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Evan Fales

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ARE CHRISTIANS OBLIGED TO BE PACIFISTS?

Evan Fales

This note contributes to an exchange between J. Kellenberger and S. Bringsjord over whether a religiously based ethics is committed to pacifism. I argue that Bringsjord's objection to Kellenberger's defense of pacifism is misplaced. I then briefly examine the scriptural basis for Christian pacifism.

In a note replying to J. Kellenberger's "A Defense of Pacifism,"¹ Selmer Bringsjord presents what he regards as a powerful argument against (P), the claim that

- (P) For every agent *S*, if *S* wages war, then *S* does something which is morally impermissible.²

Bringsjord takes (P) to articulate a minimal commitment of the pacifist position. His argument against (P) is, briefly, that God, who is morally impeccable, is (according to the Bible) engaged in a massive war against Satan and his evil forces.

This argument is less powerful than Bringsjord thinks. The natural reply to it is that pacifists are committed, not to (P) but to (P'):

- (P') For every *human* agent *S*, if *S* wages war, then *S* does something which is morally impermissible.

Bringsjord dismisses (P') as being *ad hoc*. Yet (P') is very far from being *ad hoc*. A pacifist might prefer (P') to (P) for at least two reasons: (1) because God has the moral authority to perform acts which humans and nations have no authority to perform; and (2) because that authority, in this instance, can be grounded in God's greater knowledge.

(1) There are many acts which ought to be done, but ought not to be done by me, because I lack the proper authority. It would be improper for me to imprison in my basement for a certain period of time someone whom I know to have committed a crime—even if a similar incarceration would quite properly be imposed by the state. It is improper for me to do this because I lack the proper authority: I am neither a judge nor a jailor. Similarly, God has the authority to perform certain acts which neither I nor any other human or human institution has the authority to perform—e.g., to determine who goes to hell. But why suppose that God, and only God, could have the proper moral authority to wage war?



(2) The natural answer to this second question is that only God knows enough about the consequences of waging particular wars; only God is morally impeccable enough, impartial enough, and so free of self-deception as to be sure of waging war for the right reasons; and only God has the means to see to it that a war achieves its intended ends and no others. Kellenberger holds that war necessarily involves violence, where violence, by his definition, violates the basic right of persons to be respected as persons. But it is not clear that a war waged by God, using divine means, necessarily involves violence in this sense. And, even if it does, pacifists who advocate a utilitarian or a retributivist theory of justice can maintain that violence is sometimes justified, even if mere human beings are never in a position to know when. Such a pacifist could hold that every human war is at least presumptively wrong.

Bringsjord's argument against (2) is curious. He imagines an alien being, S^* , who correctly believes that waging war against human agent S will end S 's evil activity. And he thinks that no pacifist would condone S^* 's waging such a war. Similarly, we are to suppose, no pacifist could condone God's waging such a war. But why would a pacifist agree to that? Why should he suppose that S^* here is relevantly analogous to God? S^* merely has a true belief that his war will terminate S 's evil; God would have knowledge. S^* considers (it seems) merely the consequence that S 's evils be brought to an end but not the all-things-considered goodness and evil engendered by his act of war; God does consider these. S^* has (presumably) limited means; God does not. Finally, God is morally impeccable, whereas S^* may or may not be. Clearly, our judgment about S^* is not germane to whether it is ever right for God to wage war.

So much for the theoretical defense of religious pacifism against the scriptural objection mounted by Bringsjord. But can we find any Biblical backing for the two responses just presented? Indeed we can. It is, to be sure, uncertain whether the Bible contains any passage unambiguously affirming God's omniscience, strictly speaking. But it will be denied by no one that the Bible affirms God's knowledge of the world—and of "the hearts of men"—to be vastly superior to that of any human being (e.g., Is. 48:3, 5; Jn. 2:24-25; Acts 15:18; and, perhaps more tellingly, Job 36:4 and Ps. 147:5).

So God is, Biblically speaking, in a far better position than we to *know* whether the effects of a war will morally justify the means used to wage it. And, it must be conceded, men never are in a very good position to know this. Thus it would be quite proper for God to have authority to wage war, while improper for men to have this authority (unless demonstrably so commanded by God). Furthermore, the N.T. quite explicitly asserts this difference in authority. The clearest text is Rom. 12:17-21, which partly reads:

Repay no one evil for evil...
 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave
 it to the wrath of God; for it is written,
 "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says

the Lord.” [Here Paul is quoting Dt. 32:35, which perhaps has in Dt. a slightly different sense than that intended by Paul.] No, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink....” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This Pauline passage, moreover, resonates with the Sermon on the Mount, most specifically with:

“But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also....” [Mt. 5:39]³

which is an essential proof-text for Christian pacifists. This difference in authority is indeed illustrated by Jesus’ whipping of the Temple money changers, an act from which Mt. 5:39 would require ordinary mortals to refrain.

Nevertheless, we cannot conclude from this that universal pacifism has good Biblical warrant. For one thing, the *motive* which underlies Paul’s prescriptions in Rom. 12 does not seem to reflect what we would understand by an ethics of love. He quotes Prov. 25:21-23, which has it that by requiring an enemy’s evil with good, one will “heap coals of fire on his head.” Furthermore, we cannot ignore passages like Mt. 10:34-39, which, on the face of it, is a commandment to be at war with the members of one’s own family. Nor is this passage a throw-away line, since nearly a dozen N.T. passages (notably Mt. 12:46f and Lk. 14:25-26) repeat the message, a message that appears to constitute one of the recurring themes of the Gospels.⁴

Do these preachings attributed to Jesus contradict the Sermon on the Mount? In fact, they do not. Bluntly put, Jesus’ teaching is: love your enemies, hate your kith and kin. The anti-family side of this teaching has seemed unpalatable to many, and various interpretive maneuvers have been deployed to soften its harshness. It is not my intention here to enter into such interpretive disputes; I will say only that I believe that, given the historical context of his ministry, Jesus had eminently good reasons of a pragmatic sort for promulgating this astringent doctrine. Even so, in those days of Roman occupation, it was indeed a hard saying. But not a contradictory one.

For present purposes, the relevant point is just this. Nothing I have said precludes the possibility of giving a religiously based defense of universal pacifism. But, on the other hand, no such defense can be based, in a straightforward and unproblematic way, upon appeals to Christian scripture. Religious pacifists are better advised to look elsewhere.

NOTES

1. James Kellenberger, "A Defense of Pacifism," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987).
2. Selmer Bringsjord, "Christianity and Pacifism: A Reply to Kellenberger," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989).
3. Kellenberger, I assume, would find congenial neither the commandment not to resist evil, nor the retributivist tone of the Pauline passage. But the language of these texts appears to be quite unambiguous.
4. Elsewhere—e.g., Mt. 5:22 and 7:3-5—Jesus is reported as having preached a more conciliatory attitude towards one's brothers. Arguably, however, the use of the kin-term in these passages is metaphorical—cp. Mt. 12:50, and, indeed, the majority of uses of ἀδελφός in the N.T.