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THE DOVE, THE FIG LEAF AND THE SWORD

Why Christianity changes its mind about war

Alan Billings

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Foreword

The law of unintended consequences often features in discussion about the use of military action and particularly the use of air strikes or remotely piloted air systems (RPAS), more commonly called drones. In the ethical debate, such considerations bring a sober reality to possible action. In other areas of life there are occasionally good unintended consequences.

The last years of the twentieth and the first of the twenty-first centuries have seen the armed forces of the United Kingdom on continuous operational duty, from ridding Kuwait of an invading force to intervention in so-called 'failing states', the response to terrorist threats and the current presence in Afghanistan. In each of these situations military chaplains have been present, offering spiritual and pastoral care to the men and women of the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force. Such care often involves ethical discussions, and it is important for chaplains to keep their thinking on the issues relevant and up to date. Chaplains provide a safe haven in which there can be reflection and debate, though it is never their role or responsibility to justify any particular military action.

It was on a wet and windy day in 2003 that Dr Alan Billings first addressed an RAF Chaplains' Branch Ethics Day. With customary style, Alan lectured on some of the material addressed in this book, perhaps in itself an unintended consequence of such engagement with military chaplains.

In addition to the annual military training they undertake that enables their ministry, chaplains are required to attend a programme of continuing ministerial development throughout their ministry in the armed forces. Subjects may range from Christian apologetics to fresh expressions. As might be expected, ethics is a perennial subject at these courses, and always popular. Ethical and moral debate features heavily in a military chaplain's ministry. However, while chaplains are not ethicists, it is important to bring a particular Christian perspective to the debate, whether in an academic setting or in an operational environment such as Afghanistan. For our parishioners of sailors, soldiers and personnel of the RAF, these issues are not discussed in the abstract but against the reality of conflict. Moreover it is important that an ethical framework be understood long

before conflict is faced. Such gatherings had their beginnings in the dark days of the Second World War, when RAF chaplains met together for rest, reflection, spiritual refreshment and intellectual stimulation. Meeting together was and is important, especially for those serving alone on isolated units. A popular lecturer of these wartime gatherings was C. S. Lewis, as a consequence of which he travelled far and wide to RAF establishments to lecture and engage with the men and women on active duty. Some things don't change, and Alan has for the last ten years or so travelled to lecture chaplains and service personnel from all three services, both in the UK and overseas.

In this book Alan provides a wide-ranging perspective on the Christian view of war, rightly beginning with the premise that 'while Christianity commits its followers to seek for peace, it was never a "pacifist" movement'. Exploring the Church's relationship to power lies at the very heart of this subject, and just as the world has changed, so has conflict and warfare, and therefore the Church's response has by necessity developed to meet each particular era and situation. Here we are encouraged to discover what this response has been, and in so doing realize that there has never been a quick-fix answer to the challenging questions that warfare poses to Christian thought and practice. We are led through the very history of our world, laced as it is with conflict and war.

The principles of the just war, with which so many are familiar, raise many questions. Very simply, they are an ethic of war; so what about peace? With great skill and insight, Dr Billings introduces the reader in Part 1 to the age of the *dove*, and the idea of non-resistance and a powerless Church. The argument for a pacifist Church is often based on the fact that Christ calls us to peace, but what does this really mean? Here we find the roots of the issue as reflected in Scripture and contemporary thought. However, as the history moves on, and as empires grew, the message of the Church changes in Part 2, the age of the *fig leaf*. Here we are led through the early thoughts of the principles of just war, to a full and elaborate exposition of the theory and what it could and would mean in an ever-changing world. Was just-war theory a force for good or did it simply assist unscrupulous rulers in giving an excuse for conflict to build their empires? It might be the stated view of the Church that war was evil but sometimes necessary; however, Dr Billings clearly outlines that this was far from the whole story. Could a war really ever be just?

