

Can Evil Always Be Overcome With Good?

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MOST contemporary discussions of Christian ethics are concerned with the distinction between love and justice and with the intricate, complicated relationship of the one with the other. Perhaps the most serious ethical problem we face consists in the fact that while love is and must be committed to the establishment of justice, the means often required in this undertaking are apparently means of which love cannot appropriately make use. Without presuming to solve this problem—it will be with us till the end of time—may I suggest what seems to me to be a more precise way of defining it than the use of the terms “love” and “justice” makes possible?

A fruitful beginning of discussion lies, I believe, in the recognition that a distinction can be made between two operations in the ethical life: the creation of good and the destruction or restraint of evil. This article will be concerned with how these two operations are actually related in Christian ethical life and thought; just now I am interested only in pointing out that *in idea* they obviously

stand more clearly and sharply over against each other than do the ideas of love and justice.

Relationship of Good and Evil

As to the way in which the two operations are related in fact, I believe that four statements can be made with little danger of serious disagreement: (1) The creation and growth of good undoubtedly involves as a part of itself the restraint and destruction of some evil. (2) The existence of evil often interferes with or prevents the growth of good. (3) The restraint or destruction of evil is futile unless it is followed or accompanied by the growth of good. (4) The destruction of evil by no means involves or assures the growth of good.

In a word, it will be generally recognized that the destruction of evil is futile unless it clears the way for the growth of good and also that, while the destruction of evil does not automatically involve the growth of good, the growth of good *does* inevitably involve the destruction of evil.

But a fundamental and sometimes irreconcilable

difference among us emerges when we ask the further question: "Are the restraint and destruction of evil *adequately* cared for by the growth of good or are there ever circumstances when this work of destruction or restraint can legitimately be undertaken separately and directly?" Here, it seems to me, is the crux of the difference between those who, at least implicitly, deny the possibility of the Christian use of coercion and those who affirm that possibility. No one will assert that the use of coercion can of itself create good; the question is whether it is ever necessary to prevent or destroy evil. To that question many Christian pacifists, if they are consistent, will answer: "No; the *only* way to overcome evil is with good."

In view of the fact that those who take this position appeal so frequently to the example and teaching of Jesus, it may be worthwhile to consider his characteristic ethical teaching in the light of the distinction I have suggested. I believe that all of us, whatever answer we would give to the question just raised, will agree on the following points, although in this short essay none of them can be adequately elaborated. (1) Jesus thought of God primarily as the Creator of good. He is the Father Almighty. He feeds the sparrows and clothes the flowers and it is not His will that one of the little ones should perish. His purpose is the positive, creative purpose of bringing to pass justice and brotherhood among men under His own loving rule. (2) Although Jesus would not have said that man's duty and true destiny was to co-operate with this creative purpose of God—that is a modern way of speaking—still His meaning would certainly not be seriously misrepresented by such a statement. He often says that we must submit ourselves to God's righteous and loving will and that we must be like God, the Father of all men. (3) Although Jesus commands us to devote ourselves to the creation of good, He nowhere asserts that we should do so in order to destroy evil. We should do so, according to Jesus, simply because such is God's will for us. Still, it is fair to assume that He did see, what is undoubtedly a fact, that creating good has the effect of restraining and destroying evil. And it is likely that the fact of this effect was not altogether absent from His mind when He urged that we should not resent or resist our enemies. Certainly this was true of Paul, who in the twelfth chapter of Romans tells us quite explicitly that we are to overcome evil with good. (4) The ethical teaching of Jesus is ideally adapted to this growth of good. Indeed, the only way to create good is Jesus' way. Meekness, non-aggressiveness, complete forgetfulness of self—this is the spirit in which the organic operation of creat-

ing good must be carried on. And in so far as evil is to be overcome by good, this is the method through which alone the victory can be won. Rational critics of Jesus' ethical teaching should recognize this: the end of ultimate importance is the creation of good and Jesus' ethic is perfectly adapted to that end.

