

## Chapter 1

### TOWARDS A CORRECT STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

THE problem under discussion is formidable indeed, and extremely hard to approach with the necessary clarity. It is all too easy to bring in a host of more or less unconscious ideas, emotions, and reactions which have nothing to do with the basic question but may well invalidate all our reasoning from the outset. So it is vital to define the problem in as exact terms as possible. Now, a study of the Bible is the essential basis for any answer to our agonising question; but before entering on such a study, we must eliminate certain non-biblical considerations which are often introduced. Christian theology should start from the Scriptures, not from preconceived ideas.

#### 1. *The Question of 'Values'*

First of all, then, we must ask whether on the level of human civilisation there are any values to be protected and maintained at all costs because they have an absolute worth in the eyes of God; so that the need to 'defend' them outweighs every other consideration, including the concern to be faithful to God Himself in the methods we use. Could there, in fact, be values more important for Christians to preserve than their humble obedience and faithful witness to the Gospel?

Christianity does, of course, allow us to recognise certain values as true and good. But it must be added at once that they always contain an element of sinfulness; they are never entirely true or absolutely good, because they share the universal corruption of the human race. They are in no way divine hypostases nor post-Christian revelations, but simply stages in human development which can be spoken of before man's Maker without too great shame. For us Christians the concern to respect God's will in our actual conduct, and to bear witness to our Saviour, is obviously of greater importance than the consideration of any values which may deserve defending. As G. Gusdorf puts it,<sup>3</sup> 'to prefer a value, even

a genuine one, to the person of Christ, is to be guilty of grave lack of faith; for values are worthless except in the context of Christian obedience.' In other words all immoderate love of human values betrays a latent idolatry. As the Bible reveals to us, they are also terribly relative, and we relapse into sheer paganism if we exalt them into a system or try to use them as a premise for resolving a problem in Christian ethics. To a Christian, human values can only be of secondary importance.

In any case, I do not believe that the history of human society shows certain catastrophic situations where Christians could legitimately consider the Gospel's moral demands as temporarily suspended and virtually unfulfillable during the time of the so-called crisis—so that they would thereby be released from the obligation to conform to such demands in their daily conduct. On the contrary, I believe that the only true crisis began with the Cross, and that this crisis will end only with the Lord's return; that till this time Christians are called to a faithful witness. They could never be absolved from obedience to their Master by any national catastrophe or even the collapse of a civilisation, nor would such things justify their being content with a cheapened version of Christianity. Quite the reverse: it is just at such moments that their love should not 'wax cold.' It is then that each Christian must 'endure unto the end' (Matt. 24:12-13; Luke 12:35-40).

## 2. *Is Mars Dead?*

I am always surprised to see how readily most Christians assume the permanent disappearance of certain forms of paganism, as personified by the ancient pagan deities. A glance through Christian literature may discover plentiful references to Mammon, but there is hardly anything about no less formidable gods, such as Bacchus and Venus, Moloch and Mars. Yet these relics of paganism are far from dead, and the mystique of Mars in particular, with its glorification of warrior virtues and exaltation of the hero (brought to its peak by Adolf Hitler), persists today as strongly as ever. Such a mystique is surely not to be found in the Gospel, however; witness the way Jesus, and later Paul, were ready to flee in order to escape from those who wished to kill them.

The terrifying thing here is that our crucial decisions are often dictated by deep-seated and largely unconscious motives, and that we then seek to justify them on a different level and by quite different arguments. It is natural for man to assess his own dignity by his

capacity for fighting; he is proud of his combativeness and very ready to see it as the chief sign of his manhood. In itself this powerful instinct is neutral from the Gospel's point of view, because it is a manifestation of the flesh. But obedience to the Gospel certainly does not mean that a man is bound to yield to the combative instinct which will so readily seize, exalt, and galvanise his flesh.

Like all the other pagan deities, Mars strives to enslave men to the deepest inclinations of their flesh, and the war-god's whole art lies in honouring the combative spirit by decking it out in pomp and finery, seducing men's hearts with all manner of tricks and deceptions. For instance, throughout the ages soldiers' uniform and equipment has had a triple function. In the soldiers themselves it induces a mixture of arrogant boldness, instinctive fear, and a collective fatalism which will destroy their individuality. In their neighbours it induces a 'healthy respect' (as it is often called), which leads to ready submission. Thirdly, it induces an admiration among women which can only heighten the soldier's own conviction that he is a hero. Thus does Mars succeed, with his glittering panoply, in drawing men into his vile work.

Oh, yes, he is a cunning god, who can charm his victims the better to capture them. He dulls their wits by his solemn processions, but sharpens their emotions and their griefs by rekindling in them the flame of memory. He makes men drunk, sets them shuddering with mystical dread and ecstasy; they are literally possessed by him. Within a few seconds his clarion call snatches them out of their family traditions, their personal opinions, their religious or political faiths, fusing them together in a common fever of mass exaltation which first galvanises them, then leaves them breathless and fuddled. This pagan god has suddenly transported them into another world, has made them thrill with a new life, wild and glorious, which they will remember nostalgically. Like Venus, Bacchus, Mammon, and all the other pagan powers, Mars makes men lose themselves in something greater than themselves; and to this overwhelming force they will remain in more or less willing bondage.

