

Faith and Thought

Newsletter of the
Victoria Institute

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EDITORIAL

At the risk of being repetitive, I must say that we were again short of material for a second newsletter in 1986. However, the greatly enlarged edition of *Faith and Thought*, October (Volume 112/2), compensated to some extent. This bumper issue was, of course, the occasion to honour the memory of Dr. R. E. D. Clark, our late Editor. We hope that all who read the issue considered that we had done something, however inadequate, to bring Robert's life and work to the attention of those who never knew him, and to strike chords in the minds of those who had been so fortunate.

This newsletter contains two articles which to some extent complement one another. 'Dissonance and Faith' deals with the tensions with which Christians have to live while being 'in the world, but not of the world'. The article 'Just-War Theory' describes one of these tensions—our attitude to nuclear warfare. Since, in Britain, we may well find ourselves confronted with defence as an election issue, readers will hopefully find this discussion relevant. Perhaps these two articles will stimulate some discussion: please write in, as comments are always welcome.

Regarding our contributors, Tony Walter is a free-lance writer and very concerned with social issues. David Kibble is Head of Religious and Community Studies in a Leeds school.

As this issue was going to press, the Editor heard of the death of

Professor Donald M. Mackay on February 6, after a long illness. Donald has been a champion of truth in the interrelationship between faith and science for many years. A fuller appreciation will follow later, but all members of the Victoria Institute will, I know, join in sending Valerie and the family our deepest sympathy.

BOOKS FOR REVIEW

The Editor has the following volumes awaiting review, and would be very grateful for offers from reviewers. Please indicate your preference and qualification.

- D. Williams *Not once, but twice* (the account of healing from cancer)
- W. Law *A serious call to a devout and holy life* (the writings of the 18th century divine)
- D. Guthrie *Exploring God's Word* (Bible guide to John's gospel)
- J. White and K. Blue *Healing the wounded* (the costly love of church discipline)
- D. J. Hall *Imaging God* (dominion as stewardship)
- K. Barker *The making of a contemporary translation* (how the N.I.V. came to be produced)
- J. Hemming *Instead of God* (working out our own salvation)
- R. Bergland *The Fabric of Mind* (the brain and its mechanism)
- J. Pollock *The Master* (a life of Jesus).
- W. Bühlmann *The church of the future* (what will the church be like in 2200?)
- T. Shaw *E. M. Blaiklock—A Christian scholar*
- J. Watson *Through the year with J. I. Packer* (daily readings and comments)

DISSONANCE AND FAITH

We live in a complex world in which it is not always clear what is the right course of action, nor whether particular actions are fully consonant with our beliefs. Tension and the possibility of regret are ever present.

In the first section of this article, I explore what some psychologists have concluded about this. In the second section, I explore whether some psychologically functional mechanisms for avoiding tension and regret may well be morally dangerous. And in the final section, I explore some implications for Christians—how can we live in a secular society and remain true to our faith?

Dissonance and the psychology of regret

Three decades ago, the American psychologist Leon Festinger published his theory of cognitive dissonance,¹ which attempted to explain how people come to hold and change attitudes, opinions and beliefs. Festinger explored the process of rationalisation, by which we come not only to accept but also to justify a *fait accompli*. We may spend weeks agonising whether to buy a Fiat or a VW, carefully and rationally weighing up the pros and cons of each model. But once we have paid over the best part of our hard-earned savings and are driving off in our new Fiat, a less rational process takes over. We are interested no longer in choosing between the various models, but in dispelling any doubts that the Fiat may not be the best. We tend to discount evidence that would foster such doubts, and take pleasure in the features of the Fiat that have obvious merit. We have moved from reasoning to rationalisation, from choosing to justification. We quickly confirm the opinion that the Fiat is better for our purposes than its competitors.

Festinger's point is this. Once we have engaged in a particular behaviour, such as buying a Fiat, it is not pleasant to endure the tension (or dissonance) of attitudes, opinions and beliefs that are inconsistent with our behaviour. There is a natural tendency to reduce this dissonance, which can be done either by changing the behaviour or changing the opinions. Since much behaviour is either a *fait accompli* (as in the Fiat purchase) or is difficult to reverse without adverse comment from others, it is often easier to change the opinion to suit the behaviour than reverse the behaviour to suit the opinion.

Sometimes of course, we just have to live with dissonance. Although it may be generally true that, having actually made it to school, most five year olds who had held the opinion that school was nasty are likely to reverse that opinion, some little boys have to continue attending school even though they continue not to like it, and attendance does not change their opinion! And not every child who is forced to eat spinach changes the opinion that spinach is horrid.

