"CHRISTIAN PACIFISM"

New York, N.Y.

Sir: I find the debate between Mr. Wilhelmsen and Mr. Miller on "Christian pacifism" strangely interesting. They have not really come into dialogue, I think, but they both are obviously concerned to face the question from perspectives of Christian faith as once delivered to the saints, rather than from perspectives of pre-determined philosophical "truth."

It does strike me as peculiar, however, that both men can so easily identify good and evil. Wilhelmsen seems to think mass war can be conceived adequately in the simple paradigm of individual combat, without the slightest reference to the many-faceted and largely impersonal forces which contribute to and result from actual war—forces sociological and psychological which do cause irreparable damage to individuals, families, and societies.

It is not in fact merely a matter of one soldier taking up the sword against another, with or without the other's spiritual welfare in mind. And it is trite to claim the pertinence of St. Thomas's concept of a just war without elucidating it in broader terms than that. The balance between the possible good and the probable evil of any decision involving mental and physical injury of any human beings does not so easily yield to generalities; grace and sin do not answer to universal categories, no matter how well intended. Thus there may have been justice for some society to go to war in a certain situation: that is debatable; but there is no generalization from such an instance by which any other society may justify its own war: that is sophistry.

In the other camp Miller distinguishes meaningfully between "cheap grace" (for cowards, pacifist or bellicist—rejected also by Wilhelmsen) and "costly grace" (the way of the cross); but he identifies his own position so easily with "costly grace" that one may not follow this argument without trepidation. He juxtaposes "withstanding evil" and "non-violence" in a way as to suggest their identity. But I wonder whether evil may be withstood in any such pre-determined manner. Evil seems so insidious, so clever that I never know where to expect it next. Can a principled stance against evil in a certain form (war, poverty, all the bad things) really expect to deal with it significantly? And how can the coward be so easily dismissed after all, when we all turn out to be cowards in various situations and to various extents?

So it seems scarcely relevant to us mere human beings, fearing for our very souls, to challenge us to be heroes, to take up our crosses—"the old rugged kind"—and seek that "costly grace" by prearranged non-expedient, non-violent resistance. And the suggested payoff—that "perhaps God's grace will abound most for those who choose the heroic way . . ."—just begs every question.

It seems to me that Wilhelmsen and Miller each in his own way set up straw men, fire off blank cartridges, and barely touch the human dilemmas involved in group violence. But despite this it also seems that they have raised the questions which are crucial for Christians in this debate:

1) Incarnation and Atonement. Is the love of God in Jesus Christ historically effective? Has evil been defeated in the Cross of Christ?

2) Salvation. What does it mean in social life to bear the marks of the Cross? To live by the Resurrection?

3) Eschatology. What is the bearing of the Christian hope of final redemption, of the total Reign of God, on present ambiguous existence?

I am glad to see these Christians arguing a moral problem from Christian assumptions: it makes an important question (which had seemed so dull for so long) come alive again to reality.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0084255900002990 Published online by Cambridge University Press