CHRISTIAN PACIFISM: AN ORTHODOX VIEW

The Non-violence Position Represents “a Principled Refusal to Look at Reality”

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I take it as axiomatic that any battle between armies, if it is going to be fought at all and thus won or lost, must be fought upon a common field of battle. And if this holds true for battles it holds equally true for debates upon fundamental spiritual absolutes: unless the theoretical grounds are common to both parties argument is futile. Precisely because of this, debate is often futile in our time because agreement upon fundamentals is rarely possible within a world as badly fissoned spiritually as is our own. It is often better to retire from the game than merely go through the motions mechanically, scoring debater’s points and winning empty victories due to a superiority in dialectical skills.

Having meditated long upon the current debate about pacifism and the traditional doctrine of the just war, a debate prompted by the discovery and development of atomic energy, I have often thought that the participants in the argument were talking about different things, debatable things, which were simply not being debated at all. This impression was deepened when I addressed the question as it is being argued within a Christian context.

The defenders of the traditional doctrine of the just war—a doctrine to which I adhere—seemed to me to be men who rested their case almost exclusively upon philosophical grounds, upon conclusions deducible from the natural law. The advocates of pacifism (I abstain from considering the case of those who advocate surrender: non-violent resistance is not surrender but precisely resistance of a certain kind) seemed to argue from properly theological grounds, from an appeal to the beatitudes as urging non-violent resistance to evil and from the Christian call to a personal perfection which excludes the possibility of killing another human being under any circumstances. Gandhi’s frank preference for the “violent” man over the coward has been cited by Christian pacifists who do not condemn legitimate self-defense by a nation as such, but who see in it an inferior incarnation of the fullness of the Christian life.

The just war doctrine does not meet this position because the just war doctrine proceeds from natural and philosophical premises whose limits preclude any consideration of the meaning of Christian love and perfection as such. I would suggest that Christian “traditionalists” might better engage the pacifists on a common ground were they to argue directly from the very heart of Christian dogma itself. This would not only make discussion possible but it would turn the flank of the pacifist counter-attack against the traditional doctrine: i.e., the contention, itself irrelevant to pacifism theoretically but convenient as a dialectical rebuttal, that the just war doctrine was elaborated in a pre-atomic age and has been rendered irrelevant by the flat of history.

I should like this small essay to be nothing other than the initiation of such an argument by a man who thinks within the orthodox Christian tradition. Permit me to marshall my thesis under three headings: evil; love; tragedy.

Implicit in the non-violent position is the assumption that love will eventually conquer evil and win the world for Christ, even if temporarily a Communist victory by force of arms would be overwhelming. Now I suggest that this doctrine enshrines a conception both of love and of history that are debatable on grounds common to the traditions of Christian theology as those traditions have grown up within the Western world. Imposing that the powers of evil shall be overcome by what it considers to be a manifestation of Christian love, the non-violence position is guilty of what Dr. Eric Voegelin would call a principled refusal to look at reality. The contention is completely beyond the experience of the human race: evil unresisted simply feeds upon itself; the Hitler of the Berlin bunker of 1945 and the criminals surrounding him were worse men than they were when they assumed power in 1933.

The pacifist position assumes that the free will
of man can eventually, if not today then tomorrow or sometime in the future, be bound by the mere presence of the good. Yet it is the testimony of the race and the teaching of St. Paul that whereas we would do the good, we often do the evil. Knowledge of goodness, the presumed effect of non-violent resistance against tyranny, would not necessarily mitigate or eliminate that tyranny. Implicit in the position is a doctrine of love that is not Christian and that evinces that subtle materialization of the spiritual that is common to religious traditions that came to fruition beyond the borders of historic Christendom.

The issue demands elucidation. The East, conceiving love as it does in terms of a subtle "energy" radiating from the good man and bringing under its sweet yoke those exposed to its influence, implies that love is a kind of lofty "force" superior to matter but functioning much the same way as does a magnet with reference to steel. Exposed to love (in this instance as manifested in non-violent resistance), evil would wither away and the hardness of the hearts of men would disappear and charity would thus conquer the world.

St. Thomas Aquinas would have found in this doctrine a confusion between efficient and final causality and the whole tradition of scholastic theology would have rejected it on the grounds that the free will of man can be bound only by the Vision of God, that the good here below does not necessarily elicit the love of the human heart, because even God Himself as known in the darkness of faith by men here below can be rejected, because every good encountered this side of beatitude is perforce limited and therefore exclusive of other goods. Were this not true, men would not be free to choose between what is morally good and that good residing in all sin that makes sin a permanent attraction for the human race. I can have a thousand reasons for loving the good, for surrendering myself to a human or to a divine person, but none of these reasons constrains my will.

Precisely here lies the mystery of human freedom. The non-violent theology, by preaching an ineritability—quasi or absolute—of the victory of goodness, not only confines the nature of goodness but destroys the freedom of man. This doctrine on the will implies a doctrine on the meaning of history that displays all the marks of classical millenarianism: i.e., the doctrine assumes that its followers have discovered the key to peace on earth; it assumes that history is redeemable this side of apocalypse and judgment; it assumes that the powers of evil can be bound by the forces of good within history itself.

But orthodox Christianity has insisted throughout two thousand years that there is no heaven on earth and that there is no way to end the power of the Prince of this World short of that transcendence of history which is apocalypse. The tradition has respected the mystery of evil that each man experiences in the depths of his freedom. A theology whose inner logic denies human freedom and preaches an end to evil within history can hardly call itself Christian.

