

The Christian and the War

THE editor of *The Christian Century* has brought out his editorials, published since America was plunged into the war, in book form.* They are introduced with a touching confession in which the author admits that during the years preceding the war he was unable to arrive at any stable equilibrium between the pacifist position and the Christian justification of war; that he "pushed the issue into the future," assuming that "when the crisis came" he would make an "arbitrary choice" and that it would probably be on the pacifist side. Yet he could not quite bring himself to "contract out" of the war as the pacifist proposed to do. So "while the press was waiting" he hammered out the first of the series of editorials on December 9th in which he found a way of being neither a "Christian pacifist" nor a "Christian militarist."

The position thus formed is expressed in a temper quite consonant with a "stop press" journalism, but hardly calculated to draw upon the wisdom of the Christian ages. The truth is that Dr. Morrison has found a formula for the solution of the Christian's relation to the war which has never been heard of before in all Christian history; and which is hardly plausible enough to be heard of again. It rests upon

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the neat but unconvincing device of making an absolute distinction between a society at peace and one at war. The first is governed by freedom; and the other by necessity. Moral decisions are possible in a period of "pacific relations," but not in time of war because then everything is governed by necessity. When war has become an "existential reality" it is like a "fact of nature." It makes all questions of right and wrong irrelevant.

It seems that war so completely destroys all human freedom that among the questions with which it confronts a Christian "the question of righteousness is not among them." The paramount question is: "Do I want my country to live?" which the Christian of course answers affirmatively, being careful meanwhile not to ascribe any moral significance to the answer.

Having thus become a pure nationalist, with no other purpose but the preservation of the nation, the Christian expresses his Christian faith, not by dealing with moral issues morally but by facing "necessity" religiously. The religious response to the tragic necessity of war is contrition for the common guilt in which all nations are involved. But the Christian must beware lest he give any moral significance to the struggle or believe that anything but national existence is involved in it. He cannot adequately express the sense of a common guilt if he makes discriminating judgments in regard to relative guilt. That would make him a "party to the pretentious hypocrisy of the state." The only true Christian response to war is this scrupulously universal confession of guilt. The pacifist does not feel the common guilt because he is seeking a position of guiltlessness. The "Christian militarist" meanwhile is involved in self-righteousness. This leaves only the editor of *The Christian Century* in the lonely splendor of possessing a form of contrition acceptable to God. "Discourses on humility," declared Pascal, "are a source of pride to the proud." The words are applicable to Dr. Morrison's pretentious treatment of a profound and perplexing problem. But one must be quick to admit that all of us will do well to heed Pascal's warning.

Both propositions: the absolute distinction between war and peace, and the absolute impossibility of discriminating between the comparative justice of embattled causes, are untenable.

As to the first, nothing is more patent than that the whole of human history is a curious mixture of necessity and freedom. A peaceful society, with all its vast interrelations and conflicting responsibilities, offers us no such free choices as Dr. Morrison supposes; nor is our freedom as completely lost in wartime as he asserts. By his own admission war is the consequence of sinful attitudes among the nations. If nations and groups were not selfish, they would,

of course, not be involved in the tensions and covert conflicts which may ultimately lead to war. But it is absurd to draw an absolute line between the tensions and potential conflicts of an allegedly "pacific" society and the overt expression of those conflicts in war. It is equally absurd to regard reason and freedom as completely determinative in the former, and unreason and necessity in the latter condition.

If it is inevitable that a Christian become a pure nationalist, once his nation is attacked, and think only of national self-preservation, one might imagine that he would be allowed to exercise a certain amount of foresight and seek to avert potential peril by proper measures. On that point Dr. Morrison makes a revealing confession. "Perhaps," he declares, "the war became inevitable at a point much further back [than the actual attack]. But for our human intelligence there was nothing to do but go on the assumption that until overt war actually came there was still a possibility of preventing it." Here the author misses a marvellous opportunity for contrition. He might have admitted that he failed to gauge the potential peril to the nation correctly, despite very obvious facts which were not really beyond the grasp of "human intelligence"; and that he may have increased the peril by refusing to admit its existence.

These confusions about the relation of necessity to freedom in human history are serious enough; but they must be subordinated to the more serious defect of the immoral nationalism into which Dr. Morrison's curious reasoning betrays him. The only war which can be regarded as an inexorable necessity is apparently the war into which our own nation is plunged. The whole world may be at war, peoples may be ravaged, nations annihilated, and men enslaved. All this presents us with no special problem, until we are attacked.

Holland is invaded, let us say. That releases the Christians of Holland. They may have had scruples about war. But it has come to them like a "fact of nature." They must defend their country. They can be Christian in doing so provided of course they are scrupulous in expressing a common contrition for the sin of war in general and are careful to make no distinction between their cause and that of their oppressors. If they make such a distinction, they become involved in the hypocritical pretensions of the state. So long as the Dutch fight merely for themselves and do not pretend to, or do in fact, fight for some principle of justice transcending national existence, they are Christian. Meanwhile what about the rest of us? We are still allowed to believe that "the worst thing we could have done for America and for mankind was to get into the war." We are still held in the grip of a curious moral dogma that war is wholly evil even when waged in defense of other peoples' lives

and liberties. We are released from the inaction of this position only when our own precious skin is also touched. It must be touched; if we are only threatened, we must not act because human intelligence is unable to determine how real potential perils are.

Dr. Morrison's doctrine is bad politics, bad religion and bad morals. As politics it puts a premium upon lack of foresight. As morals it discounts every decent sense of loyalty to anything above the national interest. As religion it has the merit of seeking to find some guarantee against the persistent tendency of all human beings to an inordinate self-righteousness. But it tries to overcome this tendency by an obvious falsehood. It is false to declare that there are no significant distinctions in history between enslavers and slaves, between oppressors and the oppressed. Even if the falsehood were more plausible, it would not serve the purpose which Dr. Morrison intends. Self-righteousness belongs as much to the common guilt of all peoples, from which there is no complete escape, as any of the sins which Dr. Morri-

son enumerates. Like all basic sins, it expresses itself most clearly at the point where someone imagines that he has found a neat formula for overcoming it.

Perhaps if the version of Christian faith which Dr. Morrison expounds had taken the problem of our common guilt more seriously before the war, he would not have fastened upon the idea so hysterically in relation to the war. In every human situation we share some guilt for the evil which we must oppose; and must yet "be firm in the right as God gives us to see the right." We may fail, either in fully understanding the judgment which stands over both us and the enemy and unites us in a common need of grace; or in making sharp distinctions between right and wrong according to our best judgment. We may actually fail in understanding either the religious or the moral dimension of our situation. But it is preposterous to seek to guarantee the understanding of the one by purposely obscuring the other. It is also foolish to imagine that we face this problem only in war time.

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