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AN INQUIRY INTO THE ACCORDANCY OF WAR WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIANITY

by Jonathan Dymond

Chapter 2 Part 3

The opinions of the earliest professors of Christianity upon the lawfulness of war are of importance, because they who lived nearest to the time of its Founder were the most likely to be informed of his intentions and his will, and to practice them without those adulterations which we know have been introduced by the lapse of ages.

During a considerable period after the death of Christ, it is certain, then, that his followers believed he had forbidden war, and that, in consequence of this belief, many of them refused to engage in it—whatever were the consequences, whether reproach, imprisonment, or death. These facts are indisputable. “It is as easy,” says a learned writer of the seventeenth century, “to obscure the sun at mid-day, as to deny that the primitive Christians renounced all revenge and war.” Of all the Christian writers of the second century, there is not one who notices the subject, who does not hold it to be unlawful for a Christian to bear arms. “And,” says Clarkson, “it was not until Christianity became corrupted that Christians became soldiers.”

Our Savior inculcated mildness and peacefulness. We have seen that the apostles imbibed his spirit and followed his example, and the early Christians pursued the example and imbibed the spirit of both. “This sacred principle, this earnest recommendation of forbearance, lenity, and forgiveness mixes with all the writings of that age. There are more quotations in the apostolic fathers of texts that relate to these points than of any other. Christ’s sayings had struck them. ‘Not rendering,’ says Polycarp, the disciple of John, ‘evil for evil, or railing for railing, or striking for striking, or cursing for cursing.’” Christ and his apostles delivered general precepts for the regulation of our conduct. It was necessary for their successors to apply them to their practice in life. And to what did they apply the pacific precepts that had been delivered? They applied them to war. They were assured that the precepts absolutely forbade it. This belief they derived from those very precepts on which we have insisted. They referred expressly to the same passages in the New Testament and, from the authority and obligation of those passages, they refused to bear arms. A few examples from their history will show with what undoubting confidence they believed in the unlawfulness of war, and how much they were willing to suffer in the cause of peace.

Maximilian, as it is related in the Acts of Ruinart, was brought before the tribunal to be enrolled as a soldier. On the proconsul’s asking his name, Maximilian replied, “I am a Christian, and cannot fight.” It was, however, ordered that he should be enrolled, but he refused to serve, still alleging that he was a Christian. He was immediately told that there was no alternative between bearing arms and being put to death. But his fidelity was not to be shaken. “I cannot fight,” said he, “if I die.” The proconsul asked who had persuaded him to this conduct. “My own mind,” said the Christian, “and He who has called me.” It was once more attempted to shake his resolution by appealing to his youth and to the glory of the profession, but in vain. “I cannot fight,” said he, “for any earthly consideration.” He continued steadfast to his principles, sentence was pronounced upon him, and he was led to execution.

The primitive Christians not only refused to be enlisted in the army, but when they embraced Christianity while already enlisted, they abandoned the profession at whatever cost. Marcellus was a centurion in the legion called Trajana. While holding this commission he became a Christian, and believing, in common with his fellow Christians, that war was no longer permitted to him, he threw down his belt at the head of the legion, declaring that he had become a Christian, and that he would serve no longer. He was committed to prison, but he was still faithful to Christianity. “It is not lawful,” said he, “for a Christian to bear arms for any earthly consideration,” and he was in consequence put to death. Cassian, who was notary to the same legion, gave up his office almost immediately afterwards. He steadfastly maintained the sentiments of Marcellus, and like him was consigned to the executioner. Martin, of whom so much is said by Sulpicius Severus, was bred to the profession of arms, which, on his acceptance of Christianity, he abandoned. To Julian the apostate, the only reason that we find he gave for his conduct was this: “I am a Christian, and therefore I cannot fight.” The answer of Tarachus to Numerianus Maximus is in words nearly similar: “I have led a military life and am a Roman, and because I am a Christian, I have abandoned my profession of a soldier.”

These were not the sentiments, and this was not the conduct, of the insulated individuals who might be actuated by individual opinions, or by their private interpretations of the duties of Christianity. Their principles were the principles of the body. They were recognized and defended by the Christian writers who were their contemporaries. Justin Martyr and Tatian talk of soldiers and Christians as distinct characters, and Tatian says that the Christians declined even military commands. Clemens of Alexandria calls his Christian contemporaries the "Followers of Peace," and expressly tells us that "the followers of peace used none of the implements of war." Lactantius, another early Christian, says expressly, "It can never be lawful for a righteous man to go to war." About the end of the second century, Celsus, one of the opponents of Christianity, charged the Christians with refusing to bear arms even in case of necessity. Origen, the defender of the Christians, does not think of denying the fact. He admits the refusal, and justifies it, because war was unlawful. Even after Christianity had spread over almost the whole of the known world, Tertullian, in speaking of a part of the Roman armies, including more than one third of the standing legions of Rome, distinctly informs us that "not a Christian could be found among them."