The Roman Catholic Church made of Thomas Aquinas her Common Doctor, and when he confronts the precept of not resisting evil he speaks out of a context that ought to reveal even more radically the different theologies of love motivating the orthodox Christian tradition and the doctrine of non-violent resistance. Aquinas argues the issue in an extremely provocative context: the morality of a religious order of men directed to soldiering! He comes out for the validity of such an order on the grounds that it is entirely proper that "a religious order be established for soldiering, not indeed for any worldly purpose, but for the defense of divine worship and public safety, or also of the poor and oppressed, according to Psalm lxxxi, 4: Rescue the poor, and deliver the needy out of the hand of the sinner."

Even when one abstracts from the historical conditions themselves obviously bound up with the Middle Ages, it should be clear that we are moving here in a spiritual and intellectual climate that has nothing to do with any kind of hierarchy that would permit soldiering as a kind of concession to human weakness. We rather face the mind of the same Aquinas who earlier had argued that the soldier who refers the good of his country in a just war to God as ground and cause of all goodness enters into a business which "may be the cause of martyrdom." The Common Doctor of the Catholic Church clearly has no inferiority complex when he discusses war, and let it be noted that his arguments move from theological rather than philosophical premises.

In the article first cited St. Thomas faces squarely the precept to resist evil and replies that a man may refrain from resisting evil and thus attain perfection provided that it is "expedient to act thus for the spiritual welfare of others." He goes on to condemn out of court those who tolerate passively the wrongs done to others: "this pertains to imperfection, or even to vice." Let us note carefully the emphasis placed upon the Other. I refrain from resisting evil and attain perfection if this will benefit
spiritually the Other. I fight if by fighting I protect the Other."

There is not a word here suggesting Gandhi’s emphasis upon the personal perfection of the man resisting evil, nor is there anything that calls to mind the mystique the Christian pacifist throws around his own understanding of spiritual command to self-perfection through the practice of the beatitudes. For Aquinas my perfection seems little more than a by-product of my being about my brother’s business, little more than a consequence of my concentrating upon the rights and wrongs of other men. The love here is ecstatic, almost erotic in Sombart’s and Dawson’s sense of the term.

In another context St. Thomas says that I ought violently to resist an unjust attack from an aggressor if by so resisting him I can deter him from his act and thus bring him to see the evil of his ways. Given the proper circumstances, therefore, violent resistance can well be demanded by the very law of Christian love itself. I ought to love my enemy so much that I am courageous enough to take up the sword against him. To fight cleanly is hardly enough, but to fight with love calls for a heroism that is truly a nailing of oneself upon the cross, a sacrifice of self for the Other that transcends the limits of the flesh because here the Other to whom I sacrifice myself is my enemy and my sacrifice is precisely the sword I take up against him.

This doctrine is bound to shock the non-violent resister because to him love is essentially egocentric and because for him the Other exists largely as an instrument whereby he can achieve his own perfection. I would suggest that the pacifist’s customary social irresponsibility follows precisely from this warped conception of the meaning of love. But the orthodox call to perfection is primarily a call to perfect the Other and thereby become perfected.

The Thomistic doctrine on war and violence is by no means a purely “natural law” doctrine; it is all that, of course, but it is a theology as well. Maintaining, as indicated, that a soldier who dies not alone directly for the faith (who is a martyr by definition, according to Aquinas) but for his country when engaged in a just war (provided that the soldier lay down his life because the good of his nation is wrapped within the infinite goodness of God) St. Thomas sees the soldier as a possible martyr and saint precisely in his role as soldier. The Incarnation could not be expressed more compactly: the temporal is so thoroughly saturated with the spiritual that the very act of fighting under arms can partake of the awful and mysterious battle between good and evil themselves.

Orthodoxy can be defined as the refusal to dissolve the tension that forms human existence into a cross. Orthodoxy, as Chesterton once wrote, is the making of the lion to lie down with the lamb without the lion thereby becoming lamblike. The tragic moment rooted in the very heart of man is denied by the pacifist when he advances against us the inconceivability of modern war. Modern war is unthinkable. Let us admit that at the very outset. But what is unintelligible to man (such as chance) might be intelligible to God. St. Thomas tells us that a judge who orders a thief put to death acts rightly, but he adds that the thief’s wife who pleads for the life of her husband because she has children to feed also acts rightly. The more universal good might well conflict with the less universal, but he who is in charge of a less universal good is bound in duty to pursue it.

Yves Simon, commenting on this teaching, raises the hypothetical question of a gravely sick father whose son is at his bedside trying to keep him alive. God reveals to the son in a private revelation that it is His Will that the boy’s father die by morning. What ought the son to do? Simon answers unequivocally: the son ought to do everything in his power to keep his father alive. If God wants the old gentleman dead, that is God’s business; his is to do his duty as a son. This is God’s will for him.

When applied to the possibility of an atomic war this principle takes on an awesome mystery and reveals what might well be the final test for the human race. If God were to will the twilight of civilization in an atomic war this would be God’s affair, not the West’s. What God would will of the West would be that it do its duty come what may. The West would be foolish indeed to seek such a destiny in armed conflict with the Soviet Union, but if forced to armed conflict in the defense of justice, the tradition says clearly that the West in all conscience would have to shoulder this duty.

Western Christendom has taught us all that resurrection from death is the meaning itself of faith, that spiritual death is a death more final for the human spirit than honorable defeat, even if that defeat should lay waste the world. The cosmos itself, and its destruction in some awful atomic Götterdämmerung would not be too high a price to pay for man’s answer to this supreme challenge. And let us be assured of one thing, for this, too, our Christian inheritance teaches us: if the world were thus stilled and silent, bereft of the voice of man, it would have seen apocalypse. The night would have passed and man would have entered into his inheritance.