

RED CROSS AND NEUTRALITY

In June 1968 the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany held its 18th General Meeting in Frankfurt. Mr. H. Bachmann ICRC Vice-President, and Mr. H. Beer, League Secretary-General, delivered messages expressing the good wishes of the two international institutions of the Red Cross. Dr. A. Schlögel, Secretary-General, reviewed the varied activities carried out by the National Society during the previous year.

Mr. Walter Bargatzky, President, Minister Carlo Schmid, representing the Government, and Professor Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, addressed the meeting. Professor Weizsäcker discussed problems relating to humanitarianism in the world today and the connection between Red Cross action against suffering and death on the one hand, and the principle of neutrality on the other hand. We believe our readers will be interested in the following extracts from his speech¹:

... "It is important not to underestimate the considerable moral success and the undoubted transformation which has been accomplished in the course of these efforts to limit war and to broaden the scope of humanitarian action during hostilities. Any retrograde step from the results achieved would exact a horrible toll. But it is also important to realize that any conquest is, in turn, based on compromise solutions relative to conditions existing at the time and adapted to specific moments of history. For such a venerable institution as the Red Cross is today, it would be dangerous to overlook the historical changes wrought over the last century.

In the first place we must be aware of one objection which might be raised to efforts to humanize war—and it has been raised—namely, that by mitigating the horrors of war, man's natural instinct to eliminate it completely is diminished. By convincing governments, through your neutrality and your work for the benefit of the victims of the wars they have started, you repudiate

¹ Our translation.

a higher duty to humanity, that of exposing the moral impossibility of tolerating war. Your neutrality reduces humanitarianism and at the same time recognizes great inhumanity. Such censure may appear unjust when it comes from outside. But I do not believe that any of us who have worked for humanity, either in the Red Cross or in some other organization, has resisted the temptation of directing this reproach against himself. That Dunant aspired to exceed the results obtained by the Red Cross is unquestionable.

At any time in history it is essential to draw a distinction between what is possible at a given period and what is utopian. The period of Red Cross history from Dufour and Moynier to Max Huber, the manner in which it made humanitarianism possible through neutrality, was in keeping with the evolutionary stage reached by the community of European States, where its main activities took place. To have expected more at that time would have been to achieve less. Whoever wanted to oppose the principle of war had to do so from a different angle. However, two events have meanwhile occurred which impel us to revise our attitude.

The first is the transfer of bitter conflicts to regions outside Europe. Until 1945 the Red Cross, to carry out its activities unimpeded had to speak the language of the American-European culture. To ensure that it was heeded by the people and governments of Europe it had to adopt European concepts. What was its strength then is now its weakness. In order for its assistance to reach areas where distress is greatest, the Red Cross must make itself heard by the nations of Asia and Africa. It must at all cost be receptive to ideas on a world-scale. It will thereby observe with surprise that many of the concepts which were only recently considered universal are strictly European or Western.

The second point is the increasing awareness in all countries that world peace through politics is a prerequisite to the survival of the modern world. Elimination of war has today become a subject for reflection which no-one demanding more humanity can ignore if he wishes to be taken seriously. It is by no means an easy subject and whoever broaches it without the necessary composure will in the long run receive no more attention than he who ignores it. According to the ideas I referred to earlier, I would say that evolution may be described as follows:

The cultural tradition, and consequently the social order in which we live, is being radically transformed under the impetus of science and technology. This is a change of tradition through increased knowledge, particularly knowledge of cause and effect. This knowledge has and creates a tradition of its own; it would be worthwhile observing the inter-action of tradition and knowledge leading to scientific concept, but that study would go beyond the scope of this conference. From another angle it demands and obtains a change of social structures and standards. In particular, it demands the creation of a new tradition, and, at the same time, a new and strict moral code to control the excessive power which it has placed in our hands. In the event of war this power takes the form of the weapons of mass slaughter we possess today and which, given the political order prevailing in the world today, we shall no doubt continue to make even more terrible. An analysis of the legitimacy of this increase of armaments—which it is neither possible nor necessary to give in this talk—has led me to conclude that the technological world is no more stable in the armament sector than it is in others. It requires a definite and systematic stability dependent on political stability. World peace through politics is today, as a result of technical developments, a *sine qua non* for the survival of the modern world, and the demand for it has become ineluctable.

World conscience has started to become familiar with this idea. World political structures are a long way from satisfying this demand and I believe we are heading for decades in which the danger of war will increase. At the same time, however, it has become impossible to accept unquestioningly the inevitability of war. What are the principles which correspond to this state of universal conscience?