All this is explicit. The evidence of the following facts is, however, yet more determinate and satisfactory. Some of the arguments which, at the present day, are brought against the advocates of peace, were then urged against these early Christians, and these arguments they examined and repelled. This indicates investigation and inquiry and manifests that their belief in the unlawfulness of war was not a vague opinion, hastily admitted, and loosely floating among them, but that it was the result of deliberate examination, and a consequent firm conviction that Christ had forbidden it. Tertullian says, "Though the soldiers came to John, and received a certain form to be observed, yet Jesus Christ, by disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier afterwards; for custom never sanctions any unlawful act." "Can a soldier's life be lawful," says he in another work, "when Christ has pronounced that he who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword? Can anyone who possesses the peaceful doctrine of the gospel be a soldier, when it is his duty not so much as to go to law? And shall he, who is not to revenge his own wrongs, be instrumental in bringing others into chains, imprisonment, torture, and death?" The very same arguments that are brought in defense of war in the present day were brought against the Christians sixteen hundred years ago, and sixteen hundred years ago they were repelled by these faithful contenders for the purity of our religion. It is remarkable, too, that Tertullian appeals to the precepts from the Mount in proof of those principles on which this essay has been insisting: that the dispositions which the precepts inculcate are not compatible with war, and that war, therefore, is irreconcilable with Christianity.

If it is possible, a still stronger evidence of the primitive belief is contained in the circumstance that some of the Christian authors declared that the refusal of the Christians to bear arms was a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The peculiar strength of this evidence consists in this: that the fact of a refusal to bear arms is assumed as well known and unquestioned. Irenaeus, who lived about the year 180, affirms that the prophecy of Isaiah, which declared that men should turn their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, had been fulfilled in his time. "For the Christians," says he, "have changed their swords and their lances into instruments of peace, and they know not now how to fight." Justin Martyr, his contemporary, writes, "That the prophecy is fulfilled, you have good reason to believe, for we, who in times past killed one another, do not now fight with our enemies." Tertullian, who lived later, says, "You must confess that the prophecy has been accomplished, as far as the practice of every individual is concerned, to whom it is applicable." It has been sometimes said that the motive that influenced the early Christians to refuse to engage in war consisted in the idolatry that was connected with the Roman armies. One motive this idolatry unquestionably afforded; but it is obvious, from the quotations that we have given, that their belief in the unlawfulness of fighting, independent of any question of idolatry, was an insuperable objection to engaging in war. Their words are explicit. "I cannot fight if I die." "I am a Christian, and, therefore, I cannot fight." "Christ," says Tertullian, "by disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier," and Peter was not about to fight in the armies of idolatry. So entire was their conviction of the incompatibility of war with our religion, that they would not even be present at the gladiatorial fights "lest," says Theophilus, "we should become partakers of the murders committed there." Can anyone believe that they who would not even witness a battle between two men, would themselves fight in a battle between armies? And the destruction of a gladiator, it should be remembered, was authorized by the state as much as the destruction of enemies in war.

It is, therefore, indisputable that the Christians who lived nearest to the time of our Savior, believed, with undoubting confidence, that he had unequivocally forbidden war, that they openly avowed this belief, and that, in support of it, they were willing to sacrifice, and did sacrifice, their fortunes and their lives.

Christians, however, afterwards became soldiers. And when? When their general fidelity to Christianity became relaxed; when, in other respects, they violated its principles; when they had begun "to dissemble" and "to falsify their word" and "to cheat;" when "Christian casuists" had persuaded them that they might "sit at meat in the idol's temple;" when Christians accepted even the priesthoods of idolatry. In a word, they became soldiers, when they had ceased to be Christians.

The departure from the original faithfulness was, however, not suddenly general. Like every other corruption, war crept in by degrees. During the first two hundred years, not a Christian soldier is upon record. In the third century, when Christianity became partially corrupted, Christian soldiers were common. The number increased with the increase of the general profligacy, until at last, in the fourth century, Christians became soldiers without hesitation, and, perhaps, without re-

morse. Here and there, however, an ancient father still lifted up his voice for peace; but these, one after another, dropping from the world, the tenet that war is unlawful ceased at length to be a tenet of the church.

