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

by Jonathan Dymond

Chapter 2 Part 4

It is obvious that this reasoning proceeds upon the principle that it is lawful to do evil that good may come. If good will come by violating a treaty, we may violate it. If good will come by slaughtering other men, we may slaughter them. I know that the advocate of expediency will tell us that it is not evil of which good, in the aggregate, comes, and that the good or evil of actions consists in the good or evil of their general consequences. I appeal to the understanding and the conscience of the reader: is this distinction honest to the meaning of the apostle? Did he intend to tell his readers that they might violate their solemn promises, that they might destroy their fellow Christians, in order that good might come? If he did mean this, surely there was little truth in the declaration of the same apostle, that he used great plainness of speech. We are told that "whatever is expedient is right." We shall not quarrel with the dogma, but how is expediency to be determined? By the calculations and guessing of men, or by the knowledge and foresight of God? Expediency may be the test of our duties, but what is the test of expediency? Obviously, I think it is this: the decisions that God has made known respecting what is best for man. Calculations of expediency, of "particular and general consequences," are not entrusted to us, for this most satisfactory reason: that we cannot make them. The calculation, to be anything better than vague guessing, requires prescience, and where is prescience to be sought? Now it is conceded by our opponents that the only possessor of prescience has declared that the forbearing, non-resisting character is best for man. Yet we are told, that sometimes it is not best, that sometimes it is "inexpedient." How do we discover this? The promulgator of the law has never intimated it. From where, then, do we derive the right of substituting our computations for His prescience? Or, having obtained it, what is the limit to its exercise? If, because we calculate that obedience will not be beneficial, we may dispense with his laws in one instance, why may we not dispense with them in ten? Why may we not abrogate the law altogether?

The right is however claimed, and how is it to be exercised? We are told that the duty of obedience "may sometimes be doubted," that in some cases we are induced to "call in question" the obligation of the Christian rule, that "situations may be feigned," that circumstances "may possibly arise" in which we are at liberty to dispense with it, that still it is dangerous to "leave it to the sufferer to decide" when the obligation of the rule ceases, and that of all these doubts "philosophy furnishes no precise solution"! I know not how to contend against such principles as these. An argument might be repelled, the assertion of a fact might be disproved, but what answer can be made to "possibilities" and "doubts"? They who are at liberty to guess that Christian laws may sometimes be suspended are at liberty to guess that Jupiter is a fixed star, or that the existence of America is a fiction. What answer the man of science would make to such suppositions, I do not know, and I do not know what answer to make to ours. Among a community that had to decide on the "particular and general consequences" of some political measure, which involved the sacrifice of the principles of Christianity, there would of necessity be an endless variety of opinions. Some would think it expedient to supersede the law of Christianity, and some would think the evil of obeying the law less than the evil of transgressing it. Some would think that the "particular mischief" outweighed the "general rule," and some that the "general rule" outweighed the "particular mischief." And in this chaos of opinion, what is the line of rectitude, or how is it to be discovered? Or, is that rectitude, which appears to each separate individual to be right? And are there as many species of truth as there are discordances of opinion? Is this the simplicity of the gospel? Is this the path in which a wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err?

These are the principles of expediency on which it is argued that the duties that attach to private life do not attach to citizens. I think it will be obvious to the eye of candor that they are exceedingly indeterminate and vague. Little more appears to be done by Dr. Paley than to exhibit their doubtfulness. In truth, I do not know whether he has argued better in favor of his position, or against it. To me it appears that he has evinced it to be fallacious, for I do not think that anything can be Christian truth, of which the truth cannot be more evidently proved. But whatever may be thought of the conclusion, the reader will certainly perceive that the whole question is involved in extreme vagueness and indecision; an indecision and vagueness that it is difficult to conceive that Christianity ever intended should be hung over the very greatest question

on of practical morality that man has to determine; over the question that asks whether the followers of Christ are at liberty to destroy one another. That such a procedure as a war is, under any circumstances, sanctioned by Christianity, from whose principles it is acknowledged to be "abhorrent," ought to be clearly made out. It ought to be obvious to loose examination. It ought not to be necessary to ascertaining it, that a critical investigation should be made of questions which ordinary men cannot comprehend, and which, if they comprehended them, they could not determine. Above all, that investigation ought not to end, as we have seen it does end, in vague indecision, in "doubts" of which even "philosophy furnishes no precise solution." But when this indecision and vagueness are brought to oppose the Christian evidence for peace; when it is contended, not only that it militates against that evidence, but that it outbalances and supersedes it, we would say of such an argument that it is not only weak, but idle; of such a conclusion, that it is not only unsound, but preposterous.

