

"Angels with Camouflaged Faces". A reflection on the ethical profile of soldiers facing the challenges of a culture of peace.

PETER FLEETWOOD

Question number one. Why are you listening to an English priest who has no official link to the military world? From my point of view, it is a happy accident. Whether it is so happy for you can only be judged after this talk! The office where I work at the Pontifical Council for Culture in the Vatican is next to the one that Monsignor Werner Freistetter used to occupy, so he knows me well. Werner and I have worked together on several projects, so I hope his instinct in choosing me is one that proves helpful to you. I ought to say, in passing, that it has become clearer over the years that the Catholic Church really needs to maintain a quality presence in the armed forces. Not all my friends would agree with that, but my conviction comes from watching British Catholic chaplains at work, and seeing how those who work well have a real influence at many levels of the services within which they minister.

Question number two. Why is this reflection entitled "Angels with Camouflaged Faces"? Anyone here who knows the world of films will see the reference straight away. The film "Angels with Dirty Faces" appeared on the cinema screens of the United States of America in 1938. James Cagney and Pat O'Brien played two friends, Rocky and Jerry, tough youngsters who grew up in Hell's Kitchen, a particularly rough part of New York. Rocky got into trouble with the law and was sent to a reform school. That was an excellent school for criminals, and Rocky was an excellent pupil, becoming a hard racketeer. Jerry was lucky enough to escape the clutches of the police, and eventually became a priest.

The film picks up the story when Rocky and Jerry meet as adults. Father Jerry spends much of his time working with youngsters growing up in circumstances he knows only too well. Rocky is waiting for an opportunity to get back into racketeering. It is a violent film in some ways, but the title is bursting with pre-Second World War American optimism. What the "American dream" offers, in its many and varied forms, is reassurance that unpromising beginnings are no barrier to great success – financially, romantically or, in this case, morally. The idea that our future is fixed by our circumstances was totally unacceptable at that time in the United States. Despite all that has happened more recently, I think the same conviction is alive and well and there are modified versions of the same basic story line in contemporary American films, poetry and literature. Angels do not all have bright clean faces, and goodness is found in the most remarkable places. It takes determination to make things happen, to change things. I know some people would hesitate to accept this, because it seems to be based on the ideology of free choice, but I think we have to see the positive value of the belief that human beings can improve and be helped to improve.

Question three. Why did I think of this film title in the present context? Monsignor Freistetter asked me to speak at a meeting on the new ethical profile of soldiers facing the challenges of a culture of peace. What struck me straight away is how hard it is for many people *outside* your world to look at a soldier and think of him or her as an agent of peace, what is often referred to as a *miles protector*. If I am honest, even I, who am totally convinced of the need for a Catholic presence in the armed forces, sometimes wonder about the advertisements

the United States armed forces produce to entice priests into becoming chaplains. They nearly always depict handsome young priests smiling with soldiers, sailors or air force personnel. The only time there is a serious face is when a soldier is receiving absolution in the desert or a chaplain is celebrating Mass. These faces are so different from the ones that advertise war films, and – let us be honest – these are the pictures most people see of service men and women (even though they are actors). So my question is really about what is in a face. Is the man or woman whose face is smeared with camouflage material a devil or an angel?

AN ATTITUDE, NOT A STRATEGY

I am clearly not qualified to speak to you of tactics, strategy or the things you do as part of your daily job. You are highly trained people, and I would never dare to interfere in your sphere of competence. What we are doing here is reflection, a step back from the technical routines you carry out in your specialised tasks. What I am trying to do is to help you to respond to something mentioned in the declaration issued at the AMI General Assembly held in Rome in November 2000. Please allow me to quote from that document at length:

"Even the legitimate use of force, but above all the use of force to prevent such dangers, always finds itself in a complex area of conflict made up of theological, ethical, legal and humanitarian standards. This calls on soldiers to have a particularly high sense of responsibility.... Exercises and simulations prepare the soldier in his specialist field for the higher mental and physical demands during missions. But there is also a way of preparing the individual for the application of ethical norms in emergencies under mission conditions: arranging daily life on and off duty in accordance with one's sense of responsibility and one's conscience; the conscience remains the final authority for personal decisions. However, in order to build a conscience, the individual needs both a valid system of values as well as sufficient expert knowledge."

