obama or David Cameron. It is fair to say not a single Western political leader considers such a strategy practical or, indeed, *sane*. That is, with the exception of UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn who has been roundly derided for even proposing the idea in the British Parliament.

It is thus worth considering whether or not personalist philosophy has any place in mainstream political discourse. As King demonstrated a half-century ago, nonviolence does not mean *passive acquiescence*. During the fight for equal rights it meant civil disobedience, political pressure and a willingness to militantly reject the prevailing order which contributed to the brutal subjugation of a racial minority. Surely, in the domain of international politics, similar lessons may apply. Fighting and defeating ISIL will not come about through “surgical” bombing campaigns which kill scores of civilians, or arming peripheral extremist groups bent on regime change. It might be possible, though, by ameliorating the material conditions of those fleeing ISIL’s violence, assisting the Kurdish and other local forces best equipped to fight it on the ground, and appealing to reason, not vengeful reactions to bloodshed.

As some have written, the West’s deployment of military forces has only served to exacerbate regional disorder. Bombing is symptomatic of short-term thinking; it kills civilians, incites hatred and undermines the potential for negotiation. A major ground invasion, the only other solution being debated, is nothing short of reckless. More than a decade of war in Iraq, and five in Syria, have debilitated the land and left millions dead. Another significant conflagration risks plunging major powers against one another in transnational warfare.

If King’s philosophies are to have any application whatever, the potential for diplomacy and tactful intervention must be explored. As Lancaster Theological Seminary professor Greg Carey wrote,

Horrific as ISIL may be, it by no means stands outside the circle of humanity. It seems to have arisen and found nourishment out of countless factors, including the interventions of our own government. Violence has a way of pulling us all in. Somewhere the cycle has to end.

The Canadian context

February 15 marked a change of course in Canadian foreign policy, and the first indication of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s international outlook. Marking a distinct break from the previous government of Stephen Harper, the Liberal Party honored a campaign promise by announcing the end of Canada’s bombing of targets in Iraq and Syria and the withdrawal of its six CF-18 warplanes from the coalition strike force. Preparing for a revamped non-combat mission – although reconnaissance and refueling aircraft will remain deployed in the region – which includes a tripling of special forces training personnel and more than \$800 million in humanitarian assistance, Trudeau declared a “new role” for Canada in the fight against ISIL.

“Our goal is to allow local forces to take the fight directly to ISIL,” he said, “to reclaim their homes, land and future... We believe there is an important role for Canada to plan in the fight against ISIL, a role that we can play, a role that we must play.”

Interim Conservative Party leader Rona Ambrose fired back, claiming Canada’s withdrawal from the bombing campaign “is not in keeping with the contribution of [Canada’s] allies,” and “blunt[s] the sharp end of [the military’s] spear.”

In the halls of Parliament, a decade of majority Conservative rule inculcated within parts of traditional Canadian consciousness the belief that Canada's only acceptable contribution to international conflict – as defined by the other major Western powers – should be an aggressive military one. Ambrose's comments certainly reflect this thinking. The Liberal's plan, however, complicit as it may be in its allies' continued bombing strategies, transitions Canadian foreign policy toward considering alternative methods of intervention which less brazenly threaten the sovereignty and material condition of other states.

It should of course be obvious to any discerning reader that the policies of a center-right party like the Liberals are fundamentally antithetical to the radical philosophies of King. Indeed, Trudeau is no pacifist, and nonviolent solutions are not always possible. Yet there is a faint symbolism in this new Prime Minister's thinking which takes stock of Canada's proud peacekeeping legacy and seeks to discard the previous government's bellicose approach to foreign policy. Some may interpret this as crass electoral expediency, an empty gesture to appease antiwar supporters while appropriating the NDP's long-established position.

Whatever the case, the post-9/11 neo-conservative dogma which vehemently declares "We Don't Negotiate With Terrorists" is by now completely bankrupt. From a purely semantic point of view, the labeling of groups as "terrorist" implicitly delegitimizes nonviolent responses and makes them less possible. Then, of course, comes the unpleasant and by now well-known reality that governments including the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia have been arming and funding the very "terrorists" they condemn publicly.

Canada's Liberals, like the vast majority of other Western governments, still subscribe to the consensus on state sovereignty established at the 2005 World Summit where R2P was born. This "solidarist" conception of world order, predicated on the use of armed intervention to *promote and protect* sovereignty, is the paradigmatic discourse in global politics. Human rights norms, on the other hand, exemplify the "standard of civilization"; adherence to minimum humanitarian standards, codified in international law, distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate forms of intervention against sovereign states. Rarely are violent means skirted for the attainment or protection of liberal democratic rights in other nations. As Michael Ignatieff wrote in *Human Rights: As Politics and Idolatry*, the exercise of force, more often than not, is necessary to prevent further violence, genocide and the like. Indeed, not all would agree.

In its new approach to ISIL, Canada's young government has taken a diminutive step toward addressing a generation of blunders which have aided and abetted extremism worldwide. Instead of dwelling on the retaliatory destruction of symbolic enemies, this cabinet has so far opted for restrained consideration of the forces at play. A far cry from the philosophies of King though it may be, the politics of personalism may have found a fragment of potential for a legitimate and newfound reemergence.