Christian obligation is a much simpler thing than speculative philosophy would make it appear; and to all those who suppose that our relations as subjects dismiss the obligation of Christian laws, we would offer the consideration that neither the Founder of Christianity nor his apostles ever made the distinction. Of questions of "particular and general consequences," of "general advantages and particular mischiefs," no traces are to be found in their words or writings. The morality of Christianity is a simple system, adapted to the comprehensions of ordinary men. Were it otherwise, what would be its usefulness? If philosophers only could examine our duties, and if their examinations ended in doubts without solution, how would men, without learning and without leisure, regulate their conduct? I think, indeed, that it is a sufficient objection to all such theories as the present, that they are not adapted to the wayfaring man. If the present theory is to be admitted, one of these two effects will be the consequence: the greater part of the community must trust for the discovery of their duties to the sagacity of others, or they must act without any knowledge of their duties at all.

But, that the pacific injunctions of the Christian Scriptures do apply to us, under every circumstance of life, whether private or public, appears to be made necessary by the universality of Christian obligation. The language of Christianity upon the obligation of her moral laws is essentially this: "What I say unto you, I say unto all." The pacific laws of our religion, then, are binding upon all men, upon the king and upon every individual who advises him, upon every member of a legislature, upon every officer and agent, and upon every private citizen. How then can that be lawful for a body of men that is unlawful for each individual? How, if one is disobedient, can his offence make disobedience lawful to all? We maintain yet more, and say that to dismiss Christian benevolence as subjects and to retain it as individuals is simply impossible. He who possesses that subjugation of the affections and that universality of benevolence, by which he is influenced to do good to those who hate him, and to love his enemies in private life, cannot, without abandoning those dispositions, butcher other men because they are called public enemies.

The whole position that the pacific commands and prohibitions of the Christian Scriptures do not apply to our conduct as subjects of a state, therefore appears to me to be a fallacy. Some of the arguments that are brought to support it so flipperly dispense with the principles of Christian obligation, so gratuitously assume that because obedience may be difficult, obedience is not required, that they are rather an excuse for the distinction than a justification of it. Some are so lamentably vague and indeterminate, the principles that are proposed are so technical, so inapplicable to the circumstance of society, and in truth, so incapable of being practically applied, that it is not credible that they were designed to suspend the obligation of rules that were imposed by a revelation from Heaven.

The reputation of Dr. Paley is so great that, as he has devoted a chapter of his Moral Philosophy to "War and Military Establishments," it will perhaps be expected, in an inquiry like the present, that some specific reference should be made to his opinions; and I make this reference willingly.

The chapter "on War" begins thus: "Because the Christian Scriptures describe wars as what they are, as crimes or judgments, some men have been led to believe that it is unlawful for a Christian to bear arms. But it should be remembered that it may be necessary for individuals to unite their force, and for this end to resign themselves to a common will; and yet it may be true that that will is often actuated by criminal motives, and often determined to destructive purposes." This is a most remarkable paragraph. It assumes, at once, the whole subject of inquiry, and is an assumption couched in extraordinary laxity of language. "It may be necessary for individuals to unite their force." The tea table and the drawing room have often told us this: but philosophy should tell us how the necessity is proved. Nor is the morality of the paragraph more rigid than the philosophy. "Wars are crimes" and are often undertaken from "criminal motives and determined to destructive purposes," yet of these purposes, motives, and crimes, "it may be necessary" for Christians to become the abettors and accomplices!

Paley proceeds to say that in the New Testament the profession of a soldier is nowhere forbidden or condemned; and he refers to the cases of John the Baptist, of the Roman centurion, and of Cornelius; and with this he finishes all inquiry in to the Christian evidence upon the subject, after having expended upon it in less than a page of the edition before me.