There is an admirable dream behind those lines. It may not be the American dream, but it is still something very optimistic. It is the idea that highly trained soldiers will be capable not only of almost instinctively executing their missions on a technical level, but that their moral instinct will develop into something equally finely tuned. The pilots of low-flying combat aircraft have fantastic reactions, something I admire and find reassuring. These are men and women who have done so much practice flying that their superiors can rely on them to react almost instantly to anything that happens in or around their aircraft in combat conditions. Their wingmen can trust them completely. The team can work efficiently because of their technical competence. For all that, what they are doing is operating a system, without *necessarily* bothering about the ethical questions involved. But the AMI text from the year 2000 envisages the possibility of adding that dimension.

How does one prepare soldiers for making ethically appropriate, just or morally good decisions in the heat of a military mission? Here the context is vitally important. All-out war is a very difficult case, one that some of you may have experienced first hand. I have not. But soldiers today are frequently involved in peacekeeping missions either within the jurisdiction of their own nation, or elsewhere as part of an international arrangement. If I am not mistaken, this is the case for most people here today. Luckily the heat of battle is rarely something that goes on and on in the course of these missions, so there is – apparently, at least – a little more space to think before acting. Some missions are so delicate that officers often have to be first class diplomats, although without the embassy parties and the smart cars. Their decisions need to come, almost instinctively, but with clarity and charity, out of a coherent attitude to their troops and the people they are there to help or protect. Quite apart from their strategic acumen and logistical experience, what guides their decisions is their understanding of people. I suggest that the success of the decisions they make and the orders they issue will depend on how well they have communicated to those they command a similar attitude.

As I said, the question I share with you is really about what is in a face. But it is not just a question of what is behind the camouflage on a soldier's face. What do soldiers see in other people's faces, if indeed they see those faces in the first place? I believe we can find helpful approaches to this question here in Vienna, in Rome, and in the writings of some of Europe's most remarkable thinkers and poets. What would make a camouflaged face angelic would be the quality with which a soldier's eyes view the world and, above all, the people in it. If soldiers are truly passionate about their job, they will surely also be *compassionate* towards the people on whose behalf they do their job. But how?

THE FACE THAT THREATENS

There is a thread running through the history of political theory that some would call pessimistic and others would simply see as *realistic*. If I were a gambling man, I should guess that military experts would see it as realistic. It is the idea that, to survive, I must view people as a potential threat until the situation proves otherwise. Please don't panic – I have no intention of tracing the whole history of political theory! But I shall mention three thinkers who start out from the premise that other people can be bad for you.

First comes my fellow Englishman Thomas Hobbes. He shared Machiavelli's cynical assumption that human beings are naturally selfish, but developed a psychological theory in which "the physiological principle behind all behavior is self-preservation"¹. The instinct of self-preservation is a restless and precarious factor throughout a person's life. "Each human being is actuated only by considerations that touch his own security or power, and other human beings are of consequence to him only as they affect this"². Without civil power to regulate human behaviour, the situation would be what Hobbes describes as a "war of every man against every man". The famous description of human relationships left behind by Hobbes is *homo homini lupus*: everyone has to presume that everyone else is a danger, a real threat to continued survival. Of course, Hobbes was writing in a time of uncertainty and national insecurity, so one can see why he was so vehement in his search for civil peace, but his psychological description of the human person and human relationships is powerful and has had an enduring appeal.

One direct follower of Hobbes the Englishmen is one of the most influential thinkers ever, the German Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The most influential section of his most famous book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, is "The Dialectic of Lordship and Bondage". Like Hobbes, Hegel offers a psychological explanation for the way human relationships evolve into a political system. The basic event in Hegel's view of humankind is *recognition* (*Anerkennung*). We first become aware of ourselves only when we recognise something of ourselves in other people. But, according to him, every relationship is unequal. In some way or another, we naturally desire to control the other person – to be the one who makes the most amusing comments, to make sure the other person respects us, and so on. In this little vignette, Hegel says the Lord is in a curious and difficult situation; he looks down on the servant, and cannot recognise himself in the servant. But he recognises the similarity, and presumes that the servant will try to assert himself and take his place. He feels threatened. There ensues a psychological struggle for survival, what Hegel calls a "life and death struggle". This may seem exaggerated, but it has appealed to many people, presumably because it rang true in their experience. Suffice it to say that this text from Hegel is the one that sparked off Karl Marx's theory of class struggle.

England and Germany have spoken of the threat we human beings are to each other, but the last word goes to a Frenchman, Jean-Paul Sartre. He tells a story of an encounter in a café, presumably in Paris. It is all about a customer catching the waiter's eye. To cut a long story short, the customer and the waiter cannot help viewing each other (literally) with suspicion and even hatred. The waiter's gaze (*le regard*) is something quite alienating and threatening for the customer, who himself responds unconsciously with a menacing glare. Anxiety and

aggression arise even before people have spoken in this scenario. I once thought this was the eccentricity of a French intellectual, but it is something one can experience anywhere with young people – or even not so young people – who have been drinking heavily. Even an innocent glance in their direction can be something they perceive as a threat, and their reaction can be quite alarming and dangerous.

