THE PROBLEM OF WAR

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This article was first written by Herman Bavinck, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam, in November 1914. *Much of the material deals with political problems peculiar to the time of writing and has therefore been omitted here. However, Bavinck's survey of the Bible's attitude to the problem of war still merits the consideration of Christians today. After briefly mentioning the Pacifist argument that Christianity and war are directly opposed to one another, he reminds his readers of accusations levelled against church and clergy for their inability to prevent the war. Then he continues :*

It is therefore surely worth the effort to try and answer the following questions: What attitude is Christian ethics going to adopt towards war? Does war have a place in the Christian world-and-life view? Or must war at all times and in all places be condemned and opposed as a crime? Does war make any 'sense', or is it never anything but gruesome injustice, brute force and a work of the devil?

In this investigation the Old Testament need not detain us for very long. For no one can deny that in it war is again and again referred to as a divine right. Throughout the centuries, from the time of the Exodus in the fifteenth or fourteenth century B.C. up until the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Israel was involved in strife with the surrounding nations. This strife was looked upon religiously and ethically as a war waged by the God of Israel against heathen gods.

Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel [1 *Sam* 17.45], a warrior [*Ex* 15.3], mighty in battle [*Ps* 24.8], who goes to war with His people [*Judges* 4.14], equips the judges by his Spirit [*Judges* 3.10], teaches David the art of war, girds his loins with strength and delivers his enemies to him for destruction [2 *Sam* 22.35f]. Just as he sometimes ordains the defeat of His people for their chastisement and humiliation, so He also grants victory in battle by divine aid. In many a psalm or hymn, therefore, such help is invoked, or gratitude is expressed for victory [*Ex* 15; *Judges* 5; 2 *Sam* 22; *Ps* 3, 27, 46, 68, etc.]. This is not only the people's view of war, but also that of the prophets. Abraham took part in the battle against the despots of Sodom and Gomorrah [*Gen* 14]. Moses and Joshua, the judges and the kings led

[1]Translated from the Dutch by Stephen Voorwinde.

Israel in battle against her enemies in and around Canaan. Deborah stirs up her countrymen for battle against Sisera, the Canaanite general [*Judges* 4.6, 14]. Samuel musters the children of Israel against the Philistines [1 *Sam* 7.5f]. An unnamed prophet encourages Ahab to wage war against Benhadad of Syria [1 *Kings* 20.13f]. From Amos onwards the later prophets repeatedly proclaim that the great and terrible Day of the Lord shall be preceded by awful wars [*Amos* 5-7; *Is* 13.6-18; *Joel* 3.9-17, etc.]. But after that, the kingdom of peace shall come – to Israel and to all the nations of the earth. Then they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Peace shall be so rich and abundant that even the animal world and nature will participate in it. The wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the lion shall eat straw like an ox [*Is* 2.1-4; 9.2-7; 11.6-9, etc.]. All such peace shall accrue from the Messiah, who is the Prince of Peace [*Is* 9.5; *Mic* 5.5; *Zech* 6.13], and to whose kingdom of justice and peace there shall be no end [*Ps* 72.17; *Is* 9.6].

Now ancient Israel lived in circumstances completely different from those of the Christian community in the days of the New Testament. Hence its history cannot simply be our directing principle or example. Nevertheless, the Old Testament propagates the view that war is not of itself unjust and unlawful in every case. Moreover, in God's hands it can serve as a means toward higher goals, towards the coming of the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, war is temporary and at the coming of the Messiah it shall immediately make way for the kingdom of eternal peace.

Now it is at this point that the New Testament picks up the thread. For it is the Messiah, who by this time has appeared in the person of Jesus, who brings peace on earth [*Luke* 2.14], guides our feet into the way of peace [*Luke* 1.79], and establishes a kingdom which consists of righteousness, peace and joy [*Luke* 19.38; *Rom* 14.17]. This peace is, of course, primarily religious in nature. Objectively it is the relationship of peace which Christ has established between God and man [*Eph* 2.17]. Subjectively it reveals itself in the blessed knowledge that we are reconciled to God and that no guilt will ever remove us from fellowship with Him [*Rom* 5.1]. This peace is bestowed on the community by the Father, who is the God of peace [*Rom* 1.7; 15.33]. It forms the content of the Gospel which is called the Gospel of peace [*Acts* 10.36; *Eph* 6.15], and even now believers enjoy peace as a fruit of the Spirit [*Gal* 5.22]. However, this religious peace also has ethical results. For by his sacrifice Christ not only brought reconciliation and peace between God and man, but also between the various nations and peoples [*Eph* 2.14f], so that there is no longer Greek or Jew, barbarian or Scythian, slave or free, male or female, but all

