

CHRISTIAN PACIFISTS: A FRAGMENTARY CONVERSATION

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Two priests talking

PHILIP: So you see, I think the time has come for Christians to *refuse* war. War has changed, consequently the theology of war must undergo development. Now that we've all got the H-bomb, a just war is no longer possible, because the evil effects will always outweigh the good. The Christian must rise to the occasion and refuse any kind of war.

JUDE: *Any* kind of war? Even ordinary resistance to invasion for instance, by ordinary weapons? I fully agree that indiscriminate mass-destruction is unjust, and that such weapons are forbidden by the natural law, but I can't see that that means a Christian must go totally pacifist.

PHILIP: There's no half-way house now. Even the military will tell you that. You go on and on about law and justice, but a Christian has got to rise to higher things. Charity, forgiveness, love—*that's* Christianity, and it's never been tried yet. Now it's time for the Christian to teach the power of love—not only teach it, but exemplify it.

JUDE: Doesn't charity presuppose a foundation of justice? I don't know about human laws, but keeping the natural law seems to me love too, for practical purposes.

PHILIP: No, it isn't enough.

JUDE: It's a good start. If some general is going to kill a million women and children at one blow, I can tell him it will be a *sin*.

PHILIP: And he will produce some other priest who tells him it's all right in the circumstances. No, I won't waste any more time discussing how far it is possible to go in war without committing sin. The gospel of Christ is not at all concerned merely with the avoidance of sin: it is concerned to show the ideal life which Christ sets before us in the Sermon on the Mount. The way of love instead of the way of force.

JUDE: You mean a Christian today ought to be a pacifist?

PHILIP: I don't care for the word 'pacifist', I would rather say 'peace-maker'. Overcoming evil by good. Peace is not some-

thing negative, it has to be constructed. Blessed are the peace-makers.

JUDE: We all agree to that, but—

PHILIP: No, you don't really; so long as you rely on violence, you can't make peace. Once you renounce *all* violence, then you can start active and persistent peace-making.

JUDE: That's all very well, but to be an active and persistent peace-maker, as between the gangster and his victim, one must begin by protecting the victim. The weakness of the pacifist position is that he leaves the protecting to somebody else and then blames them for doing it. If there's to be any peace-making, somebody has to use violence first on the gangster.

PHILIP: No, not violence. A certain amount of force perhaps. Police-action, if you like. But not violence.

JUDE: What's the difference?

PHILIP: By violence I mean any kind of force that is incompatible with loving. Peace-makers have different ideas as to where the line should be drawn: a truncheon perhaps, but not a bayonet; a revolver perhaps, but not high explosive. One must allow for different consciences.

JUDE: One must allow for the lack of any genuine principle, 'Incompatible with loving!' You couldn't have a more negative, a more meaningless, definition. The hangman can renounce violence on such a definition and remain in his job.

PHILIP: There is nothing negative about love.

JUDE: No, but it is something spiritual, an inward attitude of the will, whereas force is something outward and physical. The two are not commensurate. Defining violence that way is like defining poison as any drink which is offered by an unfriendly hand.

PHILIP: Physical force is not the only force: love is a force too.

JUDE: Yes, and it's always needed: but sometimes physical force is needed too.

PHILIP: The Christian must believe that there is no limit to the power of love.

JUDE: I'm afraid we're in danger of wallowing in mere verbiage, the merest wishful rhetoric. What does it boil down to in practice? Look here, Philip, there's a young parishioner of mine named Rufus. He's been reading your articles and being a generous-minded young man he wants to do whatever our

Lord says. So he's going to write to you for advice—shall he answer the call-up to military service? I told him to join up but refuse anything to do with indiscriminating slaughter.

PHILIP: If he writes to me I shall advise him to answer Christ's call instead.

JUDE: In other words—

PHILIP: To refuse military service altogether. To renounce the right of self-defence, as becomes a Christian.

JUDE: But it's not so much the right of self-defence he would be renouncing but the duty of defending others.

PHILIP: If the others are Christians, they ought not to want to be defended by violence. But it doesn't matter what they want, what matters is that he feels the call to bear witness to the power of love. Let him bear his witness and suffer his martyrdom.

JUDE: He won't be martyred. He'll get exemption and do well in his profession while his rivals are away on their military service.

At the worst perhaps he'll do some national service on a farm.

PHILIP: All that is accidental. If many more young men in this country refused military service war would soon be a thing of the past, like duelling.