I can only guess what do you think of these ideas, at least the brief sketch I have given of them? If you think they create a pessimistic view of human nature, you probably think it would be good to present a more optimistic assessment. But most military thinkers would probably have to admit that they cannot fault this negative description of other people we do not know well. In a training situation, who is the enemy? If your country is at war with another, it is usually obvious who your enemy is. But if there is internal tension in the country where your peacekeeping mission takes you, how can you possibly know who is going to be the next person to try to kill you or your friends, or plant a bomb in a public place, perhaps even as a suicide bomber? There is no way of knowing, and so everyone becomes your potential enemy. After 11 September 2001, the people of the United States of America have begun to understand what people in Great Britain and Spain have accepted as normal security measures for thirty years. The fact that anyone could use the word "normal" of these situations is part of the tragedy; it shows how long and how hard a task it is to counter, let alone eradicate, terror tactics. You are never sure about anyone, and you never really relax. You very soon learn to take nobody at face value. But is that the only way? Listen to a brief quotation from *The Cocktail Party* by the poet T.S. Eliot:

But let me tell you, that to approach the stranger
Is to invite the unexpected, release a new force,
Or let the genie out of the bottle.
It is to start a train of events
Beyond your control³.

THE FACE THAT BECKONS

There is an alternative understanding of relationships between people, a different way of looking at people. Let me briefly tell you a very personal story. Several years ago, before I had even heard of the Pontifical Council for Culture, I was chosen by Pope John Paul II as an *auditor* at the first Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Europe, which came in the wave of relief and euphoria after the collapse of the Soviet Union. People have become more sober and realistic since then. One evening I was invited to supper with the Pope as part of an English-speaking group. The Holy Father was curious to know about us and asked people to say something about themselves. He asked me where I worked, and I told him I taught philosophy in the northern provincial seminary near Durham in England. When he asked me what my specialisation was, I said, "Your Holiness, I don't think you would like to know". He banged the table in mock anger and boomed out the words, "the Pope wants to know!" My reply had exactly the effect I feared; when I said, "Marxism, Your Holiness", he covered his face and groaned. I quickly added, "I am an expert, thanks to Father Wetter, but I don't really like Marxism". "So what *do* you like?" said the Pope. "A contemporary French thinker, Your Holiness – Emmanuel Levinas". He was curious to know why, and we discussed Levinas for a few minutes, then other philosophers. I was very impressed how easily he discussed a subject like that, for which he had not been prepared, in English.

It was only after Levinas' death in 1995 that I was told he was "the Pope's philosopher". Levinas was a Lithuanian Jew born in Kaunas in 1906, who lived for the latter part of his life in Paris. His thought was focused on human relationships. Unlike Freud, who was convinced that the basic human urge or *libido* was sexual, Levinas thought that the natural human urge

or *libido dominandi*, to use his phrase, had been expressed above all in our desire to dominate reality by knowing it. The very word *concept* speaks of grasping and, in some sense, possessing what it can know. Many of our relations with other human beings are coloured by this unconscious tendency to want to dominate or even possess the other. For Levinas this is a relationship doomed to failure. "If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power"⁴. The other person's alterity has to be totally respected, even if his or her presence is an "irruption" into my life. "The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place"⁵. The respect we owe to the other implies that we have to give him or her a real priority over us. In fact, in an interview, Levinas once said his basic conviction was that we should give ethical and ontological precedence to the other. That is a phenomenal ethical challenge.

What it means for Levinas is that "morality presides over the work of truth"⁶. In other words, the *value* of my life for you takes precedence over the *meaning* of my life for me. "It is as though I were destined to the other before being destined to myself"⁷. Pondering on the meaning of my life in isolation or self-reflection is an irrelevant extravagance. The face of the other person breaks into my world and calls out to me. That face demands a response from me, commands my attention, refuses to be ignored, makes a claim on my existence and tells me I am responsible. It is like being a hostage. "It is impossible to evade the appeal of the neighbor, to move away"⁸. "The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, calls me into question.... Ethics begins before the exteriority of the *other*, before other people, and, as I like to put it, before the face of the other, which engages my responsibility by its human expression.... An ethics that is not a servitude, but the service of God through responsibility for the neighbor, in which I am irreplaceable"⁹.

