

THE VIETNAM WAR AND AMERICAN RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY

by

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Despite what seemed like the interminable bloodbath of Vietnam, and because of it, the great changes of the war's decade were ones of sensibility, awareness, and attitude, not of institutions.

-- Morris Dickstein

This paper takes its cues from "Hiroshima" and "Nagasaki," and the closing days of World War II. It inquires into the longer-range influences of those events upon the modern era and upon the formation of 'the American mind.' It wonders what happens when every aspect of human life is subjected to pervasive reinterpretation and potential realignment. It finds justification for speculating on this matter in the changes that occurred in the nature of warfare. Before the nuclear capability was developed warfare could be kept within some manageable bounds; the catastrophes it unleashed, no matter how tragic, were always of finite proportions. But the nuclear explosion changed the meaning of war. Through it, as Robert Lifton has pointed out, fundamental shifts occurred in the way in which human life is approached and understood. Lifton contended in Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima (1968) and in Boundaries (1970) that the shifts appeared in a variety of perceptual realignments. Heretofore, he said, life and death were taken as interdependent polar terms; life was taken

as the dominant regulative term, and death was comprehended in terms of life. Following Hiroshima, a reversal and interchange occurred within the dominant relationship: death became the commanding term, and life was conceived in terms of death, first, for those directly affected by the war, but gradually for an increasingly larger number of persons. With this came changes in the ways human beings understand both themselves and the world in which they live. Human beings had come to conceive life differently. And the ramifications were to be felt in a wide variety of aspects of our common life. Persons related to persons, and nations to nations, in a different way. Changes came in attitudes toward government, toward leadership, toward the role of the military, toward all forms and reservoirs of power, to authority itself. From this point forward, all instruments of power, in degrees never possible before, were approached with suspicion. Power, by definition, carried the threat of destruction, and destruction carried the capacity of extinction. Lifton employed this interpretation to explain why patterns of personality formation changed from a fixed to a fluid, protean style.

Sensitivities nurtured by such awarenesses called for an urgent and thorough reexamination of everything upon which sustainable human life depends. There was a reassessment of the function of our dominant political, social, and cultural institutions. Serious attention needed to be given to the dynamics of world order, particularly as these had been redressed by the cataclysmic event. The function and value of education had to be -- and was, in fact -- reassessed. Value

issues, many of which were assumed to have been settled long ago, were opened to fresh examination. There was deep recognition that the survival of the species required deliberate attention. Further, given the radical and primary character of the change that had occurred, no assurance could be given that the new strategies would prove successful. Indeed, strategy itself became a subject of critical attention. It was as if the forces that had been unleashed were too powerful to be tamed and were threatening to run their own courses, being challenged, as Thomas Merton said, only by "an alternative way of being." Along the way, there would be an accumulation of wondrous scientific advances, all of which would also make the prospect of all-out destruction more immediate and imminent. And it wasn't Hiroshima, simply; it was also the Jewish Holocaust. The two events became fused in western consciousness. Regarding this coupling, Ron Rosenbaum writes (in "The Subterranean World of the Bomb," in Harper's, March, 1978):

When early strategists began to talk about the totality of nuclear war, they used phrases like "the death of consciousness" on the planet. Kissinger used the only slightly more modest phrase "an end to history." Without consciousness not only is there no history, there is no sorrow, no pain, no remorse. No one is missing or missed. There is nothing to feel bad about because nothing exists to feel. A death so total becomes almost communal. The holocaust of the European Jews left behind millions to feel horror, bitterness, and loss. When people began applying the word "holocaust" to nuclear war they meant a holocaust with no survivors, or one in which, to use the well-known phrase, "the survivors would envy the dead." Even now when a much-disputed scientific report argues the probability for long-term post-holocaust survival, at least in the southern hemisphere, one does

not, if one is an American, think of surviving a total nuclear war. One thinks of dying in a flash before there's time to feel the pain. Could that be the attraction, if that word may be used, of nuclear war? Is there some Keatsian element "half in love with easeful death" in our fantasies of the end? (pp. 88-89)

But, we need to turn to an analysis of "Vietnam" -- an event which political scientist James Rosenau, for one, finds it difficult to define as "a war." Indeed, "Vietnam" was not simply a war, and "Hiroshima" was not only a massively destructive nuclear explosion. Neither can be understood in narrow senses, for each also stands as a shock to fundamental human assumptions. Lifton refers to them as challenges to "underlying symbolic matrices," that is, as events through which the sets of connections by which human beings come to define themselves are reassessed and eventually redressed.