Part 3, the age of the *sword*, examines some four centuries, from the Reformation to the First World War, and the enormous changes society faced during these years. Central to any discussion of just war is the work of Vitoria and of Grotius. Here is the just-war theory that many will recognize, discussed with a very helpful historical, political and

theological background. Moving through the Enlightenment, romanticism and nationalism, and recognizing the emergence of writers from disciplines other than theology, such as the soldier Clausewitz, the cold reality of the horrors of war that would mark the twentieth century is introduced. The First World War, the 'war to end all wars', the first total war, bringing a fully mechanized force with huge destructive power, is discussed, along with the contemporary Christian responses. The twentieth century was scarred by two world wars. The national consciousness was influenced by an act of remembrance that drew on one strand of Christian thinking in particular – the idea of sacrifice.

During the latter part of the twentieth century the world changed again. Intervention became the buzzword, followed by 'asymmetric warfare'. Clear ethical thinking was and continues to be required. The Church may not be the voice it once was, but surely it should have a view. The book concludes with a very helpful reflection on what the author believes the Christian witness should be in a post-Christian society. Not all will agree – but then some things don't change. Can there be a just peace?

I welcome the contribution this book makes to the continuing debate and the ever-changing spectrum of responses of Christian thought in areas of peace and conflict. It will make a good source book for all involved with the subject, at whatever level.

I believe that those to whom this book is dedicated are Christian realists who are called to engage with the realities discussed here. I hope and pray that, as this book intends, the reader will pray for all who seek to follow their vocation in working for peace, for 'Blessed are the peacemakers'.

The Venerable Ray Pentland CB QHC
Chaplain-in-Chief (RAF)

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My thanks go as ever to my wife, Veronica, who has had to endure rather strange conversations about war and peace while this book was being written, and to Alison Barr at SPCK for her help and encouragement.

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I dedicate the book to them.

Alan Billings
Sheffield

Introduction: cruel necessity

> Why did men fight?
>
> *King Arthur in T. H. White,* The Candle in the Wind

> No one is so foolish as to prefer war to peace in which instead of sons burying their fathers, fathers bury their sons, but the gods willed it so.
>
> *Herodotus*

> Even by the feeble a city may be shaken to its foundation, but to set it up again is a sore struggle.
>
> *Pindar*

> All great civilizations have, in the end, perished owing to defeat in war.
>
> *Harold Nicolson*, Why Britain is at War

The history of the human race, the history of successive civilizations, has been a history of war. 'Warfare', said the historian Frederick Russell, 'has been one of man's most distinctive activities.'[1] There is, therefore, every reason to suppose that the Christian Church would give its members unequivocal and consistent guidance in the matter. Yet that is not what we find. The Church changes its mind. If we doubt that, even the most cursory glance at a few points in history would show it to be so: the first Christians disapproved of military involvement altogether; the medieval Church allowed fighting but tried to restrain it, except when it came to fighting Muslims or heretics; some of the reformers were pacifists, others fought Catholics or fellow Protestants; by the time the nation state emerged, clergy of all denominations were more than willing to bless each national war effort; while in the later twentieth century the Church began to have serious doubts about the use of some weapons, especially weapons of mass destruction, and some prominent voices could be heard calling for a return to a stance of principled non-violence. There has not even been a consistent approach with regard to the clergy. They have sometimes regarded it as their duty to take up arms and fight, sometimes not. The sixteenth-century reformer Huldrych Zwingli, to take one example, fought to defend the Protestant cause in Switzerland and died doing so.[2] Martin Luther saw this as a judgement of God! Even today, while American chaplains to the forces may carry sidearms and defend themselves if necessary, British chaplains would be horrified at the idea.

How are these twists and turns possible? Is there some way of making sense of this apparently inconsistent and even contradictory guidance and practice? The purpose of this book is to try to give some answers to those questions and, in the final chapter, to suggest one possible response for the present time – a response that to some extent goes against the contemporary Christian temper.

