

# BLACKFRIARS

VOL. XX

JUNE 1939

No. 231

## WARS AND RUMOURS OF WARS

It is only right and proper in a world which seems to be going rapidly more and more insane that good Christians should make every effort to sound the recall to Reason. It is only our bare duty to reaffirm the elements and applications of the natural law in a world which seems to be becoming more and more insensible to the natural law. For this reason, it is impossible to over-estimate the debt we owe to those Catholic thinkers who have made it their task in recent years to re-state the natural ethics of war and peace and to apply it to modern conditions of international relationships and methods of warfare. It is salutary that the *philosophia perennis* of ends and means should be reasserted and applied realistically to new sets of facts such as aerial bombardment and bacteriological warfare, to the impending realities of war waged by the sovereign State conditioned by the exigencies of imperialistic capitalist economy.

Yet we shall be mistaken if, having done all these things, we imagine that we have done anything *specifically* Christian. We are perhaps too ready to call a *Christian* doctrine of war what are in fact only dictates of the natural reason. Grace does not destroy Nature; Revelation is not contrary to Reason. But the fact remains that we cannot give a *distinctively* Christian witness to the events in the world around us in terms solely of natural reason and natural law. Nor can I answer the burning question, 'What am I as a Christian to do in the event of war?' solely in terms of a natural ethic, however rigorous. I must see how that natural ethic is to be employed by me, not only as a rational and conscientious being, but as a Christian, in the light of my Christian Faith and calling. All that reason can show to be wrong for me as a man is wrong for me

as a Christian; but not all that is legitimate for me in accordance with the general principles of natural ethics is legitimate for me in view of my specific vocation as a Christian, here and now.

There should be no need at this date to insist on the imperative necessity for an independent and distinctively Christian judgment on the events of our time, and in particular for a distinctively Christian witness on the issues of peace and war. The disastrous effects of the failure of that witness in the past are plain for all to see. A reading of Karl Marx's remarkable essay, *The Crimean War: The Decay of Religious Authority*, suggests that the atheism of atheistic communism, and indeed the irreligion or anti-religion of the whole organised working-class movement, is due to nothing so much as the failure of Christians to exert a specifically Christian influence in international relations since the breakdown of European unity. A historical study like Hoffman Nickerson's *Can we limit War?* demonstrates that modern totalitarian warfare owes its origin and its very possibility to the collapse of that check which the Christian witness supplied in the past and should supply again to-day.

It is not, happily, our business to confess the sins of our grandfathers, nor to apportion blame for the disaster. Historians must be left to decide whether the fault lay in the failure of Christians to preach or the failure of the world to listen. But the scandal of 'the failure of the Churches' during the world-war of 1914-1918 and the calamitous results of their opportunism are too evident for us to ignore its terrible lessons.<sup>1</sup> It is to this, perhaps more than to any

---

<sup>1</sup> The writer has chiefly in mind the attitude adopted at the time by the majority of non-Catholic representatives of Christianity, for it was this that most affected British public opinion, and he has very little information regarding the attitude adopted towards it in Catholic pulpits and in the Catholic press of the time. Certain it is that Pope Benedict XV set a magnificent lead in recalling a mad world to a sense of sanity and justice;

other factor, that must be attributed the disrepute into which organised Christianity has fallen, in this country at least, during the subsequent years. The 'recruiting parsons' may have helped to fill the trenches during the war; they certainly succeeded in emptying the pews afterwards. The shallow casuistry with which they sought to evade the Sermon on the Mount disqualified them in the eyes of thousands from being taken seriously as authentic representatives of Christ. Parish magazines vied with the sensationalist national dailies in their enthusiasm for slaughtering Germans and hanging the Kaiser. Divines, challenged by the persistent question, 'Why does not God stop the war?' invented for the purpose a limited deity whose power was commensurate with the prowess of Allied arms. Appeals from fellow Christians in neutral countries to the Anglican Archbishops to influence the British Government to raise the terrible blockade of the Central Powers, which was being continued with appalling results long *after* the Armistice, were coldly rejected. Salvation by works alone—works of National Service—became the regular theme of the Sunday sermon; and the 'God our help in ages past' so constantly invoked was the petty British tribal god of the *Recessional*. For the gravity of the scandal lay, not only in the fact that the 'Churches' were no wiser and no better than anybody else, and that they were led by the current of popular emotion and hysteria instead of resisting and directing it, but that they excelled all others in the propagation of self-righteous cant, obscuring the issue in a nimbus of religiosity, degrading the Universal

---

but it must be seriously doubted whether the Catholics of the belligerent countries followed his lead with the zeal and determination which it demanded. In any case, there would seem to be little reason for self-congratulation: a Catholic, precisely because he is a member of a universal Church, has far less excuse for succumbing to an outlook of bigotted nationalism than has the adherent of a National Church brought up in the traditions of what Canon Storr has called with disarming frankness 'our National and Imperial Christianity.'