This is certainly a positive view of human relationships, but an intense and demanding one, too. It would be wrong to think that Levinas was theorising far from the sad and battered lives of so many people. He described the time he was writing as "the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia"¹⁰. How can we maintain life contains love and grace after so much suffering? "It might astonish some that faced with so many unleashed forces, so many violent and voracious acts that fill our history, our societies and our souls – that I should turn to the *I-Thou* or the responsibility-of-one-person-for-the-other to find the categories of the Human"¹¹. That is exactly where Levinas looks for hope. He is quite an optimist.

Another thinker the Pope appreciates, one whom he often met, was Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer was chairman of the Academic Advisory Board of the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* here in Vienna from the Institute's beginnings until his death in 2002, and its honorary chairman since 1989. He also regularly participated in the Pope's summer conversations at Castel Gandolfo south of Rome. He is remembered above all for his work in the field of hermeneutics, and will certainly be remembered as an authority well into this new century. What fascinated him was interpretation, effective communication between people across history and across cultural divides. When it began to be generally recognised that European culture is not *the* model for other cultures to emulate, some people feared that this new-found modesty and cultural openness might question the whole idea of objective reality and truth. What is right in one culture or set of circumstances might not be so in another. But Gadamer found a way beyond ethnocentrism and relativism.

Although he was concerned mainly with interpreting texts, his ideas help us understand people with whom we enter into dialogue. His chief insight was that of *Sprachlichkeit*, the insight that language forms and expresses human life, but also that language functions basically as conversation. The way to understand a text or another person whom we meet is not the

way we grasp an object. It is much more like people speaking to each other coming to an understanding (*Verständigung*). The way we normally use knowledge is to acquire explanations about things that "will exclude all future surprises"¹². That is the stuff of exercises. Arriving at an understanding is less final, partly because the partner we have now may not be the same as the one we shall have in the future, and other factors in either party may change. The knowledge-approach wants a formula that will be valid now and for ever, but the understanding-approach welcomes being challenged by the facets of the other over which I have no control. One is neat, the other potentially uncertain and painful.

In terms of a meeting between cultures or historical periods, the approach based on coming to an understanding forces us to hammer out what our differences are without ruling anything out and accepting that we may bring with us presuppositions and prejudices we had not recognised until now. It is not talk about the other, but talk with the other, and this is what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons" or *Horizontverschmelzung*. He is taking up the challenge of potential misunderstanding and openly relinquishing any sense of power over the other person, deliberately saying that we both have much to learn. The whole idea becomes richer and more complex if there are more than two perspectives or horizons involved.

Gadamer offers us a way of understanding historical texts and also other historical or cultural situations. But it is an approach that also opens us to relating to other people in a new way. "The challenge is to be able to acknowledge the humanity of their way, while still being able to live ours"¹³, an urgent challenge for anyone sent to work for peace and sanity in another cultural situation. Gadamer is very close to Cardinal Newman's idea that we do not grasp the truth but allow ourselves to be embraced by Truth.

THE FACE THAT REVEALS

The power of the experience of looking a stranger in the face is beyond doubt. Perhaps the best proof is to be found in those occasions when people refuse to make eye contact. I have never thought of myself or of the average man in the street as a sex maniac or a potential rapist, but it is alarming to see the way young women walk through the streets of any city in Europe. They do their best not to catch any man's eye, because we are an unknown quantity and, sadly, that makes us potentially dangerous in women's eyes. It is awful for us all to be tarred with the same brush, but that kind of fear is perfectly understandable and must be respected. At the same time, it does show how much our initial contact with someone can affect us.

Further proof is in the discipline of not considering the enemy as a person. I guess non-combatants like me can only imagine how important it is, for the sake of efficiency and survival, to banish all thoughts of who the person is behind the uniform and the camouflage material. One of the most chilling things I remember was a recording broadcast on BBC radio of the voice of the pilot of an A-10 "tank buster" firing at Iraqi troops stuck in the massive traffic jam on the road from Kuwait City to Baghdad. The adrenaline was clearly having its effect, but his training was what enabled him to get on with his job and not be distracted by the notion that he was actually killing human beings just like himself. I am not questioning the morality of what happened that day, or of training people to depersonalise the enemy. What I am saying is that, if one *is* trained to avoid all thought of the enemy's humanity, it is an extreme example of what happens when we refuse to look someone in the face. The usual mechanisms are shut down by fierce discipline, but that just goes to show how powerful the effect of conscious interpersonal contact normally is.