In general, it is not pleasant living with tensions between what we believe and what we do. Nor is it pleasant living with ambivalence as to whether a particular course of action was right. I know I am prone to this kind of regret after I've taken certain kinds of actions, and I would not recommend it to anybody! It is far more functional to

1. Leon Festinger *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stamford University Press, 1957. Some later experiments designed to refine this theory are reported in Leon Festinger *Conflict, Decision, and Dissonance*. Tavistock 1964.

rationalise away the doubts and regrets, for then you can get on with living. Any successful businessman, politician or parent has to rationalise, and as they grow older their attitudes tend to become more middle-of-the-road to fit actions that were socially or economically necessary, even though out-of-key with their once youthful idealism.

Justification and the ethics of regret

If *post hoc* rationalisation of ambiguous decisions and the shifting of personal beliefs to fit socially expected behaviour are psychologically functional for the individual, from a moral point of view a rather different conclusion may be reached.

You may grow up to believe that killing people is wrong. But then in time of war you get drafted into the army and find yourself killing people. On hand is a ready stock of justifications to do with the evil nature of the enemy and the honour of the soldier's life. If you accept such justifications, then you will be able to continue killing the enemy, and when discharged may make a tolerable re-adjustment to civilian life, not racked by guilt. But if you cannot change your beliefs about killing people, then you may well have a nervous breakdown. Although dysfunctional psychologically, this may have been the correct and more brave course morally.

Someone else may grow up also believing that killing people is wrong, and then find themselves with an unwanted pregnancy. If they have an abortion, there is clearly inner pressure to modify their earlier belief in the direction of believing that killing a foetus is all right because it is not really a person. If such a modification of perception or belief cannot be made, then guilt and emotional difficulties are likely. But, as with the recalcitrant soldier, it may be the braver course to face up to the possibility that one has actually killed a human being, and seek forgiveness from one's Maker and from one's fellow humans.

Jacques Ellul, the French social scientist/theologian wrote about this in his book *Propaganda*.² There are so many contradictory demands on people in a modern, pluralistic society that they are constantly prone to guilt; they cannot satisfy every demand made on them. There is inevitable inconsistency between what they believe and what they do. One of our greatest unmet needs today is therefore

2. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes*. Vintage Books 1973 (first published in French, 1962).

the need for righteousness, the need to feel that we are right. We need justifications and rationalisations, and it is this need that propaganda feeds upon. The more clear-cut a political ideology, the more effectively it reassures its supporters that grey is not grey but black or white. When a government is forced to make morally dubious decisions, as during a war or during economic crisis, so there is doubly fertile ground for propaganda, to reassure voters that what is being done in their name is not only all right, but positively virtuous. Those whose opinions and beliefs are formed not so much by social or psychological needs but by a deep yearning for truth, the Dietrich Bonhoeffers and the David Jenkins, may question this socially constructed virtue.

True bravery is not to take the difficult decision and convince yourself it was the right one, but to take the difficult decision and commit yourself and perhaps others to it, even though you know you *may* be wrong. As a Christian, I know that ultimately it is myself and not my behaviour that God justifies, so it is possible to take risks. There are dangers with this kind of bravery, of course. It can degenerate into sinning deliberately, knowing that God will forgive. There is the example of Reinhold Niebuhr and the Vietnam War. Apparently Niebuhr recommended the hard course of participating in the War, even though there was a chance that American involvement might be wrong. Now although a mature theologian can live with this frightful possibility, a whole nation—still less a frightened GI out in the jungle—cannot, and so Niebuhr's advice was easily translated by many as 'My country, right or wrong' and interpreted as a justification for American involvement in Vietnam.

Embracing tension between deeply-held beliefs and action requires maturity. Few of us can stand it for any length of time. As Ellul put it in *The Political Illusion*,³ we hope for comfort and happiness, not discomfort and angst: 'The hatred of tensions and conflicts rests entirely on the idea that the only aim, the only sense, the only value in human life is happiness, and, further, on the conviction that the only means, the only road to this happiness is comfort—material comfort . . . and moral comfort.'

If psychologists say we need to reduce tensions and contradictions and if theologians say this need is at the heart of both personal and social sin, then where does this leave us?

As far as non-moral decisions are concerned, I think we may take the advice of the psychologists. It does nobody any good to agonize

3. J. Ellul *The political illusion* (Alfred Kopf) 1967.

over whether they should have bought Macleans toothpaste rather than Crest or fed the kids liver instead of bangers and beans. If we can persuade ourselves that Crest is indeed best and that sausages have plenty of nourishment, then we will be free to get on with living and loving.

But when it comes to moral decisions, the psychological need to know we are right is a double-edged sword. Before we make the decision, it is God's spirit stretching us to do the good. But after we have made the decision, the Devil can and does use this psychological need to convince us that bad is indeed good, and brave is the person who faces up to the possibility that he or she may have chosen the bad. That requires either an about-turn in behaviour, or forgiveness, neither of which are easy or comfortable.

