

Conscience and the Issue of War

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In a major historic decision, the United States Supreme Court has recently decided that a conscientious objector without belief in The Supreme Being can be excused from bearing arms on the same basis as one who believes in The Supreme Being. This affirms the integrity and authenticity of the conscience of the individual whether or not he avows an allegiance to God. Exemption on the basis of belief in a Supreme Being was posited on the recognition by the State that there is an Authority superior to even that of the State and that the State dare not make demands on a citizen incompatible with his allegiance to this Supreme Being. This recent decision means that the State defers not only to God but to the conscience of the individual as well. In support of this position it is argued that to make belief in God a condition of exemption is to inject into the issue a theistic belief not shared by all the citizens, and hence these citizens are deprived of their civil rights. It is pointed out with considerable plausibility that the non-theist has as much an obligation to obey the dictates of his conscience as the theist and that all should be given equal treatment. Not only humanists (atheists) but Christians such as William Sloan Coffin, Jr., (University Chaplain at Yale), defend this position. Parallel to this development is the contention that the conscientious objector has the right to discriminate between wars that are just and those which he considers unjust.¹ Consequently, he should have the privilege of refusing to serve in a particular war even though he is not opposed to the use of force in other wars.

These issues give great strength to the individual and his rights and put his government more on the defensive when conscripting his services. It also places on the local draft board unprecedented difficulty in discriminating among those who are sincere and those who use these legal devices to escape the responsibilities which other citizens must share.

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1. cf. "United States v. Macintosh, 1931" in L. Schlissel, ed., *Conscience in America* (Dutton, 1968), pp. 193ff.

The conclusion to which this study has led is that neither of these positions is correct. The earnest Christian is presented with the necessity of reexamining and reassessing his own attitude toward the use of force in areas of human conflict. The questions include: 1) Has the conscience of the non-theist as good a claim to consideration as that of the theist? 2) Are some wars "just? 3) Is it ever right for a Christian to take human life? 4) Should one kill in self-defense? and 5) Is it right to withhold help from a victim of violence?

What is "Conscience?"

The word comes from two Latin terms: *con* (with) and *scire* (to know). It is equivalent to English "with science or with knowledge. Currently the term means "a sense of moral obligation to do what is believed to be . . . right and to avoid the contrary.' Kant defined conscience as "the consciousness of an internal tribunal in man (before which 'his thoughts accuse or excuse one another') . . . an inward judge which threatens and keeps him in awe."² Conscience is a creature of education as well as "the voice of God."

In the ancient world Socrates referred to an inner moral monitor as his "daemon" which alerted him to ethical issues. Plato attributed one's sense of moral standards to recollections of pre-existent states. Aristotle believed that man's moral sense is that which distinguishes him from the beast.

In the New Testament the writings of Paul provide the clearest teaching on conscience (*suneidesis*), a term which is found 31 times in the New Testament. For Paul conscience is the vehicle of divine revelation for both Gentiles and Jews. "Gentiles," says Paul, "not having the law, are a law unto themselves, . . . their conscience bearing witness . . . accusing or else excusing" (Rom. 2:14). Conscience serves to render moral judgment on acts practiced or contemplated. The idea is anticipated in the Old Testament as when David's "heart smote him" for having numbered the people (2 Sam. 24:10). Likewise the Gentiles are found guilty for having rejected "natural revelation" (Rom. 1:19-31). The Jews stand condemned not only for violating their consciences but especially for not living up to their "special revelation" in the Torah (Rom. 2:1-20). Conscience serves both to convict the guilty but also to console the guiltless. Paul had the assurance of a good conscience before God and man (Acts 23:1; Rom. 9:1; I Cor. 4:4; 2 Cor. 1:12). In the latter, conscience serves a similar function

2. Immanuel Kant, "On Conscience," *Great Books of the Western World*, XLII, 379.

to that of the Witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16; I John 2:27).

Conscience is seen in the Bible as a part of the *imago Dei*, which survived the Fall of man, "shattered but not destroyed."³ Immanuel Kant could have been thinking of Psalm 8 or Romans 1 when he marvelled at the "starry heaven above and the moral law within."

