

Protagonist Corner

The Church and Nuclear War
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According to the doctrine of the Just War, a Christian could participate in war only if it was a “just war,” that is, a war of defense against an obvious aggressor; a war which had as its objective the restoration of law and order, peace and justice, and was waged according to certain rules and within certain limits.

It is significant that the Church throughout the ages has tried to draw a line, to set limits to the kind of war in which Christians may legitimately participate and to the means used by Christians in waging war.

The fact is that the Church has always had an uneasy conscience about war and has tried to limit its savagery and control its excesses. In the twelfth century, when the crossbow was invented, the Church threatened to excommunicate any Christian who used anything more deadly than the simple bow and arrow. There were similar protests from the Church when the use of gunpowder was introduced. For a very long time it was forbidden to wage war on Christmas Day, Easter, and several other church festivals—even in the most furious battles the troops withdrew from contact on these days.

Until comparatively recent times, Sunday was always a day of truce. During the Boer War, Baden Powell (founder of the Boy Scout Movement) was besieged in Mafeking. The troops surrounding him, the Boers, were like his own troops not only practising Christians but Sabbatarians. It was forbidden to break the Sabbath Day and that prohibition included waging war on the Sabbath. So from midnight on Saturday to midnight Sunday there was a mutually agreed truce and not a shot was fired! The Household Cavalry inside Mafeking got so bored that they began to play polo on Sunday afternoons. A deputation under a white flag came from the enemy camp to protest this desecration of the Sabbath and the letter is said to be still extant in which Baden Powell replied to the Boer commander apologising for the behaviour of his men and promising that there would be no more polo playing on a Sunday.

On Christmas Day 1914, the first Christmas of the First World War, the guns were silent on the Western Front. British and German troops climbed out of their trenches and mingled freely with one another exchanging greetings and gifts. It is an interesting comment on how far things have changed from Christmas Day 1914 that the first atomic bomb was exploded on Easter Sunday, and Hiroshima was obliterated on the sixth of August, the Feast of the Transfiguration. Subsequent tests in the postwar years took place on Christmas Island and, indeed, one of the code names given in the atom bomb project was Trinity!

There is a tendency for some to argue that there is no fundamental difference between waging wars with bows and arrows and waging wars with nuclear

weapons; that it is only a matter of degree and therefore unimportant; that the principle is basically the same. I cannot but feel that this is the argument of some kind of a moral imbecile. To take Christ and the Gospel seriously is to acknowledge that there must be limits to the Christian's participation in the coercive structures of society, however sinful the world. There are, there must be, limits to our accommodation to the world. There is, there must be, a point at which in the name of our Christian obedience a line must be drawn.

When one looks back through the history of the past fifty years or so one cannot but wonder at what point the Christian Church will be prepared to draw the line, and hold it! I am old enough to remember when in 1937 the Church and Nation Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, representing what was by far the majority opinion in the Church, which was of course non-pacifist, roundly condemned indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations, reprisals, "and other deplorable means of waging war as clearly contrary to the Christian ethic." Only a few years later, during the second stages of the Second World War, when these "deplorable means" were being employed on a wholesale scale, though a number of individual Christians protested, the Church made no overt condemnation. I have seen in my own lifetime the Church's attitude to war suffer the death of a thousand qualifications!

There are many who cannot accept the full pacifist position, which would renounce the use of force of any kind, because they believe that in a sinful world the possession of force by the state is necessary "for love's sake." But the advent of nuclear weapons has brought a new dimension to war and demands a re-examination by the churches and the Christians of their position.

There are many who would argue that the nature of nuclear war is such that the Christian must be prepared to renounce it unconditionally, that the doctrine of the Just War, formulated by the fathers and taken over by the reformers, is no longer one that has any validity.

If, for the Christian, war can only be justified when it is an instrument for preserving peace, justice, and freedom, then it must be obvious that these ends could not be served by nuclear warfare. Such a war would be self-defeating. It could not achieve peace with the enemy for, in the wake of an all-out nuclear war, there would be no enemy with which to make peace. Even within the limits of one's own country there would be such chaos and devastation that any survivors would, in the struggle for existence, be fighting one another, not the foreign invader. Witness the fact that amongst the items considered necessary for those rich enough to afford deep shelters are rifles, not to be used against the enemy but to ward off their fellow citizens who, in their desperate hunger, might want to share their supplies of food! All talk about the ends of justice being served becomes irrelevant. The only justice such a warfare would serve would be like setting fire to a theatre and shooting down all the patrons who run for the exit in the certainty that among the victims will be Public Enemy Number One!