Let us once again refer to the principles formulated by Jean Pictet in his book.¹ The first of these, humanity, is defined as follows:

“ The Red Cross fights against suffering and death. It demands that man shall be treated humanely under all circumstances ”. The fifth principle, neutrality, is: “ The Red Cross must observe strict

¹ J. Pictet, *Red Cross Principles*, ICRC, Geneva, 1956.

neutrality in the military, political, denominational and philosophic spheres". In connection with this principle Pictet writes: "Neutrality is essentially a negative concept—the quality of someone who remains outside a conflict, who does not openly take the side of either party". I would quote two more sentences: "Although neutrality defines the Red Cross attitude towards belligerents and ideologies, it never determines the institution's behaviour towards sufferers". Neutrality "is not so much a part of the Red Cross ideal as a means of accomplishing its task".

What we have already said clarifies these sentences. Military neutrality, that is to say towards belligerents, in actual practice, is a prerequisite to any Red Cross assistance. This neutrality is neither an end nor an ideal but a means; it is the means of making belligerents understand that it is not detrimental to their interests to allow the Red Cross to assist the wounded and the sick. Not being an end, but a means, neutrality does not demand indifference for the belligerents' objectives. To expect the citizen of a State at war to be indifferent to his country's objectives would be to expect too much of human nature. On the other hand, whoever, as a member of the Red Cross, helps war victims, may well be expected not to take part, either openly or secretly, in the fighting to achieve his country's war aims. This rule does not demand too much of human nature; to observe it is a matter of ethics, to apply it is consistent with a moral value.

It is natural and important that the Red Cross, by reason of its incontrovertible neutrality, should remain apart also from conflicts which are not military in character. This attitude is consistent with political, religious, philosophical and ideological neutrality. And yet, neutrality cannot be complete. One cannot remain neutral to humanity itself. That is why, to quote Pictet again, neutrality never determines Red Cross behaviour towards those who suffer. However, the guide-lines must often be the subject of subtle distinction and constantly revised. Let us first endeavour to define the traditional Red Cross attitude to this problem.

It cannot be denied that wars are not waged solely for the purpose—which I shall qualify by the use of a neutralizing phrase—of safeguarding national interest. Combatants are often convinced that they are fighting for high ideals: for freedom, against slavery,

for justice, against exploitation, for humanity. Those who serve the Red Cross may, for their part, often be unable to dispel the feeling that one belligerent is defending a bad cause or using the most inhuman means. In such a case indifference would be impossible not only from the human but also from the moral point of view. Nevertheless they must be neutral in action, for it is solely the absolute confidence it engenders throughout the world by its neutrality, that the Red Cross is allowed freedom to carry out its mission of assisting war victims. In such a case this neutral attitude is identified with constructive action of a moral order, for it invites even the combatant to make, within his own mind, that distinction without which humane thought and action is impossible. The very fact that there are men who refuse to take up arms, even for a just cause, in order to give practical effect to genuine love of one's neighbour, namely to relieve suffering, and that combatants respect and facilitate this attitude is a determinant factor of humanity.

The problem may be summarized as follows: the spirit of neutrality must be and remain understood. There is a great risk that neutrality may become an argument in defence of moral indifference. We must absolutely ensure that the traditional concept of neutrality is still convincing despite the twofold change of world conscience which we have just mentioned.

The classical phrases of neutrality, which for example determine the choice of such terms as "religious", "philosophic" or "ideological" put conflicting convictions, relatively speaking, on the same level as conflicting interests. Let me explain. When using the adjective "religious" I construe a religion to be a particular and historically evolved form of belief, common to a community of human beings, in a truth which determines their way of life. However, that truth is not the origin of separation from other groups, but one which in the minds of its believers should rally all men to it. It is the very principle and true sense of the term humanity.

The restrictive designation of this belief by the use of the term "religion" is an act of resignation before the problem of truth. But we are now walking on thin ice. This resignation certainly means that we cannot await the end of the struggle for truth if we wish here and now to practice love of our neighbour. That is why practical humanitarianism must remain neutral in religious conflict.

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Moreover, that is the exact sense of the parable of the Good Samaritan: the Samaritan was the religious adversary of the Jew to whom he gave help. But if neutrality becomes indifference, if it no longer sees that the aim of religion—whatever form it takes—is humanity itself, then that neutrality may unexpectedly become injustice and the excuse for callousness. But indifference will out! It degrades the very humanitarianism to which it aspires to the level of a specialized, useful and no doubt laudable task—for instance assistance to the sick—but in doing so it loses conviction and at the same time the very principle on which its effectiveness depends . . .