Conscience, however, is a creature of education as well as "the voice of God." It can be educated either for better or worse. It can also be calloused, seared and rendered almost inoperative. Thus the individual conscience can never be considered as safe guide to the truth. Realizing this Charles Wesley prayed, "Quick as the apple of an eye, O God, my conscience make. Awake my soul when sin is night, and keep it still awake." However, we should be prepared to give another the benefit of the doubt, rather than jeopardize his relationship to his God (Romans 14), even to preferring his conscience to our own.

The crucial question remains—to what extent is one's conscience "the voice of God? To what extent does it have grounding in objective moral norms? Or, is it autonomous? If the latter is so, can it claim a moral basis equivalent to one who believes his conscience is based on the will of God? Conscience has always based its claim on an authority outside the self, sitting in judgment on the self.

The non-theist who appeals to his conscience, as opposed to the laws of the state, simply places his conscience against the collective conscience of society. The theist, however, bases his appeal upon what he affirms is God's will for him as opposed to the will of the state. The state must then decide whether to honor his conviction of a higher loyalty to God, even if convinced he is mistaken, or whether to assert a prerogative which is contrary to his conviction of the divine will. The non-theist, therefore, has no objective frame of reference to which his conscience seeks to conform, but rather has the arrogance to assert that his own subjective judgment has more moral authority for him than the collective judgment of society. Such a claim for the autonomy of the individual conscience could only receive attention at a time when existentialist philosophy discards adherence to an objective absolute standard of values. It is comparable to the situation in which there is no "king," (external authority) and "everyone does what is right in his own eyes" (cf. Judges 21:25). Unless one holds that all wars are unjust, there seems no valid grounds for permitting him to decide which particular war he will avoid. No individual has sufficient information to determine whether one war is unjust. To admit this would

3. C. F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 519.

make his judgment equal to the wisdom of administration and Congress, to whom more information is available.

The Biblical Data on War

Those in the Judean-Christian heritage naturally look to the Bible for guidance in the matter of conscience. The Bible says categorically, "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). There are several Hebrew words which can be translated "kill." The word used here means specifically "international killing" or "murder." That its meaning is limited to what we term murder is indicated by the fact that the taking of life is sometimes done with divine sanction and with the sanction of the community. David slew Goliath with obvious divine approval, not because Goliath was a political adversary, but because he had defied Israel's God. Blasphemers were condemned to receive the death penalty (Lev. 24:10-23). Achan's sin was punished by death (Josh. 7). Samuel slew Agag the Amalekite with divine approval (I Sam. 15:33). Because the Amalekites attacked the Israelites in the desert, Jahweh decreed the genocide of that tribe, a task which King Saul was required to accomplish (I Sam. 15:18). The city-state of Jericho was devoted to destruction by the express command of Israel's God (Josh. 6:17, 21). The extermination of all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan was likewise authorized by the Lord in order to safeguard the holy nation from contamination by their new environment (Deut. 1:1-6). Later, non-Israelites were "sanctified" (set apart) by the Lord for the purpose of conducting a "holy war" against the chosen people in order to discipline them (Isaiah 10:5-15; 13:3-5).

Jesus, disavowing the precedent of Elijah (II Kings 1:10, 12), said he had not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them (Luke 9:52-56). Jesus not only supported the command not to kill, but forbade hatred of one's neighbor (Matt. 5:21-16). Jesus also said that those who live by the sword shall perish thereby (Matt. 26:52). What about the Acts and the Epistles? The Christians were urged by their leaders not to rebel against the government or slave-owners (Rom. 13:1-7; Col. 4:1-3; I Pet. 2:18-25). Relief from economic exploitation was to be sought not in violence but by patient waiting for the returning Lord to redress their grievances (James 5:7-9). The conviction by which they lived was that the entire structure of human society is subject to the government of God, who is alert to injustice and will eventually assure the vindication of the just and the triumph of their cause. The battle against their enemies and oppressors is to be carried on by the Lord; the prerogative of judgment is his alone. The Christian's obligation is not self-defense, but rather to overcome evil with good and hatred with love (Rom. 12:18-21).

The ethical demands of love for one's neighbor is a prominent theme of the New Testament. Jesus said it stood along side the first as the greatest of all the commandments (Mt. 22:35-40). Paul and James agreed that

love of one's neighbor is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:4; James 2:8).