These arguments are all derived from the silence of the New Testament, and to all reasoning founded upon this silence, no one can give a better answer than himself. In replying to the defenses by which the advocates of slavery attempt to justify it, he notices that which they advance from the silence of the New Testament respecting it. He says it is urged that, "Slavery was a part of the civil constitution of most countries when Christianity appeared; yet that no passage is to be found in the Christian Scriptures by which it is condemned or prohibited." "This," he rejoins, "is true, for Christianit

y, soliciting admission into all nations of the world, abstained, as behooved it, from intermeddling with the civil institutions of any. But does it follow, from the silence of Scriptures concerning them, that all the civil institutions which then prevailed were right, or that the bad should not be exchanged for better? I beg the reader to apply this reasoning to Paley's own arguments in favor of war from the silence of the Scriptures. How happens it that he did not remember it himself? Now, I am compelled to observe that in the discussion of the lawfulness of war, Dr. Paley has neglected his professed principles of decision and his ordinary practice. His professed principles are these: that the discovery of the "will of God, which is the whole business of morality," is to be attained by referring, primarily, to "his express declarations, when they are to be had, and which must be sought for, in Scripture." Has he sought for these declarations? Has he sought for "Resist not evil," or for "Love your enemies," or for "Put up thy sword," or for "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal," or for "My kingdom is not of this world"? He has sought for none of these. He has examined none of them. He has noticed none of them. His professed principles are, again, that "when our instructions are dubious, we should endeavor to explain them by what we can collect of our Master's general inclination or intention." Has he conformed to his own rule? Has he endeavored to collect this general inclination and to examine this general tendency? He has taken no notice of it whatever. This neglect, we say, is contrary to his ordinary practice. Upon other subjects, he has assiduously applied to the Christian Scriptures in determination of truth. He has examined not only their direct evidence, but also the evidence that they afford by induction and implication, the evidence arising from their general tendency. Suicide is nowhere condemned in the New Testament, yet Paley condemns it – and how? He examines the sacred volume and finds that by implication and inference it may be collected that suicide is not permitted by Christianity. He says that patience under suffering is inculcated as an important duty, and that the recommendation of patience implies the unlawfulness of suicide to get out of suffering. This is sound reasoning, but he does not adopt it in the examination of war. Could he not have found that the inculcation of peacefulness forms as good an argument against the lawfulness of war as the inculcation of patience forms against the lawfulness of suicide? He certainly could have done this, and why has he not done it? Why has he passed it over in silence?

I must confess my belief that he was unwilling to discuss the subject upon Christian principles, that he had resolved to make war consistent with Christianity, and that foreseeing her "express declarations" and "general intentions" militated against it, he avoided noticing them at all. This much at least is certain, that in discussing the lawfulness of war, he has abandoned both his avowed principles and his correspondent practice. There is, to me at least, in the chapter "On War," an appearance of great indecision of mind arising from the conflict between Christian truth and the power of habit, between the consciousness that war is "abhorrent" to our religion, and the desire to defend it on the principle of expediency. The whole chapter is characterized by a very extraordinary laxity both of arguments and principles.

After the defensibility of war has been proved, or assumed, in the manner that we have exhibited, Dr. Paley states the occasions upon which he determines that wars become justifiable. "The objects of just wars," says he, "are precaution, defense, or reparation... Every just war supposes an injury perpetrated, attempted, or feared."

I shall acknowledge that, if these are justifying motives to war, I see very little purpose in talking of morality upon the subject. It was wise to leave the principles of Christianity out of the question, and to pass them by unnoticed, if they were to be succeeded by principles like these. It is in vain to expatiate on moral obligations if we are at liberty to declare war whenever an "injury is feared." An injury, without limit to its insignificance! A fear, without stipulation for its reasonableness! Also, the judges of the reasonableness of fear are to be they who are under its influence, and who are so likely to judge amiss as those who are afraid? Sounder philosophy than this has told us that "he who has to reason upon his duty when the temptation to transgress it is before him is almost sure to reason himself into an error." The necessity for this ill-timed reasoning, and the allowance of it, is among the capital objections to the philosophy of Paley. It tells us that a people may suspend the laws of God when they think it is "expedient," and they are to judge of this expediency when the temptation to transgression is before them! Has Christianity left the lawfulness of human destruction to be determined on such principles as these?