But just what is it that is revealed when we look into another person's face? It may sound blasphemous to some, but I am attracted by what Levinas says about the face as the place where, above all others, God is revealed. If he is right, a soldier is an angel with a camouflaged face, but it is also true that a soldier is no different from anyone else, and that he or she, too, discovers the ground and the measure of ethics in other human faces. Those others, too,

are God's messengers, or angels, in what they demand of us. Pope John Paul II recognised in his *Message for the 23rd World Day of Peace*, held on 1st. January 2000, that there are circumstances where the use of arms is justified: "At times brutal and systematic violence, aimed at the very extermination or enslavement of entire peoples and regions, has had to be countered by armed resistance" (No. 3). But he links any possible justification of the use of force with "the principle that the good of the human person comes before all else and stands above all human institutions" (No. 9).

For Levinas, "the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery"¹⁴. Since the days of Abraham, the Jews have been wise enough to invest in after-life insurance by working on the principle that one never knows when one is entertaining angels. But, like all good hospitality, it is ultimately not an effort. Indeed, it is often a pleasure. After a while, one's ethical training gives one an instinctive response to God's presence in others. "Ethics begins... before the face of the other, which engages my responsibility by its human expression.... An ethics that is not a servitude, but the service of God through responsibility for the neighbor, in which I am irreplaceable"¹⁵. The Other is something akin to a sacramental presence of God in the world. "One follows the Most High God above all by drawing near to one's neighbor, and showing concern for 'the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar'.... The Justice rendered to the Other, my neighbor, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God"¹⁶. As a commentator on Levinas wrote, "to live and suffer humanly with and for the Other, this is how God realizes fidelity to the unique world of human being. To the extent to which humans act in this way, God is alive"¹⁷. We may need to hone this phrase and insist that we humans in no way give God life, but – and here the English idiom is important – we *can and do* bring God to life for others. This is evangelising at its best.

The English poet Francis Thompson wrote a poem entitled *In No Strange Land*, in which he suggests we find God and heaven not in some strange far-off place, but much closer to home than we spontaneously think or are taught to believe. The images come from places in London, but ignore that and share his vision of the closeness of God.

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air -
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumb'd conceiving soars!
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places;
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces
That miss the many splendoured thing.

But when (so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry – and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
 Cry – clinging heaven by the hems;
 And lo, Christ walking on the water,
 Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

From a Christian point of view, the other is not God, but a gateway to the Mystery of God, because each face itself invites us to respect the mysteriousness of every person. An instinctive ethical response will come from training in recognising this. Ethics do not exist except where people co-exist, but once we accept that it is people who create the ethical context, we also need to recognise the ethical demands placed on us by every single human face, camouflaged or not.

AUTHOR

Don Peter Fleetwood, Mitarbeiter des päpstlichen Rates für die Kultur bis 2003, ist Stellvertreter des Generalsekretärs der europäischen Bischofskonferenz (CCEE) in St. Gallen.

NOTES

- 1 George H. SABINE, *A History of Political Theory*. Fourth edition revised by Thomas L. THORSON, Hinsdale IL (Dryden Press) 1973, p. 428.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 429.
- 3 T.S. ELIOT, *The Cocktail Party*, Act 1, Scene 1.
- 4 LEVINAS, *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh (Duquesne University Press) 1987, p. 90 [originally published as "Le temps et l'autre" in J. Wahl, *Le Choix, Le Monde, L'Existence*, Grenoble-Paris (Arthaud), 1947].
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 6 Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht (Kluwer) 1991, p. 304.
- 7 LEVINAS, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, translated by Betta Bergo, Stanford CA (Stanford U.P.), 1998, p. 165.
- 8 LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being...*, p. 128.
- 9 LEVINAS, *Outside the Subject*, translated by Michael B. Smith, Stanford CA (Stanford U.P.) 1993, p. 113.
- 10 LEVINAS, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, New York (Columbia U.P.) 1998, p. 97.
- 11 LEVINAS, *Outside the Subject*, p. 42.
- 12 Charles TAYLOR, "Remembering Gadamer" in the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen Newsletter 76, Spring 2002/No. 2, p. 10.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 14 LEVINAS, *Time and the Other*, p. 75.
- 15 LEVINAS, *Outside the Subject*, p. 113.
- 16 LEVINAS, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Sean Hand, Baltimore (John Hopkins U.P.) 1990, p. 81.
- 17 Adriaan PEPPERZAK, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, Evanston (Northwestern U.P.) 1997, p. 190.