

Ethical Record

Vol. 96 No. 1

JANUARY 1991

Editorial

EUROPE'S "RESCUERS"?

IN THIS MONTH'S "Viewpoints", Stuart Munro replies to a criticism I made of his talk on Ralph Fox in my editorial for the July/August issue. Readers may like to look at this item before they proceed further with this one.

It will be remembered that my editorial did not call into question the Soviets' wartime military achievements which are emphasised by the people whom Munro quotes. What it did implicitly question was Stalin's basic attitudes and objectives; and here one has to stress that Soviet military activity cannot be considered separately from Stalin, who was the commander-in-chief of the entire war effort.

For much of the period after 1941, Stalin's policy was purely defensive, aimed at holding the line against the biggest assault launched anywhere by Hitler (see the statistics given by Sir Michael Howard). This, it must be noted, was defensive action against a former treaty partner who was now renéging (re: the Non-Aggression Pact of 1939).

When the Soviets eventually went on the offensive, it was not in the name of democracy, and after Hitler's defeat Stalin clearly showed that he was intent on carving out a "sphere of influence" in Eastern Europe. At the Potsdam Conference in 1945, he said: "Any freely

lected government (in Eastern Europe) would be anti-Soviet, and that we cannot allow." These intentions were very quickly translated into actions similar to his 1939-40 policy in East Poland and the Baltic states. It is the bitter legacy of such actions that much of Eastern Europe is only now recovering from.

By the time of Potsdam, Churchill's attitude to Stalin had changed radically, and his 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech is in stark contrast to the 1942 speech quoted by Munro.

In brief, the Soviet military achievements were initially in the interests of survival, and later, with the advance westward, took on dubious political implications.

Further, while they were an indispensable—even decisive—factor in the defeat of Nazism, this does not mean they were a "rescue" for Europe. They could only have been that if Stalin had been committed to the democratic freedoms which the Nazis had destroyed, and he clearly was not. A rescue is an act of delivering people from *all* evil, not an act of removing one evil only to replace it by another.

Finally, these points are made with full appreciation of the bravery shown by the Soviet forces (especially at Stalingrad) and of the suffering and privation endured by the Soviet people throughout the war years. However, it was unfortunately not the soldier, housewife or mother who determined state policy. □

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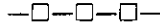
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The views expressed in this journal are not necessarily those of the Society

George C. Marshall, *Chief of Staff, US Army*: "The gallantry and aggressive fighting spirit of the Russian soldiers command the American armies admiration".

General Douglas MacArthur, *Commander in Chief, Pacific Area*: "The scale and grandeur of the Russian effort mark it as the **greatest military achievement in all history!**"

Stuart Munro, London E11



Alex Comfort's Lecture

I read Alex Comfort's recent lecture with some care but frankly I feel I am either too stupid or unscholarly to obtain any idea of philosophy from it. I would be intensely interested if anyone would attempt to explain to a plain man like myself what it is all about.

I notice that in the *Ethical Record* for October 1990 (page 8) Barbara Smoker comments that Comfort includes Science in his idea of Religion. I do also! I would define Religion as any philosophy or belief held with or without any rational explanation, i.e., a blind faith, and a blind faith in Science seems to me a better choice than any other.

Colin Bell, London N12

THE MYTH OF MORALITY

by S.E. PARKER

(Abridged from a Talk given to the Sunday Forum on June 3, 1990)

"Moral people skimmed off the best fat from religion, ate it themselves, and are now having a tough job to get rid of the resulting scrofula".

Max Stirner

MORALITY IS CONCERNED WITH RIGHT-DOING AND WRONG-DOING. *Thou Shalt* cannot be separated from *Thou Shalt Not*. When most people say that something is moral they mean that that something *ought to be done*. And when they say that something is immoral they mean that that something *ought not to be done*. This popular usage is, to me, the most unambiguous use of the word "moral". "Moral action", wrote Lan Freed, in her book *Social Pragmatism*, "is conduct motivated by the aim of acting self-sacrificingly, in obedience to the 'voice' whose first command is 'act *not* as you desire, nor as you consider it expedient to act, but as you feel you ought, morally speaking, to act".

But why should I act as I "ought" to act? Why should I be "moral"?

