

Opinion

What did Sheen know?

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Introductory note

While researching the possibility of a link between the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the rejection of traditional Western values, a quotation from Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen emerged in which he seemed to identify just such a connection.

When, I wonder, did we in America ever get into this idea that freedom means having no boundaries and no limits? You know I think it began on the 6th of August 1945 at 8:15 am when we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. That blotted out boundaries. The boundary of America that was the aid of nations, and the nations that were helped. It blotted out the boundary between life and death for the victims of nuclear incineration. Among them even the living were dead. It blotted out the boundary between the civilian and the military. And somehow or other, from that day on in our American life, we say we want no limits and no boundaries.¹

After defending my theory in the online magazine MercatorNet², the correlation between public affirmation of a gravely immoral act and the subsequent abandonment of traditional values and ethics began to seem self-evident. Conversely, my ability to justify this 'self-evident' observation to the skeptical reader seemed less and less adequate.

The argument in its bare essentials is that the affirmation of a gravely immoral act is implicit rejection of any moral theory which condemns such an act. Traditional Western ethics condemns the bombing of Hiroshima as gravely immoral. Therefore, affirmation of the bombing is implicit rejection of traditional Western ethics.

But as valid as this argument may be, it is apparently insufficient. Something is missing – a broader context or set of assumptions which must be identified and shared. To this end, the following reflection on the words of Archbishop Sheen asks 'What did Sheen know?'

The Moral Judgement

Archbishop Fulton Sheen, from his 'What Now America?' talks:

When, I wonder, did we in America ever get into this idea that freedom means having no boundaries and no limits? You know I think it began on the 6th of August 1945 at 8:15 am when we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. That blotted out boundaries. The boundary of America that was the aid of nations, and the nations that were helped. It blotted out the boundary between life and death for the victims of nuclear incineration. Among them even the living were dead. It blotted out the boundary between the civilian and the military. And somehow or other, from that day on in our American life, we say we want no limits and no boundaries.³

This brief quotation from Archbishop Fulton Sheen was never broadcast in the United States. Sheen's final 13 part series was recorded between 1974-75, but was only made available more recently on VHS.

There is at least one other quotation available from then Monsignor Sheen on the issue of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His statements are reported in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, May 1946:

Use of Atom Bomb Assailed by Sheen

Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen of Catholic University in a sermon on April 7 in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York scored our use of the bomb on Hiroshima as an act contrary to the moral law and said, "We have invited retaliation for that particular form of violence."

Both obliteration bombing and use of the atomic bomb are immoral, Msgr. Sheen said, because "they do away with the moral distinction that must be made in every war – a distinction between civilians and the military."

[...]

1 <http://alanhipps.blogspot.com/2006/03/what-now-america-archbishop-fulton.html>

2 http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/truman_was_right/

3 <http://alanhipps.blogspot.com/2006/03/what-now-america-archbishop-fulton.html>

Discussing arguments that use of the atomic bomb shortened the war and saved the lives of American fighting men, Msgr. Sheen declared: "That was precisely the argument Hitler used in bombing Holland."⁴

There is a qualitative difference between the first quotation and the second. The second is what we might expect someone in Sheen's position to make just prior to the first anniversary of the bombing. He gives his immediate moral judgement, alludes to deeper consequences of the act, and compares it unfavourably with the moral nature of the enemy's acts. But the first quotation, coming 28 years after his original statement, puts the bombing in a broader cultural context. Sheen identifies the bombing of Hiroshima as the beginning of a specific idea about freedom in American culture, and in so doing, he implicitly confirms the relative novelty of this idea. Today, we might well take this idea for granted. What else could 'freedom' mean, if not the absence of limits and boundaries? Sheen's comments are an important historical reminder that this definition is neither old, nor self-evident. These comments are of particular relevance to those of us who have encountered through fields like bioethics the pernicious erosion of traditional limits and boundaries within Western culture.

How did Sheen know to draw such a link between the bombings that ended America's war in the Pacific, and a cultural shift against limits and boundaries?