According to the interpretation I am proposing, "Hiroshima" lended substance and fiber to "Vietnam." The revised understanding of the implications of warfare affected the way the war was perceived, interpreted, portrayed, and fought. Because the stakes were conceived differently the war itself was regulated by a new agenda. "Winning" and "losing" couldn't mean what they meant before. Neither could be determined on the basis of the acquisition of territory, the winning of battles, the killing of enemy soldiers, the bombing of enemy establishments, the plundering of enemy

strongholds, etc. For the battles that were waged were motivated by other kinds of interest, and were assessed by new sorts of criteria. The battlefield itself was the arena whereon other sorts of conflict were finding dramatic expression. The issue wasn't physical combat simply, nor could differences of opinion be restricted to matters of military strategy. But Vietnam became both the scene and the testing-ground for a more comprehensive adjustment of human priorities. Some of the sensitivities nurtured in response to "Hiroshima" and the Jewish Holocaust could not find enunciation and challenge -- both at once -- until "Vietnam." By the time of "Vietnam," "Hiroshima's" realignments had become self-conscious, and had come to influence strategy. This made it impossible to judge the outcome of the war in traditional terms. The threat of destruction of infinite proportions was the regulative polar term by which all finite events were given a corresponding place.

Signs of this larger transposition appear in American religious sensitivities. It is no longer necessary to demonstrate that the past years have seen a phenomenal growth of interest in "spiritual religion" in the west. Yoga, transcendental meditation, trans-personal psychology, psychic awareness, mind-expanding experience, the attraction of eastern gurus, etc., are examples in point. But no less significant is the development of a simpler, less conflicted,

attitude and response to life -- an orientation that is being nurtured in the west, in part, through the influence of Asian religious currents. All of this has become a fact of modern religious, social, cultural, and psychological life.

But the linkage between this religious transformation and "Vietnam" has not been examined thoroughly. The linkage is direct, profound, and multi-layered. "Vietnam" gave occasion to Asian religious sensitivities. The latter were one set of self-consistent religious and attitudinal options to which the west had been made susceptible by the gnawing, self-developing experience of "Hiroshima." Indeed, "Vietnam" brought eastern religious sensitivity to light in the west. It provided an opening that even the most sophisticated missionary strategy could not have duplicated. For when one dominant strain of western religion came, as it were, to the end of its tether, there was response, but response from a source previously understood to be utterly alien.

In making this suggestion, I am not invoking any simple-minded "influence theory." I do not mean that those westerners who went to Vietnam were exposed to Asia simply by being there, then returned, bringing their "treasures" back with them. Some of this happened, of course. But the linkage is more specific. For "Vietnam" was fought in the Occident as well as in the Orient. And the terms were as much mental, psychological, and spiritual as they were geographical and militarial. "Vietnam" stimulated Asian religious sensitivities in the west because it was an event that could not be adequately or satisfactorily

comprehended in the most prominent and/or standard western ideational terms.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant German Protestant theologian who met his death on the gallows in a Nazi prison in 1944, would have understood the connections. In words not wholly comprehensible from his Letters and Papers from Prison, he suggests that the occurrence of two full-scale world wars in Christian Europe in less than half a century is a judgment against the Christian religion of the severest kind. Bonhoeffer perceived that there was something intrinsic to the spirit of western religion, something in its fiber, and, perhaps, something fundamentally characteristic of "the western mind," which is consonant with such conflict. In saying this, we are pointing to a dispositional factor. We are not overlooking injunctions within Christian aspiration toward loving one's enemies, turning the other cheek, not responding in kind when one is despised, harmed, or wrongfully used, etc. Neither is this to minimize Christianity's emphasis upon love, peace, brotherhood, harmony, and gentleness -- qualities that are vividly exemplified in the lives of St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and a host of other persons both well and lesser known.