Destruction of Evil

One cannot stop here, however. One must ask Jesus the crucial question to which we came earlier. Is the destruction or restraint of evil *adequately* taken care of by the growth of good (that is, as a kind of by-product) or will the circumstances ever be such that it must be undertaken as a separate and largely mechanical operation (although always and only with a view to making possible the growth of good)? I am convinced that the answer Jesus would have given to this question is at the essential point quite clear. He believed that evil would have to be destroyed by direct methods. These methods God would use—soon and with catastrophic results. It is not clear that He thought of man as having, meantime, any responsibility for this kind of action, but it is not certain that He did not. The implications of Jesus' stern condemnation of various kinds of evil must not be ignored. It is by no means to be assumed that Jesus would have favored the abolition of all use of coercion whether "violent" or "non-violent," against evil in this evil world. I should say that it is very unlikely that He would have taken any such position. Certainly the early church did not, although it was able to leave to others the responsibility of actually using this force.

The Christian can consistently abjure the direct use of coercion only on one of two conditions: either he must regard the undertaking of the restraint or destruction of evil by direct, mechanical means as being never under any circumstances legitimate, whether the means are used by God or man, or else he must expect God to use such means as are necessary for this purpose and *to use them soon*. I add this last phrase because it is impossible to be *for a long time* in the position of saying, "This ought to be done, but man ought not to put forth his hand to do it." It is impossible to maintain *for an indefinite period* that God will and must use means which man ought never to use. If God is thought of as doing some of His creative work in and through man, there is no reason to decide that He is not doing some of His destructive work in and through man also.

A. J. Muste, in his moving book, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World*, writes:

"It is said that the apocalyptic element in the teaching

of Jesus shows that Jesus did not really expect His followers by ethical, social effort to strive for and achieve the Kingdom of God on earth—and by inference the elimination of such evils as war—but that the Kingdom would at ‘the end of the age’ be ‘brought’ from without by God or His Messiah. Certainly no one saw more clearly than Jesus that all power to serve God and to realize His will on earth comes from God by grace. But to represent Him as believing that God acts upon man in a non-moral, mechanical fashion from without, that God imposes Himself by force on men and on history, is to deny the most basic and distinctive element in Jesus’ teaching. God is Father. God is Love. He cannot deny Himself, He cannot act otherwise than as a Father dealing with His children. Therefore, Jesus when He realized that He was God’s Son, rejected the materialistic ‘supernaturalism’ involved in the concept of a Messiah, a vicegerent of God, who made stones into bread and jumped from temple-pinnacles. It is impossible to conceive of Him as a coherent personality at all if we suppose that He after all expected that it was by the intervention of just such a magic-mongering Messiah that the Kingdom was in the end to come.”

This paragraph is wrong at one point and right at another. It is wrong in affirming (apparently entirely on a priori grounds) that Jesus did not ascribe coercive action to God. It is right in suggesting that one cannot consistently ascribe such action to God and continue indefinitely to deny all responsibility for the same kind of action to man. It is for this reason that (aside from those whose pacifism is largely merely traditional and those who interpret their pacifism as a special vocation) most pacifists fall into two groups: liberals, who deny—implicitly, at least—that direct, destructive action is ever necessary and therefore affirm that such action is impossible for God and wrong for men; and members of millennialist sects, which hold that God will *shortly* put forth His strong arm to judge and to destroy evil and that therefore men do not need to assume any part of this responsibility.

Nothing Created by Coercive Action

Not that the Kingdom of God can be created by any coercive action, whether God’s or man’s. Nothing can be *created* by such action. The justification of it is never that it creates good; but only that it prevents or destroys evil in order that good may be created—created through other processes entirely. The action of fighting a war, to take the crucial example, will never bring anything positive into being. It will never create democracy, justice, civilization, or anything else. All one can claim is that it is sometimes necessary to restrain and destroy the forces set to render the achievement of these positive ends impossible.

This position involves certain obvious risks. There is the risk that after evil is destroyed, good will not grow; that after the world has been made safe for democracy, democracy itself will languish. There is also the desperate risk that the very process of destroying evil will destroy the good also (it is bound to destroy some of it), or that in destroying certain evils, it will bring other worse ones into existence. These risks are not to be denied, but there are circumstances when they must be taken. Better to disregard the *chance*, however grave, that justice and brotherhood will not grow even if one acts, than to disregard the *certainty* that tyranny and cruelty will be established if one does not.