Father of mankind to the level of an instrument of British policy, and elevating the Kaiser to the dignity of Antichrist. It is not to be wondered at that, when the war was over and seen as the sordid and futile waste it really was, it was widely felt that 'Christianity had failed.' Failed, not the world only, but its own message. The war to end war, the war which was to establish the reign of righteousness and justice, left the world worse off and with more injustice than before. Christians had succumbed to propaganda instead of bearing witness to the truth.

\* \* \* \* \*

What is the truth? How are we to judge, with *Christian* eyes, the catastrophic events which threaten us to-day? Since the last war there have been many encouraging signs among Christians of a firm purpose of amendment. Yet it is possible to complain that there has been too exclusive a preoccupation with the purely ethical and practical issue, 'What is *A* to do?' That is indeed the question which must ultimately be faced; but it is too often overlooked that we are not equipped to answer it until we have decided what war *is*, and how it is to be regarded by *Christian* eyes. A moral theology of war presupposes a dogmatic theology of war. The basic error of Christian pacifism of Tolstoyan complexion is that it isolates the moral admonitions of Our Lord from their dogmatic and historic setting. It divorces the Sermon on the Mount from its theocentric presuppositions and from its place in the historic revelation of the divine economy, and treats it merely as a guide to humanitarian conduct, or a philosophy of the use of force. The vitalistic Christian militarism which we have seen expounded by some Catholic writers displays an equal insensibility to what must be the fundamental principle of anything which can claim to be a genuine Christian attitude to war—the answer to the questions, 'What, in the light of divine revelation and divine teaching, is the *meaning* of war in general? And what are we to conclude is the meaning of the wars which now threaten us as Christians

must view them in the light of the history of God's dealings with men?'

For to ask, 'What is to be the Christian's view of a war?' is to ask 'What is God's view of a war?' 'What is its meaning in the purposes of His providence?' By faith we participate in *God's* view of things and events; we do not view them solely in relationship to their proximate and secondary causes, we view them in the light of the revelation of the designs of the First Cause; purely human judgment is subjected in humble obedience to the Divine *KRISIS*. And the authentic record of God's judgment on man and His dealings with men, and the place which events occupy in His economy of salvation, is the Bible.

So long as the Bible is not so regarded, but treated as a manual of conduct, it is impossible to gather from it any coherent view of war which is capable of grounding a Christian's outlook. So Christian pacifist and Christian militarist can engage in a battle of contradictory texts, torn from their historic context, whose only result is a complete scepticism in the power of God's Word to throw any consistent light whatsoever on our perplexities. And indeed, so regarded, it is impossible to reconcile the savage bellicosity of the Judges of Israel with the pacifism and defeatism of its Prophets, the fervour of the Machabees for theocratic-nationalist revolt with Our Lord's admonition to sheathe the sword, to turn the other cheek, to resist not evil; it is not easy even to reconcile His own words among themselves. We shall search in vain in the Scripture for a consistent philosophy of force or for a consistent ethic of the use of force. We shall search there in vain for any consistent philosophy or ethic at all. We shall find, in fact, very little concern for the 'ethics of the just war.'

What we shall find is a *religious* conception of the function of war in God's government of mankind, developed and applied with ruthless consistency from Genesis to the Apocalypse. We shall find an interpretation of history, a Divine view of history, which will have widely diversi-

fied moral consequences when applied to diverse historical phases or epochs. The sacred writers are little interested in secondary causes, though they are profoundly interested in temporal events, and quite especially in wars. But they view them *sub specie æternitatis*, they see them as manifestations of the will of God, as instruments of His justice and His wrath. War, like pestilence and famine and earthquake, is the sign and the vehicle of God's judgment on man for sin, the vindication of His sovereignty over rebellious man, of His unique Lordship of life and death.

So, in the beginning, it is above all as the Lord of Hosts that God reveals Himself to His chosen warlike tribe. Their battles are His battles; their victories the sign of His fidelity to His covenant with them; their arms the instruments whereby He implements His promises to them of a land flowing with milk and honey, the instruments of His just judgment on those who would hinder His purposes for His people.

