

In Praise of Good Sense

by Erasmus

Thank you for asking me to join this discussion. Your invitation has charm and just the touch of beleaguered optimism I always loved. After all the blood your century has spilled, at least a few of you believe that reasonable men might yet persuade the world that war must never come again. It warms and heartens me that the plight of Peace still touches some minds. You really seem to believe that some argument, even one called up from the past, might yet move the warrior heart. Do I believe that this might happen? Of course I will try again. The native good sense of men might yet listen. I never despaired of mankind, no matter how much evidence might have overwhelmed my faith in it.

At least this discussion can be carried on safely in public. There was a time when speaking out against war was dangerous, and I constantly spoke against it. If one opened his mouth against war, he was looked on as worse than a beast, as a fool, and (can you believe it?) as un-Christian! And where do you think this avalanche of abuse came from? From rulers? From militarists? By no means. From them you heard just what you might expect: the straight politics of Realism. They were unhindered by moral considerations. "We do what we have to do," they said. At least that had a certain dark integrity and no pretense of morality. But the theologians and philosophers were another story. From them came the true undoing of Peace.

War is the most dangerous rock on which every good society comes to shipwreck. Yet these thinkers, custodians of Christ's words, erected a moral defense of war. Twisting here, bending there, they created a philosophy

Brooklyn residents among our readers are advised that the Erasmus of these remarks is not the large public high school with which they associate the name most closely but, rather, the Rotterdam-born priest, humanist, and classics scholar whose prodigious undertakings in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries included a Latin edition of the New Testament based on the original Greek text and such works as *The Education of a Christian Prince* and *The Praise of Folly*. Dennis Peters was instrumental in obtaining these remarks for presentation to ACDA.

of war and described the conditions under which it is justified. They pressed into their service every authority, human and divine, to prove that war is a moral, acceptable way to resolve disputes. Aristotle, Plato, the Fathers of the Church, even Jesus himself, march forward as if in uniform to defend the just war theory.

In their zeal to justify war these theorists sifted the Gospel words of Jesus. The evangelists plainly show Him instructing his followers not to resist evil, to return good for evil, to put away their swords. But in these mountains of evidence they find a bump from which they argue that Jesus allowed violence and therefore war. On it they erect one of their famous "distinctions." Christ, they say, was teaching only *relative* pacifism, not *absolute* pacifism. He intended his followers to prefer nonresistance but to set it aside for a good cause. What evidence do they offer? The incident in which Jesus drives the moneychangers from the temple. On just one occasion Jesus seems to depart from his own principles and in doing so provides the ransackers of the Gospel a reason to justify the slaughter of war.

The theorists of just war have another device for diluting the message of Jesus. They draw further "distinctions" from his sayings by dividing his words into *Commandments* and *Counsels*. The Commandments apply to everyone; the counsels are means for only a few souls seeking perfection. A reasonable, well-intentioned person must follow the Commandments—honesty, chastity, and the like. But when justice applies the pressure of almost superhuman demands, as asking to return good for evil and giving up one's cloak, these exceed the powers of ordinary people. Jesus expects ordinary people in the real world to use common sense. For everyone knows there are times when a man simply has to return injury for injury or he will lose his honor or a higher good. With arguments such as these the scholastic theologians try to force the words of Christ to contradict what their weak faith cannot believe, that he was a man of Peace. I cannot accept their reasoning.

I may as well come directly to my point. There is no such thing as a just war. War

cannot live with justice. How can any war be justified? I will go further, lest I be accused of equivocation. I will repeat with approval the words of Cicero: "An unjust peace is preferable to the most just war."

