

## "CHRISTIAN PACIFISM"

Nyack, N. Y.

Sir: Mr. Frederick D. Wilhelmsen's essay on what he chooses to call "Christian pacifism" ("Christian Pacifism: An Orthodox View," *Worldview*, April) is a familiar exercise in the knocking down of one of the most popular straw men of our time. The pacifism that he so neatly disposes of is a figment of his own mind, barely a caricature of any historically discernible variety of pacifism. To refute a creature of one's own imagination is hardly an intellectual feat worthy of display in public print. If the subject is worth discussing, why not have a real dialogue between proponents and opponents of pacifism or of non-violent action?

As my small contribution to such a dialogue, I should like to make a few marginal observations on Mr. Wilhelmsen's article.

"Implicit in the non-violent position," he says, "is the assumption that love will eventually conquer evil and win the world for Christ." This may be one possible implication of non-violence, but it is certainly not an inescapable one. It is quite possible to embrace non-violence in the belief that the world as such is unredeemable, but that this does not make love irrelevant. One need not project an eschatological perspective in order to prefer humane methods to barbaric ones. Whether such methods are effective and under what conditions are separate subjects of inquiry. There are substantial moral factors to be considered in their relation to the means that are involved in a struggle. As Niebuhr pointed out years ago, it is at best dubious that a wealthy nation could employ non-violence successfully against an onslaught by poor nations. Love implies more than saying to one's neighbor, "I'm all right, Jack."

"Evil unresisted simply feeds upon itself: the Hitler of the Berlin bunker of 1945 and the criminals surrounding him were worse men than they were when they assumed power in 1933." The period referred to falls into two parts: six years of cowardly appeasement by the West followed by six years of unrestrained slaughter, culminating in the mass "terror" bombings of Dresden by the West and the mass extermination of Jews and Slavs by the Nazis.

Is Mr. Wilhelmsen prepared to advance the thesis that by relentless warfare the West deterred the Nazis from their worst crimes, which in fact grew to fever pitch under the pretext of a struggle for survival? On the other hand, the only advocate of a pre-emptive attack on Germany in 1933, to my knowledge, was Leon Trotsky, who urged that the

Red Army march immediately on Berlin. One wonders whether, from Mr. Wilhelmsen's point of view, it was fortunate or unfortunate that Trotsky was then no longer a wielder of Soviet military power.

Every reputable historian, of course, traces the rise of Hitlerism to the revengeful Versailles Treaty. From the end of World War I, it was in the power of France, England and America to undercut the roots of Nazism. In the 1930's, Chamberlain and Daladier softened only under pressure and sought to pacify Hitler by betraying Austria and Czechoslovakia. These were scarcely acts of Christian love. They were diametrically opposite to Christian pacifism and Gandhian non-violence. On the other hand, there were notable cases of non-violent resistance on a limited scale in Norway and Denmark after those countries were overrun by the German military forces, and these contrast not only in spirit but in result with the policy of "appeasement" for which pacifists now are wrongly blamed.

Not only this, but a comparison of the non-violent resistance in Norway with the terrorist resistance in France and in the East would go far to show that a good cause is harmed by violent methods, because it sets up a vicious dynamic of reprisal and counter-reprisal which adds up to a bloodbath of hate that carries over into the aftermath of war with the lynching of one's own countrymen as suspected collaborators.

We could learn a lesson from our own history, too. The Union's response to Fort Sumter led inexorably to Andersonville, Sherman's dreadful march to the sea, and the rise of the carpetbaggers and the Ku Klux Klan in the decades afterward. In a very real sense, the non-violent campaigns of today's Negroes are a resumption of the non-violent efforts of Garrison and Phillips, which the Civil War left in ruins.

"There is no way to end the power of the Prince of this world short of that transcendence of history which is apocalypse." Mr. Wilhelmsen is surely aware that his opponents have at least an equal if not a better warrant, on both biblical and patristic grounds, for a view that the Kingdom of God will occur within history—not as a result of man's efforts, to be sure, but by God's grace and will. However, this point need not be at issue here, since it is he and not the pacifists who equate the abolition of war with the breaking in of the Kingdom.

One is reminded of the jejeune argument that in a world without war life would be insipid and un-

eventful, as if war were the sole major problem confronting mankind. Surely it would be indeed a fanciful optimism to suppose that the abatement of mass slaughter by exterminative weapons between major powers would automatically obliterate all types of homicide or even enmity among men. But it is just as far-fetched to imagine that exterminative warfare cannot cease so long as two men can get angry enough to slug each other with fists.