It was left to the Prophets (more particularly to Jeremias and Ezechiel) to see that this conception of war as the instrument of God's judgment cut both ways. War is the sacrament, the effective sign, of the wrath of God not only for Israel but *against* Israel. As the victories of Israel were the manifestation of God's fidelity to His covenant, so the defeat and decimation of Israel is to be the manifestation of God's anger with Israel for her infidelity. Egypt and Assyria and Babylonia are the instruments of Providence for the punishment of God's faithless people. War is not only something to be *waged* in the name of God, it is something to be *undergone* at the hand of God. Confronting the temporal facts of Israel's sins with the eternal fact of God's just judgment, the Prophet foresees that retribution must come, that the backslidings of Israel must receive terrible punishment from God through the ravages of its powerful neighbours, the very neighbours with whom it has sought pacts and alliances instead of trusting in the power of the Most High. It is no question of finding ethical justifica-

tion for the invasions of these 'strangers'; there is no pretence that their's is a 'just war' in compliance with the dictates of the natural law. On the contrary, the very Prophets who see in them the instruments of the divine judgment on Israel denounce them for their own injustices, and foretell their own future retribution. But for Israel there is no question of 'resisting aggression,' of 'stopping Nabuchodonosor.' Repentance, a return to the Lord God, is the only way the Prophets know of averting catastrophe.

In the New Testament there is no change in this idea of the Providential function of war. There is still the same causal connection between sin and war. Jerusalem has killed the prophets and stoned them that were sent to her: her house shall be left desolate (Mt. xxiii, 37, 38); she has not known the things that were to her peace: her enemies shall cast a trench about her and compass her round and straiten her on every side, and beat her flat to the ground and her children in her (Lk. xx, 41-44). Still, as of old, the daughters of Sion must weep for themselves and for their children (Lk. xxiii, 28). Christ's admonitions for His disciples 'in those days' are explicit and unmistakable,

'You shall hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that ye be not troubled. For these things must come to pass: but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom . . . And when you shall see Jerusalem compassed around with an army, then know that the desolation thereof is at hand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains: and those who are in the midst thereof depart out: and those who are in the country not enter into it. For these are the days of vengeance . . .' (Mt., xxiv, 6, 7; Lk., xxi, 21 ff.).

It is odd indeed that G. K. Chesterton could find in the Gospels 'not a word about war at all . . . nothing that throws any light on Christ's attitude to organised warfare except that He seems to have been rather fond of Roman soldiers.' Yet two startling facts emerge from this passage alone which might be expected to have made a singular ap-

peal to G.K.C.'s imagination and love of paradox. Not only does the Saviour urge on His disciples an untroubled detachment with regard to future wars in general; with regard to one imminent war in particular His instructions (echoing with significant differences those of Jeremias before Him) are not only non-participation, but flight and avoidance. Yet humanly speaking it is difficult to conceive of more justified—or more heroic—'resistance to aggression' than that of the defence of Jerusalem against Titus. And humanly speaking it is difficult to imagine more despicable 'unpatriotism' than to abandon the heroic army of defence and 'flee to the mountains.' But the Christian disciple is not to see the siege of Jerusalem with the eyes of Josephus, but with the eyes of Providence. He is to see not the tyranny of the Roman army of occupation, nor the justifiableness of the cause of Simon and his followers, but the Hand of God; for 'the kingdom of God shall be taken from you and shall be given to a nation yielding the fruits thereof' (Mt. xxi, 43).

Thus the Old Testament religious conception of war dominates also the New Testament, but it is confronted with a new order of facts. The kingdom of God is no longer to be identified with any one earthly kingdom, nor are its destinies to be bound up with those of its armed forces. The kingdom of God is taken from a privileged nation and race; the children of God are born not *ex sanguinibus*, but *ex Deo*; the children of Abraham are not the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, but those who share the faith of Abraham. A congregation of the faithful, a universal *Ecclesia* which transcends races and frontiers, with a government distinct from and independent of national or imperial governments, takes the place of a chosen race governed by a political theocracy. The Christian has here below no abiding city; he is *civis sanctorum et domesticus Dei*.