The Primacy of Belief

In a 1943 address entitled "The Thing We are Fighting Against", Sheen wrote:

The War is exploding the fallacy that it makes no difference what we believe. It does make a tremendous amount of difference what we believe, for we act on our beliefs. If our beliefs are right, our deeds will be right. The evil of the Nazis is that they practice what they preach. If twenty years ago we so educated ourselves along the line of Christian morality as to see the utter moral evil and logical absurdity of these ideas, we would not now have to sacrifice our lives to blot them from

the earth. What we were once tolerant to as a wicked idea, we must now be intolerant to as a deed.⁵

In another address, Sheen clarifies the primacy of belief even in the midst of war:

Peace does not follow the extermination of dictators, because dictators are only the effect of wrong philosophies of life, they are not the causes. They come into environments already prepared for them, like certain forms of fungi come into wet wood. [...] It is not the bad dictators who made the world bad; it is bad thinking. It is, therefore, in the realm of ideas that we will have to restore the world!⁶

In the same address, he describes the choice confronting humanity:

Our choice in this war is to be made among three dogmas: Whether man is a tool of the State, as the Totalitarian believes; or whether man is an animal, as the secularist tradition of the Western World—including too many Americans—believe; or whether man is a creature made to the image and likeness of God, as the Christian believes.⁷

In short, Sheen was highly aware of what he called the theological view of the war. He knew the importance of beliefs, and he saw that the war was testing the ideologies of his age. So he would without doubt have been aware, in 1946, that his condemnation of the bombing placed him among a small minority of Americans. A Gallup poll from 10-15th August 1945 found that 85% of Americans approved of using atomic bombs on Japanese cities, while only 10% disapproved.⁸ It is hard to imagine how it must have felt to see so many of one's compatriots approving of an act contrary to the moral law. Sheen's experience may have resembled that of another Catholic priest – Fr James Gillis, editor of *The Catholic World*, as recorded in September 1945:

4 *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Vol. 1 No. 10. May 1. 1946. p12 http://books.google.com/books?id=RwwAAAAMBAJ&source=gbs_all_issues_r&cad=1

5 <http://www.fultonsheen.com/Fulton-Sheen-articles/The-Thing-We-Are-Fighting-Against.cfm?artid=3>

6 *War and Revolution*. January 1943. <http://www.fultonsheen.com/Fulton-Sheen-articles/War-and-Revolution.cfm?artid=2>

7 *ibid*

8 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/17677/majority-supports-use-atomic-bomb-japan-wwii.aspx>

For days and weeks after the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Japan, there was a landslide of comment, scientific, pseudo-scientific and fantastic, opinions, explanations, rejoicings, and even of thanksgiving to God. Somewhere in the enormous mass of matter dislodged, as it were, by the bomb, there may have been a moral judgement, apart from the Pope's. If so, I confess I did not find it though I searched diligently. What I hoped to discover was an expression of the conviction that we the people of the United States and perhaps with us the people of Britain, have struck the most powerful blow ever delivered against Christian civilization and the moral law.⁹

The intensity of Gillis' feeling is clearly expressed:

It is pathetic and tragic that people whose civilization is called Christian, presumably founded on the Gospel, had to all appearances no doubt that what was done was permissible and laudable.

I do not delude myself that my opinion is of importance. But to relieve the pressure on my conscience, I here and now declare that the use of the atomic bomb in the circumstances, was atrocious and abominable: and that civilized people should reprobate and anathematize the horrible deed.¹⁰

It is important to note that Gillis goes on to describe the essence of the moral problem:

First, it is morally permissible to bomb objects of military importance, railroads, bridges, munitions dumps, factories producing instruments of war, even if in doing so, one kills innocent persons. Second, it is not morally permissible to bomb innocent people directly or purposely.¹¹

Gillis' reaction is not mere sentiment. Rather, his evident disgust at the jubilation of his compatriots is grounded in his understanding of the moral injunction against the intentional killing of enemy non-combatants. As a basic principle of both international law and Catholic moral philosophy, we may safely assume that this principle was also known and held by then Msgr. Sheen at

the time of the bombing. Given Sheen's wartime comments about the ideological and theological aspects of the war, the importance of belief, and the three-way struggle between totalitarian, secularist, and Christian dogmas, it seems safe to conclude that Sheen recognised the moral significance of the bombings in the wider context of American culture.

In the context of a three-way struggle between totalitarianism, Western secularism, and Christianity, the bombing might logically be interpreted not only as a blow against Japanese totalitarianism, but also as a blow against Christianity. In principle, the intentional targeting of enemy non-combatants is compatible with totalitarianism, and with Western secularism. But it is – according to Catholic moral teaching – incompatible with Christian belief. Though we can all acknowledge that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bought victory over Imperial Japan, the victory belongs to secular America, not Christian America.

The victory for 'secular America' corresponds with the implicit rejection of traditional Western values and ethics described in the introduction. But Sheen's depiction of theological struggle between Christian and secular dogma within America offers a much richer context, and helps us to grasp the further ramifications of the bombing. Whatever the state of this theological struggle in 1943, it should by now be obvious that 85% affirmation for the bombing in 1945 must have constituted a severe blow to the moral integrity of the nation.

