

IN DEFENCE OF NON-PRAGMATIC PACIFISM

I begin this paper with a blunt theological declaration that I will not have time to defend but which is the framework within which I will offer a particular argument in favour of Christian pacifism. The blunt declaration is that violence and warfare are always a manifestation of human sinfulness. They represent a failure to live the kind of lives that God calls us to live. Put in more explicitly Christian terms, engagement in violence and in warfare are a failure of Christian discipleship.

Not everybody will regard that as a particularly compelling point of departure. In mitigation, let me make another claim. We need as many arguments as we can muster to oppose the evils of violence and warfare in our world, and to encourage the pursuit of true justice and peace. Different kinds of arguments will be more or less convincing in different contexts and among different audiences. Given that eighty-five percent of the world's population confess allegiance to some religious tradition or other, religious reasoning undoubtedly has a role to play. As a Christian theologian, I seek to do my part in persuading Christian audiences that the life and teaching of Jesus provides incontrovertible support for a pacifist position. If Christians seek to defend the use of violence and warfare in global affairs then they need to know that they are choosing a path that has no warrant in the life and teaching of Jesus.

For the first 300 years of Christian history, opposition to warfare and to Christian engagement in the military was unanimously endorsed by all Christian theologians. There were two reasons for this. The first was that involvement in the Roman imperial army required soldiers to swear absolute allegiance to the emperor, even to worship him. That, said the early Christians, was a violation of two commandments: 'You shall have no other gods before me', and, 'you shall not commit idolatry'. It is arguable that the trust we place in military power today is yet another form of false worship.

The commission of idolatry was not the only reason, however, for Christian opposition to military service. The most lengthy treatise opposing Christian involvement in the military comes from the second and early third century theologian, Tertullian. In *De Corona*, Tertullian rebukes Christians

who enlist in the army and invokes the argument against idolatry. But that he says, is a merely accidental argument. The more fundamental reason for opposing warfare is faithfulness to the teaching of Jesus. Tertullian writes: 'I think we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians. What sense is there in discussing the merely accidental when that on which it rests is to be condemned?' (Tertullian 1994b: Ch. XI, 99) He then proceeds to ask:

Do we believe it lawful for a human oath to be superadded to one divine, for a man to come under promise to another master after Christ...? Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs? (Tertullian 1994b: Ch. XI, 99)

Clearly Tertullian thinks that the answer to each of these questions will be no, his warrant being the teaching and example of Jesus. The straightforward inference to a pacifist position from the gospel record of Jesus' life seemed to Tertullian and to all theologians of the early church to be incontrovertible.

The teaching of Jesus frequently appealed to included especially the sermon on the mount in which Jesus says, 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evil doer. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also' (Matthew 5:38–9). Or again: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven ...'(Matthew 5:43–4).¹ In respect of the law against murder Jesus says, 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council'(Matthew 5: 21–2). Jesus typically makes more stringent the

¹ Of all the sayings of Jesus beginning, 'You have heard that it was said ...', this is the only one where the source is not Jewish Scripture. The saying, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy", was presumably well known in the surrounding culture.

customary prohibition of violence. Again in Matthew's record of the sermon on the mount, in the segment known as the Beatitudes, Jesus promises blessing for those who make peace: 'Blessed are the peacemakers', he says, 'for they will be called children of God'(Matthew 5:9). That peacemakers should be called 'children of God' indicates that the way of peace is God's way and promises that God will vindicate those who make peace rather than those who make war.

Alongside his teaching, the early Christians turned also to Jesus' example. When facing arrest prior to his crucifixion, Jesus rebuked his disciple Peter who had drawn his sword against the soldiers. Jesus told him bluntly to put away his sword. Tertullian, again, took that instruction as a principle to be applied to all: 'Christ in disarming Peter, Tertullian wrote, unb[elt]ed every soldier' (Tertullian 1994: Ch. XIX, p.73). When Jesus himself was subjected to the brutal violence of crucifixion, among his dying words was the prayer that his executioners should be forgiven. Love of enemies was a principle upheld by Jesus even unto death.

Christians found plenty of support elsewhere in the Bible for their pacifist position.