This is presumably why men are so pleased to dwell on their memories of the services and wartime adventures—except for the very grimmest of these. Such memories are by no means always unpleasant; there is the pleasure of emancipation from traditional moral obligations, the strange amoral freedom Mars offers to the men and women who (by merely being 'called up') have come into his power. All the profiteers, from armament manufacturers to looters

of corpses, are secretly glad of the good business which is promised them. No, Mars is a deity with a wide appeal.

But that is not the full extent of his cunning. By honouring holocausts in the name of freedom, by a mystique of shedding blood on battlefields for noble causes, he even persuades men that they are profoundly right to indulge their combative instinct. He makes them proud of their bondage to the flesh, and actually find in it their self-justification. Bacchus, Venus, Mammon do just the same; and this too is a common basis for all such aspects of paganism. Indeed Mars not only mobilises whole populations and carries them with him in his whirlwind progress; but those three other gods ride ever in his train. Everything must feed his consuming fire, and there is nothing he cannot use to heighten his triumph: courage and cowardice, loyalty and treachery, the joys of conquest and the pangs of terror, the purest love and the basest prostitution, splendid self-sacrifice and sordid private interests, truth and lies, pity and hatred, religion and atheism. In his irresistible wake he sweeps along the whole of humanity, leaving no one unscathed; no one except Jesus Christ.

For, like all the others, this pagan deity is overcome by the Crucified, whose resurrection gives the lie to fatalistic despair. Jesus quietly says no to Mars.

But the war-god is not at a loss. He hides for a while, puts on a skilful disguise, and penetrates into the Church of Christ. Christians go on chanting their Saviour's praises and victory without realising that their hearts have already been delivered up unresisting to the domination of omnipotent Mars. They sincerely love Christ, but in their churches and cathedrals stand the names of those who have given their lives for their country. They glorify Christ, but are flattered when their sanctuaries are adorned with ex-servicemen's flags. They preach Christ, but exalt the greatness of their country and the nobility of its heroic defenders. They teach love of one's neighbour, but enjoin military service. They say you cannot serve God and Mammon, but they themselves serve God and Mars. Mars laughs quietly, sure of his triumph—from which Mammon too will emerge not without profit. Mars knows he can rely on Christians' passive obedience when D-Day comes, and he despises the puny sovereignty of Christ, knowing that Christ's so-called disciples have already bowed the knee before him, Mars.

Can the pagan war-god, in whose world all is fatalism, really be reconciled with Jesus, who challenges all forms of fatalism? 'The

most unanswerable charge which can be made against the military system,' writes Henri Roser,<sup>4</sup> 'is not that it may some day bring you to kill your fellow-men, terrible though that is; but that it introduces you into the closed circle of a completely pagan world, a world impervious to grace because it has first declared such grace inoperative or even non-existent.'

When Christians approach the problem of war, they must surely examine themselves loyally and thoroughly, to see they do not take for God's word what is only a suggestion from Mars—highly suspect because highly pagan. For 'the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other' (Gal. 5:17).

### *3. The Cult of the City*

There is another virus which has penetrated quite as deeply into the body of the Church, and that is the Roman conception of the City. The whole philosophy of ancient Rome, its religious beliefs and its marvellous system of law, were based on the fundamental principle that the City must be served first, that all other allegiance men owed should be subordinated to the service of what today we call 'our country'. The grandeur of such a conception is undeniable, and many of its fruits have had an enduring nobility.

This religion of the City—the State—is generally the common denominator among a country's inhabitants, ground on which they will unite solidly despite their differences of race, religion, education, wealth, and power. Mars understands that very well, and brandishes this idol on high; he sees everybody prostrate themselves before it, then tames it to his own advantage. But an idol it remains: for if the City's good becomes the criterion of good and evil, if the City is the supreme reality to which men must sacrifice themselves entirely, then it has taken the place of God.

Alas, from the time of Constantine, this aspect of paganism has also found its way into the Christian religion. Christianity's intoxication was so complete that even the Reformers did not succeed in shaking it off, and today only the theologians round Karl Barth try to use the Christian revelation for an assessment of the juridical order; the attempt is still in its infancy. But the oecumenical Church recognises that 'our essential fault is that we have failed in absolute obedience and self-consecration to God; this has been due, and still is, to the insidious influence of individual and collective selfishness, which makes us confuse our own will with God's, and profane

Christ's name by invoking His authority on behalf of prejudices and plans which are only too human.'<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. *Ends and Means*

Before tackling so delicate a problem as that of war, it is essential to consider the fundamental question of ends and means.