Such was the origin of the present belief in the lawfulness of war. It began in unfaithfulness, was nurtured by profligacy, and was confirmed by general corruption. We seriously and solemnly invite the conscientious Christian of the present day to consider these things. Had the professors of Christianity continued in the purity and faithfulness of their forefathers, we should now have believed that war was forbidden, and Europe, many long centuries ago, would have reposed in peace.

Let it always be borne in mind by those who are advocating war that they are contending for a corruption that their forefathers abhorred; and that they are making Jesus Christ sanction crimes which his purest followers offered up their lives so that they would not commit them.

An argument has sometimes been advanced in favor of war from the Divine communications to the Jews under the administration of Moses. It has been said that as wars were allowed and enjoined to that people, they cannot be inconsistent with the will of God.

We have no intention to dispute that, under the Mosaic dispensation, some wars were allowed, or that they were enjoined upon the Jews as an imperative duty. But those who refer, in justification of our present practice, to the authority by which the Jews prosecuted their wars, must be expected to produce the same authority for our own. Wars were commanded to the Jews, but are they commanded to us? War, in the abstract, was never commanded. And surely, those specific wars that were enjoined upon the Jews for an express purpose are neither authority nor example for us, who have received no such injunction, and can plead no such purpose.

It will, perhaps, be said that the commands to prosecute wars, even to extermination, are so positive and so often repeated, that it is not probable, if they were inconsistent with the will of Heaven, they would have been thus peremptorily enjoined. We answer that they were not inconsistent with the will of Heaven then. But even then, the prophets foresaw that they were not accordant with the universal will of God, since they predicted that when that will should be fulfilled, war should be eradicated from the world. And by what dispensation was this will to be fulfilled? By that of the "Rod out of the stem of Jesse."

But what do those who refer to the dispensation of Moses maintain? Do they say that the injunctions to the Jews are binding upon them? If they say this, we have at least reason to ask them for greater consistency of obedience. That these injunctions, in point of fact, do not bind them, they give sufficient proof by the neglect of the greater portion of them, enforced as those injunctions were, by the same authority as that which commanded war. They have, therefore, so far as their argument is concerned, annulled the injunctions by their own rejection of them. And, out of ten precepts, to reject nine and retain one is a gratuitous and idle mode of argument.

If I am told that we still acknowledge the obligation of many of these precepts, I answer that we acknowledge the duties that they enjoin, but not because of the authority which enjoined them. We obey the injunctions, not because they were delivered under the law, but because they are enforced by Christianity. The command "Thou shalt not kill" has never been abolished, but Christians do not prohibit murder because it was denounced in the Decalogue—they would have prohibited it if the Decalogue had never existed.

But let us go farther. Some of the commands under the law, Christianity requires us to disobey. "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father... all the men of the city shall stone him with stones so that he dies." "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, entices thee secretly, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' thou shalt not pity him or conceal him, but thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death." Now we know that Christianity will not sanction an obedience of these commands; and if we did obey them, our own laws would treat us as murderers. If the precepts under the dispensation of Moses are binding because they were promulgated by Heaven, they are binding in all their commands and all their prohibitions. We habitually disregard some of these precepts, and it is criminal to obey some—with what reason then do we refer to them in our defense?

And why was the Law superseded? Because it "made nothing perfect." "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." The manner in which the author of "truth" prefaced some of his most important precepts is much to our present purpose. "It hath been said by them of old time, 'An eye for an eye...' He then introduced his own precept with the contradistinguishing preface "But I say unto you." This, therefore, appears to be a specific abrogation of the authority of the legal injunctions and an introduction of another system, and this is all that our present purpose requires. The truth is that the law was abolished because of its imperfections, yet the advocates of war take hold of one of these imperfections in justification of their present practice. Is it because they feel that they cannot defend it by their own religion?

We therefore dismiss the dispensation of Moses from any participation in the argument. Whatever it allowed, or whatever it prohibited in relation to war, we do not inquire. We ask only what Christianity allows and prohibits, and by this we determine the question. It is the more necessary to point out the inapplicability of these arguments from the Old Testament, because there are some persons of desultory modes of thinking, who find that war is allowed in "the Bible," and who forget to inquire into the present authority of the permission.