JUDE: On the contrary, there would soon be anarchy, and the smash-and-grab people all over the world would be doing what they like. You pacifists don't make allowance for original sin, fallen human nature. The world is full of would-be gangsters all waiting for their chance, in many cases quite impervious to appeals to reason or to examples of forgiving love, not to count the far more numerous stupid and gullible people always ready to support the gangsters. Peace will always have to be fought for; there will be small wars needed—call them police-action if you like—somewhere in the world this year, next year and every year to the end of the world. Yes, even if we get a world-government. If a Christian says he will refuse any part in these, and tries to persuade all other Christians to follow him, he is taking up an impossible anti-social anarchistic and unchristian position. It is certain that he would never get support from the bishops of the Catholic Church.

PHILIP: In fact, you are saying that Jesus Christ was mistaken in preaching the new way of love?

JUDE: If he meant what you say he meant, yes, he would have been mistaken. But of course he didn't.

PHILIP: And yet the way of non-violence in peace-making is practical too, far more practical than making war. Only it must be uncompromising. The spirit of absolute violence can be overcome by the spirit of absolute non-violence. Gandhi showed the way. Gandhi proved that our Lord's teaching was practical for a nation as well as for the individual.

JUDE: Steady on! You mustn't ask me to accept Gandhi as the infallible interpreter of scripture!

PHILIP: No, but he took the Sermon on the Mount literally, which is more than most Catholics do.

JUDE: He was a great man, and his technique of mass non-violence may be needed by the world yet. It seemed to succeed because the British were basically decent people. But as soon as the British had gone, its non-success became evident, and Gandhi said that many more Gandhis would be needed. I must admit that I never cared for the puritanical side of his teaching, nor for his custom of blackmailing friends and foes by his hunger strikes.

PHILIP: You wouldn't have liked our Lord's methods either, I expect. So, 'Get thee behind me, Satan'.

JUDE: All right, let's get down to the real question. What makes you think the Gandhi, or Quaker, or 'Christian-pacifist' interpretation of our Lord's teaching is correct?

PHILIP: Why, surely, it's all there in the Sermon on the Mount, as well as in our Lord's whole life and character!

JUDE: Evidently my picture of him is quite different from yours, you must come down to details.

PHILIP: Well, look at the Sermon on the Mount. There we have the Christian ideal set before us in the most absolute terms; the very essence of the Gospel. Not just a counsel of perfection addressed to a few chosen disciples, but the call of the Gospel itself, summoning all men to a new way of life. The Kingdom of God must be put first, and national institutions and human values are all of no account in comparison. Marriage, family life, property, courts of law—the Christian may use all these natural rights but must be prepared to sacrifice them at any moment. We cannot exaggerate the radical renunciation which the Gospel involves; we can never properly 'belong' to this world again.

JUDE: All this, my dear Philip, is what I take the liberty of calling verbiage. Will you get to the point?

PHILIP: I am coming to it. One of the natural human rights is self-defence, and clearly our Lord asks us to renounce it. 'I tell you that you should not offer resistance to injury; if a man strikes you on the one cheek turn the other', and so on. I admit there's a deliberate force of paradox in such words which warns us not to take them too literally. I grant you that when our Lord was struck on the face, in the court of the High Priest, he did not turn the other cheek but made a spirited protest. Nevertheless these sayings, about non-resistance to evil, are meant to present a challenge to all worldly values.

JUDE: More verbiage, Philip! You said we cannot possibly exaggerate these radical renunciations, and now you say they must not be taken too literally. Remember you are asking my young friend Rufus to take them quite literally. Some more evidence, please.

PHILIP: Well, I suppose our Lord's central idea is forgiveness. 'Forgive and it shall be forgiven you.' We advocates of non-violence merely want to put his teaching into practice. We believe that forgiving love has unlimited influence, even (if it were tried) over those you call the gangsters.

JUDE: That's right enough, if by unlimited you mean unknown limits. The Christian who takes our Lord's words seriously must love his enemies, pray for them, see the possibilities of good in them, understand them instead of merely blaming them, refrain from revenge, be ready to meet them half-way as soon as they change their heart, be as friendly as possible towards them, be on their side (as it were) against their worst self. This is love, but love does not mean that we should stand aside while those we love commit injustice against others we love. To hate the sin and to love the sinner is part of the A.B.C of Christianity. No doubt it is difficult, but a Christian policeman can love the gangster even while he hits him over the head with his truncheon, and the Christian soldier will pray for the enemy he is shooting, or even if need be, bayoneting. Charity is higher than justice, but it has to be built *on* justice, not injustice.