Religious implications: in the world but not of it

It has often been said that Christians are called to be in the world but not of it. We are to be out there, challenging and changing a sinful and secular people. Now this creates enormous dissonance for Christians. On the one hand we have to live among, and with, people whose behaviour may not conform to Christian beliefs. To be with them, we have to join in their lifestyle, to be 'all things to all men' in the words of the Apostle. And yet at the same time, we have to maintain our own distinctive beliefs. How can it be done?

Sociologist Steve Bruce's recent book *Firm in the Faith*⁴ is illuminating here. He compares liberals and evangelicals; they both want to be in the world but not of it, but have adopted different strategies. He concludes that sociologically and psychologically the evangelical strategy has proved far more effective in maintaining the faith and numbers of the faithful. It is evangelical, not liberal, churches that are booming. The evangelical strategy has been to counter the behaviour and attitudes of society with an alternative 'Christian' world.

So evangelicals read 'Family' and 'Christian Woman' magazine, go to their own Christian rock festivals, use their local church for friendship as well as worship, and marry fellow-believers. Though they venture out into the world to earn a living and to evangelise, they do not need the secular world for the feeding of mind and spirit, and as a result it is remarkable how resilient conservative evangelical beliefs have been in the face of a secular society. The danger, of course, is that this Christian world is so personally fulfilling that some

4. S. Bruce *Firm in the faith* (Gower) 1984.

evangelicals spend very little time in the world, and converts are often from within the families of evangelicals. Evangelicals may not be of the world, but often they are hardly in it either; the holy huddle can be all too pleasantly devoid of dissonance.

The liberal strategy is much more risky. It involves building bridges with the other side—dialogues with Marxists and Hindus, marriages with agnostics, and so on. Bruce, an impartial observer of the scene, notes that the traffic over these bridges has proved one-way, with liberal Christians becoming more and more secular over the years and little sign of agnostics becoming more Christian. There is no liberal Christian woman's magazine, no liberal Christian pop culture, no liberal Christian holiday camps. The result is that liberal Christians depend on secular magazines, music, holidays and so on for their daily needs, the dissonance inevitably set up by this is easily resolved by shifting their beliefs towards the secular.

We all like comfort, Christians included. Many liberals resolve dissonance between Christian belief and secular activity by letting their beliefs become eroded. Many evangelicals resolve the dissonance by retreating to a 'Christian world' in which the behaviour expected of them is consonant with historic Christian belief. But there are a few who, either by birth or through carefully nurtured maturity, seem to relish dissonance. It is a liberal, not an evangelical, bishop who is proving a thorn in the flesh of the present government, and is prepared to relish rather than run away from the dissonance set up between his Christian beliefs and his membership of the political establishment. And there is a modern generation of thinking evangelical laypeople who relish both being in the world and maintaining a Christian critique of it. A publishing house such as the Inter-Varsity Press has long since given up restricting itself to devotional aids and helpful tips on how to resist sin in professional life, and has gone on to the offensive with Christian critiques of art and of academic disciplines such as history and sociology, written by lay practitioners in these fields.

The moral of all this? Firstly, we must be aware that there is a natural tendency to change our beliefs to conform with our behaviour, and that this creates a secularising tendency for Christians who have to live in a secular world. Secondly, we recognise that living with dissonance and potential regret is hard emotionally, but may in certain circumstances be morally courageous. Thirdly, by recognising this, we may help one another live with tension by providing support. And lastly, wherever we see a fellow Christian choosing to live with tension, then let us applaud their courage, whether or not we agree with their particular theological stand.

THE JUST WAR THEORY AND THE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS: PUSHING FORWARD THE FRONTIERS OF DEBATE

Most of the debate concerning the morality of the use of nuclear weapons has centred around the Just-War Theory. This theory argues that a war may be fought with a clear conscience under certain conditions, namely: (1) the war must be undertaken by the leaders of the state; (2) it must be fought for a just cause; (3) recourse to war must be a last resort; (4) there must be a formal declaration of war; (5) those engaging in war must have a reasonable chance of success; (6) the evil or damage which the war entails must be proportionate to the injury it is designed to avert or the injustice which causes it; (7) non-combatants must be immune from harm; (8) the means of war must be proportionate: any warlike action must be honourable and restrained.

It is the latter two conditions which have been particularly to the fore in the nuclear debate. Some supporters of the Just-War Theory have argued that to use nuclear weapons would break both of the conditions. The Church of England report, *The Church and the Bomb*, argues in this way. Speaking of non-combatant immunity it says that 'figures given in a U.N. study [show] that the tactical use of nuclear weapons in a battlefield situation in a fairly densely populated rural terrain in Europe could be expected to result in 150,000 immediate civilian casualties and a further 30,000 from fallout effects. The equivalent figures for military casualties would be 30,000 and 5,000. Such a use of nuclear weapons amounts to the wholesale and foreseen killing and injuring of non-combatants.'¹ It then considers the matter of proportion and argues that the pain, suffering and long term effects of a nuclear explosion could never be described as honourable, just and proportionate. The use of nuclear weapons then, according to the Church of England report, is unjust on the grounds that the conditions of non-combatant immunity and proportionality cannot be met.