At this my contemporary Niccolò Machiavelli still smiles in a patient, superior way. He was always the realist; he prided himself on living in the real world, unaffected by moral demands. We both wrote books for our princes, you know, he for the Medici, I for young Charles V. His book became far more widely known and, to the destruction of Europe, more widely used. "You must be realistic," he said, "if you want power. And even to do good you must have power. If you want to rule, you cannot learn from fabulous republics spun from the dreams and wishes of moralists with no stomach for reality." And again: "Anyone who plans to act like a good man all the time will be ruined by the majority who are evil." It never changes, does it? If you present the absolute case for peace and nonviolence, the realists shrug you off as a gentle dreamer and deluge you with facts and realities. But with the Machiavellis you face no pretense of morality. So let me assure you that I have heard the arguments of the realists before. They rarely change. And I have also seen the results of this realism. I am not attacking war because I know nothing about it.

Must I present my credentials to prove that I know war first hand? For forty years I crisscrossed Europe when it was most constantly at war. Rapine and carnage were everywhere. And in every single case those who waged war offered the most ringing defense of the justice of their cause. They swore that simple justice drove them to fight even against their wills. When animals fall upon one another, I can understand and forgive, for they act in ignorance. But human beings should not have to be shown by reasoning that war is unjustifiable, since it harms not so much those who start it and carry it on. The full burden of it falls upon the innocent, who gain nothing from either victory or defeat. The chief hurt falls on those who have nothing to do with it. No cause, however just it seems, can be set against the lives of the innocent, the unhappy masses, whom war inevitably destroys. Even with the primitive weapons of the sixteenth century, we had no clean, surgical wars where deft commanders cut away the offending tissue and left the rest of the population clean and whole. War always destroys the innocent. You cannot justify their deaths. Nor can you cover your guilt by claiming that God marches on your side. How often I have seen armies driven by the fanatic certainty that they smite in God's name. How shameful that so often their cause was defended by the airtight logic of scholastic philosophers proving that they are preparing for a better world. Sleep well, O Soldier of Christ!

But some will object that the love of violence is inborn in the human heart, and that, therefore, wars are inevitable. Yes, I believe I know the human heart. Homer was correct when, in the *Iliad*, he portrayed the fierce joy men often feel in battle, the sentiment that quickens the pulse, the thrill

of living at the edge of death. How do I explain this fierceness? I once tried to explain it by turning to the field you now call anthropology. Rousseau and Freud later did much the same with no more special skills for the task than I had. With you moderns anthropology has become a veritable passion, mapping out your conduct from the behavior of our primitive ancestors. From where did this love of violence enter the human heart? Violence seems so foreign to the way we are born: weak, defenseless, with no natural equipment for either violent attack or defense. We seem created for gentleness and making friends.

I think that having to kill animals changed our primitive ancestors from gentleness to violence. They had to defend themselves from terrifying beasts. The terror of being pursued gave way to a rush of relief when they killed the violent animals. This relief developed into a thrilling pleasure and then into joy. It was joy to pursue animals and kill them. Those men who did it most often and most surely earned the gratitude of their frightened little bands. They became the leaders, the heroes. Killing became a joy and watching it a thrill. Gradually the enemy became not animals only, but other men. Greed and struggle for territory arose with the lust for power. As men battled each other to the death they felt joy and the hot rush of pleasure in their veins.

But no matter how violence entered the human heart, I admit that it lives in us now. I also know that this flame of violence dies as suddenly as it flares up. Of itself, it does not have enough energy to sustain the effort required for war. For that you need fanatics and causes and philosophers who show ways to justify war. You need philosophical reasoning and even, God help us, religious motives to keep a war raging. Fanatics and philosophers now provide the incentives to war. Left alone, the human impulse to violence dies quickly. Men yearn for peace as they long for sleep after coition. Only when violence is carried along by a twisted philosophy can wars go on.

In my days the fuel for war was supplied by kingdoms and principalities clashing for power in the most hideous ways. A thousand men would die in a month of fighting for a little hamlet. The countryside was streaming with widows and orphans and bewildered animals. When the hamlet finally fell, its new prince would casually sell it to his former enemy or trade it away to form a coalition against his former ally. Scholastic philosophers call this cynical power play a "just war." It is just, they say, because it was declared by a legal ruler with a proper motive. Did any prince ever lack for a just cause when he felt he needed one?

