

QUESTIONS and ANSWERS

[E3]

ON THE CHURCH AND NONVIOLENCE

Q *Did not Jesus sometimes give sanction to the use of force?*

A The Sermon on the Mount, and the Cross, show that Jesus generally taught and practiced redemptive radical nonviolence. Outsiders have always recognized this; both Joan Baez and Nikita Khrushchev know that Jesus turns the other cheek. Joan rejects the American establishment because it does not follow Jesus; Khrushchev condemns the hypocrisy of the establishment in pretending to follow Jesus. Furthermore, the Gospels above all portray a deep consistency in his character. Isolated incidents and sayings must be understood in the light of this overriding fact.

Q *Why did Jesus not tell soldiers to give up their profession?*

A They were all the police there was. The Roman Empire was not like one modern nation among many; it was closer to what the United Nations would become if it absorbed all sovereignties and made idolatrous claims for itself. Jesus, like the martyrs, accepts the police power, he is not an anarchist; but he rejects the idolatry.

Q *Did not Jesus use violence in clearing the Temple of Money Changers?*

A He had already clearly stated that he was not a political Messiah; he had no armed crowd behind him. He acted by force of moral authority; what he did was a piece of prophetic symbolism, or a nonviolent demonstration.

Q *What does Jesus mean, "I came not to bring peace but a sword?"*

A The context shows that it means, "I came to make men take sides and if necessary sever family ties"; truth takes precedence over conformity.

Q *Did the early Church permit its members to serve as soldiers?*

A Before Constantine the Church was very reluctant to permit it, although there was no universally accepted statement other than the Gospels themselves and the examples of the martyrs. The "conversion of Constantine" was really a conversion of Christianity into an established religion resting on the power of the sword. But his age is over: the "new churches" of

Asia, Africa and elsewhere are minorities in a non-Christian society, and many feel that the same thing is happening in America.

Q *What authority does the just-war doctrine have in the Church?*

A Augustine of Hippo, taking for granted the establishment of the Church, set up principles to keep the conduct of war inside some bounds. The principles of this "just-war doctrine" (fighting only in self-defense, first exhausting non-military means, limited goals, humane methods, not attacking civilians) have no New Testament basis. They came from Augustine's own well-cultivated moral sense, but could have been drawn either somewhat looser or stricter. Nobody seems to have made a plausible defense of the Vietnam war, or of nuclear war, on Augustine's principles. And it is surely beyond human power to state confidently that this or that brushfire war could never spread into a nuclear war. Thus under modern conditions hardly any conceivable war could be just, and the just-war doctrine comes to the same results as Jesus' nonviolence. Attempts have been made, as by Paul Ramsey, to set up a sufficiently broad definition of the "just-war" to include Vietnam or nuclear war; this seems disingenuous.

Q *Was not pacifism discredited by its collapse in 1939?*

A Between the two World Wars there was, among other views, a sentimental and unrealistic pacifism which overlooked the reality of sin and assumed (in effect) that if you love your enemy he will love you. Both the Gospel story and the teaching of Jesus suggest that if you love your enemy he may very well crucify you. When such persons discovered what was going on in Nazi Germany they lost all theological basis for their belief. Reinhold Niebuhr's criticism of this view as Utopian is correct. The Christian must remember both sides of the truth: "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

Q *Should we have let Hitler overrun us?*

A We must first understand that this question refers to ancient history which will not recur. The thing which used to be called "war", associated with generous sentiments of chivalry, will never exist again. That understood, we have much to learn from the Quakers and others who continued to profess nonviolence during World War II. It is unrealistic to imagine statesmen

being converted to nonviolence when war breaks out, of all times; but if they had been converted in 1919 and exercised firm generosity to Germany, there might well have been no Hitler. And the thing which the pacifists then affirmed came true in wholly unexpected ways; nothing which might have happened if we had not fought could be worse than what is now happening.