Blotting Out Boundaries

Nearly thirty years after the bombing of Hiroshima, Sheen identified this act as the beginning of Americans' rejection of boundaries and limits. For the bombing to have such an effect on American culture, it is not enough that the moral law be broken. After all, on the scale of atrocities, either of the atomic bombings can be outmatched in quantity by the firebombing of Tokyo, or the allied bombing campaign over Germany. Both are in turn dwarfed in magnitude and in quality by the Holocaust, and the equally inhuman cruelty of the Japanese war crimes across Asia.

If the Nazi regime or Imperial Japan had survived the war, we might now be discussing the impact of their crimes on the culture and beliefs of those nations. But the defeat of those regimes constitutes a repudiation of their crimes and the philosophies that spawned them. The Holocaust and the

⁹ <http://orientem.blogspot.com/2008/08/sixty-three-years-ago-today.html>

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

Japanese war crimes can now be endorsed only by fringe groups at odds with the rest of society. Yet Sheen clearly takes ownership of the bombing of Hiroshima:

When, I wonder, did we in America ever get into this idea that freedom means having no boundaries and no limits? ...when we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. [emphasis added]

Sheen attributes ownership of the bombings to Americans collectively. Such ownership does not apply to the Holocaust or to Japanese war crimes, hence they cannot have the same influence on the American people or culture.¹²

In a similar vein, if the firebombing of Tokyo or the allied bombing of German cities were widely perceived to be the definitive blow that ended the war and saved many lives, we might now be discussing their impact on Western culture and beliefs. But relatively few people seem aware of the fact or the magnitude of those bombing campaigns, and their efficacy (or necessity) in shortening the war is left indeterminate in our cultural narratives. Though it can be said that 'we' were responsible for those bombings also, 'we' are not aware enough, nor are 'we' driven by the argument from necessity, to give them our individual affirmation.

By contrast, the atomic bombings are uniquely situated to influence Western culture and beliefs, because they are *widely* credited with ending the war and saving many lives. The history of the war in the Pacific will always culminate in these two decisive blows against the Japanese mainland, and our cultural narrative reflects the apparent necessity of these actions. So although the boundary between civilian and military had already been 'blotted out' by both sides in the conflict, it is not until the use of the atomic bombs that the American people are asked to endorse retrospectively the killing of civilians as a means of obtaining immediate victory. The boundary between civilian and military, or more properly: combatant and non-combatant, is central to the ethics of warfare. Yet as Sheen rightly observes, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroys that boundary.

Sheen describes the 'blotting out' of three boundaries: first is the boundary between life and death for victims of the bomb's radioactive fallout. Reports from survivors of the atomic bombings brought

into the public consciousness the possibility of a lingering death as a consequence of the hidden poisonous effect of the bomb.

Only several cases are known to me personally where individuals who did not have external burns later died. Father Kleinsorge and Father Cieslik, who were near the center of the explosion, but who did not suffer burns became quite weak some fourteen days after the explosion. Up to this time small incised wounds had healed normally, but thereafter the wounds which were still unhealed became worse and are to date (in September) still incompletely healed. The attending physician diagnosed it as leucopenia. There thus seems to be some truth in the statement that the radiation had some effect on the blood.¹³

The second boundary is:

the boundary of America that was the aid of nations, and the nations that were helped. [emphasis added]

Note that Sheen here says the boundary 'of' rather than the boundary 'between'. The bombing did not blot out the boundary *between* the aid of nations and the nations helped, but on an historic level it blotted out the boundary defining America in this benevolent role, coming to the aid of other nations. With the intentional destruction of entire cities, the war could not be depicted purely as the freeing of a subject nation from tyranny or dictatorship.

The third boundary to be blotted out was the distinction between civilian and military. This boundary was clearly established in international law and treaties, and is a basic principle of Catholic moral philosophy with regard to Just War. For Americans, public endorsement of the killing of civilian non-combatants would have been unprecedented. Even General Sherman's controversial 'March to the Sea' during the American Civil War had not encompassed such evils:

War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it; and those who brought war on our country, deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out. [...] You might as well appeal against the thunder-storm, as against these terrible hardships of war. They are inevitable; [...] We don't want your negroes

¹² This point should be obvious to most people, but various internet comments suggest otherwise.