But it is to recognize that the religions that have become entrenched in western culture are father religions primarily. And it is to add that father religions, characteristically, are, to use David Bakan's phrasing, religions of "agency." They encourage one to set things in motion, to

be an effective doer, to work for a particular cause or end or objective. Only with large reluctance will they accept things as they are. They work instead to make things better. They are instrumental. They channel and regulate power. They set out for goals that have not yet been achieved. And this kind of aggressive, anti-passive mood or disposition finds it fitting that there be an ultimate victory. It encourages the promotion of strategies through which good will redress, eliminate, or conquer evil. It believes it proper that right should vanquish wrong, that justice should be effected, even though considerable latitude is provided regarding the means by which victory shall be achieved. All of this belongs to a conviction that life does indeed exhibit a basic propriety, a fundamental harmony, a sense of balance and rightness that wills to be exercised, must be enunciated, and must eventually become visible. It believes in judgment against wrong, and it expects such judgment to be expressed, sometimes dramatically, in historical events. Even the great song and cry of the social revolution of the sixties, "We Shall Overcome," can be understood in these terms.

"Vietnam" was a severe challenge to these fundamental convictions, because it provided no clear way in which victory could be conceived or its terms enacted. "Right" and "wrong" could not be distinguished with clarity. The components of justice could not be easily identified. In religious terms, the event itself did not seem to exhibit a "theophanous"

character, as Paul Tillich would have said it: it was difficult to construe the day-by-day occurrences as visible signs of the working of an invisible divine will. For the war didn't mean what wars had meant before. Previous frameworks of interpretation didn't count. Earlier criteria didn't register. Former understanding didn't fit. What followed was profound mental anguish, deep interior turmoil, massive divisions within the country, political and military leadership unsure of itself, and pervasive readjustments within that ongoing sense-of-things Lifton refers to as the "underlying symbolic matrix."

The anguish and ambivalence is reflected in a host of chronicles and interpretations of the war that have appeared in recent weeks and months. For example, in his autobiographical A Rumor of War (1977), Philip Caputo recalls what it felt like to be inspired by John F. Kennedy's memorable inaugural injunction "ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country." Caputo writes:

This is what I wanted, to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace, I hungered for danger, challenges, and violence.

I had no clear idea of how to fulfill this peculiar ambition until the day a Marine recruiting team set up a stand in the student union at Loyola University. They were on a talent hunt for officer material and displayed a poster of a trim lieutenant who had one of those athletic, slightly cruel-looking faces considered handsome in the military. He looked like a cross between an All-American halfback and a Nazi tank commander. Clear and resolute, his blue eyes seemed to stare at me in challenge. JOIN THE MARINES, read the

slogan above his white cap. BE A LEADER OF MEN.¹

Caputo recalls:

I rummaged through the propaganda material, picking out one pamphlet whose cover listed every battle the Marines had fought, from Trenton to Inchon. Reading down that list, I had one of those rare flashes of insight: the heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary. The country was at peace then, but the early sixties were years of almost constant tension and crisis; if a conflict did break out, the Marines would be certain to fight in it and I could be there with them. Actually there. Not watching it on a movie or TV screen, not reading about it in a book, but there, living out a fantasy. Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest. The recruiters started giving me the usual sales pitch, but I hardly needed to be persuaded. I decided to enlist.²

At the end of the three-year enlistment period, after Caputo had been to "Vietnam" and in the midst of "Vietnam," he feels differently:

I came home from the war with the curious feeling that I had grown older than my father, who was then fifty-one. It was as if a lifetime of experience had been compressed into a year and a half. A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust. Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses -- a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people.³

¹ Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977), p. 5.

² Ibid., p. 6.

³ Ibid., p. 4.

Caputo's aspirations had been altered.

I was left with none of the optimism and ambition a young American is supposed to have, only a desire to catch up on sixteen months of missed sleep and an old man's conviction that the future would hold no further surprises, good or bad.

I hoped there would be no more surprises. I had survived enough ambushes and doubted my capacity to endure many more physical and emotional shocks. I had all the symptoms of combat veteranitis: an inability to concentrate, a childlike fear of darkness, a tendency to tire easily, chronic nightmares, an intolerance of loud noises -- especially doors slamming and cars backfiring -- and alternating moods of depression and rage that came over me for no apparent reason. Recovery has been less than total.¹

Summing it up, Caputo writes:

Beyond adding a few more corpses to the weekly body count, none of the encounters achieved anything; none will ever appear in military histories or be studied by cadets at West Point. Still, they changed us and taught us, the men who fought in them; in those obscure skirmishes we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. Most of all, we learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. Everyone loses that illusion eventually, but in civilian life it is lost in installments over the years. We lost it all at once and, in the span of months, passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age. The knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on a man's existence, severed us from our youth as irrevocably as a surgeon's scissors had once severed us from the womb. And yet, few of us were past twenty-five. We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads.²

¹ Caputo, ibid., p. 4.

² Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv.

The disillusionment was thorough, and it was experienced not only among those who participated in the war directly, but by the people at home, those who watched the war, night after night, on television. Peter Tauber catches the sense of the general mood in his novel, The Last Best Hope (1977):

All over, a dreary mood had settled in. No lever could be found to move the world. The war had become, for many at home, the source of fruitless contention; for others, a new idiom of entertainment: in the evenings they could turn a dial a "watch the war." To some it existed solely because it was on every channel. If not palpable, it was nonetheless undeniable. People had begun to chant that "things were in the saddle," and to feel that their lives were at the mercy of forces, great or infinitesimal, beyond their control: overwhelming vectors, insuperable momentum, genetic and historical.¹

Vietnam was not the traditional war. There was to be no victory, no conquering of the forces of evil by the forces of good, no basis on which heroic aspirations could be sustained or even recognized.

But gradually there came a shift, an adjustment, perhaps, to the inevitable. In Morris Dickstein's words, it became apparent that there had been "an over-reaching." And with this gradual acknowledgment came a series of attempts to effect a disengagement, a relinquishing of involvement, a persistent and growing criticism of "clear-cut military victory" objectives, and profound individual and corporate soul-searching.

¹ Peter Tauber, The Last Best Hope (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 26-27.

The mood was changing. The disposition was being altered. And the shift was enunciated in the music, particularly on the songs sung by Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, and, most especially, by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Lennon's "i don't wanna be a soldier mama i don't wanna die" and his "Imagine" said it well:

well, i don't wanna be a soldier mama, i don't wanna die
 well, i don't wanna be a sailor mama, i don't wanna fly
 well, i don't wanna be a failure mama, i don't wanna cry
 well, i don't wanna be a soldier mama, i don't wanna die
 oh no oh no oh no oh no

imagine there's no countries
 it isn't hard to do
 nothing to kill or die for
 and no religion too
 imagine all the people
 living life in peace

What happened in the music was also portrayed in the poetry, through the writings of Allen Ginsburg, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, and a host of others. It was in evidence in the temper of the new publications. It could be felt in the churches too, particularly in shifts in liturgical style. It was implicit in the accelerated extinction of institutions that had been established on a prior set of conditions and assumptions. This was "Vietnam," a war that served as a challenge to a sense of rightful expectation. It was an event that had become an occasion for a thorough reassessment and eventual redressing of human sensitivities.

And it wasn't simply a matter of faulty forecasting or military miscalculation. Norman Cousins gets at a part of the truth when he writes:

The purpose behind our involvement was to prevent the nations of Indochina from toppling in a "domino" process extending throughout Asia. We expended 50,000 lives in that effort and incurred 250 billions of dollars in debt. Vietnamese casualties exceeded one million. Thousands of villages were devastated. Hundreds of thousands of people became homeless.

But now we discover that the assumption underlying our involvement in that war was incorrect. We had feared that the emergence of "people's republics" in Indochina would lead to the overthrow of other governments stretching as far west as India and as far east as the Philippines. Far from being fused into a single, dynamic ideological force directed by Peking or Moscow, the countries of Indochina have been preoccupied with the same separate national problems and regional antagonisms that have always dominated their individual histories. The war between Cambodia and Vietnam is the most explicit expression of the fact that national differences are more powerful than ideological allegiances.

Our mistaken assessment of the likely course of events in Indochina was not just the product of faulty intelligence operations. More generally, it was the result of a fundamental error in U.S. policy. Until only recently, American policy makers proceeded on the assumption that ideology was more potent than nationalism and that as new countries became Communist they would be woven into a single world fabric.¹

But the issue runs even deeper. For, as the war progressed, it became apparent that what was occurring, as Peter Tauber phrased it, was "contrary to American Faith."² Michael Herr reflects

¹ Norman Cousins, "A Message from Indochina," in Saturday Review, March 18, 1978, p. 4.