The argument

The principal argument of this book is that while Christianity commits its followers to seek for peace, it was never a 'pacifist' movement in any absolute sense. It was always possible to contemplate resorting to force in certain circumstances. This is because the peace that is sought is never a mere absence of conflict but a peace based on justice, and sometimes that requires the perpetrators of injustice to be restrained or overcome. As a result the Church's attitude towards the use of force can be very different at different points in its own historical development and in the light of particular situations of conflict. As circumstances change, the Church is challenged to use its store of wisdom – Scriptures, creeds, doctrinal statements and the writings of theologians – to refresh and renew its thinking in order to give guidance to its members who must act in the world. Answers to questions posed by new situations can rarely be simply read off from the pages of Scripture. They require careful and often fresh and creative thinking. However, one consequence of this is that Christians do not always reach the same conclusions and do not always speak with one voice. As well as explaining what the thinking of individual Christians and the Church was at certain points, I shall also seek to explain why that thinking took the form it did.

Throughout Christian history one critical variable in this process of reflection has been the Church's relationship to power. The first key moment was the emergence in the fourth century of a leader of the Roman Empire who was Christian. Before the Emperor Constantine (*c.*272–337), Christianity was one religion among many in the Empire, and the Church stood at the margins of society. For much of that time it did not seek to engage with political or civil society, believing that such engagement was pointless: the end of the world was near. In any case the Church was powerless and sometimes persecuted. In that context it declared itself opposed to violence, identifying strongly with the historical Jesus of Nazareth who was himself far from any position of worldly power and offered no resistance when faced with suffering and death. But after the conversion of Constantine the Church came centre stage, the pre-eminent religion of the Empire. It was powerful; its members now included politicians and soldiers who had to keep the

peace of the Empire; it had to rethink its attitude towards power and coercion if its guidance were to have any utilitarian value; it ceased to be pacifist. For around the next 1,500 years, most of Europe came under the direct influence of the Christian Church.

A second key moment came after the Reformation, with the gradual formation of the modern nation state. At first Christianity played an important role in contributing towards the identity of each emerging nation. As long as the prevailing cultures were religious, nation states needed religious validation for their wars. Nationalism was wedded to religion. Then with the gradual secularization of European culture, nationalism often replaced religion as a supplier of meaning and validated its own wars. Religious justification was sometimes sought, generally welcomed, but not decisive. By the time of the Second World War, Christianity in the West found itself pushed from the centre of power towards the margins of society again. Religion played little or no part in decisions about peace and war. In the most recent period, Christianity has returned to a position of relative powerlessness. Its influence, if it has any, is now indirect, often as legacy rather than as a living faith. Perhaps we should not be surprised, therefore, to find the Church becoming more ambivalent in its attitudes towards the exercise of power, especially the lethal power wielded by states and their armies.

In order to understand these shifts and changes I have divided Christian history into three major periods and given each a symbol: dove, fig leaf and sword. Each serves as a summary of the Church's broad moral stance at that time. The *dove* is immediately understood as the dove of peace and stands for the Church's first thoughts about violence: it taught its followers to renounce the use of force as Jesus had refused to meet evil with evil. After Constantine the Church committed itself to a new doctrine – the idea that in certain circumstances force could be justified as the lesser of evils. Some would say that the principles of just war were a *fig leaf* that hid what were often the real or at least the mixed motives of rulers for resorting to force. Then as Christian Europe felt threatened by enemies without and within – Muslims and heretics – and its own unity was fractured at the Reformation, reasons began to be advanced for using the *sword* to safeguard or forward the faith. That idea of violence in a righteous cause began with religious wars but with the rise of the nation state migrated to the cause of secular nationalism. Religious fervour made way for equally strong feelings for the nation, or more likely was co-opted into the service of nationalism. The churches – plural now – found Christian justifications for blessing national war efforts. By 1914 we are not surprised to find each side in the First World War believing it was fighting to save Christian civilization. Dove, fig leaf and sword. Finally, as we come to our own time, the Church has once again begun

to find reasons for opposing or being extremely cautious about many modern military interventions and the use of some modern weapons of war. Is the dove returning?