PHILIP: I just don't see how you can be said to love somebody you are bayoneting. If that isn't verbiage, what is?

JUDE: A bayonet is only a sword stuck on a rifle. I suppose one can use a bayonet without following all the suggestions in the

sergeant's handbook. Didn't our Lord say something after the Last Supper about buying a sword? Another paradox of course. But it doesn't indicate any special horror of swords or bayonets.

PHILIP: It was no paradox later on when he told Peter: 'Put up the sword into its sheath, for those who take the sword will perish by the sword'. Surely this was a momentous saying. In those words he was teaching, nay commanding, the full doctrine of non-resistance; or rather of non-violent resistance.

JUDE: I absolutely agree, but to whom was he speaking? Not to the State, but to the Church, to the Apostles. The question in Gethsemane was whether the Church, as such, should resist persecution by force, and our Lord said decisively, No. If force offered a true solution for the Church, God would provide more than twelve divisions of angels, enough to overwhelm any Roman army; but the Church must always win its victory through love and persuasion and sacrifice and martyrdom. Is not this also the true key to the other utterances of our Lord about non-violence as a method of love? We must not fight for religion, either to spread it or to save it; we must fight (when we must fight) for justice and freedom as demanded by the natural law.

PHILIP: No, I can't agree. For our Lord there was no such thing as a just war. He definitely refused to encourage the Jewish resistance movement against Rome, though in itself it was a just enough cause.

JUDE: That's true, but do you think he discouraged it because he disapproved of all war? Or wasn't it rather because he disapproved of the Jewish dream of world-power and fore-saw its inevitable failure? The only practical war-question was whether the Jews should rise against Rome. Our Lord gave no encouragement to this, and when challenged in the last days of his life he answered in favour of paying tribute to Caesar. If he was what people now call a Christian-pacifist, he certainly did not make his meaning clear to the public mind, or else he could hardly have been put to death, as he was, on a charge of sedition against Caesar. The charge was false, as Pilate saw, but it was not incredibly false, as it would have been if it had been common knowledge that his teaching was 'pacifist'. We might easily imagine that if he had been born in other

circumstances at a different period of history, our Lord might have willingly fought, as Socrates did, in defence of freedom and justice for mankind. It would be easier to imagine him doing that than to imagine him trying to turn ordinary soldiers from their duty and allegiance. After all, we know little of our Lord's actual life except in its last few months: it gives us no right to feel sure of what the Carpenter of Nazareth would have done if (for instance) his village had been raided by brigands. I think myself he would have turned out with the other men to defend the village.

PHILIP: You are blind to the whole lesson of Christ's life and death, it seems to me. He took on all the powers of this world, and vanquished them by non-violence carried to the point of death. Thereby he raised up a new power of life, capable of transforming the world. The secret of this power still remains within the Church: it is her secret, her hidden life. It is in our power to learn this secret and to show forth this life upon which the Church and the world depend.

JUDE: All very true, but you mustn't be carried away by your generous eloquence into impossible and utopian conclusions. My criticism of your position is that you do not make enough distinctions. For instance, self-defence is one thing, and the defence of justice and humanity is another: you mix them up. Again, physical force and spiritual force are two different things, but not two contrary things: and sometimes physical force may rightly be at the service of spiritual force. Again, I don't agree with your definition of violence: violence should be defined as unjust or unnecessary force: love has nothing particular to do with it, except that love would prevent it happening.

Finally, this idea of semi-commandments, of Christian injunctions which are not commands but which all Christians are expected to observe, seems rather odd to me. Doesn't it blur the distinction between commandments and counsels, between natural law and ascetical theology? That distinction seems to me rather valuable, and likely to grow in importance as the Church's development of doctrine spreads from the sphere of faith into that of morals.

PHILIP: Apart from the three 'Evangelical Counsels', I suppose all our Lord's advice, suggestions, invitations—call them what

you like—are addressed to all Christians surely? About forgiving for instance.

JUDE: I would call forgiving one's enemies part of the natural law. It comes under the fifth commandment forbidding 'anger, and still more, hatred and revenge'. That's the English Catechism.

PHILIP: But that is the fifth commandment read in the new light of Christianity.