At the same time that these nationalistic struggles were increasing, the Reformation came with the finest, purest motives of all for waging war on one's fellow man. Men must now kill each other for the good of immortal souls. The heretic slain by the orthodox could sink no further into sin; such a slayer saved innocent souls from hearing false doctrine to the peril of their souls. Hovering over all the bloodletting were the theologians, acting as moral umpires, measuring out the rules for conducting it all quite morally.

“Did any prince ever lack a just cause when he felt he needed one?”

What were these philosophers trying to prove with their theory of just war? What is a just war? Is it not one that a Christian may wage while staying free of sin? Though his human weakness makes him quail at human slaughter, his conscience remains clear, so long as his legitimate prince has caused the war to subdue a greater evil. Again I ask, was there ever a ruler who did not think his cause was just, and that it would lead to a better world?

From this chain of reasoning you may see how a philosophical, rationalizing attitude toward war will never bring it to an end. Once the proponents of just war theory get you matching syllogisms with them, you have lost more than an argument. You have transformed war into an abstraction to be weighed on some logician's scales. What spirit possesses such men that an enemy of war has to press his case with reason and logic? The arguments do not lie in your power of reasoning but in your hearts, your common feelings. The most effective argument I can use against this madness is an itemized catalogue of your nuclear arsenals. How could sensitive people bear to listen to such a hideous catalogue and dare to debate the morality of manufacturing it, much less of ever using it?

Just war? An oxymoron—a contradiction in terms. Just war? For that phrase I have a word, but it relates more to the sense of smell than to rational debate.

And yet the theory of just war seems to be plausible. We hear this plea so often: “We are waging war, it is true, but we are doing it unwillingly. We are forced into it by the wicked deeds of others. We are only pursuing our rights. Our cause is just.”

To that plea I say this: All the evils of war we must fix as the responsibility of those who bring forward such

specious defenses of war. And doesn't it come down to this, that we have turned our minds over to Aristotle and to Roman legalists? They carry more weight with us now than the words of Christ. Their legalisms permit us to match violence with violence, to extract our pound of flesh. The teaching of Christ is polluted by the writings of dialecticians, sophists, and pagan lawyers.

Do we want a war, a truly just war? Then let us see our true enemies. Let us take arms against greed and anger and ambition, the fear of death. That is a war whose outcome will be peace.

War comes from the freed of political leaders, influenced by fanatics and fatuous propagandists. You must never again reach the point where you call “heretic” and “traitor” one who preaches vigorously against war. If you do that, those who pervert the Gospel to furnish greedy rulers with justification for their schemes will become the orthodox and the very pillars of society.

So, perhaps you have expected the wrong thing from me. I will not give you a closely reasoned tissue of chop logic to counter the sophism of the “just warriors.” I will not write a legalistic document on which I can fling down my triumphant pen and gloat over a vanquished opponent. Those who justify war will never be routed. And toward them you must not become hostile. Striking out at them is as contrary to Christ's nonviolence as killing them. You must win them with an example of love.

I have never despaired, though, and I never caused the souls of good people to waver by preaching despair in dark times. When I died, my message of nonviolence, of tolerance, of an end to fanaticism seemed to die with me. It seemed swallowed by brutality. But it stayed alive for two hundred years and reemerged in the French Enlightenment. It flowered into political and religious toleration in your own constitution. My abhorrence of nationalistic pride, my desire for a united Europe, lies in your United Nations. My love for Christ never excluded my love for men of other faiths or of none. Though some wanted to burn me for saying it, I preferred the just Turk to the unjust Christian. That spirit of tolerance lives more strongly with you than I ever dared to hope. So perhaps in time this last madness, this legalistic justification of war, one day will also pass and we will learn to trust the promptings of our heart to which the message of Christ so ardently appeals—“Blessed are the Peacemakers.”