

# CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND NATIONAL INTERESTS

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For most of the past half century, the foreign policy of the United States has been set by people who call themselves *Realists*.@ Anyone who disagrees with a policy called realistic is dismissed as unrealistic or idealistic. The central tenet of this realism is that *the national interest*@ must be the controlling factor in decisions by the government. With the claim that the national interest takes precedence over all other considerations, ethical questions are effectively excluded. Neither Christian ethics nor any other moral argument is allowed to intrude upon the realist concern with the national interest. That the government of a nation has to defend the national interest seems to many people self-evident.

What is not self-evident, however, is that a nation-state has only one interest. That is, a constant reference to *the national interest*@ obscures an obvious truth: a nation-state has many interests. Undoubtedly, a nation-state cannot sacrifice its existence but survival or annihilation is not usually the immediate choice. When the nation-state acts, what is most immediately at issue is what kind of self it chooses to be. Like an individual person, the nation-state has to coordinate its many interests for the sake of the self it is becoming.

A parallel between the individual's morality and the morality of the nation-state is precisely what is denied in the literature of *Realism*.@ On one side, the individual is encouraged to be ethical. Religions, especially Christianity and Buddhism, are praised for supporting *Altruism*@ at the personal level. But to protect these good and innocent people, it is necessary for the government to act amorally in a world where power politics is the only currency. The standard practice is to refer to the Sermon on the Mount as a beautifully idealistic morality that might inspire individuals but is totally irrelevant for governmental activity.

If one accepts the assumption that the choice is between *National interest*@ and *Altruism*,@ there is no contest as to which will triumph. For an alternative, one has to deny both options. Neither *National interest*@ nor *Altruism*@ is a meaningful description.

## Altruism

The question for the nation-state is its many interests. Having policies that are beneficial to other countries can be one of those interests, but such a stance is not well described as *Altruism*.@ The problem with *Altruism*@ is not whether it can be raised from individual to governmental level. More to the point, *Altruism*@ is not a useful or accurate way to describe individual morality.

Altruism is a term first used in English in 1853 as a direct translation from French. The term was invented by Auguste Comte, the philosopher who wished to found a religion of humanity. The term derived its meaning from a contrast to egoism and selfishness. The law and duty of life in altruism was summed up in the phrase: Live for others.

I find it ironic that in the literature of recent decades altruism is especially identified with Christianity. Comte was quite clear that the chief opponent of his religion of humanity was Christianity. Whereas Christianity worshiped the creator of the universe, Comte's religion was a worship of humanity. In a similar vein, ecological literature regularly attacks Christianity for placing man on top of nature, language which ancient and medieval Christianity never used. The ecological culprit is Comte who in the nineteenth century completed the process begun by Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century. But Bacon was still constrained by Christian precepts while Comte had no use for Christianity.

Comte's exalted view of humanity was correlated with a rather grubby picture of the human individual. He assumed that the individual is naturally selfish. The evolutionary view that emerged in the 1850s dovetailed with Comte's view. Life is a brutal struggle; it is every man for himself and only the strong survive.

While the natural selfishness of the individual became the common assumption in the nineteenth century, there remained a class of actions that was left unexplained. Some people seemed to engage in self-sacrificing activities out of regard for others. Comte's concept of altruism covered these activities. Two explanations of altruism seemed possible. Altruists are people ignorant of their own good, perhaps hoping to get payback in another world. Or an almost opposite explanation: altruists are sneaky clever in getting their own greatest satisfaction by seeming to live for others.

There have been a few thinkers who advocated universal selfishness as the way to a perfect world. Most people, however, sense that there is a flaw in claiming that selfishness is all that is needed. In important concerns of life, for example, the family, each man for himself seems a prescription for disaster. The opposite of selfishness, altruism, is seen to be desirable.

Does the human race need a group of people who are capable of transcending their natural selfishness to work for the good of others? It is not a coincidence that the modern professions had their origin in the middle of the nineteenth century. Especially in the United States (in contrast to England

and other European countries), modern professions have been entrepreneurial undertakings that laid claim to an ideology of service. Professional codes of ethics are very much concerned with an ethic of altruism. On the one hand, the client's needs are said to take precedence. On the other hand, it is almost impossible to find a code of professional ethics that mentions that professionals receive money for what they do. Modern professions use the language of a medieval monastery while they are enmeshed in a bureaucratic, capitalistic, competitive world.

Professionals are often uneasy about the gap between what they actually do and high-blown rhetoric of what a professional is supposed to be. The gap generates cynicism among large segments of the public who are supposedly being served by altruistic professionals. The unrealistic rhetoric in professional literature is unfortunate because professional activity can be a model for all kinds of work; the term altruism gets in the way of appreciating the good qualities in the lives of many professionals.