Is Force Ever Justified in Christian Ethics?

Historically Christians have taken three basic attitudes toward the morality of war. One is the pacifist position that the use of force is seldom, if ever, justified. This attitude prevailed during the first three centuries of the church and among the Anabaptists for the last three centuries. The early Christians were a minority group in the Roman empire. From the reign of Augustus until the barbarian invasions, the Roman soldiers were primarily guardians of the peace rather than engaged in aggressive wars; theirs was police duty for the most part. Jesus' personal example of nonresistance and his refusal to sanctify contemporary revolutionary movements were remembered and taken as precedents. The church was an "underground movement" and a minority sect felt no responsibility for maintaining the status quo. Christians were exhorted by their leaders to keep the law scrupulously, to pray for their governors and, unless the government threatened their loyalty to Christ, to obey the secular authorities.⁴

The book of Revelation, however, like the Old Testament, has imagery like that of Jewish apocalypses in which the judgments of God envision the destruction of rebels to the divine rule. Even Jesus is pictured as a warrior conquering his enemies by force. It was recalled that Jesus used force rather than persuasion or boycott in expelling merchants from the temple in Jerusalem (John 2:15). It is significant also that the hallelujah chorus by the redeemed saints is occasioned by the destruction of Babylon. The saints did not participate in the destruction of Babylon however; that was accomplished by the Lord and they were only spectators (Rev. 17:16; 18:6; 19:1-6, 11-16). This passage in the Book of Revelation cannot easily be used to justify warfare because the saints are not the belligerents and because the language is highly figurative. In short there is much in the Old Testament to justify warfare, but many see no justification in the New Testament.

It should be pointed out, however, that the New Testament ethic is for individuals and does not relate primarily to nations as such, nor does it involve police action to protect the rights of civilians. Roman soldiers

4. A non-Christian pacifism, an outgrowth of Oriental philosophy, "dissolves the contrast between the good and the bad by merging both into an undifferentiated whole." E. L. Long, Jr., *War and Conscience in America* (Westminster, 1968), p. 71.

were urged by John to "do violence to no man," but that was probably a reference to "police brutality," rather than law enforcement. What does the Christian ethic say about the use of force to defend the victim of attack? The Good Samaritan gave help to the victim of robbery but apparently did nothing about pursuing the robbers. But parables usually have one focus, and this one served to define "neighbor." Love of neighbor in a similar situation would seem to call for the use of force if nothing less would protect the defendant from injury or death. The Christian ethic with reference to war, therefore, depends upon implications rather than upon explicit commands or prohibitions.

Here, as in other aspects of social ethics, both Old and New Testament need to be consulted. In many respects the nation of Israel during the kingdom period offers a closer approximation to our nation than does the Christian church of the first century. This is true because the prophets of Israel had some opportunity for influencing national policy, while the Christian church of the first century had no influence on the rulers of the Roman world. We can therefore learn about Christian ethics from the prophets of Israel as well as from the apostles of the church. Sometimes the prophets foretold divine protection apart from human participation. At other times and to a limited extent, military action had prophetic sanction, especially during the time of Elisha; King Saul's defense of Jabesh-Gilead had the sanction of Samuel, and the refusal of some tribes to join in battle against a common foe drew the rebuke of the prophetess Deborah.

The Pacifists

The Anabaptists are like the early Christians with reference to non-violence. They think of society as alien and of themselves as "dead to the world." They are content to be protected by police action and yet accept no responsibility for an orderly society. They are concerned solely with loyalty to Christ even if in so doing they become irrelevant to their contemporary world and hence irresponsible in social issues. The other churches are regarded as having compromised with the world unless they practice nonviolence in settling disputes. They do not admit that one must sometimes choose the less of two evils. A. J. Muste, for example, urges unilateral disarmament, in the confidence that such an example by a strong nation will lessen the bellicose aims and methods of rival powers.

