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November 30, 2003

Typeset in Scala 11/13
Title set in Hadley, by Apostrophic Type L'abs

Produced in Adobe InDesign



Underhill, Evelyn. *The Church and War*. Hoopoe Publications, 2003
<www.disseminary.org/hoopoe/pubs/underhill.pdf>.

THE CHURCH AND WAR

Evelyn Underhill

We are moving – perhaps more rapidly than we realize – towards a moment in which the Church, if she is to preserve her integrity and her spiritual influence, will be compelled to define her attitude towards war; to clear her own mind as to the true reason why her members, by the mere fact of their membership, are bound to repudiate war, not only in principle but also in fact. The reason, for there is only one, is simple and conclusive. The Christian Church is the Body of Christ. Her mission on earth is to spread the Spirit of Christ, which is the creative spirit of wisdom and love; and in so doing bring in the Kingdom of God. Therefore, she can never support or approve any human action, individual or collective, which is hostile to wisdom and love.

This is the first and last reason why, if she remains true to her supernatural call, the Church cannot acquiesce in war. For war, however camouflaged or excused, must always mean the effort of one group of men to achieve their purpose – get something which they want, or prevent something happening which they do not want – by inflicting destruction and death on another group of men. When we trace war to its origin, that origin is always either mortal sin – Pride, Anger, Envy, Greed – or else that spirit of self regarding Fear, which is a worse infidelity to God than any mortal sin. The Christian cannot serve these masters, even though they are wearing national dress. His attitude to the use of violence “justifiable” or “unjustifiable,” was settled once and for all in Gethsemane. Our Lord’s rebuke to St. Peter condemns all “righteous” wars, all resort to arms, even in the defense of the

just and holy. No cause indeed could have been more just and holy than that of his disciples who sought to defend the Redeemer from His enemies; from their point of view, they would have been fighting for the Kingdom of God, and the highest claims of patriotism must fade before this. Yet it was not by any resort to arms that the world was to be saved; but by the suffering, patience and sacrificial love of the Cross.

To defeat the power of evil by the health-giving power of love and thus open a channel for the inflow of the creative grace of God is therefore the only struggle in which the realistic Christian can take part. No retaliation. No revenge, national or personal. No “defensive wars” – i.e., destroying our brother to prevent him from destroying us. “Fear not him that can kill the body” says the Church – or so at least the Church ought to say. Yet armament factories working full time announce to the world that we do fear him very much indeed; and are determined, if it comes to the point, to kill his body before he can kill ours. This attitude is one with which the Christian Church must never come to terms; for questions of expediency, practicality, national prestige and national safety do not as such concern her. All these derive from human egotism and human fear. Her single business is to apply everywhere and at all times the law of charity; and so bring the will of man, whether national or individual, into harmony with the Will of God. Charity means a loving and selfless co-operation of man with God; and because of this, loving and selfless co-operation between men. In this the Church has a constructive programme far more complete, definite, and truly practical – and also far more exacting – than that of any political reformer; for she looks towards a transfigured world, in which the energies now wasted on conflict shall be turned to the purposes of life, and calls upon everyone of her members to work for this transfigured world. But she will not make her message effective until she shows the cour-

age of her convictions, and makes her own life, individual and corporate, entirely consistent with the mandate she has received. She cannot minister with one hand the Chalice of Salvation, whilst with the other she blesses the instruments of death.

Certainly she can, and perhaps must, under present conditions, approve the use of such discipline as is needed to check the turbulent, protect the helpless, and keep order between man and man and between group and group. But such a use of force is never by intention destructive, and works for the ultimate good of those to whom it is applied. It is often difficult to define the boundary which divides this legitimate police action from military action: nevertheless, Christians must try to find that boundary, and having found it must observe it. Christianity is not anarchy; and the right ordering of society for the good of all is a part of her creative task. But on the question of war between man and man she cannot compromise; for this is in direct conflict with her law of brotherly love. Nor can the Church put this question aside as “none of her business,” and create for herself a devotional bomb-proof shelter in which to take refuge and meditate upon God, whilst those to whom she is sent violate His laws.

The Church is in the world to save the world. The whole of human life is her province, because Christianity is not a religion of escape but a religion of incarnation, not standing alongside human life, but working in and through it. So, she is bound to make a choice and declare herself on the great issues of that life, and carry through her choice into action however great the cost. War means men pressing their own claims and demands, or resisting another’s claims and demands, to the point of destruction. At best this is atavism, at worst it is devilry. The individual sacrifices for which it calls are sacrifices indeed, but they are not made at the only altar which Christians can acknowledge – the altar of the Divine Love. Therefore the Church cannot acquiesce in war, nor can

any communicant who is true to the costly realities of faith take part in it. Christianity stands for absolute values, and the Church falls from grace every time she compromises about them, for she is a supernatural society, consisting of persons who have crossed over from the world's side to God's side and have accepted service under the august standard of the Cross, with all that service of the Cross implies. Necessarily then, though in the world the Church can never be of it. For the world detests absolute values; they are so inconvenient. "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you."

It is true that in this realistic sense the Church is a small body and Christians are a small party, but the Holy Spirit "works through minorities," and it may be that He is in this present hour giving the Church one of the greatest opportunities she has been offered in the course of her career. That stirring of men's minds to a desire for peace which is the most striking fact of our present situation is a manifest working of the Spirit of God. The first business of the Church is surely to give unlimited support to this movement wherever it appears, invest it with the fire, the passion, the beauty proper to humanity's greatest aspirations, invite all whom it has touched to a share in her sources of power, and offer them constructive work that they can do. Here each communicant has a direct obligation, for the decisive factor in the establishment of a peace-loving community is such a disciplining of the individual heart and mind as shall enable every circumstance of daily life to be received in a spirit of peaceful love, and made an occasion for the deepening of charity. The Church is, or should be, the rallying point for all those who believe in the creative and redeeming power of this tranquil and generous love, for those who trust God, and are sure that those hidden, spiritual forces which condition and support our life can and will intervene – not to save us from suffering or material loss, not in the interest of

personal or national selfishness, but to secure in the teeth of opposition the ultimate triumph of God's Will.

Now, as never before, men's consciences are moved and their fear is roused by the awful spectacle of war allied with science and allowed to work out unchecked the consequences of this dread partnership – the mind of man, and the will of man, wreaking destruction on God's world. Only Christianity can say why these things are evil, and offer a method whereby this evil can be dealt with at the source, namely, in the hearts of men. Christianity alone holds the solution of humanity's most terrible and most pressing problem. She alone has something really practical to say, for to her has been confided the Word of God for men. It is the Church's hour; and she will not face it, because like the hour of birth it means risk, travail, inevitable pain. We are forced to the bitter conclusion that the members of the Visible Church as a body are not good enough, not brave enough to risk everything for that which they know to be the Will of God and the teaching of Christ. For it does mean risking everything, freedom, reputation, friendship, security – life itself. It is the folly of the Cross, in the particular form in which our generation is asked to accept it; that absolute choice which the Rich Young Man could not make. "If I were still pleasing men, I should not be the slave of Christ," said St. Paul to the Galatians. The Church is still very busy pleasing men. She has yet to accept with all its penalties the fact of being in the world and not of it, of having renounced the world's methods and standards and put all her confidence in God's method and standards. Because of this, her supernatural life is weak and ineffective, and her influence on the nations is slight. Only when she does make that crucial act of acceptance will she become in the full sense that which she is meant to be: the organ on earth of the Divine transforming power.

London, Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, 1940