are one in Christ Jesus [*Gal* 3.28]. Thus Jesus declares that not only the poor in spirit and pure in heart are blessed but also the peaceful or the peacemakers. He says that these shall be called sons of God [*Matt* 5.9]. In the Sermon on the Mount he exhorts his disciples not to be contentious, but to be kindly disposed to their opponents; not to resist him who is evil [*Matt* 5.39]; to love their enemies; to forgive until seventy times seven, etc. In the same spirit the apostles exhort us to pursue peace, and, as far as possible, to live at peace with all men [*Rom* 12.18; *Heb* 12.14].

The New Testament ethical standard is so high that in practice it seems to be in no way applicable. These words of peace and the gruesome reality of war stand in such sharp contrast that reconciling them seems to be impossible. Christ commands us not to resist him who is evil and to love our enemy, but in war the very opposite is required: murder, burning, plunder, destruction and everything that contributes to the enemy's ruin and downfall. The antinomy has been felt in the Christian church since ancient times and has led to varying attempts to solve the problem. Some have dismissed the world as the domain of Satan and have, either in isolation or in small groups, sought to apply the fundamentals of Jesus' teaching. Others have reversed this and have rejected his teaching as thoroughly impractical and – at least in public life – have denied its value completely. Still others have struck a compromise by distinguishing between higher and lower ethics, between counsels and commands, between clergy and laity.

[*Bavinck then gives historical examples of movements and men who held to an uncompromising pacifism and of others who extolled the virtues of war. Of the former he names the Anabaptists, the Quakers and Tolstoi. Included in the latter group are men such as Hegel, Spencer and Bismarck.*]

Neither of these sentiments, however, can be harmonized with Christianity. The champions of peace do indeed at all costs like to appeal to Jesus' utterances in the Sermon on the Mount. Yet by so doing they forget other truths which also find expression in the Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount is not to be equated with Christianity, and the problem of war is not so simple that it can be resolved by an appeal to a single text. It is much rather part of a wider issue which touches on the relationship of Christianity to natural life as a whole, to the entire sinful world and all it contains.

At this point it must immediately be said that although passive morality is in the foreground in the New Testament, an active and positive element is by no means lacking. The virtues which were then recommended to the Christians [vis. patience, longsuffering, forbearance, meekness, submissiveness] all played a large part. What else could be expected at a time when Jesus' disciples were few in number, small by the world's

standards and without any influence on public life? But it is all the more striking that Christianity is devoid of all asceticism and from its very beginning took on a positive relationship to the world at large. This fact is principally found in the statement that God loved the world and that Christ came not to destroy the world but to save it. From this focal point lines are drawn in all directions to indicate the place Christians are to occupy and the attitudes they are to have in this sinful world. They must not withdraw from the world, but being in the world they are to keep themselves from the evil one. Nothing is unclean of itself. All God's creation is good and nothing is to be rejected if it be accepted with thanksgiving. Marriage is honorable among all. The government is God's servant and is entitled to obedience and respect. Whoever becomes a Christian is to remain in the calling to which he was called. The prayer of Jesus' disciples is that God's name be hallowed, that His kingdom come, that His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. All this points, not to an avoidance, but to a sanctification of the world.

In this connection it is significant that the New Testament never disapproves the military profession as such. The soldiers who came to John the Baptist did receive an order not to take money by force, etc., but not an order to leave the service [*Luke* 3.14]. Jesus expressed his amazement at the great faith of the centurion at Capernaum and healed his servant [*Matt* 8.5f]. Later the centurion Cornelius and his whole household were baptized and admitted to the church [*Acts* 10]. Without having any scruples about it, Jesus, in one of his parables, speaks about a king who before going to war sits down and considers whether he with ten thousand men is able to meet his opponent who has twenty thousand [*Luke* 14.31]. Similarly Paul takes pleasure in using military imagery to describe the life of the Christian [*Rom* 6.13; 1 *Cor* 9.7; *Eph* 6.10-18; 2 *Tim* 2.3, etc.]. Even more striking is the fact that Jesus explicitly forbids the use of the sword for his defense, as the weapons of believers' warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God [*Matt* 26.52; 2 *Cor* 10.4]. Yet he is just as definite in affirming that he has not come to bring peace on earth but a sword, that is, to cause discord between people, even between the members of one family [*Matt* 10.34, 35]. Therefore, when the disciples are presently to go out into the world to preach the Gospel, they are to expect persecution and hate from the world. Then they will not only need a purse and a bag but also a sword, i.e., they must be completely ready to engage in spiritual warfare against the world [*Luke* 22.36].