There is an article by Roland de Pury with some masterly pages on this subject: 'If Jesus truly rose from the dead . . . and if the Crucified and the Resurrected are one and the same . . . that signifies that the End is one and the same as the means. The End is only the product of the means, the harvest of the means sown. What a man sows, says Paul, that shall he reap. Far from bad means being justified by their ends, it is they which corrupt the ends. For the end is formed by the means, as a lake is formed by the rivers flowing into it. Poisoned rivers make a poisoned lake. Evil flows on its infernal course, and there is no possible branch stream on the way, nor can evil ever be put to the service of good. Injustice will never issue in justice, nor falsehood in truth.'<sup>6</sup>

'Identity of the end and the means,' he declares further on, 'such is the foundation of our attitude in this world.' And he pronounces the terrible judgment: 'If during its history the Church has claimed to be following God's end by Satan's means, then without any possible doubt it was no longer at that moment the Church of Christ but had denied its Lord.'

So far, I agree entirely with the content of the article; and I cannot help thinking that de Pury's own words must almost have driven him to an outright condemnation of war. Certainly he has been careful to avoid using the word 'violence', and he does not say: 'War will never issue in peace, nor violence in justice.' Yet he has apparently sensed that his thought implied this, and that anyone who followed his reasoning would be bound to conclude: 'Therefore, a Christian cannot fight.'

But de Pury rejects such a conclusion; and in the last three pages of his article, to avoid so dangerous a plunge, he does a real 'Christiania turn', tersely declaring: 'God's means do not consist in our all letting ourselves be slaughtered.'

This seems somewhat lacking in respect towards Christian martyrs, and he is also too ready to ridicule Tolstoy, however right he is that Tolstoy should not be confused with the Gospel. Nevertheless, to use his own metaphor, his thought seems to have branched off abruptly and inexplicably into quite a different stream. Till this

point he has opposed means which fit their ends to means which do not; but now he slips into an altogether different antinomy, suddenly opposing justice and mercy—as if the sole difficulty were in reconciling the claims of these two. Astonishingly, he fails to see that in exercising mercy *and* in exercising justice there is always the separate problem of means and ends. ‘Sometimes the means of justice demand the use of force . . . and a certain element of violence . . . with all the obligations which that implies.’ When our friend makes such an assertion, he is missing the core of the problem, which is whether murderous violence can really lead to justice and peace: he has retreated before the logical issue to his argument.

But let us hold to his affirmation in this notable article that for a Christian the end never justifies the means. Charles Westphal has written that the Church must recall this fact uncompromisingly, and that ‘such a refusal to compromise is perhaps the most distinctive and irreplaceable function of the Christian in political life.’<sup>7</sup> But should the Christian recall it in his words alone, or by his acts as well?

### 5. *The Criterion of Effectiveness*

There is another important question, akin to the preceding one: can effectiveness be an ethical criterion?

Most people, when discussing the rightness or otherwise of war, at once take their stand on the terrain of effectiveness, even before they have decided on the rightness of the end to be pursued or the means to be employed. They instinctively reject any solution they do not think effective; but effective to what end? They believe they know this, but would be in difficulties if asked to justify clearly and cogently both the end and the means they have adopted. That is why arguments about war are so often confused and disheartening.

The trouble comes precisely from considering effectiveness before fidelity to the Gospel. If we were studying problems of sexual morality or financial honesty, and tried to resolve them from the standpoint of effectiveness before thinking about being faithful to God, the results would plainly be disastrous. Why should things be any different with the problem of war?

To me it seems indisputable that questions of effectiveness are secondary and should be considered wholly within the framework of faithfulness to our Saviour. ‘I always try to see first what is lawful,’ declared Galvin, ‘and only after that what is possible.’<sup>8</sup> The concern for effectiveness can, of course, and even should, influence the form

of our obedience; but it cannot on its own be the determining motive in our decision, nor can it ever give an ethical content to our action. We must first see clearly what end is to be attained, then try to discover what means will allow us to reach it—and means, let me repeat, which must be in harmony with the end. Only then shall we choose among these means the ones which appear to us most effective.

‘But the Christian shouldn’t be a yogi.’ I would reply to such an objection that he certainly shouldn’t be a commissar; and that when we look at yogis or at Gandhi, we can see by contrast how much our ‘Christian civilisation’ is saturated with this religion of effectiveness, which has absolutely nothing in common with the Gospel. In fact neither the prophets, nor Christ, nor the apostles knew anything about the reign of effectiveness.<sup>9</sup>

Not a single one of their moral exhortations is founded on regard for effectiveness *as a moral criterion*. Quite the reverse: the whole of the Gospel denies this Western dogma. If the men of the Bible were to return to earth now, they would be completely stupefied at the idea that an act can be *ethically founded* on such a preoccupation, that a Christian can take an important decision with this as his sole concern. They would doubtless fail to understand why we persist in giving the name ‘Christian’ to a civilisation for which the essential criteria are utility and efficiency.<sup>10</sup> At any rate our era is really the era of pragmatism, with all the inhumanity that can imply.

Perhaps I shall be accused of having widened the area of discussion. But it is surely obvious that the way we consider the problem of war depends entirely on the attitude we take towards this corruption of Christianity by the cult of effectiveness.

Let us now listen to the Word.