

THE CHRISTIAN AND WAR

A Theological Discussion
of Justice, Peace
and Love

OCTOBER 1958

Published by the Historical Peace Churches and the
Fellowship of Reconciliation

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international law." The Amsterdam definition is somewhat more general:

In the absence of impartial supra-national institutions, there are those who hold that military action is the ultimate sanction of the rule of law, and that citizens must be distinctly taught that it is their duty to defend the law by force if necessary.

Insofar as there is a "rule of law" in international affairs, that law does provide an aid to conscience. But it is clear that the rule of law in world affairs is both primitive and partial. Undue reliance on it as a guide leads to a false legalism. The United Nations provides the most objective collective judgment available, but it is not an "impartial supra-national" institution, nor is it infallible. To "defend the law" is part of the defense of justice and order, but it is no substitute for it.

The third approach to the concept of a just war, is the position advanced at Oxford that Christians, in obedience to conscience, have a duty to participate in war "waged to vindicate what they believe to be an essential Christian principle: to defend the victims of wanton aggression, or to secure freedom for the oppressed." In its stress upon conscience and its avoidance of elaborate formulas, this definition is closest to the idea of a just war here advanced. It has the merit of simplicity, and flexibility in the face of changing crisis. It also has the weakness of giving little precise guidance to the conscience. While aggression and oppression remain the chief targets of a just war, the formulation seems to breathe more of a crusading spirit than most non-pacifist Christians would find appropriate today.

IV THE NEW DIMENSION OF WAR

The rapid development of weapons of mass destruction has enormously increased the destructive power in Soviet and Western hands. This has created a new dimension of catastrophe for any future global war. And because of the ramifications of the power blocs, and the tensions between them, there is grave danger that limited wars will become a global war. Obviously, the probability of tremendous, perhaps incalculable, destruction on both sides in a future war needs to be reckoned with in the moral calculations of the just war position.

The notion that the excessive violence of atomic warfare has ended the possibility of a just war does not stand up. Even the Amsterdam proposition, which rejected the concept of the just war, as traditionally defined, brought back the idea itself under the guise of Christian "duty in particular circumstances." The moral problem has been altered, not eliminated.

The threat of atomic destruction has heightened the criminal irresponsibility of aggression, the employment of war as an instrument of national or bloc policy. Correspondingly, the moral obligation to discourage such a crime or, if it occurs, to deny it victory, has been underscored. The consequences of a successful defense are fearful to contemplate, but the consequences of a successful aggression, with tyrannical monopoly of the weapons of mass destruction, are calculated to be worse. While the avoidance of excessive and indiscriminate violence, and of such destruction as would undermine the basis for future peace remain moral imperatives in a just war, it does not seem possible to draw a line in advance, beyond which it would be better to yield than to resist.

false dichotomy.

Resistance to aggression, designed to deny it victory and tyrannical control, is not to be equated with victory by those who resist the aggressor. In view of war's new dimension of annihilation, the justification for a defensive war of limited objectives, to prevent conquest and to force an end to hostilities, does not apply equally to the objectives of bringing an aggressor to unconditional surrender and punishment. Because the ultimate consequences of atomic warfare cannot be measured, only the most imperative demands of justice have a clear sanction.

For this reason, the occasions to which the concept of the just war can be rightly applied have become highly restricted. A war to "defend the victims of wanton aggression," where the demands of justice join the demands of order, is today the clearest case of a just war. But where the immediate claims of order and justice conflict, as in a war initiated "to secure freedom for the oppressed," the case is now much less clear. The claims of justice are no less. But because contemporary war places so many moral values in incalculable jeopardy, the immediate claims of order have become much greater. Although oppression was never more abhorrent to the Christian conscience or more dangerous to the longer-range prospects of peace than today, the concept of a just war does not provide moral justification for initiating a war of incalculable consequences to end such oppression.

