

Correspondence

“Reflections on Israel”

To the Editors: Michael Novak's "Reflections on Israel" (Comment, *Worldview*, February) contains two disturbing oddities. First, he moves without a break from "an absolute to be written into American foreign policy" to "an inflexible Christian imperative" without showing that these might be different orders of significance. Second, his inflexible Christian imperative is that "Israel must survive."

Clearly Mr. Novak is in no mood to argue; he pronounces. But he pronounces in the one case like a man who has learned little from the "Christian" foreign policies of the past. And his reasoning about why Israel must survive is, I fear, a disguised piece of Christian triumphalism made at the expense of the Jews.

To move from American foreign policy to a discussion of Christian principles of public action without offering any sign that he knows the difference between them smacks of the naive sins of our fathers ("the Christian social order") and the more sophisticated sins of our own generation, which ("responsibly," of course) baptized obliteration bombing, NATO, Kennedy adventurism and Vietnam. It is continuously impossible in Mr. Novak's article to locate the referent to "our" thinking, "our" dealings. Is it American? Is it Christian? Only Mr. Novak's confessor knows. The pronouncement style is perhaps at fault here. But why a pronouncement at all on issues as complex and ambiguous as these?

On the reasons why "Israel must survive" Mr. Novak is insulting to both Christians and Jews. Perhaps the style betrays again. But Israel must survive, it turns out, for the sake of Christian esthetic reasons and Christian self-respect. "Israel must survive. It is an inflexible

Christian imperative. It would profit us nothing to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of Israel. Were Israel lost through fault of ours, the world would lose its savor; the dignity of living would be forfeit." Why must Jews continue to be a means to Christian self-regard? Have they so little status, so little claim as human beings? Are they finally a property in the Christian stage setting? And are Christians such monsters as to have to be appealed to on grounds that their lives would be less dignified or the world less savory if Israel were decimated or scattered?

And finally: Need it be imperative for any of us to survive? I never heard that it was an "inflexible Christian imperative" that survival of anybody be taken as an absolute—not the Church, not Israel, not the world itself. It is only required that men stand to their posts and do their duty. We shall all die: Christians, Jews and secularists. And hopefully Mr. Novak wishes us to die on behalf of something better than survival. I wish he had told us so more clearly.

Theodore W. Olson
Division of Social Science
York University
Ontario, Canada

Michael Novak Responds:

Survival is, of course, not absolute enough for everyone. But for me, on the matter of Israel, it is a goal quite high enough just now, and not yet assured. Precisely because Israelis are persons, ends-in-themselves, their annihilation would be intolerable to me as a Christian and as an American. It is not that they are means, but that my moral universe includes them as ends.

I write as a Christian and as an American, to an intelligent audience, for whom elementary lessons in the difference between one and the other do not have to be spelled out on every occasion.

Pronouncements are, occasionally, firm declarations of intent—a little different from argument, but in their own way illuminating.

“Genocide in Vietnam?”

To the Editors: One really should forget the final paragraph of Hugo Bedau's "Genocide in Vietnam?" (*Worldview*, February). The author examines that charge with considerable intellectual acuity and with a proper pinch of skepticism. He concludes: "If my analysis is correct, the accusation of genocide in Vietnam against the United States can be sustained only by further conceptual argument or by the discovery of new evidence."

Still a second unsustainable conclusion is added: "History gives us no better term than 'genocide' with which to express our horror at what our government has done in Vietnam"; the term has "an undeniable rhetorical appropriateness." But even rhetoric has its rules; one should have a higher esteem than that for "the art of persuasion, beautiful and just." Say rather—after Bedau's own analysis—that the term has "an undeniable *sophistical* appropriateness." Sophists were skilled at making the worse appear the better reason, or at making an admittedly unproven accusation appear to be proven.

As for the substance of Bedau's analysis, he should be commended for having brought reason to bear on an emotion-laden subject. Destruction with malice, expressed or implied, needs the "specific intention," the *mens rea* as well as the *actus reus*, of destroying a people *as such*, or a part of a people *as such*, or *one* Vietnamese *qua* Vietnamese *as such* and not as combatant or as a collateral death, to constitute it genocide. That Bedau shows to be required to sustain the accusation.

The trouble with using the "model" of "express malice with further intention" as backing for imputing genocide to U.S. policy in general is that such an analysis still requires proof in the first place of that *specific genocidal* malice before reference is made to any further intention (which could in no case justify genocide). To establish that, as Bedau

[Continued on p. 47]