In the light of this we are to read the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly its 'non-resistance' passages. The



Sermon on the Mount is not based upon any general philosophy regarding the use of force; it is not directly concerned with politics or the compassing of political ends (which is not at all to say that for Christians it has no relevance to them). It is descriptive of the conduct of the children of the Kingdom under the conditions of the new dispensation. God saves His people now, not in alliance with their states and their armies, but in suffering with them and in taking upon Himself the punishment of their sins; not by force but by submission to force. Self-assertion has no place in this new technique; evil must be overcome by good; the anger of man worketh not the justice of God; and God manifests His saving power by dying on a Cross. The coming of Christ brings peace on earth to men of good will, but the peace which He gives is not such as the world gives. It is peace with God, and peace among men *in* God. Just because He brings peace—not any peace but that *kind* of peace—He brings ‘not peace but a sword’: the sword of division between the children of the Kingdom and the children of the ‘prince of this world.’ The sword, the material sword, will be used *against* the children of the Kingdom; it is not to be used *by* them in their conquest of the world by Passion (*cf.* Mt. xxvi, 52).

The Kingdom of God which has come among men is thus dissociated from any particular political unit. The new alignments of the forces of good and evil cut across all alignments of nation, race or political allegiance. There is neither Jew nor Greek, Barbarian nor Scythian: all are one in Christ Jesus. Political groupings and allegiances have now only a relative and not an absolute importance; but because that relativity is their relativity to eternity, their importance is enhanced rather than reduced. In the light of this Christ’s attitude to political authority must be understood. Its measure is its service to the Kingdom. He—or rather Our Lady and St. Joseph for Him—submit to the enrolment, but evade the tyranny of Herod who seeks His premature death. He pays His

taxes, solely for the avoidance of 'scandal,' but protesting that the children of His kingdom are free (Mt. xvii, 24-26). He pleads before His judges when to do so gives an opportunity of bearing witness to the Truth, to His Kingship; otherwise He is silent. No text is more mishandled than *Render to Caesar*. It is not a very telling text to use in the interests of current ideas of patriotism. For it is a decision on a political issue *against* the local patriots and *in favour* of submission to the foreign and pagan conqueror. It is as if He were to arise to-day in Prague and to tell Czech patriots to Render to Hitler the things that are Hitler's. But the decision is not a political decision, still less a decision on the *de jure* claims of Rome to Palestine; it is an injunction to render its due to the *de facto* authority. It is not an exception from, but an application of, the injunction of non-resistance.<sup>2</sup>

This enables us to understand the strange combination of submission and independence with respect to the secular power of the first disciples, and which is operative throughout the whole course of the Church's history. All power is from God; the civil ruler is the minister of His wrath, the instrument of His judgment on sin. But so is the slave-owner, even the 'froward' slave owner, who is to be obeyed for the same reason: the reason Christ gave for paying His taxes, to avoid 'scandal,' 'to put to silence the ignorance of foolish men' (I Peter, ii, 12-20, *cf.* Rom. xiii, 1-7). St. Paul asserts vigorously his rights as a free Roman citizen, and makes full use of them in the interests of his freedom to preach the Gospel. But there is no guaran-

---

<sup>2</sup> In the righteous press of to-day it would doubtless be denounced as cynical opportunism, as is the Holy See's rapid recognition of *de facto* conquests. In terms of a purely natural ethic it would be hard to defend; in religious terms which see the Hand of God, punishing and bringing good out of evil, and the purely relative importance of the determination of political forms to the promotion of the Kingdom of God, such conduct is seen to be governed by essentially Christian principles.

tee that the civil power will act justly; there is no guarantee that the Christian will not suffer from it wrongfully (*cf.* I Peter, ii, 19, 20); on the contrary he is to expect unjust persecution from governors and kings for Christ's sake (Mt. x, 18). Like Christ Himself, the Christian knows 'what is in man,' and he is to 'beware of men' (*ib.*, 17). Not only must he expect to *receive* injustice at the hands of earthly rulers; he cannot preclude the possibility that they may command him to *perform* it. In that event he must 'obey God rather than men' (Acts v, 29).

\* \* \* \* \*

All of which may seem to tell us little about what we, as Christians, are to think of Adolf Hitler, or Danzig, or the Soviet Alliance, or aggression, or military service or A.R.P. or the R.A.F. or the T.A. or A.A. But it should provide the *perspective* in which Christians should view them. Our Lord in the Gospels gives us no rule of thumb for grappling with the peculiar problems of succeeding epochs. He *does* give us a *viewpoint* and a *vocation* which must profoundly affect our outlook on these things and our conduct in their regard.

In a further article it is hoped to suggest how we may learn from the endeavours of Christians of other times to see the problems of their own epochs with Christian eyes, and, very tentatively, some ways in which we may do the same in our own and fulfil our specifically Christian mission in the events of to-day and to-morrow.

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.