While this position gives the claims of order a certain immediate priority over the claims of justice, the fact remains that

no lasting peace is possible except on foundations of justice. Nor can the shorter-range prospects be improved unless remedial measures are taken in regard to social injustices likely to erupt as civil and hence international war. Consequently, the restraints imposed by the new dimension of war underline the importance of a vigorous development of methods of peaceful change. For God wills both justice and peace.

GOD ESTABLISHES BOTH PEACE AND JUSTICE

Since the Christian attitude on participation in war has become a subject of concern in ecumenical circles, and partly in response to the Amsterdam challenge to theologians to study the issues seriously, the European Continuation Committee of the Historic Peace Churches and the I.F.o.R., on the one hand, and two non-pacifist Christian leaders, Bishop Angus Dun and Professor Reinhold Niebuhr, on the other, have issued statements¹ presenting their respective positions and identifying certain issues which need more detailed consideration in future work. The present paper, written by two members of the Historic Peace Churches and indebted to the suggestions of other members of these churches and the I.F.o.R., is here presented as a further contribution to the discussion. The Peace Churches intend to continue their study of the issues, and hope that their efforts, together with those of pacifists and non-pacifists in many other places, may lead to a clarification of the Church's position on contemporary war.

The article, "God Wills Both Justice and Peace," by Bishop Dun and Professor Niebuhr, published as a reply "for discussion purposes" to the pamphlet of the Historic Peace Churches, *Peace is the Will of God*, augurs much good for the future. This is not because an early agreement between the divergent views expressed in the two documents is to be expected — the thoughtful reader of both will become quite conscious of this — but because serious conversation has finally been joined between traditions that have communicated far too little in modern times. And such conversations will be welcomed by all who recognize the value of dialogue in the development of Christian insights, regardless of their particular viewpoint.

This said, however, it must be added that "God Wills Both Justice and Peace," does not deal adequately with the main line of argument in the statement it purports to consider. (For brevity's sake and without disrespect, we may in the future refer to the statement argued by Bishop Dun and Professor Niebuhr

¹ Continuation Committee of the Historic Churches in Europe, *Peace is the Will of God*, October 1953, and Angus Dun and Reinhold Niebuhr, "God Wills Both Justice and Peace," *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. XV, No. 10, June 13, 1955.

as DN and to *Peace is the Will of God as PWG*.) Whatever the validity of its arguments or conclusions, PWG is primarily an attempt to put forth a distinctively Christian approach to war by the isolation and exclusion of a complex of axioms of other extraction, which through the centuries have become so deeply imbedded in the substratum of Christian thinking that, for most people, they are not required to answer critical muster. It is after a scrutiny of such presuppositions that the Peace Church document concludes with a call to Christians to live fully in the "new aeon," where lesser loyalties are subordinated to the *agape* of the Christian community. DN takes a position with respect to only one of these challenged presuppositions, namely, "the concept of the 'just war'," and even then agrees that the concept offers little precise guidance to Christian individuals trying to decide what they should do in the various conceivable modern war situations. Whereas it would seem that, in order to reply clearly to PWG, convinced representatives of the nonpacifist position should be ready to explain for what reasons and under what conditions Christians are called to go to war with the assurance that it is God's will, the present reply satisfies itself with the demonstration that the problem is complicated; its last word is that every individual must decide with little help from its authors or from other Christians.

PWG recognizes that Christian individuals now find themselves in a complex of societies, each involving certain bonds of social obligation and responsibility, but this Peace Church statement goes further in clearly asserting that membership in the Body of Christ is membership in a social group whose bonds transcend other impulses of social cohesion. One indication of what pacifists regard as a failure to consider this point seriously is the fact that, although DN refers in many places to Christians as individuals and to society at large, it refers to the Church only once, and that is in connection with a quotation from PWG. In a word, it appears as though its authors are replying, not to PWG, but to a kind of individualistic pacifism that was current after the First World War — and with traces of the same individualism appearing in the argument. Although DN accuses the pacifism it attacks of "applying an individual ethic to a collective situation," its own conclusion is that, "in the end, each must weigh the conflicting claims for himself . . . each must decide whether, on balance, there is enough preponderance of moral value on one side of a conflict to justify conscientious participation . . . in the final analysis the individual conscience is the arbiter of the concept of the just war." This is the neglect