The apostle Paul, for example, enjoins readers of his epistle to the Romans to 'bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them'. And further, quoting Proverbs 25:21–22a "... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:14, 20–1).² Such advice is repeated by the unknown author of the first epistle to Peter who writes in the face of early persecution of Christians, 'Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing' (I Peter 3:9). Clearly, the recommendation of both authors is that Christians subjected to evil or oppression should respond without violence.

In Christian theological reasoning, faithfulness to the teaching and example of Jesus is an imperative laid upon us because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I am compelled again to cut a long story short here, but the theological argument in favour of pacifism depends crucially

² The New Testament scholar C.K. Barrett writes, 'In view of v.21, it can scarcely be doubted that the "burning coals" are the fire of remorse. If an enemy is treated in this way he may well be overcome in the best possible fashion—he may become a friend.' Barrett, *Harper's New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle to the Romans*. Reprint. (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987 [1957]), 242–3.

not just upon the teaching and example of Jesus, but also upon the fact that his way of non-violence, of forgiveness, and love of one's enemies was vindicated by God through the raising of Jesus from the dead. The forces of violence and evil were undoubtedly gathered at Calvary. Crucifixion was a brutal and violent means of execution. It was a means of asserting the absolute and inviolable power of Rome, even over life and death. As Jesus' broken body was taken down from the cross and laid in a grave, it appeared that the power of Rome had won. And so it would have remained if Jesus had not been raised by God from death. The resurrection is, among other things, a decisive vindication of Jesus and his ministry, and a refutation of the view that violence and evil will triumph in the end. It signals that the forces of evil will not have the last word. The purpose of God represented in all that Jesus said and did will not be defeated, even when we do our worst.

What all of this amounts to, in my view, is that Christians are presented with a stark contrast between the power exercised in weakness, in forgiveness, and in love, and the power of violence and military force. The two are not compatible. Indeed, in the crucifixion of Jesus they are set in direct opposition to one another. No elegant casuistry, no amount of pragmatic justification for war, no appeal to a provisional ethic necessary in a world that yet falls short of the kingdom of God, can disguise the stark and irreconcilable contrast between the life and teaching of Jesus, and the violence of warfare.

Arguments in favour of Christian pacifism have been advanced in much more detail by a number of contemporary Christian ethicists. My estimation of the state of play is that such arguments are gaining traction among Christians today, albeit there is a very long way to go to in convincing all who claim to be followers of Christ that participation in violence and warfare is fundamentally incompatible with the Christian gospel.

I want to draw attention, however, to one important aspect of the argument that I have briefly sketched. Ethical arguments can generally be arrayed along a spectrum between absolutist approaches to ethics at one end of the spectrum and relativist approaches at the other. Deontological ethics is an example of an absolutist approach that allows no exception to the

universal dictates of practical reason. Consequentialist ethics, on the other hand, tends toward a relativist approach in which the right, or the best possible, action in any given circumstance depends upon the likely consequences of the action. A consequentialist who is inclined to a pacifist position in most circumstances leaves open the possibility, albeit a slim one, that violent intervention in a situation of conflict might sometimes produce just and peaceful ends. The assassination of Hitler has sometimes been offered as an example. Consequentialism is a pragmatic mode of argument. Its principal concern is the adoption of means that will produce the best outcome.

The theological argument that I have offered above is not of that kind. It holds rather that the use of violence in any circumstances is intrinsically wrong. It is wrong because it flies in the face of God's intent for human life as revealed in Jesus Christ. Understood theologically — that is, in the light of Christ — the use of violence against other human beings, for any reason, is one more instance of what the Bible calls sin.

I noted to begin with that the basic theological commitment that drives this argument will not appeal to everybody. Recognition of this fact does not invalidate the argument, but should function rather as an encouragement to pacifists to develop as many arguments as they can, suitably tailored to the range of fiduciary commitments of the world's multiple audiences. For some audiences, for the fifty-two percent of New Zealanders, for example, who claim no religious affiliation, consequentialist arguments are likely to be more compelling. As a Christian theologian, however, I consider it my task, in cooperation with others, to provide arguments for the consideration of the 2.2 billion Christians in the world. For that audience we must continue to make the case that involvement in any kind of violence and in warfare is a failure of Christian discipleship.

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