² Tauber, op. cit., p. 27.

the confusion and ambivalence in his description of religious life in Vietnam during the war:

Prayers in the Delta, prayers in the Highlands, prayers in the Marine bunkers of the "frontier" facing the DMZ, and for every prayer there was a counter-prayer -- it was hard to see who had the edge. In Dalat the emperor's mother sprinkled rice in her hair so the birds could fly around her and feed while she said her morning prayers. In wood-paneled, air-conditioned chapels in Saigon, MACV padres would fire one up to sweet muscular Jesus, blessing ammo dumps and 105's and officers' clubs. The best-armed patrols in history went out after services to feed smoke to people whose priests could let themselves burn down to consecrated ash on street corners. Deep in the alleys you could hear small Buddhist chimes ringing for peace, hoá bien; small incense in the middle of the thickest Asian street funk; see groups of ARVN with their families waiting for transport huddled around a burning prayer strip. Sermonettes came over Armed Forces radio every couple of hours, once I heard a chaplain from the 9th Division starting up, "Oh Gawd, help us learn to live with Thee in a more dynamic way in these perilous times, that we may better serve Thee in the struggle against Thine enemies...." Holy war, long-nose jihad like a face-off between one god who would hold the coonskin to the wall while we nailed it up, and another whose detachment would see the blood run out of ten generations, if that was how long it took for the wheel to go around.¹

Tauber adds:

To many it was hard to believe. And so it was not believed. It was not so much a heroic refusal as it was romantic. For belief itself was the greatest agony. What was held as true was disappointing: what was hoped for seemed impossible. Cherished values trembled. Dear faiths brought the most painful and paradoxical returns: the best intentions in

¹ Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 45.

the world murdered and maimed and ruined.

So the faithful, the hopeful, had few good choices then: acceptance, withdrawal, rejection, or revolt. They chose the romantic course.

To no use¹.

The experience of Vietnam was such that it fostered many of the same insights that are taught in Asian religious traditions, particularly in Buddhism. In suggesting this, we are drawing upon a consensus that eastern and western religious traditions can be distinguished from each other regarding the meaning of successes and failure, "winning and/or losing," and the like. Ivan Morris, in his brilliant book, The Nobility of Failure (1975), which is an analysis of the concept of heroism in Japanese thought, approaches the distinction in the following way:

The Judaeo-Christian approach is based on the comforting idea that, so long as a man keeps faith, God will be on his side and he, or at least his cause, will eventually triumph. Thus a hero like Roland, though defeated in battle, is never abandoned by God and succeeds in contributing to the Christian victory over the Saracens.

This basically optimistic outlook has been especially conspicuous in the most western of all major Western countries, the United States of America, whose tradition has always tended to extrude any tragic sense of life and, often against cogent evidence to the contrary, to put its trust in the essential goodness of mankind, or at least that part of mankind which is fortunate enough to reside within its boundaries. "I know America," a recent President was fond of saying, "and the heart of America is good." The statement is not without a certain irony when one recalls the identity of its

¹ Tauber, op. cit., p. 2.

author; yet the sentiment reflects an underlying assumption that has been widely and confidently accepted. Americans, of course, are no strangers to despair, yet it comes not from any philosophical awareness of man's existential limitations but from disappointment that follows excessive hope in the possibility of compassing worldly happiness.¹

By contrast, Morris describes an attitude to life that has been expressed in Japanese culture, and is typical of the Buddhist orientation:

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the Japanese, who since ancient times have tended to resign themselves to the idea that the world and the human condition are not essentially benign. For all the country's vigour and ebullience, there is a deep strain of natural pessimism, a sense that ultimately things are against us and that, however hard we may strive, we are involved in a losing game. Sooner or later each individual is doomed to fail; for, even if he may overcome the multifarious hurdles set by a harsh society, he will finally be defeated by the natural powers of age, illness, and death. Human life...is full of sad vicissitudes, fleeting, impermanent like the seasons. Helplessness and failure are built into human enterprises.²

Morris explains that "this underlying pessimism" -- which also recognizes a wonderful beauty and poignancy in "the pathos of things" -- is supported by Mahayana Buddhist religion.

The linkages between this orientation and the lessons of Vietnam are subtle and indirect. Through the frustrations

¹ Ivan Morris, The Nobility of Failure. Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), pp. 38-39.

