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WAR AND THE CHRISTIAN

(II)

By D.B. Knox

The Protestant Faith

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The Bible is deeply concerned for right relationships. A passion for righteousness is something we have largely lost sight of in our modern society. The Old Testament, and the New, are full of a passion for righteousness, for right relationships, for right dealings, for rendering to everyone what is due, rendering to God what is due to God, and to our neighbour what is due to him.

A passion for righteousness may call us to war. Righteousness may well involve anger, but it never involves the hating of your enemy in a vindictive sense. Regard for righteousness involves anger against unrighteousness. In Rom. 1:18 we read of the anger of God revealed against all unrighteousness of men.

Anger is compatible with love, but only with holy love: that is, a love which hates unrighteousness, hates iniquity and which shrinks from it with that instantaneous reaction Christ had when He said to His friend Peter "Get thee behind me, Satan, thou savourest not the things of God....". This intense and holy passion for righteousness has nowadays been largely lost amongst Christians. We need to ask the Spirit of God to teach us the mind of God with regard to righteousness because otherwise we fall into the quagmire of sentimental love. Sentimental love which does not differentiate - a love which has no principles - is the curse of our modern society. This is absolutely foreign to the New Testament and the Old. God is love and God is righteous; there is no contradiction between the two. Love must always be righteous. God's love, His holy love, is seen in His holy righteousness on the cross. "He spared not his own son but delivered him up for us all". At Calvary pain and suffering and death was accepted, indeed inflicted, by God to achieve righteousness, and it was an action of love. But it was holy love, not sentimental love which does not differentiate between right and wrong, justice and injustice,

good and evil. This latter so called love is the thing to beware of, and it is this which is played upon today with regard to the Vietnam war. Every sensible, responsible adult regards war as horrid, but undifferentiated dislike of war is not the Christian attitude. The Christian must hate with an intense hatred unrighteousness and accept, if necessary, suffering and indeed inflict it as God inflicted it on His Son, in vindication of righteousness. To think that freedom from pain and injury is the great aim in life is to have lost all sense of the supernatural dimension of life and indeed all sense of moral values. This is, of course, what our modern society has done. It ignores, if not denies, that man is a being of two worlds, the supernatural as well as the natural, and that he lives by values which transcend the natural order. Typical modern thought cannot avoid wrong conclusions because it abstracts from the whole merely a part, and bases its judgments on this part, ignoring the rest of reality.

War is only to be undertaken as an act of righteousness and judgment. God delegates to men His supreme right to judge in certain circumstances. We have not all got the duty to judge, but this office is delegated to some, e.g., parents have a duty to judge the behaviour of their children. Private persons have received from God no right or duty to judge one another, and we are not to usurp this office. God is ultimately the only judge, for He alone has the right to judge, for He is our creator and we are all created as it were tenants-in-chief to God. Through God's nature of long-suffering, He has postponed judgement for our sins for the time being, to provide us with the opportunity for salvation. Otherwise, if God entered into judgment with us, we would all be condemned and finished. Meanwhile, in the long-suffering of God, and for the preservation of

society, He has delegated to persons holding institutional positions His right of judgment which then becomes their duty to discharge conscientiously. It is no mere option. That is why St. Paul says in Rom. 13 that the magistrate is the minister of God. In this the apostle was echoing the Old Testament "The judgment is God's" (Deut. 1:17); "He said to the judge You judge not for man but for the Lord" (II Chron. 9:6).

Unless the magistrate is acting as God's delegate he has no right even to lay an arresting hand on a person, a fellow man created in God's image. Nor have we any right to judge one another unless we are acting in God's name. Now, of course, judgment administered by men may be very inexact, because of their sin and blindness and ignorance, nevertheless the administrator of justice is ultimately acting in God's behalf. That is why the policeman may arrest you.