Of course, history cannot really be divided in such a neat fashion. The early Church, for instance, may not have been as uniformly pacifist as is often portrayed. Even after Constantine there were subterranean currents of pacifism in some parts of the Christian world, in addition to the monastic orders. Around the time of the Reformation and subsequently, there have been Christian churches that have had a principled commitment to non-violence. In more recent history there have often been dissenting Christian voices calling nations to stand back from militarism and jingoism, even though the Christian majority was quite content to wave the flag. Nevertheless, I think there is enough truth in this division of Christian history to use the symbols as a means of focusing our reflections and enabling us to answer the question, 'Why did Christianity change its mind at this point in time?'

War and Christian ethics

Despite this ambiguous history, and the weakened position of Christianity in contemporary Europe, the Church can still contribute to ongoing debates about peace and war. It has a long history of reflecting on the morality of war and at different points in its history has translated those ethical concerns into practical guidelines. These have enabled the actions of rulers and soldiers to be scrutinized and have also provided a basis for law. Because of the ever-changing nature of war itself, the need for reflection and debate is never exhausted. The means of fighting change, as do the reasons given, and both need scrutiny. In the past century alone there was considerable evolution in weaponry (from tanks to planes and submarines to drones), while the reasons for fighting have become more varied (humanitarian interventions as much as wars for domination, territory or natural resources).

But thinking about the ethics of war is never easy and has become more difficult in the contemporary context. There are three principal reasons for saying this.

First, those who argue that morality has no place in discussing matters of war – often called 'realists' – seem to have had their case strengthened as a result of philosophical challenges to the very idea of (objective) morality.[3] In the past, realists insisted that morality must be set aside and issues of peace and war decided by power not morality – realpolitik. For much of the twentieth century that first step of ignoring morality has been made easier by a powerful philosophical idea that morality is a subjective and private affair, where there are as many moral opinions as there are

people holding them. Moral consensus is simply not possible, so that any talk of morality is just a disguised way of asserting one particular point of view. In the context of public policy-making, what we see, therefore, is not a search for morality but a struggle by those with one set of opinions to impose their will upon others. In arguing about the ethics of war there is a logically prior argument to be had about ethics itself.

Second, thinking rationally about war has become more difficult because while members of the public are probably better informed than they have ever been, we live in a much more emotional age and emotion tends to be the ultimate moral authority. This can make it quite difficult to have a rational and dispassionate discussion about the use of force, especially after military action has begun and television and newspapers are filled with images of the dead and wounded. No one can fail to be moved by this reporting, and while it is good that we are always reminded of the cost of war and some of its horrors, it does make it difficult to confront the painful facts and hard choices that lie behind any decision to deploy force. In recent action involving British troops, the media have given many opportunities to the bereaved relatives of soldiers killed on the battlefield to state their opposition to particular conflicts, as if their point of view, emotionally highly charged, trumped all other considerations. Indeed, any hapless politician called upon to justify conflict when faced with the spouse or parent of a dead soldier could quickly appear heartless and insensitive and his or her point of view be dismissed without further notice.

In the third place, and allied to the above point, thinking about war has become more difficult at a time of global mass communication in the context of the so-called war on terror. These are asymmetrical conflicts in which contemporary enemies are in no position to defeat Western armies on the battlefield or by conventional fighting. They achieve their victories in part by undermining the morale and will of those who oppose them, which they do through skilful exploitation of the global media. While some in the West welcome greater media exposure as a restraining and moderating influence on the conduct of war, others consider it potentially dangerous for democratic states. The resolve of a government and nation to see through a campaign can be undermined as a malleable public opinion is manipulated and shaped through exposure to often harrowing and poignant images of war seen on the television and the internet.

Nevertheless, despite the emotional age – or perhaps because of it – the time seems right to take a fresh look at the question of war and why at certain moments or in particular circumstances the Church changes its mind. This will bring us finally to a consideration of some pressing issues of the present age.

The writer

No commentary is without bias, notwithstanding the best efforts of the writer to identify his or her own prejudices and prevent them distorting the evidence presented and judgements made. But perhaps it will assist readers to draw their own conclusions about my judgements if I make that bias clear at the start.