of the most important social dimension, the Church of Christ. The Peace Churches know from experience that Christians must sometimes follow their conscience in opposing social evil as individuals, when the voices of the churches are unclear and even conflicting, but they do not excuse this situation by calling it normative. While the authors of DN propose the application of an individual standard of choice to a social situation, the Peace Churches appeal to the Church to be faithful to her distinctive calling as Church, with a message that is desperately needed in the face of what all societies recognize as the world's most pressing social problem.

Let there be no doubt about the issues at stake. We are not talking only about border skirmishes, such as those of the *Pax Romana* at the time when the concept of the "just war" was first articulated. Neither can we apply the scholastic Roman Catholic "just-war" doctrine, where a war is not just unless it can be won, to the case of those modern wars where everybody loses. Some of these difficulties are recognized in the last two sections of DN in the following words: "There is no adequate definition of a just war which can surely be applied to the various conceivable war situations with which the nations may be confronted; the authors speak of the new dimensions of war arising from the enormous increase in the destructive power of modern weapons. We can only agree. This only makes the question the more urgent.

The Peace Church statement is cited in DN ("the Christian 'may not calculate in advance what this may mean for himself or for society'") to accuse pacifists of failing to regard the consequences. We would, indeed, be ready to begin a discussion on the consequences of a given modern war, although experience has indicated that proponents of war who want to discuss only consequences often fail to include all the consequences and to evaluate them from a distinctively Christian viewpoint. On the one hand, they attack pacifists for not making decisions by weighing the consequences; on the other hand, they themselves refuse to accept the responsibility for the consequences for past wars by contending the wars they favored were not the wars that were later actually fought. If we are to discuss "The War to End All Wars," we will insist on pointing out that one of the consequences was a second World War more terrible than the first. If we discuss World War II, the war to "establish the Four Freedoms," we will also discuss the consequences for millions of non-combatants who were direct victims of rockets, atomic bombs, and the later extension of Russian totalitarianism. From past experience,

x pacifists are led to wonder whether it is not inherent in the nature of war that military necessities which sacrifice the proposed ends continually arise. War may appear to achieve certain goals, but the chain of consequences does not stop at apparent victory. Modern war is not an instrument that can be used to achieve a given objective and then laid down at will.

But the real issue in this discussion of consequence is not the reluctance of pacifists to begin by speaking of consequences, but a disagreement concerning the standard by which the consequences are to be evaluated. Consequences cannot be meaningfully discussed until this last point is clear. The authors of DN contend that certain wars are "just" — but it is precisely their standard of justice by which they evaluate these wars and their consequences that must be called into question. Specifically, they must assure us that their concept of justice will lead to distinctively Christian decisions in accordance with the testimony of the Word of God. This, as we shall see, has not been done.

Lest we seem to evade the issues as they are phrased in DN, however, we shall comment on them more specifically before coming to the basic problem.

I DOES PACIFISM DISTORT THE COMMAND OF LOVE?

It is argued in DN that "love has what might be called two dimensions: the vertical dimension of perfection, of sacrificial love; and the horizontal dimension of concern for all people, or concern for social justice and the balances by which it is maintained. The pacifist comprehension of love seizes upon one of these two aspects." The pacifist is thus led "to exalt peace over the claims of justice." To insist on absolute nonresistance in a sinful society is to allow evil in the form of injustice to go unchecked and thus to defeat the very purposes of love, according to DN. Against pacifists, who would see the struggle for justice as a rough and inferior approximation of love, the authors of DN assert that "justice is not simply an approximation of love in an evil world . . . Justice is an instrument of love in a sinful society." These authors do recognize, however, that "justice, which depends upon the uneasy balances of social life, is not ultimate."

This dialectic does not yield a clear conclusion on the factors which should finally determine the decision of the Christian or the content of the Church's message in practical situations. Near

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