The ultimate sanction of the magistrate in the community is the sword, that is to say, force, and the ultimate sanction of international justice is war. We all hope that through the establishment of other less drastic methods of international justice, the time may soon come when the sword of war will very seldom have to be unsheathed, but at present it is the only method. It may well be that a nation has an obligation to vindicate righteousness in the community of nations and it may be only able to do so by war at the present juncture.

It is not right for the magistrate to let individuals do as they like in the community; and it is also not right if it is the duty of a particular nation to enter into an obligation to fight for right relations amongst nations, to neglect to do so. The question of when there is a duty to

enter into a war is a difficult one and it will be resolved for any nation by a consideration of such things as its commitments, its obligations and its ability to help, but basically, underlying all, is the fact that if your brother is suffering wrongfully and needs your help and if you are in a position to give it, i.e., if it is practical and not impractical, it is your duty to help. So in quarrels between the nations you must ask where does the right lie, if anywhere? What is my obligation to that right? The painfulness of war is not an ultimate reason for refraining from it. A nation may have to engage in it until we can develop better forms of international tribunals.

There is, however, this difference between the magistrate's use of the sword, and war, in that war is not primarily an act of retributive justice though ultimately it must be grounded on this principle. The conquest of Canaan by Israelites was an exception in that retribution was not only its ground but also its objective. The extermination of the Amorites was retribution for their iniquity and the Israelites received a clear command to this effect. But normally war, when undertaken in the cause of righteousness, is not undertaken primarily to kill people. It is undertaken to deter nations from actions they ought not to be doing. If a person is doing an unjust act it may be your duty to restrain him. This is the question to be faced; not how painful it is to him or you.

In seeking the Christian attitude to war, we need to ask, is righteousness something God maintains and does He call on us to maintain it also; does He call upon us to react to unrighteousness? We are to have a hostility in our own hearts to unrighteousness so that we hate it in the same severe way that God does. A passion for right-

eousness has no place for vindictiveness against the person, but it does make you hate the unjust action intensely and it may require you to act in a way that other people say you hate the person because it may require you to engage in horrible war against him.

The questions that must be asked about Vietnam are these: Where does the right lie? Does it lie on any side at all? Where does our duty lie if a right lies in a certain place? These are the questions to be asked. Not how many innocent people are involved. The involvement of the relatively innocent with the guilty is inseparable from war and although this should prompt us to energetic striving to achieve more efficient international tribunals, it is not a reason for embracing passivism or declining to fight in the cause of righteousness.

In the national sphere we have advanced considerably in efficiency in the administration of justice compared to the early days when it was left to 'the avenger of blood' to vindicate righteousness. But force still remains the final sanction. In the international sphere, we have not made much progress at all. But the way of progress is not by the denial of the rightness of war when it is the only way of vindicating righteousness, but by improving international institutions so that war, though remaining the final sanction, need be seldom, if ever, resorted to, and then limited war rather than total war.

The rightness of any particular war and rightness of the way it is waged are two distinct questions. In the discussion of the Vietnam war these two questions are constantly confused. Moreover, the obligation to maintain righteousness is omitted. All war is horrid. So is an execution;

so is life confinement in Grafton gaol. But it may become our duty to inflict these judgments. If anyone delights in war he is sinning against God and is doing the very thing Christ corrected when He told His disciples "Love your enemies". If we are to engage in war without sin we must strengthen our belief in the supernatural God.

We must answer the question of Vietnam conscious of our relationship to our revealed God who is judge of all. If we think of God only as the ground of our own being we will have lost the key of God's revelation as the guide to ultimate values in morality. Everything will be relative, and our judgment will be swamped by undifferentiating sentimental "love". Love in the Scripture is holy love, which goes out to all people and treats all people as persons. But the very fact of treating them as persons, honouring them as persons, may mean you have the awful responsibility delegated to you by God to give them what they deserve. For at the last, as the Scriptures constantly reaffirm, God the righteous judge will give to every man according to his works.

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