For a number of years now I have spent time teaching the ethics of war in military settings, principally at the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre, Amport, part of the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. I am not a pacifist, nor a militarist, and I do not feel bound by the idea of just war, though I do think the just-war approach enables Christians – and others – to scrutinize the motives of those who would take us to war and the means we use in conducting it. I stand in the tradition of Christian realism associated in recent times with the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. I believe there are occasions when democratic states have to oppose force with force, and sometimes this may mean qualifying or setting aside a just-war principle. In some circumstances, for instance, it may be better to fight as a first and not last resort, if dragging out a crisis makes the prospect of victory less certain or might even contribute towards defeat. This was what Winston Churchill thought in the 1930s when the British and French governments, faced with Adolf Hitler's troops occupying first the Rhineland and then Austria and Czechoslovakia, decided to appease rather than oppose the Nazi regime. An earlier military response to Hitler, as Churchill urged, might have significantly changed the course of European history. It might have saved many Jews. As it was, conflict was not avoided but merely postponed, and the subsequent war was at first a close-run thing.

That, then, is my bias. It is captured in what Oliver Cromwell is said to have murmured when he saw the dismembered body of King Charles after his execution: 'Cruel necessity'. War is always cruel and an evil; but sometimes it is the lesser of evils and a necessity.

The book in outline

The book is in four parts.

Part 1 traces the story of Christianity and its attitude towards war from its origins in the first century to the time of the Emperor Constantine. For most of this time the Church was powerless, preaching and practising non-resistance as it waited for Christ's return. I call this the period of the dove.

Part 2 takes the story on from the time of Constantine, when the Church sought to reconcile the Lord's example of non-resistance with the realities

of power. The result was the formulation and attempted application of the idea of just war. I call this the period of the fig leaf. It ends with the break-up of Christendom at the Reformation.

Part 3 looks at the position of the Church in the post-Reformation, modern world, when for a time European Christians took up arms against one another in the name of God and then, as they gradually learnt religious tolerance, found a new cause – the nation state. Nationalism succeeded religion as the cause to fight for, with the blessing of the churches, Protestant and Catholic. Now Christians came to believe in violence for the sake of a righteous cause. I call this the period of the sword. It falters with the First World War and ends with the Second.

Part 4 looks at the present position of the churches in a post-Christian society, when a greater commitment to peace and perhaps even a return to non-violence seems more urgent than ever, given the nature of modern warfare and weapons of mass destruction. Are we seeing the return of the dove?

In an Afterword I set out briefly what I believe the Christian witness should be in the light of the changes and upheavals of the last half-century or so. In this way, in a post-Christian society, the Church can serve the present age.

This is the book in outline. We begin by looking at the world into which Christianity came and the Church's first thoughts about war.

Part 1
THE DOVE

Christianity's first thoughts: the renunciation of violence

The attempt to formulate a set of ethical criteria by which all wars could be scrutinized was essentially the work of Christian theologians, beginning principally with St Augustine early in the fifth century. Augustine believed that it was possible to fight a moral or just war; or rather he believed it was justifiable to fight a war, as a lesser of evils, in certain circumstances. But this was not the first thought of Christianity when it contemplated conflict in the world. On the contrary, as far as we can tell, the first Christians were opposed to the use of force whether by individuals or the state. In other words, Christianity began by thinking that war in any circumstances was always immoral. This is the judgement of the pacifist. It is also the mark of the sect – a religious group that does not believe it has any particular obligation towards society or the state, a group that to this extent is world-rejecting. How this came about is the theme of this first part of the book. We begin by considering the world into which Christianity came, looking at the various approaches to war found in the thinking of Greeks, Romans and Jews – some of which later Christian theologians were to draw upon. I then suggest reasons why the early Christians went down a quite different path, renouncing violence. This was a stance that would eventually become problematic for the Church as it moved from the periphery of society to the centre of power. First, however, we turn to the context in which the early Christians found themselves and ask why, given their appreciation of the relative peace and order Roman power had brought to the world (the *Pax Romana*), they adopted the way of non-violence.

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