Violence, rapine, and ambition are not to be restrained by morality like this. It may serve for the speculation of a study, but we will venture to affirm that mankind will never be controlled by it. Moral rules are useless if, from their own nature, they cannot be, or will not be applied. Who believes that if kings and conquerors may fight when they have fears, they will not fight when they have them not? The morality allows too much latitude to the passions to retain any practical restraint upon them. And a morality that will not be practiced, I had almost said that cannot be practiced, is a useless morality. It is a theory of morals. We want clearer and more exclusive rules. We want more obvious and immediate sanctions. It is in vain for a philosopher to say to a general who is burning for glory, "You are at liberty to engage in the war provided you have suffered, or fear you will suffer, an injury. Otherwise, Christianity prohibits it." He will tell him of twenty injuries that have been suffered, of a hundred that have been attempted, and of ten thousand that he fears. And what answer can the philosopher make to him?

I think that Dr. Paley has, in another and a later work, given us stronger arguments in favor of peace than the Moral Philosophy gives in favor of war. In the Evidences of Christianity we find these statements: "The two following positions appear to me to be satisfactorily made out. First, that the gospel omits some qualities, which have usually engaged the praises and admiration of mankind, but which, in reality, and in their general effects, have been prejudicial to human happiness."

ess. Secondly, that the gospel has brought forward some virtues, which possess the highest intrinsic value, but which have commonly been overlooked and condemned. The second of these propositions is exemplified in the instances of passive courage or endurance of suffering, patience under affronts and injuries, humility, non-resistance, and placability. The truth is, there are two opposite descriptions of character under which mankind may be generally classed. The one possesses vigor, firmness, and resolution, is daring and active, quick in its sensibilities, jealous in its fame, eager in its attachments, inflexible in its purpose, and violent in its resentments. The other meek, yielding, complying, and forgiving, not prompt to act, but willing to suffer, silent and gentle under rudeness and insult, suing for reconciliation where others would demand satisfaction, giving way to the pushes of impudence, and conceding and indulgent to the prejudices, the wrong-headedness, and the intractability of those with whom it has to deal. The former of these characters is, and ever has been, the favorite of the world. Yet so it has happened that, with the Founder of Christianity, the latter is the subject of his commendation, his precepts, and his example, while the former is in no part of its composition. This morality shows, at least, that no two things can be more different than the heroic and the Christian characters. Now it is proved, in contradiction to first impressions, to popular opinion, to the encomiums of orators and poets, and even to the suffrages of historians and moralists, that the latter character possesses most of true worth, both as being most difficult either to be acquired or sustained, and as contributing most to the happiness and tranquility of social life. If this disposition were universal, the case would be clear; the world would be a society of friends. Whereas, if the former disposition were universal, it would produce a scene of universal contention. The world would not be able to hold a generation of such men. If, in fact, the latter disposition is partial, if a few are actuated by it among a multitude who are not, in whatever degree it does prevail, it prevents, allays, and terminates quarrels, the great disturbers of human happiness, and the great sources of human misery, so far as man's happiness and misery depend upon man. The preference of the patient to the heroic character, which we have here noticed, is a peculiarity in the Christian institution, which I propose as an argument of wisdom. These are the sentiments of Dr. Paley upon this great characteristic of the Christian morality. I think that in their plain, literal, and unsophisticated meaning they exclude the possibility of the lawfulness of war. The simple conclusion from them is that violence, devastation, and human destruction cannot exist in conjunction with the character of a Christian. This would be the conclusion of the inhabitant of some far and peaceful island, where war and Christianity were alike unknown. If he read these definitions of the Christian duties, and was afterwards told that we thought ourselves allowed to plunder and to murder one another, he would start in amazement at the monstrous inconsistency. Casuistry may make her "distinctions," and philosophy may talk of her "expediencies," but the monstrous inconsistency remains. What is the fact? Muslims and Pagans do not believe that our religion allows war. They reproach us with the inconsistency. Our wars are, with them, a scandal and a taunt. "You preach to us," say they, "of Christianity, and would convert us to your creed. First convert yourselves; show us that you yourselves believe in it." No, the Jews at our own doors tell us that our wars are evidence that the Prince of Peace has not come. They bring the violence of Christians to prove that Christ was a deceiver. Thus do we cause evil to be spoken of the way of truth. Thus are we, who should be the helpers of the world, its stumbling-blocks and its shame. We, who should be lights to those who sit in darkness, cause them to love that darkness still. Well may the Christian be ashamed for these things. Well may he be ashamed for the reputation of his religion. And he may be ashamed too, for the honored defender of the Christian faith who stands up, the advocate of blood, who invents subtle sophisms and searches over the fields of speculation to find an argument to convince us that we may murder one another! This is the "wisdom of the world" – that wisdom which is emphatically called "FOOLISHNESS."