One of the most common justifications for acting morally was, until very recently, an appeal to "God". Indeed, the whole case for Christian morality rests upon not only the belief that a god exists, but that this god tells us what is right and what is wrong. This is not convincing. Even supposing that the Christian god exists, his existence does not give me any reason why I should accept, for instance, the ten commandments. I am simply told that I ought to do so. If I refuse to accept this demand and am then told that "God" will punish me, my obedience is no longer a matter of accepting the validity of the ten commandments, but an expedient designed to avoid

the painful results of not submitting to someone I believe to be more powerful than myself. I act not *morally*, but *expediently*. And this is not to take into account the fact that I have no way of knowing whether the ten commandments do express the "will of God", since all I have to go on is what some unknown scribe at some unknown date *states* was the "will of God".

There are, of course, those who do not believe in a god who nonetheless believe in morality. In place of a divine sanction they seek one in some other fixed idea: evolution, the "common good", the needs of "Humanity" or "Society" or some other personified abstraction. A critical analysis of this type of justification will show that there is no more to these "secular" moral commands than there is to the "will of God". For example, there is much talk about the "common good", but any real attempt to discover what that "good" is will reveal that there is no such animal. All there is is a multiplicity of diverse and often conflicting opinions as to what this "good" *ought* to be. The "common good" is merely a high-sounding rhetorical phrase used to disguise the particular interests of those using it.

Indeed, it is this dressing-up of particular interests as moral commands that lies behind morality and renders it a myth. All moral codes are inventions of human beings who want what *they* believe to be "right" accepted by all to whom the code applies. An individual, or group of individuals, wants to promote his or their interests and preferences. To make these interests and preferences known plainly, to say I or we want you lot to behave as I or we say because that would serve my or our interests, would show the demand for what it is: a demand to do something for the benefit of those making it. If I wish to promote my interests, and I am frank about this, I might get the support of those whose interests coincide with mine, but that is all. If, on the other hand, I claim that I am speaking in the name of God, or Humanity, or the interests of the Nation or Society, then my claim becomes much more impressive. This way of demanding gains me the advantage that, if anyone does not agree with me, I can say he has something *wrong* with him, since he is opposed to the "good" of God, of Humanity, or the Nation, or Society. In the sphere of moral preaching the ability to use an effective guilt-inducing technique is invaluable. Without it, and the fixed ideas it invokes, so-called moral demands would lose their allure or menace and be reduced to simple demands whose implementation would depend solely upon the power of those making them.

Morality, then, is a myth, a fiction invented to serve particular interests. As a myth, however, it has its uses and it is because of these that I do not anticipate that it, any more than religion, will disappear. I have no vision of muddle-headed moralists being replaced by clear-headed amoralists, much as I would like to see it. For example, the moral myth can add garnish to the often unsavoury dish of politics. By turning the most trivial of political pursuits into a moral crusade, one can appear as a knight in shining armour, win the support of the credulous and the vindictive, and give a pseudo-strength to the weak and wavering. I grant that not all who engage in such crusades are mere cynical manipulators of the masses. There are undoubtedly some who sincerely believe in the moral principles they preach, some, in fact, who are possessed by the sacredness of their cause. The realities of power, however, deal harshly with their delusions. More often than not they are faced with the choice of either discarding their moral principles or being paralysed by inability to implement

them. Either way their moral myth will be exposed for what it is: a sham. Like all myths it may have its soothing properties and useful deceptions, but when taken literally it can be poisonous.

To conclude: to say something is morally good or morally bad in the end boils down to nothing more than that something is *said* to be morally good or bad. *What* will be said to be good or bad depends upon the belief of the person making the statement. When moral judgments conflict, behind all of the verbal pyrotechnics there is simply one idea lodged in one head and a different idea lodged in a different head.

For myself, I have no use for the myth of morality, except as source of entertainment or data for the study of slavery to fixed ideas. For the rest, I am content to reflect with Hajdee Abdee el Yezdee that:

"There is no Good, there is no Bad: these be the whims of mortal will:

What works me well, that I call *Good*: what hurts and harms I hold as *Ill*;

They change with place, they shift with race, and, in the veriest space of Time,

Each Vice has worn a Virtue's crown; all Good was banned as Sin and Crime". □

HUMANIST HOLIDAYS

LINCOLN, EASTER 1991

March 29 to April 2

Enquiries and early bookings imperative, by **February 7 at very latest, to:**

Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham,

Glos GL52 5AA

Phone: 0242 239175

Cost per person: shared room en suite £108; single £141, half-board (£15 less without en suite); deposit £20. Extra days: £27.50 (shared), £39.00 (single) half-board.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Charles Bradlaugh Commemoration

January 30, 1991

Meeting to mark the One Hundredth Anniversary of the death of Charles Bradlaugh at 7 p.m. in the National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place, London SW1.

Main Speaker: Michael Foot, M.P.

Also speaking: Rene Short (ex-Labour M.P.)

ALL WELCOME