There are some persons who suppose themselves sufficiently justified in their approbation of war by the example of men of piety of our own times. The argument, as an argument, is of little concern, but everything is important that makes us acquiescent in war. "Here are men," they say, "who make the knowledge of their duties the great object of their study, and yet these men engage in war without any doubt of its lawfulness." All this is true; and it is true also that some good men have expressly inculcated the lawfulness of war; and it is true also that the articles of the Church of England specifically assert it. But what if it should have come to pass that "blindness in part hath happened unto Israel"? What is the argument? That good men have engaged in war, and therefore that Christianity allows it. They who satisfy themselves with such reasoning should bear in mind that he who voluntarily passes over the practice of the first two centuries of Christianity, and attempts to defend himself by the practice of after and darker ages, has obviously no other motive than that he finds his religion, when vitiated and corrupt, more suitable to his purpose than it was in the days of its purity. This state of imperfection and impurity has diffused an influence upon the good, as upon the bad. I question not that some Christians of the present day who defend war, believe they act in accordance with their religion; just as I question not that many, who zealously bore faggots to the stake of the Christian martyrs, believed so too. The time has been, when those who killed good men thought "they did God service." But let the succeeding declaration be applied by our present objectors: "These things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father or Me." Here, then, appears to be our error – that we do not estimate the conduct of men by the standard of the gospel, but that we reduce the standard of the gospel to the conduct of men. That good men should fail to conform to the perfect purity of Christianity, or to perceive it, need not be wondered, for we have sufficient examples of it. Good men in past ages allowed many things as permitted by Christianity, which we condemn, and shall forever condemn. In the present day there are many questions of duty on which men of piety disagree. If their authority is rejected by us on other points of practice, why is it to determine the question of war? In particular, why do we insist on their decisions, when they differ in their decisions themselves? If good men have allowed the lawfulness of war, good men have also denied it. We are therefore again referred to the simple evidence of religion – an evidence which it will always be found wise to admit, and dangerous to question.

There is, however, one argument brought against us, which, if it is just, precludes at once all question upon the subject: that a distinction is to be made between rules which apply to us as individuals, and rules which apply to us as subjects of the state; and that the pacific injunctions of Christ from the Mount, and all the other kindred commands and prohibitions of the Christian Scriptures, have no reference to our conduct as members of the political body. This is the argument to which the greatest importance is attached by the advocates of war, and by which thinking men are chiefly induced to acquiesce in its lawfulness. In reality, some of those who think most acutely upon the subject acknowledge that the peaceable, forbearing, forgiving dispositions of Christianity, are absolutely obligatory upon individuals in their full extent, and this acknowledgment I would entreat the reader to bear in his recollection.

Now it is obvious that the proof of the rectitude of this distinction must be expected of those who make it. General rules are laid down by Christianity, of which, in some cases, the advocate of war denies the applicability. He, therefore, is to produce the reason and the authority for exception. Now we would remind him that general rules are binding, unless their inapplicability can be clearly shown. We would remind him that the general rules in question are laid down by the commissioned ministers of Jesus Christ and by Jesus Christ himself, and we would recommend him, therefore, to hesitate before he institutes exceptions to those rules upon any authority inferior to the authority that made them.

The foundation for the distinction between the duties of individuals and those of communities must, we suppose, be sought in one of these two positions:

1. That because no law of general authority exists among nations, by which one state is protected from the violence of another, it is necessary that each independent community should protect itself, and that the security of a nation cannot sometimes be maintained otherwise than by war.
2. That because the general utility and expediency of actions is the foundation of their moral qualities, and because it is sometimes most conducive to general utility and expediency that there should be a war, war is, therefore, sometimes lawful.

The first of these positions will probably be thus enforced. If an individual suffers aggression, there is a power to which he can apply that is above himself and above the aggressor, a power by which the bad passions of those around him are restrained, or by which their aggressions are punished. But among nations there is no acknowledged superior or common arbitrator. Even if there were, there is no way in which its decisions could be enforced, but by the sword. War, therefore, is the only means which one nation possesses of protecting itself from the aggression of another.

This, certainly, is plausible reasoning; but it happens to this argument as to many others, that it assumes that as established, which has not been proved, and upon the proof of which the truth of the whole argument depends. It assumes that the reason why an individual is not permitted to use violence is that the law will use it for him. And in this the fallacy of the position consists, for the foundation of the duty of forbearance in private life is not that the law will punish aggression,

but that Christianity requires forbearance. Undoubtedly, if the existence of a common arbitrator were the foundation of the duty, the duty would not be binding upon nations. But that which we require to be proved is this: that Christianity exonerates nations from those duties that she has imposed upon individuals. This, the present argument does not prove; and, in truth, with a singular unhappiness in its application, it assumes, in effect, that she has imposed these duties upon neither the one nor the other.