We have seen that the principle on which Dr. Paley's Moral Philosophy decides the lawfulness of war is that it is expedient. I know not how this argument accords with some of the statements of the Evidences of Christianity. We are told that the non-resisting character "possesses the highest intrinsic value" and the "most of true worth;" that it "prevents the great disturbances of human happiness," and destroys "the great sources of human misery," and that it "contributes most to the happiness and tranquility of social life." And in what then does expediency consist, if the non-resisting character is not expedient? Dr. Paley says again, in relation to the immense mischief and bloodshed arising from the violation of Christian duty, "We do not say that no evil can exceed this, nor any possible advantage compensate it, but we say that a loss which affects all will scarcely be made up to the common stock of human happiness, by any benefit that can be procured to a single nation." And is not therefore the violation of the duty inexpedient as well as criminal? He says again that the warlike character "is, in its general effects, prejudicial to human happiness," and therefore, surely, it is inexpedient.

The advocate of war, in the abundance of his topics of defense (or in the penury of them) has had recourse to this: "That, as a greater number of male children are brought into the world than of female, wars are the ordination of Providence to rectify the inequality; and one or two moralists have proceeded a step farther, and have told us, not that war is designed to carry off the excess, but that an excess is born in order to supply its slaughters. Dreadful! Are we to be told that God sends too many of his rational creatures into the world, and therefore that he stands in need of wars to destroy them? Has he no other means of adjusting the proportions of the species than by a system that violates the revelation that he has made, and the duties that he has imposed? Or, yet more dreadful, are we to be told that He creates an excess of one of the sexes on purpose that their destruction of each other may be with impunity to the species? This reasoning sur

ely is sufficiently confident; I fear it is more than sufficiently profane. But alas for the argument! It happens most unfortunately for it, that although more males are born than females, yet from the greater mortality of the former, it is found that long before the race arrives at maturity, the number of females predominates. What a pity, that just as the young men have grown old enough to kill one another, it should be discovered that there are not too many to remain peaceably alive! Let then, the principle be retained and acted upon; and since we have now an excess of females, let us send forth an army of ladies that their redundancy may be lopped by the appointed means. But really, it is time for the defender of war to abandon reasoning like this. It argues little in favor of any cause that its advocates have recourse to such deplorable subterfuges.

Ibid.

I do not know why "the profession of a soldier" is substituted for the simple term, war. Dr. Paley does not say that war is nowhere forbidden or condemned, the censure or prohibition of which it is obviously easy to have pronounced without even noticing "the profession of a soldier." I do not say that this language implies a want of ingenuousness, but it certainly was easier to prove that the profession of a soldier is nowhere condemned, than that war is nowhere condemned. Moral and Political Philosophy, Book 2, Chapter 4.

I must be just. After these declarations, the author says that when the laws which inculcate the Christian character are applied to what is necessary to be done for the sake of the public, they are applied to a case to which they do not belong; and he adds, "This distinction is plain," but in what its plainness consists, or how it is discovered at all, he does not inform us. The reader will probably wonder, as I do, that while Paley says no two things can be more opposite than the Christian and the heroic characters, he nevertheless thinks it "is plain" that Christianity sanctions the latter.

I would take the opportunity afforded me by this note to entreat the reader to look over the whole of Chapter 2, Part 2, in the Evidences of Christianity. He will find many observations on the placability of the gospel, which will repay the time of reading them.