² Ibid., p. 39.

of the experience came a strong need to make sense of things without recourse to the fundamentally optimistic, happiness-and-success dominated outlook of the west. James Dittes, Yale psychologist, refers to this as the search for the grammar of "positive disengagement." This, in turn, directed attention to sources of individual and corporate authority that counseled repression and extinction, rather than cultivation, of the acquisitive, aggressive, agential posture. For one of the lessons of the experience was that conflict derives from human acquisitive impulses, which conflict can never be resolved by the satisfaction of desire, for satisfactions simply stimulate additional desires. What is required, instead, is abolition, negation, repression, a quenching of appetite, and a deepened empathy with what Morris refers to as "the pathos of worldly misfortune."

The resolution of "Vietnam," even in military and political terms, required the development of an alternative strategy, a set of moves by which the dominant expectation would be held up to self-scrutiny and the natural propensity for winning, for victory, would be dissolved. Gradually, but in a visibly stumbling manner, the nation's leaders came to see this. But they couldn't find the language. The analogues they offered were inexact. They were seeking the language of disengagement, indeed, "positive disengagement" (or withdrawal that possessed positive connotations). But it was a difficult language, concept, and lexicon to locate. Describing President

Nixon's policy of "Vietnamization" -- a word and a program that comes as close to "disengagement" as political and cultural realities allow -- David Halberstam writes:

...it would be Vietnamization, we would pull back American troops, probably to 250,000 by 1970, and perhaps to as few as 75,000 by 1972. There would be fewer and fewer Americans on the ground.¹

Halberstam offers his evaluation:

So he was dealing with war without really coming to terms with it; it was the compromise of a by now embattled President who knew he had to get American troops out but who still believed in their essential mission. So now he sought peace with honor, "What President Nixon means by peace," wrote Don Oberdorfer in the Washington Post, "is what other people mean by victory."²

"Victory" or "success" or "peace" involved envisioning the war in a radically non-traditional way.

"Hiroshima" was precursor, for it created the compulsion thoroughly to revise the implications of warfare. But "Hiroshima" was more than this, for it also brought the awareness of the imminence of the end to consciousness with remarkable force. And the response has been apocalyptic. Two of the potential outcomes are Armageddon or Eden.

¹ David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (Greenwich: Fawcett Publication, 1973). p.

² Ibid.

Morris Dickstein places the chain of developments in a larger sequential pattern. In his prize-winning analysis of contemporary American culture, Gates of Eden. American Culture in the Sixties (1977), Dickstein provides the following chronicle:

The fifties were a great period for home and family, for getting and spending, for cultivating one's garden. All that is reflected in its writing. But its spokesmen also called it an Age of Anxiety; behind its material growth hovers a quiet despair, whose symbols are the Bomb and the still-vivid death camps, and a fear of Armageddon.... But this anxiety is metaphysical and hermetic, closed in upon itself.

....The spirit of the sixties witnessed the transformation of utopian religion into the terms of secular humanism... So the sixties translated the Edenic impulse once again into political terms...starting with the civil rights movement, which was propelled by the millennial spirit of Southern black religion religion...

The culture of the fifties was European in its irony and sophistication. It put its faith in what is called "the tragic sense of life," a fateful determinism that affirmed the obduracy of man's nature and his surroundings. But for the culture of the sixties the watchword was liberation: the shackles of tradition and circumstance were to be thrown off, society was to be molded to the shape of human possibility.

By the early seventies...time had once again revealed to us the illusion and even dangers of "paradise now," and had disclosed virtues we had slighted....¹

Then, with particular reference to Vietnam, Dickstein continues:

¹ Morris Dickstein, Gates of Eden. American Culture in the Sixties (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 50, 51, 255.

I needn't apply such subtle reasoning to the collapse of our client state in Vietnam to show that it too belonged among the unfinished business of the sixties. In Vietnam we lost not only a war and a subcontinent; we also lost our pervasive confidence that American arms and American aims were linked somehow to justice and morality, not merely to the quest for power. America was defeated militarily but the "idea" of America, the cherished myth of America, received an even more shattering blow.¹

The chronicle Dickstein weaves carries compelling theological force. The awareness of the imminence of the end time (explicit in the "Hiroshima" aftermath) translated into both threat and opportunity, each simultaneously. The event transposes heaven and hell, as Ernst Bloch said, into "real possibilities." From the one side, there is a well-founded fear of cataclysmic annihilation of the human race; but the same conditions, from the same analysis, can also stimulate a "paradise now" campaign. Both readings, indeed, the composite reading, is in keeping with a Christian interpretation of the meaning of history. All of it can be incorporated within the dominant American religious framework. For all of it there are precedents and analogues. It is Armageddon or it is Eden. All of it makes sense in these terms; all of it, that is, until Vietnam. And the experience of Vietnam spells an interruption in the sequence, a break in the interpretive framework, a profound "category error," a severe challenge to the mythological sequence.