As we have seen, the doctrine of the Just War demanded that certain restraints must be observed in the waging of war. Would it be possible to observe any restraints in a war with nuclear weapons? Is not this the point at which

the churches and the Christians have to say No! to the state? Not because they believe that Christians must totally renounce the use of Force and be subject to Love alone—it can after all be argued that there may be occasions when, in Love, Force has to be used—but because a limit is reached when force, controlled for limited ends, passes over into indiscriminate violence and by its very nature can no longer achieve any good end. Those who adopt this position may be accused of saying “We would rather be red than dead”—a most reprehensible sentiment! Is it not possible that what they are really saying is: “We would rather be dead than responsible for such monstrous inhumanity.”

Many pacifists will argue that the only logical position is that which renounces all war, including war with conventional weapons. That to single out nuclear war for special treatment does not make sense. That, in fact, there are only two possibilities: Trust in God (Pacifism) and Trust in God and keep your powder dry (Realism). But those who speak about nuclear pacifism have chosen the impossible possibility of: Trust in God and keep your powder damp! Because any war with conventional weapons may become a nuclear war should one side see defeat as imminent, I would myself tend to take the position that I could not support any national war, even one waged with conventional weapons, but only the kind of police action which might be undertaken by the United Nations. It seems to me that the day is gone, and long gone, when any nation has the right to be the judge in its own cause!

There are many, however, who would argue that while they agree with most of what I have said, it is nevertheless necessary to keep possession of the bomb because the possession is in itself a deterrent, is in itself the assurance that it will never be used. To have THE BOMB but not to use it; this is the answer! It is hard to understand the logic of this position. The policy of deterrence is not credible if an assurance is given that we will never use the ultimate weapons. The credibility of deterrence surely means that we would not hesitate to retaliate immediately and massively not merely after we are attacked but as soon as we become convinced that we are about to be attacked. The Advance Warning System exists, not for the sake of the wretched civilian population, but so that our missiles may be launched before those of the enemy arrive. The possibility of error (and there have been many false alarms) and the enormously reduced time between delivery and strike makes this a suicidally dangerous situation. MY fear is that a nuclear war may be started not by intent but by accident.

Again it is argued that refusal to employ or even to possess nuclear weapons means an abandonment of responsibility for human justice and would be an encouragement to the aggressor. Yet, is not any other course an abandonment, or at any rate the gravest compromise, of our peculiar vocation as Christians? The Christian must share with others a concern for social justice and for the upholding of the rule of law but there are some things which are our peculiar vocation, which only we can do: the task of evangelism, of winning men and women for Christ, of declaring and showing forth the Love of God as revealed in Christ. Is not this seriously—even fatally—compromised by involvement in the modern war situation?

Take but one aspect of this: there can be no doubt that for the Eastern

Nations the witness of Western Christianity has been gravely vitiated by our involvement in and with the nuclear powers. If only a fraction of the money, manpower, and research presently being devoted to military uses were to be devoted to development, the future prospects of the Third World War would look entirely different. Official development aid is less than five percent of what is spent in this way.

Examples:

1. The military expenditure of only half a day would finance the whole malaria eradication programme of the World Health Organisation. Less would be needed to eliminate river blindness which it is calculated affects over twenty million people in Africa alone and makes impossible the development of such fertile areas as the courses of the Nile, the Niger, and the upper Volta.
2. A modern tank costs about one million dollars. This money could provide storage facilities for 100,000 tons of rice and so save 4,000 tons or more annually from loss through rats and other vermin. The same money could provide 1000 classrooms for 30,000 children.
3. The price of one jet fighter, twenty million dollars, could set up 40,000 village pharmacies.
4. One half of one percent of the year's military expenditure throughout the world would pay for all the farm equipment needed to ensure food production and self-sufficiency in food deficit countries by 1990.

If this does not have anything to do with the Gospel then I do not know anymore what the Gospel is about!