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Christianity and Militarism

ADDRESS BY THE REV. A.W.UTTING

The Rev. A.W.Utting (Pastor of the Middleton United Methodist Church) addressing the Wesleyan Brotherhood, on Sunday, said-

Not so very long ago Dr Horton made the following noteworthy pronouncement:

“The Church still in a sense blessed war and adopted an attitude on the subject which did not discourage her members from taking part in war or serving in the Army and Navy...she ought to declare that war is un-Christian, a survival merely of the natural man and of the older order and she should entirely withdraw her sanction from war and from making provision for war. She should have the courage to say that as a Church she disapproved of great armaments as much as she disapproved of fighting and that it is the function of a Christian state- to act on the mighty principle of peace and love which could conciliate the world, not by being prepared for war but by frankly not being prepared, and by making it plain that as a country she had decided to suffer rather than to fight or even to contemplate fighting”.

According to Dr Horton then both war and preparing for war are un-Christian, in other words Christianity is entirely opposed to militarism.

What can we say to this? Let me say at once that I have never yet seen a satisfactory attempt to reconcile Christianity and militarism, although I have sought long and patiently for it.

Those who do attempt to reconcile the two usually do so on one or more of the following lines. They bring in the Old Testament to support their contention and point out that according to the Old Testament God commanded wars etc. To that we say that our standard is not the Old Testament but the New. Christ himself abrogated many Old Testament teachings. Did he not say eg ‘Ye have heard that it was said to them(.) of old time Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment; but I say unto you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of this judgment...Ye have heard that it was said, thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy but I say unto you love thine enemies etc? It is not for us to takereach his own high level.

Others make much of the fact that soldiers are often mentioned in the New Testament both by Christ and His apostles and sometimes with approval. Nor were they commended to leave their profession. But the approval given by Christ to soldiers was for their faith not their militarism. As for the latter contention, it was not Christ’s way to give commands of the order. He did not e.g. command slave owners to give up slaves. What he did do was to inculcate a certain spirit of holy love and certain principles such as this- love one another as I have loved you. And that spirit and those principles rightly understood are irreconcilable with either slavery or militarism and will one day, we trust, abolish both.

Then there are those who fall back upon the theory that struggle is the ordained method of existence and self preservation the first law of life; and along that line we try to justify militarism. But in the course of that struggle morality has emerged. We have justice truth and peace as well known qualities amongst us. Which is the more Christian course, to shape national life by those qualities or to fall back upon the method of brute struggling with brute force for the mastery? Again our authority here is not nature but Christ. He certainly did not teach us, he certainly did not practice, that self preservation was the first law of life to be maintained by brute struggling. Another class of thinkers frankly assert that while Christ’s teaching is good for and even binding upon the individual it is not practicable nationally. Any attempt to apply it is as a whole to national life would be fraught with disaster. It appears then from this assertion that Christ has no real gospel for the nation; that Christianity as an ethical code is not co-extensive with human affairs- there are certain regions where it does not and

can not apply. I reject this entirely and believe most emphatically the very opposite. Christ's law is applicable to nations as well as individuals and the sooner the rulers of nations learn that simple truth the better for us all. But note that this theory frankly gives up the attempt to reconcile Christianity with militarism. Lastly on this head there are those who deem it impossible to reconcile the two and therefore do not attempt it. But they argue that militarism is necessary because of the imperfections of individuals and nations. Exigencies are probable where brute force alone would avail to save us. Moreover they argue that a show of brute force in many cases prevent the probable danger turning into the actual. But as humanity grows more perfect these exigencies will diminish and along with this diminution the need for armaments will grow less and less and the enlightened sense of the community may be trusted to gradually dispense with them.

Upon this view I would merely observe this: Do we not believe as Christians that the moral forces of the world are the supreme forces? Then why not trust in them- why not trust in justice and love in the hour of national danger? And do we not believe that God is on the side of the moral? Then why not trust in him? Need I remind you also that we are the professed followers of him who died rather than be false to holy love that he was and is? The moral was supreme for him and should be for us and with God be the rest. Now I want you to consider with me the attitude of the early Christian Church upon the matter. According to Professor A.W. Ramsay, opinion in the early church was divided as to whether a Christian should hold office or serve in the Army. To avoid difficulty many private Christians did so but many great teachers like Tertullian and Origen took up and strongly maintained the negative position. Said Tertullian: 'You enquire whether a believer may enter the military service and whether soldiers are to be admitted into the faith...there is no disagreement between the divine and the human sacrament the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. How will a Christian man war without a sword which the Lord hath taken away? In disarming Peter he unbelted every soldier' and again in the tract entitled the 'Soldiers Chaplet', 'Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? Shall the son of peace take part in the battle?' Tertullian believed and taught that a military life was inconsistent with Christianity and he wished Christians to act accordingly.