¹ Dickstein, ibid., p. 271.

Paul Fussell writes in his The Great War and Modern Memory (1975) that the military leadership didn't know how to proceed in World War I until writers had learned how to depict it. The same phenomenon is evident in the Vietnam situation. There has been no easy way to place it, or refer it, or locate it, or make sense of it until there is a way to portray it. It is significant that this creative work is just now occurring, and that the struggles it is equipping humankind to face are ones that continue to occur after the formal military hostilities have ceased. In more than one sense, the war is over, but Vietnam continues to live and have influence in human self-awareness. Tracy Kidder describes his feelings when coming home from the war:

I remember flying home from Vietnam on the so-called "freedom bird." It was a Flying Tiger Lines commercial jet. On board, some of the jubilant GI's pinched the stewardesses because they had round eyes. The boy in the seat beside me slept with a grin on his face. We flew so far, first to Japan and then to Travis Air Force Base, and life seemed to be proceeding so normally at home, that I thought the war had vanished. But last winter, when I traveled around to find some of the men who had gone as boys to Vietnam, the war did not seem to have ended after all. In fact, it seemed obvious that no war ends until all the people who have participated in it have died or lost their memories.¹

This time the dominant literary is being effected by the journalists, war correspondents, media people, and by the

¹ Tracy Kidder, "Soldiers of Misfortune," in The Atlantic. March, 1978, p. 44.

servicemen themselves. By a curious twist, and by multi-layered cultural ironies, the language of response includes a lexicon that has developed within Asian religious settings and to a significant degree, in the west, within the monastic tradition.

It would require another paper to explore the religious implications. What seems significant, in religio-cultural terms, is that the west is facing west again, but this time (and for the first time) from the east. This has led to profound changes within the monasteries. And with a new fascination with monastic life has come an intense interest in rediscovering and reinterpreting the mystical literature of the west. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Jan von Ruysbroeck, and especially the women, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Sienna, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Simone Weil, and a host of other mystical writers are coming into greater prominence. Book series are being launched. New academic courses in western mystical literature are being conceived and offered on college and university campuses. The history of religion in the west is being reconstructed. Monastic communities are striving to renew ties and bonds with the religious situation of the twelfth century; the proponents of this effort regard much of the intervening history as being demonstrably off course. With all of this has come an increasing irritation with the dominance of the "problem-solving" approach to human life. Visible in the wake is a new mood, a more delicate nuancing, a kind of mediation

between person and world, an orientation in which the distinction between subject and object is softened, or transcended, in favor of a "sensorium of communion," to paraphrase Edmund Spenser, between self and nature.

Where will it lead? What are the ramifications? Can such metamorphoses ever succeed in the west? Is the west really capable of turning back upon itself in this manner? Can it exercise such reflexivity without denying or destroying that which makes it west? Can the new mood ever assume effective cultural form or exert social and institutional strength? It may be too early to tell. So too would it be premature to try to judge the effective life span of the new denouement.

But we can be sure that a portion of the current intrigue received its impetus from the unsettling character of the Vietnam experience. We can be certain, too, that the aftermath includes profound dangers and threats to the vitality of our common life as well as adventures. For the current quest can also be understood as a concerted attempt, in Dickstein's words, to "disclose virtues we had slighted." And the disclosures themselves, it seems, can be approached in the spirit of E. F. Schumacher's observation:

All through school and university I had been given maps of life and knowledge on which there was hardly a trace of many of the things that I most cared about and that seemed to me to be of the greatest possible importance to the conduct of my life. I remembered that for many years my perplexity had been complete; and no interpreter had come along to help me. It remained complete until I ceased to suspect the sanity of my perception and began, instead, to suspect the soundness of my maps.¹

¹ E. F. Schumacher, A Guide for the Perplexed (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977); p. 1.