In a recent study of the Just-War Theory, however, James Turner Johnson constructs a scenario in which he believes that the use of a nuclear weapon could, in fact, be more morally justifiable than the use of conventional weapons. He asks us to picture an area in West Germany which has been invaded by the Warsaw Pact armies. The

1. The Church of England Board of Social Responsibility. *The Church and the Bomb* (Hodder and Stoughton) p. 96, 1982.

inhabitants have all fled from the area. The question of non-combatant immunity does not therefore arise: there are no non-combatants around. Johnson proposes that in such a situation it might be morally right to use a neutron bomb. A neutron bomb is a nuclear weapon but one which is significantly different from the traditional atomic weapon like that used at Hiroshima. The traditional atomic weapon releases a large amount of blast and heat and causes damage to life and to the ecosystem through the release of radiation. Half the energy of the Hiroshima bomb was transmitted as blast, one third of its energy was transmitted as heat, and the remainder was transmitted as radiation. The neutron weapon, on the other hand, attempts to exploit the radiation effect as compared with blast and heat. In a neutron bomb the proportion of energy released as blast and heat is considerably smaller than that in traditional atomic warheads. The amount of damage done by blast and heat is therefore small in comparison. Moreover, the neutron radiation emitted is especially enhanced: its power enables it to penetrate steel so that tank crews, for example, would be incapacitated. The neutron radiation, however, is not long-enduring so that the lingering radioactive contamination in the affected area is diminished. In practice this would mean that the use of a neutron weapon would kill the invading army but because of the lack of blast and heat effects the buildings in the area would be largely left intact, ready for use again shortly after the explosion. The lack of lingering radioactive contamination would mean that after the wave of war had passed, the non-combatant inhabitants could return to their homes and begin work again.

Turner believes that the use of the traditional nuclear weapon in this situation would be unjust. The damage done to property, and particularly the long term effects on the environment, would force us to classify its use as unjust according to the Just-War Theory on account of the damage that would be done by blast, heat and radiation. More importantly, however, Turner maintains that the use of traditional weapons in this situation would also be unjust according to the Just-War Theory. It would be unjust because in order to stop the advancing Warsaw Pact tanks, the collateral damage to property would be enormous were the advance to be stopped with traditional weapons which rely on blast and fire alone. He therefore concludes that 'In cases like the one sketched here the possibility does seem to exist that in some conditions the neutron weapon can be used with greater moral discrimination than tactical fission weapons and even conventional high explosives.'²

2. J. T. Johnson, *Can Modern War Be Just?* (Yale U.P., New Haven) p. 117, 1984.

the nuclear dilemma: is it right to save the many by so horrifyingly debilitating the few? Of course, it may be that many would not in fact be saved by such an action and that the question's premiss is altogether wrong. In many, perhaps most, circumstances it would be: but Hiroshima showed us that it need not be.

Turner's scenario has pushed forward the boundaries of discussion in the nuclear debate. Perhaps there are other frontiers that have still to be pushed forward. What about the nuclear scenario at sea? Few have discussed this area and yet it presents us with a situation that could so easily satisfy the condition of non-combatant immunity. Supposing, for example, that in a war with the USSR an American fleet came across a Russian Typhoon class nuclear ballistic missile submarine. It is thought that these new Russian submarines are 'double skinned' which might be difficult to damage effectively with conventional weapons. Here would lie the chance of saving the lives of perhaps millions in the event of a nuclear strike by the USSR, at the expense of a few Russian servicemen. But it could possibly only be accomplished by using nuclear weapons. Would such an action be right? Such an example shows us that we need constantly to push forward the frontiers of debate in discussing the morality of nuclear weapons. Much writing on the issue at present fails to do so.

CONFERENCE OF THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

CREATION RECONSIDERED

to be held at the
LONDON INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY
St. Peter's Church, Vere Street, London W1
(off Oxford Street)
on

SATURDAY, MAY 16, 1987

- 10.15 Coffee
- 10.45 The early chapters of Genesis
*Rev. R. H. Peskett, College of St. Paul and St. Mary,
Cheltenham.*
- 11.45 Earth History, Time and Time Again
Dr. R. G. Fraser, Geology Department, University of Hull
- 12.45 Lunch
- 2.00 p.m. Perspectives on Creationist Apologetics
*M. W. Poole, Department of Science Education,
King's College, London*
- 3.00 p.m. Tea
- 3.30 p.m. General Discussion

This meeting is open to all who are interested. Payment may be made on the day, but if lunch is required, please inform the Secretary of the Victoria Institute in advance.

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