JUDE: No, it's merely the natural law at its highest. Non-Christians can rise to it, for instance David acting forgivingly to Saul. Of course, Christianity does provide far stronger *motives* for it, not to mention more grace.

PHILIP: 'It was said to them of old . . . but *I* say to you . . .'. You surely can't deny that our Lord's invitation is to higher standards of conduct for *everybody*. About forgiving, and everything else.

JUDE: Maybe, but such invitations are not usually contrary to the commandments, even if they seem to go beyond them. Now the advice you are going to give to my young friend Rufus, it seems to me, tells him to go against the fourth commandment, according to which he has the duty of defending his country when called upon.

PHILIP: Yes, but now his country is telling him to break the fifth commandment.

JUDE: So now he and everybody else can feel at liberty to break the fourth? Well, that seems to me a dangerous doctrine. The New Testament writers were very careful to avoid giving that impression, weren't they? They didn't want to be regarded as anarchists of any kind. Wouldn't it be more seemly perhaps if you, and Rufus, should claim to be acting under a special inspiration, as it were; following an exceptional vocation to refuse all war, not so much as a moral duty, but as a dramatic demonstration to make people think: a sort of sharing in the 'prophetic office' of Christ?

PHILIP: Who's using verbiage now? Why should Rufus make high-sounding claims like that when all he wants to do is act according to his conscience?

JUDE: Well, I'm not just making it up. It's a real suggestion put forward by one of the writers in a French Dominican sym-

posium lately.¹ You see, there is one great difficulty about your idea that the true Christian should refuse all war; the Christian Church itself does not agree with that, and never will.

PHILIP: You have no right to say it never will. The theology of war can change with circumstances.

JUDE: Certainly it can, and already has: for instance the older doctrine that allowed aggressive war in a just cause, in other words war as an 'instrument of policy', is quite out of date now. The French writer I mentioned hopes that a few Catholic pacifists, seeking martyrdom so to speak as an exceptional vocation, will be able to turn the whole Church pacifist; I think he's mistaken, yet it is an understandable enterprise. But as for you, you are saying that the Church is really pacifist already, committed to it by our Lord himself, and that every Christian worthy of the name should come out of the armed forces at once.

PHILIP: You're saying much the same yourself, as far as the H-bomb is concerned.

JUDE: But that proviso makes all the difference, dear Philip. Indiscriminate warfare has *always* been ruled out by theology and still is. But to go on strike against *all* war, as you want Rufus to do, would be to abandon any effort towards the rule of law, and any hope of ordered freedom in the world. It would be precisely anarchy. You'll never get Church authority to sanction that, or to admit that Jesus Christ taught it.

PHILIP: If you're right, then Rufus and I ought to be disowned by the Church, but that is certainly not the case.

JUDE: The point is, with your views, how can you teach the fourth commandment properly, or the fifth?

PHILIP: I'm not concerned with the commandments so much as the Sermon on the Mount.

JUDE: If you were a parish priest you would have to do something about the commandments too.

PHILIP: Look here, why can't you just leave me alone? Can't we just agree to differ? Why must you attack my views like this?

JUDE: Because of young Rufus of course. He has the intelligence and conscience to see he's got to do something about nuclear-war. Being young he falls for your idealist patter and easy

¹ The reference is to *Lumière et Vie* of July 1958: a special issue, mostly historical, on 'Theology and War'.

over-simplifications, and off he goes into the pacifist blind-alley, instead of sticking to the practical problem and giving a common-sense lead to all his generation.

PHILIP: Idealist patter. So that's all the Sermon on the Mount is, to one parish priest at any rate! May I point out that your own line of idealistic patter, unilateral renouncing of the H-bomb and all that, gets much more unfavourable comment from ordinary Catholics than mine does.

JUDE: Yes, because it's something they would have to make a decision about, whereas your total-pacifist programme is just airy-fairy stuff for over-sheltered intellectuals and leisured ladies to talk about in peace-time, and no ordinary person thinks it concerns him for a moment.

PHILIP: Airy-fairy stuff for intellectuals! Poor Jesus Christ!

JUDE: Poor man in the street, who gets such a strange picture of Jesus Christ from all he is told. If after 2,000 years of muddling along it turns out that Gandhi is the essence of the Gospel, surely the ordinary man is as likely to go Communist as anything. The Communists can at any rate promise order.

PHILIP: Well, Jude, let us hope you are mistaken.

(Conversation proceeding.)