Q *Should we not have protected the Jews?*

A It would have been far easier to have rescued them in peace; as it was, we failed to protect them. The free nations, the churches and world Jewry made only token efforts to give warning, sanctuary or aid to European Jews.

Q *Was not Hitler's way of waging war too abhorrent not to resist?*

A We did not resist it in fact; we were converted to it. We started work on the atomic bomb because we thought his scientists were working on it; but we discovered after the war they had rejected it as a fantasy. We did the worst possible thing of which (wrongly as it turned out) we imagined him capable.

Q *Must we not temper idealistic morality with prudence?*

A Since Hiroshima, morality and prudence come down to the same thing. For now we know that we can render the planet not merely uninhabited but uninhabitable. A sufficiently farsighted observer will agree that anybody's military occupation of anybody else's country is preferable to nuclear war. The global numbers game of Herman Kahn is abhorrent and inconclusive; we are never in possession of enough data to know what will bring on nuclear war and what will not. Thus mere prudence brings us back to the simple-minded view—which happens also to be Jesus' view—that the most reliable way to stop violence is to stop.

Q *Should we not protect our loved ones?*

A Jesus does not protect his loved ones; he confidently foresees the same end for the Twelve as for himself. Our commitment to Christ is not modified because we have family—it includes loved ones, wife, kids as well as self.

Q *Is it not our duty to act in self-defense to protect Christian civilization?*

A The time is long past when we have the option of acting in self-defense; all over the world we have imposed our culture and broken down local ways. As a result, if you scratch under the skin of an African or an Asian you will find somebody that hates our guts. We cannot stop up all the ratholes. Boris Pasternak's novel shows that Russians understand as much of the Gospel as we do, or more. If Christianity survives it will not be because of this kind of protection; for on the view here adopted, what constitutes Christianity is the refusal to use violence in self-protection.

Q *Do we not have the duty to suppress criminal elements in the society of nations?*

A There is no impartially administered law to define such criminals; and we are not good judges in our own cause. The Church has failed thus far to advocate persuasively a system of World Law which might deal with this problem among the nations as our Federal Government handles it among the states.

Q *What can we say to a soldier who is risking his life for us?*

A "Thank you very much. You have laid yourself on the line as we try to lay ourselves on the line. It was a generous impulse which led you to try and protect us. We prefer not to be protected in that way, but we thank you anyway for thinking of us. We should like to suggest what we believe is a better way—and one which involves no less courage and risk. Whatever you decide, so long as you retain your altruism our quarrel is not primarily with you, but with the establishment which sent you out to fight."

Q *Is it likely that almost the whole Church could be deeply in error?*

A In 1840 the Churches—above all ours—considered the Abolitionists to be dangerous fanatics. In short, yes.

Q *What realistic aim could a Christian believer in non-violence hold?*

A So far as possible, to convert his Church, and the whole Church, to the same position. An initial result would be that secular idealists would have that much less reason to stay out of the Church.

Q *Is it realistic to expect that we will convince the State?*

A For the Christian the Gospel is something clear, good and true and the State something problematic. We do not know how the State will behave. It is supposed to behave prudently. We have claimed that deep enough considerations of prudence lead to our position. We may or may not convince the State; but we are bound by the Gospel to try.

Q *If American Christianity came around to this point of view, would we not either render the Government powerless, or provoke it into rash action?*

A The Church is ecumenical; conversion could not happen in America without happening in other countries. Conversion would mean that people were coming to see that nonviolence is just the negative word for something whose positive is love, reconciliation and reparation. If the movement gained influence, it would mean precisely that responsible persons in all countries were really coming to believe that those across the frontiers were actual brothers.

Q *Will anything we decide now make any difference if nuclear war comes?*

A Survival is in the hands of God; and if this planet does not survive we affirm there is survival somehow. But it is our duty to protect the planet and its environment every way we can. And if humanity survives here, the existence of a nonviolent Church could persuade whatever foreigners remained that there was some element in America they can trust—and vice versa. Our decision now could make the difference between rebuilding and not rebuilding.

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