He brushes aside the argument that the Allies' disarmament following World War I did not deter Germany, Italy and Japan from aggressive acts, saying that our disarmament was not complete enough and affirming his conviction that initial suffering would be followed by peace.⁵

5. A. J. Muste, *Not By Might* (New York: Harper, 1947), pp. 127 *et passim*.

He urges a complete dissassociation with the state which makes war an instrument of national policy; nothing less is true Christian discipleship.⁶ His thinking was in the context of the nuclear arms race between the "superpowers" and does not take into account the obligation of the strong to help the weak if help is needed and requested. He too readily applies personal ethics to nations and thinks only of self-defense, not of assistance to the needy.

The Crusaders

War as a holy war or a crusade against "evil" has often been employed both in self-defense and in wars of offense. Of the three monotheistic faiths, Moslems are most prone to the j'had (holy war). The Hebrews were less war-like historically and the Christians least. During the Middle Ages, however, the Christian church was the most war-like of all communions, but it represented a departure from its own tradition. In addition to the Crusades themselves, the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants had the characteristics of a crusade. In modern times Billy Sunday called for a crusade against "the Hun," in World War I, and today Carl McIntire calls for victory in Vietnam.⁷ Not only they but many evangelical missionaries in Southeast Asia feel deeply that the only satisfactory way to resolve the conflict there is a military defeat of aggressive communism. They obviously view a war to help victims of aggression to survive the less of two evils.

"Agonized Participants"

The Christian citizen and the nation which respects Christian principles can never use force to impose its will upon a weaker neighbor when only "national interest" is concerned. Therefore the Opium War between Britain and China was immoral. Likewise the Mexican War of 1848 is a blot on the international record of the United States. Both World Wars were in common defense against aggression and were less blameworthy morally. The Korean War was primarily going to the assistance of a victim of external aggression—a "police action" which had the legal sanction of

6. A. J. Muste, "The Individual Conscience," in Paul Mayer, ed., *The Pacifist Conscience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 351.

7. Said Billy Sunday, "The man who . . . dies fighting in the trenches is better than you Godforsaken mutts who won't enlist." (R. H. Adams, *Preachers Present Arms*, p. 83).

the world Community and has some claim to having been a "just war" because it was resisting injustices.

Thoughtful people can learn from history. In the present torture of conscience, clarity is assisted by some lessons in the nineteen thirties. William L. Shirer in his *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* indicates that failure of Western Europe to resist Hitler at the outset facilitated the Second World War. It is useful to recall the insights of Reinhold Niebuhr during this decade in calling upon the Christian democracies to resist Fascism and Communism. Niebuhr blames a naive optimistic liberalism for the slowness of America to react decisively to the danger. The question may be fairly asked whether the "doves," humanists and neo-isolationists of today are similar to the pacifists against whom Niebuhr protested. As Niebuhr points out:

The defects of democratic government in the field of foreign policy are aggravated by the liberal culture, which has supported democracy in the past two hundred years. . . . It is full of illusions about the character of human nature, particularly collective behavior. It imagines that there is no conflict of interest which cannot be adjudicated. It does not understand what it means to meet a resolute foe which is intent upon either your annihilation or enslavement.⁸

Niebuhr goes on to point out that false premises of liberals and intellectuals, their wishful thinking, their assumption that tyrants would prefer not to fight, played into the hand of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia by encouraging the assumption of the aggressors that complacent democracies lack the will to resist by force. Even Hitler did not destroy the false optimism about human nature. The victorious allies after World War II falsely assumed that Russia would honor its commitments in the peace treaties. The result is the "cold war" of the past quarter century.⁹ He points out also that college faculties urged the United States to resist Hitler while their students continued to urge isolation. This he explains as due to the students' acceptance of their teachers' earlier support of pacifism.¹⁰ He

8. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*. (New York: Archon Books, 1940, 1969) p. 68.

9. Space does not permit elaboration on this point, but Russia's refusal to permit a Polish government and the reunification of Germany are example of perfidy. Later invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia confirms this.

10. But the writer remembers the cordial reception given to Niebuhr by the students at Harvard in 1943, and the coldness he received from their professors.

notes also that the idealist and moralist Christian spokesman failed truly to assess the situation. The common people, he noted, have an instinct for survival which proves a surer guide than the illusions of the intellectual.

