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Ethical Problems in Revolutionary War

Mr. Banham, now a minister of the non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland and formerly a Lieutenant-Commander in the Royal Navy and an expert in weaponry, has had practical experience in dealing with terrorist operations in various parts of the world. In this short article, a challenge to Christian thinking, he analyses the motives and techniques of terrorism.

In 1945 the first atomic weapon used in war was dropped over Hiroshima. The ethical problems raised by that bomb and the later development of nuclear weapons are now well known. But it is not often appreciated that militarism did not stand still. War, defined as the violent means by which one group of people imposes its will upon another group, also had to come to terms with weapons of mass destruction; and more and more groups have turned to using methods of mental and moral destruction as cheap, safe alternatives.

These methods are not entirely new, since guerrilla-type terrorism has a long history. But what is new is the speed and efficiency of modern communications so that terrorism is now a far stronger weapon than it has ever been in the past. Moreover, it makes use of a scientific knowledge of human behaviour in order to defeat people through their own best qualities. Thus it challenges religion itself in the hearts and minds of the people who are being attacked, in such a way that the challenge is often unrecognised.

The terrorists then have a clear field to manipulate peoples' feelings into actions which lead to a situation in which the ruling authorities simply cannot rule or keep the confidence of the people. This eventually leads to withdrawal or abdication of responsibility and the terrorists, through some front organisation, move in as "saviours" from anarchy.

It would be wrong to assume such methods are necessarily and always Communist. They were, for example, used by Grivas in Cyprus, by nationalists in Palestine and Kenya, and by Michael Collins in the 20's in Ireland. Indeed, it is those methods in use in so many places that are the main cause of the widespread violence we deplore in today's world and which at first sight seems so pointless. But it is certainly not pointless. What has not been grasped is that the main point of attack is not some authoritative force, such as the police or the army, but *public opinion* and the will to resist. Every bomb and bullet, riot and boycott has one eventual aim in end. That is, to erode away public morale. Once public opinion has been shocked by the ferocity of the attacks, shamed by the disclosures of actually inevitable, near brutality of the police and army in keeping order, and hammered by continuous events into a conviction that the authorities do not rule, then public opinion succumbs to apathy and to looking for some way out of the "mess". This means surrender, or at best compromise, or at worst the creation of some form of totalitarianism which carries within it the seeds of future conflict.

Sufficient examples now exist for a general pattern to emerge in the following form. Firstly, there is the need for a "cause" which will touch as many peoples' hearts as possible. Enthusiastic liberals and purely emotional Christians are very liable to be dragged in at this stage especially where the "cause" is indeed a wrong about which something should be done anyway. But it is worth noting that Brigadier Kitson in his book, *Low Intensity Operations* cites several examples of "causes" that were worked up where none existed with a broad enough appeal. Whatever the cause, the second step is to get the enthusiastic reformers out into the streets in as large numbers as possible. This will, inevitably, mean a confrontation with the police, if necessary through picked

“stone throwers” or the like. In the resulting baton-charge people will be hurt, tempers roused, charges of brutality made, and the challenge to the authorities in the form of the police has begun. The masses can now be called out with personal hurts to revenge; and the spiral of violence has commenced.

At this point apparently self-appointed “protectors” of the people appear. They start with bullets, then, to quote Kitson, they continue with “carefully calculated acts of revolting brutality designed to bring excessive government retaliation on the population thereby turning them against the authorities”. This strengthens their appeal especially with young people who see only that the soldiers are arresting, questioning, searching and oppressing in other ways their parents, their friends and their homes.

The news media play an important part in the campaign. Especially in a democracy, the media seek to be “fair” but “newsworthy”. Acts of violence by the few, however, are thus given exceptional prominence and swiftly create an impression that the authorities do not rule and certainly cannot protect. Yet the number of real heartless killers is surprisingly small. In Cyprus, General Grivas started with 88 men and never had more than 250. In Cuba, Castro and Guevara were at one time down to twelve; yet they built up by the methods described above till they took over the whole country. This makes the job of the authorities exceptionally difficult because every clumsy search, every act of firmness and every compulsive measure will harass or injure mainly innocent people — thus creating the hatred and distrust of the authorities which the terrorists desire. Eventually public determination crumbles and a way out is sought — generally surrender disguised as “compromise” or, if the arena is a colony, by the withdrawal of the army.

The ethical problems are extremely complex. At the first stage of getting people out onto the streets the “cause” or “causes” will have a wide appeal and, almost certainly, include grievances that are real. It is impossible to say that Christians should in future object to bureaucratic unfairness or blatant injustice. But what does need emphasising is that in righting a wrong, there is a right

and a wrong way of going about it. Moreover, pastors should be much more aware of the crowd manipulation tactics which are used today. At the stage of real violence there is an urgent need for calm, clear thought, for sanity and Christian charity. Unfortunately most of the people will no longer be in a mood to listen. Anyone who tries to stand firm against the tides of popular emotion risks ostracism or worse; and what a minister can, and will, attempt to do depends on the strength of the bedrock of his faith.

There are even more difficult ethical problems for the authorities. The primary duty of the police and the army is the strongly ethical one of maintaining law and order so that the weak, the old and the young may live in peace, and — in any worthwhile society — that true standards of justice exist for all. Indeed, any falling below that standard is to give point to the terrorists' propaganda and to create shame and despondency in the hearts of decent people. In a divided community the appeal of the original "cause" will also divide the authorities, especially the police, over what to do. And the expediency which results suits the terrorists well. Henceforth the authorities are shown to be "inconsistent" — which is treated as a synonym for "unfair".

The authorities will also have many alarmed people urging the use of counter-terrorism, draconian measures and even inhumane methods of questioning. Ethically, none of these is acceptable; and they will, thank goodness, also be unacceptable to senior authorities who understand the techniques in use by the terrorists. If men at a lower level are allowed their heads in such evil activities they rapidly discredit the authorities by "proving" the terrorists' claim that the authorities do not maintain the standards of justice for which they were elected. And the terrorists are quite likely to use churchmen to witness to what would undoubtedly be evil acts. Thus while Christian concern for the authorities' tactics must exist, it needs also to be seen that this concern is easily, and often, made use of as a weapon in the terrorists' armoury.