I do not wish to attribute to Mr. Wilhelmsen views which he does not hold, but these clearly are implications of a confusion of absolute Christian love with simple military disarmament. I believe it is true, incidentally, that there is a connection between the morality and psychology of international war and of the teen-age rumble. It is easier to be humane in a world that is not supercharged with violence. But this is not a simple or automatic thing.

"Spiritual death," concludes Mr. Wilhelmsen, "is a death more final for the human spirit than honorable defeat, even if that defeat should lay waste to the world." This is a strong statement of Christian faith that jars strangely with the weighing of expedients that has constituted "reality" in the foregoing arguments. Earlier he has had recourse to the casuistry that speaks of fighting "cleanly" and "with love"—conditions that have always been incompatible with warfare (one recalls a YMCA secretary in World War I giving instructions on how to scoop a man's eyes out), and which can have no meaning at all in a type of warfare that kills infants, mothers, the elderly and infirm indiscriminately at the press of a button—but now he comes up to the hard core of the whole religious question: salvation.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who, by the way, paid the price in full of which he speaks) distinguishes between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." These are categories that cut across the division between pacifists and their critics. The cowardly pacifist whose meekness is nothing but inaction and acquiescence, the cowardly bellicist who will stop at nothing to fortify himself against harm—both of these are tacit believers in cheap grace. Both say, in effect, that God's forgiving love is so all-encompassing that one may either stick to one's own knitting and keep one's hands free from stain, or take upon oneself the annihilation of millions, and it does not matter, because God will forgive. The former sees the image of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," and wishes to cultivate these qualities without benefit of the cross. The other thinks he is emulating Jesus, but when he says, "Let us die to make men free as He died to make men holy," he does not really mean "let us die," he means, "let us kill them before they kill us."

I believe that Mr. Wilhelmsen is right when he says that spiritual death is worse than honorable defeat. But Jesus Christ is not only the truth and

the life; He is also the Way. Non-violent resistance is not to be equated with the way of the cross, but it partakes of it; it is a relativization of it, a partial application of it. It is the way of "costly grace" that eschews both of the kinds of cowardice described above. Strictly speaking, the way of the cross means non-resistance, withstanding evil and enduring it even to death in the faith that deliverance will come in the victory of resurrection.

But how many of us Christians today really believe in resurrection? We use it all too often, I fear, as an article of dogma with which to club our opponents. If we truly believed in resurrection, we would take up our crosses—not mass-produced hollow ones, but the old, rugged kind—and seek that "costly grace" which is the gift of repentance.

Some reader will no doubt infer that I am saying something about being good so as to "merit" salvation. Of course I have said no such thing; salvation is not earned. But it also is not to be had without the marks of discipleship in some degree. There is no liturgical formula nor philosophical ingenuity that can take the place of a humble and contrite heart. We may all be damned for our mere willingness to use nuclear weapons against our enemy, whether we actually use them or not. Or we may reject nuclear war and be damned for some other sin. Whatever we may deem expedient in the realm of political and social action is not necessarily negotiable in eternity, and we should be careful lest we buy a safe conduct in our mortal life that leads us only to a blank wall of mortal despair at the end.

Conceivably there is no salvation short of sainthood and martyrdom—which I would interpret in terms of the Christian peacemaker; and Mr. Wilhelmsen in terms of the Christian warrior (a juxtaposition which I, as a pacifist, naturally find incongruous). But if not everything depends solely upon our own conduct, perhaps God's grace will abound most for those who choose the heroic way of resistance without violence. In the nuclear age, it is the only way which can any longer satisfy the Thomistic doctrine of the just war, for those to whom it means something more than a camouflage for a policy of *carte blanche* warfare. Non-violent action is not perfectionist; it is not unalloyed good. It is the genuine "lesser evil" of our time.

Will it work? We can ask the same questions of the alternatives. None is foolproof. But there are both moral and historical reasons for believing that it offers our best chance in relation both to this life and the eternal life. When we weigh the risks, we can remember the old soldier's saying: "Better to be a live coward than a dead hero." And if we are Christians we may wonder if "live cowards" really live on. In the next war, if it comes, there will be no heroes.

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