

THEOLOGIANS AND THE BOMB

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In sophisticated theological circles of all religious communions unqualified rejection of war is not even argued against anymore. It is just insulted. The word "pacifists" is apparently never used without the adjective "sentimental," if not worse.

The reason for this attitude is a little difficult to understand. It would seem that there must be more deserving objects of scorn than people who are so revolted by the shedding of human blood that, sometimes perhaps without lengthy casuistic cogitations, they raise their hands heavenward and swear to abstain from all forms of direct or indirect military action.

Let it be granted that such people are unrealistic, utopian, emotional, and all the other faults which are ascribed to them by the hard-headed empiricists of religion. For the sake of the argument, let it be assumed that they are totally wrong and may cause a great deal of harm to the relatively good society which is to be safeguarded by war. Still, from the point of view of religion—which, it may be taken for granted, abhors war even when war is inevitable and necessary—surely in a world haunted by the constant threat of annihilation there must be men and ideologies and institutions and impulses which more properly and greatly merit imprecations and refutations: namely, all those which tend to cause the reality and possibly also the necessity of organized killings.

It is a quality of moral revulsion which one finds lacking in Father John Courtney Murray's "Morality and Modern War" (*Worldview*, December 1958). Father Murray would, of course, pray and reason and exert himself for the prevention of war as much as any pacifist, but he is so preoccupied with his taxonomical endeavors in the field of military morality and social catastrophes that in his writing one does not find any sense of what nuclear war really is. The ghastly vision of thousands of charred and disintegrated human bodies is effectively hidden behind elaborate ethical charts. And in his article "Religion and the Bomb" (April 1959), Professor Julian Hartt shows that he does not like pacifists any better, even though he loses control of himself at one point to execrate war and denounce those whose systems of values foster it.

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My comments, to be sure, are pretty subjective. But on the subject of nuclear war a large dose of subjectivism is called for. In the first place, unless there be a demand for peace so violent that it will shake the heavens and thrones of the mighty, the necessary intellectual and social efforts will not be undertaken to ensure peace. And let it not be said again, as is said nowadays invariably when this point in the discussion is reached, that the belief that peace can be ensured is in and of itself idolatrously utopian: we are speaking not of the establishment of the Kingdom of God but only, and modestly, of preventing the outbreak of international atomic warfare.

One must, in the second place, begin one's arguments on this subject with a personal reaction because one has the impression that the proponents of religious realism and of theological permissiveness in regard to "limited war" have heard all the logical arguments against their views and have not been persuaded, even as—contrary to the assumption often made—most "idealists" have listened to and rationally concluded that they must reject the arguments of the realists.

What good will it do to go through the whole roster of considerations once again? Surely Father Murray had previously heard Professor Hartt's question about who can be expected or trusted to define the limits of "limited war" and the specific application of the concepts of aggressive or defensive war. It may be presumed that he has found an answer satisfactory to himself either in philosophical terms or within the authority of the Catholic Church. By the same token, it would not be too difficult to go through Father Murray's tight conceptual development and, approaching it from another perspective, point out its inadequacies. This would do equally little good. He has unquestionably been confronted with all these issues before and has, at least for himself, overcome them.

In other ways, the same probable ineffectiveness of argumentation looms up before Professor Hartt. It is not very easy to understand his ultimate concern. This seems to be that if men do not possess loftier commitments than their own lives they will not be prepared to wage war for any but egotistical goals. But men must be reminded that their egotistical goals will be destroyed by war and that loftier goals than egotistical ones are unattainable through war. And theologians must not ponderously cover under their heavy academic blankets the straightforward divine command to sanctify life, not to abandon it to the powers of human sinfulness.

(One sometimes wonders whether our insistence on theological deepening of religion and life is justified when one observes the contrast between theological subtlety and the uncomplicated, healthy human desire for dignified existence. Under such

conditions an appeal to the animalic fear of pain and death and to the untrained, uncritical wish for personal security may be entirely warranted.)