Niebuhr points out Christian pietism or perfectionism contributes to the "illusion that politics can be sublimated into an exercise of pure moral suasion." This naivete is augmented when a nation has enjoyed several years of peace. Complacency makes "advanced" nations vulnerable to "barbarian" invaders. Do we have someone today who sees as clearly and articulates the issue as well?

Then Niebuhr's concern was for the preservation of western Judaeo-Christian civilization. He felt self-defense morally justified. Today the issue is not only self-defense but whether the strong should help the weak defend themselves, whether political decisions should be settled by brute force or by persuasion. Those leaders in religion and in politics who demand negotiation instead of hostilities fail to realize that it takes two to negotiate; and that those who seek to dominate their neighbors by force of arms are not interested in negotiations while there is prospect of achieving their purpose. The peace-loving politicians who plead for negotiations with a foe who does not want peace and has no desire to avoid bloodshed (of his enemy) are either incredibly naive or they equate "negotiations" with surrender. In pleading for less money for "defense" and more for the domestic amenities of life they fail to recognize that survival is even more basic than the "better life."

Can Any Modern War Be "Just"?

Among recent advocates of the just war theory is Ralph Potter, who argues that a Christian should be as concerned with preventing injustice as in avoiding violence.¹¹ He urges a United Nations' police force not subject to the veto of the Security Council, an impossibility unless the "big" powers surrender some of their sovereignty.

Paul Ramsey argues against a Christian withdrawing from hard decisions about the use of force by national leaders, and seeks a viable "just war" doctrine.¹²

Advocates of a just war usually begin by quoting Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, in his struggle to reconcile divine providence with the fall of Rome to invading barbarians. His position is reflected in the theory of a

11. Ralph Potter, *War and Moral Discourse* (John Knox Press, 1908).

12. Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience* (1961), pp. 314ff.

just war maintained generally by the Roman Catholic church. This position is taken by Luther, Calvin and other Reformers who were also deeply indebted to Augustine. Said Augustine, "It is the wrong doing of the opposite party which compels the wise man to wage just wars."¹³ Aquinas justified war when "waged by the command of the ruler or a righteous cause and with good intention." Implicitly here is the distinction between acts and intention, a good motive used to justify a bad act. Luther stressed the distinction between the personal ethic of the Sermon on the Mount and the citizens' responsibility for justice in society. The two domains require different standards of conduct. In Calvin's theory the Old Testament ethic must not be ignored by contrasting it with the New Testament. Thus he could cojoin the New Testament motive of love with the Old Testament practice of war. The Westminster Confession concurs: "Christians . . . may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions." The last clause is sufficiently ambiguous that almost anyone could employ it to justify acts of war. Woodrow Wilson after being re-elected "to keep us out of war" could feel justified in joining in an effort to stop "the Hun."

The advent of the nuclear age has made the concept of a "just" war even more untenable. How can justice be associated with atom bombs destroying civilians? If there is such a thing as a "just" war, it should include several characteristics. 1) Resorts to arms is justified only after all other alternatives fail; 2) It should be only for the defense of freedom and justice. 3) It should be in response to the moral obligation of the strong to help his weaker neighbor to survive. 4) It should have the endorsement of the moral conscience of mankind expressed in recognized and official channels, such as the United Nations. 5) It should be resorted to only as the less of two evils. 6) It should be prosecuted with a minimum of injury, especially to the innocent. 7) It must be in the nature of police action to restrain the aggressor and defend the civil rights of his victim, like the use of police to protect civil rights within a nation. It has been argued that police must at times use force to restrain evil doers; so international conflict should be limited to similar police action. In such a case forced restraint of an aggressor would be an evil less pernicious than to abandon world order to the "law of the jungle," permitting predator nations to devour their weaker neighbors. Such police force is not possible unless nations surrender some of their sovereignty to an international body, thus

13. Augustine, *The City of God*, XIX, 7; *Great Books of the Western World*, XVIII, 515.

giving that body power to restrain the violent. Until that time, the next best is for the "strong" to act in concert to withstand the aggressor and help protect the weak. This would seem preferable to abandoning the world to the "survival of the fittest." Meanwhile more patience and persistence need to be exercised in the interest of world government, while we prayerfully await the arrival of the "Prince of Peace."