¹³ Fr. John A. Siemes. *Hiroshima Survivor* <http://www.abomb1.org/hiroshim/siemes.html>

or your horses, or your houses or your land, or anything you have; but we do want, and will have a just obedience to the Laws of the United States [...]and if it involves the destruction of your improvements, we cannot help it.¹⁴

One might think it almost quaint to read the 'destruction of improvements' as acts of wartime cruelty. Perhaps we should instead be concerned that our contemporary notion of the cruelty of war would be so foreign to the man so often quoted as saying that "war is hell".

But Sheen's argument is not, ultimately, a logical progression from the destruction of these three boundaries to the rise of an idea that freedom means having neither boundaries nor limits. Instead, Sheen progresses thematically from the destruction of boundaries implicit in the bombings, to the general rejection of boundaries and limits that arose explicit in Western culture from the 1960s onwards.

So while there is evidence before the bombing of Sheen critiquing this notion of freedom:

But I submit they are talking about license—not freedom. They are concerned with freedom from something; not freedom for something; they are interested only in freedom without law rather than freedom within the law.¹⁵

This false freedom is not yet embraced by the whole nation, but is incipient in its institutions:

That kind of education which denies guilt and sin is destroying freedom in our schools, while our soldiers are fighting for it on the battle fronts of the world.¹⁶

Hence Sheen's original quotation asks:

When, I wonder, did we in America ever get into this idea... [emphasis added]

We can therefore plot a makeshift course through Archbishop Sheen's statements, to the effect that:

1. America was engaged in a three-way struggle of beliefs: totalitarian, secular, and Christian.

2. A false idea of freedom as license was growing within America, even as its troops were fighting for true freedom overseas.
3. The bombing of Hiroshima was a gross violation of the moral law, and therefore unchristian.
4. The vast majority of Americans approved of the bombing, *contra* Christianity and the moral law.
5. This approval constitutes a victory for secular America over Christian America, insofar as it alters the beliefs of an entire generation.
6. The preponderance of this belief that freedom means 'no limits and no boundaries' must therefore be causally linked with the bombing of Hiroshima. Especially since approval for the bombing demands rejection of pre-existing moral limits and boundaries.

Conclusion

These reflections on the words of Archbishop Sheen allow us to understand the kinds of presuppositions that would allow an individual to recognise a link between a philosophically dangerous desire for 'freedom' without limits or boundaries, and an action such as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

These presuppositions include a recognition of the primacy of belief – that our beliefs do indeed determine our actions such that "If our beliefs are right, our deeds will be right." The importance of our beliefs is such that approval for the bombing of Hiroshima unequivocally challenges the coherence of our moral judgement, and our overall philosophy of life.

Sheen was aware of the depth of conflict taking place not just in the Second World War, but in the hearts of the American people. While Sheen consistently extols the virtues of American democracy, he likens its internal threats to barnacles on the hull of a great ship:

The barnacles of which I speak constitute what we have already called the passive or the soft barbarisms from within; and they are a danger to Western civilization, not quite as open as Totalitarianism, but just as insidious. These barnacles might be called superstitions or false dogmas; in any case they are assumptions of sensate culture which the press, education, and public opinion accept as unchallenged truths.

¹⁴ http://books.google.com.au/books?id=aQPnrUGcPQIC&lp_g=PP1&pg=PA343#v=onepage&q&f=false

¹⁵ <http://www.fultonsheen.com/Fulton-Sheen-articles/Freedom-in-Danger.cfm?artid=1>

¹⁶ *ibid*

[...]

Why do we mention these barnacles on the ship of democracy? Because they are endangering a sound American life; because they belong to an outmoded way of thinking that is dying with this World War; and because we are called upon in this war to be the moral leaders of the world. Never before was a greater task thrust into any nation's hands than is now thrust into our own. We have a great vocation and we must be worthy of it. The great ship of America will one day be called upon to cross the seven seas to bring food, clothing, order, and peace to the enslaved nations of the world. And we do not want that ship to be held up in its mission by barnacles and false superstitions.¹⁷

Sheen declares America's 'false dogmas' to be just as insidious as foreign Totalitarianism, and a danger to the American way of life. It is only by recognising the existence of such an internal struggle against "the passive or soft barbarisms from within" that

¹⁷ <http://www.fultonsheen.com/Fulton-Sheen-articles/Some-Barnacles-on-the-Ship-of-Democracy.cfm?artid=4>

the moral abomination of Hiroshima and Nagasaki can be appreciated in a more fulsome context. In the battle for the *beliefs* of the American people, Hiroshima and Nagasaki constituted a massive victory for secularist dogma, the final score: 85 to 10.

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