Then we have the testimony of that great opponent of Christianity Celsus, who asserted that the state received no help from the Christians in war and that if all men were to follow their example, the sovereign would be deserted and the whole world fall into the hands of barbarians' Origen in his reply said ' If all the Romans should embrace the Christian faith they would overcome their enemies by prayer; or rather they would not go the war at all being guarded by that divine power which promised to save five whole cities for the sake of fifty just persons. Later on we have the case of Maximilian who preferred death to taking the military oath. What a pity the Church of Christ did not maintain and develop this attitude! How much blood treasure and misery might have been spared. But there have not been lacking sects who opposed militarism on Christian grounds. The Paulicians in the 7th century did so and in the 16th century the Mennonites took up the same attitude. Then we have the Friends whose noble work in this direction is well known. There is Tolstoy also and in Tolstoy's land there are the Doukhobors and the Molokans who prefer exile and even death to militarism. Tolstoy tells us of one of these Doukhobors who was sent to a regiment stationed in Samarkand. The authorities did their utmost to make a soldier of him but all their efforts were met with the simple reply 'I cannot do what is opposed to my belief in God' 'Then we will torture you to death' 'That is your business. You do your work and I'll do mine'. The great and grave question for us is this: 'Is this course right? Can it be justified by and appeal to Christ?' Many are already saying yes and are looking forward to a time when the people shall refuse to take up arms both on economic and religious grounds.

Let us suppose the case of a young man already a Christian and eager to maintain his Christian faith and wishes to become a soldier. He has to ascertain what Christianity requires of him and the requirements of a military life. Consider some of the latter first. He may have to destroy life, property, health and happiness at the command of his superiors, for there is always the risk of war. On this Tolstoy very pertinently asks 'Can a Christian pledge himself in advance to kill all he may be ordered to kill? Then he will often have to stultify his reason. 'Their's not reason why .etc'. Then he runs the risk of violating his conscience by the practise of deceitful tactics. One moralist F.D. Maurice demurs to this and asserts that 'the security for a soldier's obedience lies in the cultivation of his conscience.' Unfortunately for this contention it lacks the support of the great soldiers. Note Lord Wolsley's celebrated statement that a soldier called to spy duty for example 'must dismiss from his mind any such notion as that 'honesty is the best policy' for example. It is a queer cultivation of conscience that omits this. A soldier has to render slavish obedience. Ruskin, speaking on a soldier's state said that 'It is a state of slavery- the fact of slavery is in being driven to your work without thought at another's bidding.' Speaking generally of a soldier's position we may say that he is one of a class of men taken from all industrial employment, fed by the labour of others who are taxed for his upkeep armed with destructive machine and liable at any moment to be ordered to the work of destroying life and health, prosperity and happiness to engage in immoral tactics and all perhaps in defiance of reason and moral judgment. – Over against all this set the requirements of Christianity. It forbids killing, retaliation hatred and strife and commands us to love our enemies. It is opposed to the stultification of reason. Our senses are to be exercised to 'discern between good and evil'. We are to 'prove or test all things and hold fast to that which is good.' It condemns slavish obedience to men. Where the commands of men conflict with those of God, 'we ought to obey God rather than men'. It condemns lying and deceit in every form and commands us to 'truth it in love.' Above all Christianity sets Christ before us as the ultimate authority for our lives. In all things we are to obey him. Can we say that a military life with all that it involves is in harmony with his teaching, example, mission or spirit? In spite of this it may be....that men love fighting for its own sake, materialistic men who trust only in brute force; ambitious men who seek promotion through strife, vested interests that seek only dividends and whose interests are bound up with a progressive military policy. All these clamour for big armies and navies and some call for compulsory military service. And there are those who believe in big armaments as the best method of preserving the peace. Whereas the truth is that such armaments foster the fighting spirit and all too often provoke strife.' The sight of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done'. Why not try the method of peace and love. It is time this method had a fair trial.

We must try and Christianise all government by securing all statesmen and legislators, those who believe in and love and are ready to obey the principles and spirit of Christianity. The late Dr McKennal once said 'There will be no end to the liability of war and until nations are Christian in the same sense that many men and women are so; and in this sense there is not and never has been a Christian nation'. Such a nation would suffer for well doing rather than evil doing. It would overcome 'international evil' with 'international good' by determined and sustained application of Christian principles to international affairs. May England soon become that Christian nation! The thought however that distresses many is this, what if such a nation became isolated through its noble efforts after peace? Might it not become the prey of more aggressive military peoples? I cannot think that God would permit such a catastrophe but if he did I feel sure that it would be overruled for the common good like the great catastrophe of Calvary which has been so fraught with blessing to the nations. 'Such a martyrdom would quicken the conscience of the world. In any case it would be better for us to die than to cease to act Christianly' For if we are guilty of the latter, national death- and

judgment- will overtake us, just as it has overtaken so many of the greatest empires of the past.

In conclusion I would venture to say this: I know full well that the problem we are discussing is not an easy one. All the more then it behoves every Christian man to think upon it carefully and prayerfully so that the problem may be solved and Christianity may triumph over all the strife and passions of men and nations.