In the last couple of decades, evolutionary psychology has emphasized that survival of the fittest applies at the genetic level. The genes are the true individuals (a word that means not further divisible); the human individuals are simply the carriers. From this vantage point, what looks like human altruism is revealed to be genetic selfishness; the genes recognize close relatives in the game of survival. A mother taking care of an infant or a man giving help to his brother is simply protecting the related genes. This does, however, suggest that human cooperation is a natural trait, at least within an intimate circle. The selfish genes make possible human group cooperation.

This acknowledgment of human cooperativeness is taken to be a hopeful sign. But the picture of tightly knit human groups does not immediately suggest the resolution of racial and social conflict, not to mention international problems. The hope is that if cooperation is natural at an intimate level, then the human race might be able to promote and learn the same thing in larger groups.

The hope would seem tenuous but any strand of optimistic thinking may be worth pursuing. The unwieldy term for this hope of widespread cooperation is reciprocal altruism. This abstraction is unnecessary and obfuscating. It is an attempt to save Comte's religion instead of getting rid of it. The term altruism need never have been coined and it now ought to be retired.

Morality was discussed for thousands of years without the help of the term altruism. The Greeks and Romans worked out an ethic based on rational

principles. Christianity did radically challenge some of these principles. But neither Aristotle nor Jesus begins with a choice between selfishness and altruism. Each begins by assuming that human beings choose what they see as good. The task of the teacher of morality is to enlarge and enrich that object of choice. A Christian way of life was not assumed to be a possibility for only a few heroic individuals who could live for others. Christianity was preached as a power transformative of the world not a negation of the individual's nature.

People who dismiss the Sermon on the Mount often have little knowledge of it beyond a phrase or two taken out of context. At the center of Jesus' teaching is his appropriation of Lev. 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." Christianity, like Judaism, demands that you love your neighbor as yourself, not instead of yourself. One cannot love either oneself or one's neighbor unless both are grounded in the recognition: "I am the Lord."

The choice is not to be selfish or altruistic. The choice is either to spread violence and hatred or else to discover a love that comes from God and can be possessed only if shared with others. The hard demand of Jesus' teaching is to break the cycle of violence by doing love to one's enemy, thereby converting enemy to friend. Martin Luther King, Jr. defined faith as an asymmetric response to violence. And, as King often said, everyone is welcome in the army of the nonviolent: the aged sick and the very young, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor.

This life of faith will test out the self that one possesses - or thinks one possesses. The question for the individual - and the nation-state - is what kind of self to become. Christian mystics warn that one has to be ready to let go of everything, even oneself. The love of God cannot enter if one clings to the old self and refuses to accept a new and transformed self. The grace of God is free but only if accepted.

#### National Interests

Obviously, there are differences between morality at the personal and national levels. Plato collapsed the differences when he described the *polis* as "the individual writ large." But the claim that the individual and the nation should have opposite moralities is also an exaggeration. A government is composed of human individuals who operate with ambiguous motives and an ignorance of many of the consequences of their actions. The nation's character is unimaginably complex but there are occasions when the self of the nation is in action and its character can change for better or for worse. After World War II Germany and Japan improved in character and the nation's interests shifted.

It is in every nation's interest not to have its existence threatened by its enemies. One way to attempt doing that is by amassing more military power than anyone else. If every other nation is seen as potential threat to the national interest, one must build an enormous defense. There is no stopping point until, as one author puts it, the last man on earth is dominated by one's power.

The other direction for a nation would be to learn from personal morality the need to react asymmetrically to violence. Nations do face powerful competitors. Nations do not love each other but hostility is not the only alternative. It is a national interest to form covenants with other nations, which reduces the likelihood of violent conflict. No national interest is sacrificed by mutual pacts that can benefit both nations. In today's world of heightened violence, Jesus' teaching not to return hatred for hatred, violence for violence, takes on new relevance.

As one example, consider what Arthur Schlesinger called the most dangerous moment in the history of the world. The United States and the Soviet Union were at the brink of nuclear war in October, 1962, over missiles in Cuba. The Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, sent two messages, one with blustering threats of war, the other hinting at reconciliation. John Kennedy could have escalated the military threat but chose to respond to Khrushchev's hint at a peaceful resolution. The two leaders refused, in Khrushchev's phrase, to pull the string that would tighten the knot. Was Khrushchev or Kennedy the hero? Neither, really. They simply acted as human beings with a sense of moral necessity beyond a false national pride. A nuclear war would have been obscene and absurd. But there were advisors on both sides who were urging the leaders not to back down lest it be seen as weakness.

A Christian morality and the interests of the nation are fully compatible. Those interests can include being a morally responsible member of a world community of nations. The Christian religion cannot supply answers to every political question. But its understanding of power as service to a greater good than that of one nation would set a better context for politics than the Realist's assumption that power means dominating others.

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