These utterances of Christ clearly imply that there are spiritual possessions which are of much greater value than prosperity and peace. The commands of the moral law are not all on the same level, but occupy a different rank. God comes before man. Love for Him is the great and

foremost commandment [*Matt* 22.38]. We must obey Him rather than men [*Acts* 5.29]. His kingdom and his righteousness must therefore be sought above all things [*Matt* 6.33]. For the kingdom of heaven is a treasure and a pearl of great price [*Matt* 13.44-46]. Thus a man is worth more than the whole world [*Matt* 16.26], the soul more than the body, life more than food, the body more than clothing [*Matt* 6.25]. These spiritual and material goods are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They can be possessed and enjoyed together. Yet in this present world they may clash and collide with one another again and again. Hence we are placed in a position where we must choose one or the other. The teaching of Christ and the apostles, then, instructs us that we should without hesitation abandon the lesser in order to partake of and preserve the greater. For the sake of Christ and the Gospel the right eye must be torn out and the right hand cut off [*Matt* 5.29, 30]. Father and mother, son and daughter must be left, life lost and the cross taken up [*Matt* 10.37-39; 16.24-26; etc.]. Christian morality includes absolute self-denial. Life, prosperity and peace are not the highest possessions. There are cases where what is dearest must be forsaken, abandoned and opposed. The martyrs have left us an example of this. Even Christ did not please himself, but for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame [*Rom* 15.3; *Heb* 12.2].

The same idea may yet be elucidated from another perspective. Our response to the moral law is love, which is the fulfilment of the law and the perfect bond of unity [*Rom* 13.10; *Col* 3.14]. By this definition Christian love is essentially distinguished on the one hand from Buddhist pity and on the other from so-called free love. According to Buddhism the cause of all misery lies in being. All creation, especially creation that is alive, is thus lamentable and the object of pity. We must exercise that pity mainly for our own sake in order to achieve our deliverance and to kill within ourselves the desire for life. Schopenhauer unjustly identified this pity with Christian love – unjustly because the latter is richer and stands on a higher plane. The mercy of Christianity goes much deeper than pity; it is not the single, dominant virtue, but the disposition and expression of love in a particular direction with a view to the need and misery in the world. Love goes back much further, love extends much further. To begin with, it has God and all His virtues as its object. Moreover, it also directs itself to all His works and creatures, not because they are lamentable, but because it is in God that they live and move and have their being. Likewise, Christian love is basically different from the free love whose praises are nowadays so frequently sung. This free love is really nothing but lack of discipline and the emancipation of sentiment and passion. Christian love is rather the fulfilling of the law, is decreed

by God's will and is man's duty which binds him by conscience. This love is neither arbitrary nor a matter of personal choice. It does not lie within us to determine whom or what we should love. We must love God as He reveals Himself and not as we imagine Him to be. We must love the neighbour whom God places next to us, and not the one we choose. We must love the man, woman, parents and children God gives us and not another man or woman. We must love all that is true, righteous and pure. We must hate sin and avoid it, no matter how beautifully it may present itself.

There is therefore a true, but also a false, unreal and counterfeit love. Likewise there is a good peace for which we must strive and seek to maintain with all men, but there is also a false, sinful peace which should be broken. If with lies and injustice – by way of concession and for the sake of peace – we make a treaty or quietly permit what is wrong, then we are being spineless and denying truth and virtue. Over against such false peace [cf. *Jer* 6.14] Jesus placed the claim that he had come to cast fire upon the earth [*Luke* 12.49]. There are powers in this world with which we can never live on peaceful terms. There are truths and rights, spiritual possessions and invisible treasures for which we must be willing to sacrifice everything – peace, quiet, respectability and reputation, yea even love for our family and our own life. Conditions in this incomprehensible world may be so serious and complicated that love itself may compel us to break peace and engage in battle. Prophets such as Jeremiah would much rather have remained silent and spent their days in peace and tranquillity, but they could not, nor were they allowed to. They spoke because they believed and they struggled against their nation because they loved it. By his great love for God and man Jesus himself was moved to resist all evil forces even unto death.