By the time Father Murray has run the course of his argument against the "twin errors" of pacifism and militarism, the Church is deeper in the business of justifying war than ever before in history. In the past, religious institutions have demanded that war be waged and blessed it while it was taking place, but now more is asked: nuclear war must be made a possibility by, among other things, education under the direction of a moral imperative and by the construction of model limited wars in terms of—presumably theological—conceptual analysis. The next step might be the formation of an Institute for the Theological Formulation of Atomic Military Strategy, known as ITFAMS. Such an Institute would be the logical *reductio ad absurdum* of most contemporary theologizing on the problem of war.

The trouble with most of our thinking on this question is that we have looked at Mars through the wrong end of the telescope, and therefore pacifists have shown up as small sentimental fools. We have assumed that human sinfulness is a given, determined quantity; that any attempt to reduce this quantity constitutes arrogance and self-idolization; and that, therefore, the practice of virtue must be fitted into the existing, unchangeable framework of sin. War, it is believed, is part of this permanent character of unredeemed human existence, and from this premise follow all these desperate and torturous endeavors to reconcile the realities of religion and war with one another.

Turn the telescope around, and you lose none of the objects in the picture: sin is not thereby optimistically and deceptively denied; the power of evil is not thereby denigrated; the real dangers which exist in the world are not overlooked; and the possibility of war is not thereby magically blown away. But instead of positing sinfulness as a given, dogmatic, metaphysical reality to which we must submit, it is transformed into what the philosophers call a limiting concept. It comes at the end of goodness, when goodness cannot go any further, when goodness is frustrated—not before goodness has been tried, not *a priori* telling goodness where and how far it can go.

And if virtue could not crash the barrier of sin yesterday, then today it may succeed, for neither virtue nor sin is a given quantity; rather are they dynamic realities which grow and wane, and thus the war that may have been unavoidable yesterday may be preventable today. Which of them is stronger at

any given point in history can be determined, not by philosophic calculations or by theological statistics, but only by the grace of God and by man's moral strength.

The distinction between offensive and defensive war is, of course, a very old one. Jewish law makes another fundamental distinction between "commanded wars" and "permitted wars." Commanded wars are those which the Bible describes as divinely ordered, against the seven aboriginal Palestinian peoples and the Amalekites. But this very law also long ago "historicized" this commandment, placed it in the closed chapter of the past without any possible bearing on the present: these nations no longer exist, and therefore commanded wars are no longer conceivable.

Just the same, even retroactively and against strong judicial opposition, Maimonides toned down the commandment of obligatory war by permitting it only if the enemy had explicitly refused to accept the duties of the minimal moral law incumbent upon all human beings. As for "permitted wars," that is, wars to be decided upon by human considerations, they may be entered into only with the permission of the great Sanhedrin of seventy-one members, and thus, at least for Jewish purposes, also this category of wars has become a mere memory since the Sanhedrin has in effect become unconstitutable.

"Limited wars" of which the tacticians and now also the theologians speak were the only ones which even in Biblical days were regarded as conceivable in the first place. Let anyone try to wage any kind of war these days and yet, taking the Bible seriously, adhere to the limitations there laid down—sparing all women and children, fruit trees and water springs, keeping one line of withdrawal open for the enemy by which he may save himself, exempting the newly married and those who have embarked on new constructive enterprises from military service, and sending home all those who declare not that they have scruples against bearing arms but that they are afraid! Who is not afraid? Why, not only trees and streams, the very air we breathe is homicidally polluted even before we have begun the war!

Religion may not be able to prevent war, although this is far from proved since it has never been tried, but it can in turn at least refuse to sanction it and thus establish standards toward which to strive. The minimum, however, that can be demanded from the theologians is that they cease belaboring the few pacifists and address themselves a little more to the question of how far religion can make compromises with existing conditions and still remain the hard command of God.