If it is said that Christianity allows to individuals some degree and kind of resistance, and that some resistance is therefore lawful to states, we do not deny it. But if it is said that the degree of lawful resistance extends to the slaughter of our fellow Christians—that it extends to war—we do deny it. We say that the rules of Christianity cannot, by any possible latitude of interpretation, be made to extend to it. The duty of forbearance then, is antecedent to all considerations respecting the condition of man; and whether he is under the protection of the law or not, the duty of forbearance is imposed. The only truth that appears to be elicited by the present argument is that the difficulty of obeying the forbearing rules of Christianity is greater in the case of nations than in the case of individuals. The obligation to obey them is the same in both. Nor let anyone urge the difficulty of obedience in opposition to the duty; for he who does this has yet to learn one of the most awful rules of his religion: a rule that was enforced by the precepts, and more especially by the final example, of Christ, of apostles, and of martyrs, the rule which requires that we should be “obedient even unto death.”

Let it not, however, be supposed that we believe the difficulty of forbearance would be as great in practice as it is in theory. We hope hereafter to show that it promotes our interests as certainly as it fulfils our duties.

The rectitude of the distinction between rules that apply to individuals and rules that apply to states is thus maintained by Dr. Paley on the principle of expediency. “The only distinction,” says he, “that exists between the case of independent states and independent individuals, is founded in this circumstance: that the particular consequence sometimes appears to exceed the value of the general rule.” Or, in less technical words, a greater disadvantage may arise from obeying the commands of Christianity than from transgressing them. Expediency, it is said, is the test of moral rectitude, and the standard of our duty. If we believe that it will be most expedient to disregard the general obligations of Christianity, that belief is the justifying motive of disregarding them. Dr. Paley proceeds to say, “In the transactions of private persons, no advantage that results from the breach of a general law of justice can compensate to the public for the violation of the law, but in the concerns of empire this may sometimes be doubted.” He says there may be cases in which “the magnitude of the particular evil induces us to call in question the obligation of the general rule...” Situations may be feigned, and consequently may possibly arise, in which the general tendency is outweighed by the enormity of the particular mischief.” Of the doubts which must arise as to the occasions when the “obligation” of Christian laws ceases, he however says that “moral philosophy furnishes no precise solution,” and he candidly acknowledges “the danger of leaving it to the sufferer to decide upon the comparison of particular and general consequences, and the still greater danger of such decisions being drawn into future precedents. If treaties, for instance, are no longer binding unless they are convenient, or until the inconveniency ascends to a certain point (which point must be fixed by the judgment, or rather by the feelings of the complaining party), one, and almost the only method of averting or closing the calamities of war, of preventing or putting a stop to the destruction of mankind, is lost to the world for ever.” And in retrospect of the indeterminateness of these rules of conduct, he says finally, “These, however, are the principles upon which the calculation is to be formed.”

Essays on the Doctrines and Practice of the Early Christians as they relate to War. To this essay I am indebted for much information on the present part of our subject.

Pol. Ep. and Phil. C. 2—Evidences of Christianity.

These examples might be multiplied. Enough, however, have been given to establish our position, and the reader who desires further or more immediate information, is referred to Justin Mart. in Dialog. cum Tryph. ejusdemque Apolog. 2. —ad Zenam: Tertull. de corona militis. —Apolog. cap. 21 and 37. —lib. de Idolol. c. 17, 18, 19. —ad Scapulam cap. 1. —adversus Jud. cap. 7 and 9. —adv. Gnost. 13. —adv. Marc. c. 4. —lib. de patient, c. 6. 10: Orig. cont. Celsum lib. 3, 5, 8. —In Josuam hom. 12. cap. 9. —In Mat. cap. 26. tract. 36: Cypr. Epist. 56 —ad Cornel. Lactan. de just. lib. 5. c. 18. lib. 6. c. 20: Ambr. in Luc. 22.: Chrysost. in Matth. 5. hom. 18. —in Matth. 26. hom. 85. —lib. 2 de Sacerdotio. —1 Cor. 13: Cromat. in Matth. 5.: Hieron. ad Ocean. —lib. Epist. p. 3. tom. 1. Ep. 2: Athan. de Inc. Verb. Dei: Cyrill. Alex. lib. 11. in Johan. cap. 25, 26. See also Erasmus. Luc. cap. 3, and 22. Ludov. Vives in Introd. ad Sap: I Ferus lib. 4. Comment in Matth. 7 and Luc. 22.

Deuteronomy 21:18, 21.

Deuteronomy 13:9.

John 16:3.

Transcriber’s note —The extended rebuttal of Dr. Paley presented here is entirely appropriate. Though he may no longer be quoted regularly and his philosophy may be out of date, such philosophies nonetheless form the basis of today’s

's acceptance of war, and to show them to be flawed shows today's acceptance of war also to be flawed. Moral and Political Philosophy, the chapter titled "Of War and Military Establishments."