This morality, of course, primarily refers to individual persons, but it also has significance for world powers. A nation is certainly not a mass of souls brought together by men within an arbitrary piece of land but a living organism which has its roots far back in the past and which is animated with a living patriotism in its every bone. Some people take pleasure in splitting the threads of this love into factors such as climate, soil, history, custom, etc., and then displaying it in its foolishness. But so superficial an undertaking is self-condemning and is completely powerless in the face of the reality of this love. Love – even for one's country – always has a mysterious character. It comes up out of the depths and is fed by hidden springs. For a time it may slumber and sleep, but then it reawakes with such irresistible power that even the coolest cosmopolitan is carried along with it. It then shows itself to be

so enthusiastic, lofty and disinterested that it renders one prepared for and capable of making the most demanding sacrifices.

This points to the fact that when the Most High separated the sons of man, He gave the nations their inheritance and set the boundaries of the peoples [*Deut* 32.8]. He 'determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation' [*Acts* 17.26], and gave each of them a place and a task in the history of humanity. In this respect it makes no essential difference whether a nation be great or small. Lloyd George and James Bryce have rightly reminded us that relatively small nations have contributed to the increase of the most noble cultural traits as much as – if not more than – the larger nations. Therefore it is no arbitrary matter, but rather one's calling and duty to defend these characteristics, sword in hand if need be. It is true that in the Sermon on the Mount, namely in Matthew 5.38-42, Jesus calls his disciples to a spirit of forgiveness which, we would do well to recall, stands in direct contrast to the demand of retribution, and is not susceptible to any quantitative computation [cf. *Matt* 18.22]. It is equally certain that Jesus is here speaking to those who understand, and not formulating a law that has to be observed to the letter; he is merely stating a spiritual principle which demands a different application in accord with the differing circumstances of life. Jesus himself acted in this way [*John* 18.22, 23], and Paul who preached the same spirit of forgiveness [*Rom* 12.17-21; 1 *Thess* 5.15; cf. 1 *Peter* 3.9] appeals to his rights as a Roman citizen [*Acts* 22.25]. Personal insults can and must be forgiven, but when truth or justice is assaulted in one's person, then, according to Christian principles, which place the Kingdom of God and His righteousness above all else, it is one's duty to defend and give evidence. This obligation is contained even within the Christian virtue of self-denial. For when the latter demands that for the sake of Christ and the Gospel we should forsake everything, at the same time it presupposes that all the things which we must abandon have value in and of themselves, even though it be a subordinate one. For whatever is worth nothing and does not cost us anything requires no self-denial when we have to forego it. For example, life is a possession that may and must be defended if it is not in conflict with higher concerns. In case of need every man has the right and the duty to defend his life, weapons in hand. An intruder into any house may be withstood with violence. Similarly the authorities which are called to maintain justice do not bear the sword, even the sword of war, in vain. If necessary, in the case of an emergency, they must use the sword both at home and abroad. Truth and justice are worth more for a man, for a nation and for humanity as a whole than are life, peace, prosperity and tranquillity.

It is thus noteworthy that the Christian church in all its divisions has

never condemned the warrior and war. The church herself of course may never go beyond preaching the Gospel of peace and fighting with spiritual weapons. A 'holy war' for the propagation of truth has been forbidden her by what Christ said to Peter. Yet she has never disputed the authorities' right to wage war in case of need. Pacifists have resented her for this, but they would probably have reproached the church more strongly had she taken the liberty to mingle in state affairs and, without further ado, denied war its raison d'être in this dispensation. The church may and must not do so. It is her calling, according to the word of Christ, to render to God the things that are God's and also to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

Christian ethics therefore allows no other conclusion than that there *can* be good and just wars. Perhaps they are very few in number, and even much fewer than we think. In every war, even the most just, many things take place which both Christianity and humanity very strongly condemn. Yet neither the Scriptures nor history give sufficient grounds to censure every war unconditionally. A war can be good and just provided that it comply with the demands of higher principles, serve the maintenance of justice and only then be undertaken in the case of most dire necessity. Its justification then does not lie in the right of might nor in the virtues of patriotism, heroism, patience, steadfastness, unity, readiness to make sacrifices, etc., which it may engender; even less in the consequences liable to be brought about by victory such as a broadening perspective, an expansion of culture or even of Christianity; and least of all in the philosophical conviction that all that exists is reasonable and that war constitutes an indispensable and precious moment in the development of the human race. If a war is to be defended it must itself pass the strict test of justice. Even then it resembles the disasters and adversities of life in that it remains an evil [malum physicum] which may in God's holy hands nevertheless be used for the edification of the human race. The end and purpose thus remains peace, the eternal peace of the Kingdom of God.