

Discussant Paper on Peter Van den Dungen's Paper

**JUSTIFIED WARFARE AND THE RELATIVE VALUE
OF HUMAN LIFE**

by

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Dr. van Dungen's paper explores in a most fascinating way how people from the time of the Roman Empire have been able to hold irreconcilable views with regard to the sacredness of human life. How men who hail the brotherhood of man at the same time, and probably with no feeling of conflict, and inconsistency could enjoy the horrendous spectacle in the Colosseum.

He indicates, however, although not explicitly, that the idea of fellowship of men in Christ gradually conquers the ground and leads to the abolition of slavery and serious reflection on the rights of legitimate government to impose capital punishment and rule by force. On the last issue, however, the opinion has not changed much during the centuries that have passed between Augustin and the American George C. Beckwith, the articulate secretary of the American Peace Society in the middle of last century.

Although both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas adressed the problem of warfare, one is left with the impression that a wholesale condemnation of war in general is a comparatively recent phenomen. If this is true then it took almost two thousand years before the incompatibility of warfare and the sacredness of human life was seriously considered. This, however, is not very likely.

The contribution of recent centuries is the organization and articulation of pacifism as a social movement. This invites some speculation on whether organized pacifism merely reflects the general organizational development as a part of the great transformation of the industrial age, or is an expression of a more fundamental change in moral understanding.

The fact which is most dramatically demonstrated by Dr. van Dungen is that articulate leaders of Pacifist movements, as for example William Lloyd Garrison, once confronted with actual warfare in which they had a personal stake, resolved the dilemma by apostasy. Both Garrison himself and the famous Quaker sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimké not only defended the American Civil War, but became virtual enthusiasts. It is striking how few of the theoretical pacifists were able to keep their faith when their cherished values were threatened.

Even the most distinguished hero of anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigns, Bertrand Russell, became an apostate after the outbreak of the second world war. His comments command respect for their intellectual honesty, but are at the same time an eloquent example of the somewhat theoretical nature of absolute pacifism: "When in 1940, England was threatened with invasion, I realized that throughout the First War I had never seriously envisaged the possibility of utter defeat. I found this possibility unbearable, and at last consciously and definitely decided that I must support what was necessary for victory in the Second War."

As his testimony is presented by van den Dungen, however, Russel does not display that burning fanaticism which frequently seize former pacifists recently converted to one or another noble cause of warfare. This reminds the reader of the disturbing connection that at least empirically prevails between idealism and fanaticism, and invites psychoanalytical interpretations to the effect that pacifism may be the result of the psychodynamics of reaction formation, and rationalization.

An insight of this order may be recognized in the following words of Ralph Potter: "Those who adhere to the ethic of the saint must never, never indulge in war, for they will then have no habitual modes of moral discrimination to guard them from committing barbarities under the guise of the presumed virtuous intent." Potter is also the author of what may be the most profound of the many thought-provoking quotations which makes dr. van den Dungen's paper so delightful to read: "Force must always be restrained because its only legitimate function is to restrain."

The sacredness of human life has its counterpoint in the heroic sacrifice. It is Sigmund Freud who reminds us of the fact that the preservation of life at all costs may deprive life of its deeper meaning. A willingness to sacrifice life is as Christian as the preparation to preserve it. Christ himself proclaimed that the man who will save his life, shall lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake shall find it.⁶ This may of course be interpreted metaphorically, but the example of Christ himself indicates that he also implied readiness to die. Russel's slogan Better red than dead

then is not based on Christian ethics, a fact in which Russel himself would heartily agree.

A complete knowledge of the historical contexts in which the champions of pacificism and justified warfare operate would probably demonstrate that personal attitudes more than anything else is rooted in personal experience. Distant observers in time or mileage of the horrors of war may possibly be more inclined towards theoretical pacifism than the contesting parties. Soldiers do not invariably become pacifists, despite the most ruthless exposure to the horrors of war. The crucial issue, apart from the comradeship and the abstract hatred of the enemy, is probably the meaning the war has in the life of the individual. What at first sight may appear as inconsistencies, may more thoroughly considered not be that in the true sense of the word.

The term inconsistency carries the meaning of mutual exclusion. This is not true in the course of social life. As we all know social values, if applied in a fundamentalist fashion, almost invariably tend to provoke their opposite. Freedom if, ruthlessly pursued by some, may imply suppression of others. Freedom can only be combined with the equally sacred value of equality in a balanced manner. It may then be maintained that fanaticism in general can only be intellectually maintained through a lack of understanding of this dialectics of social life. Actual experience may in some cases cure fanaticism caused by fundamentalist interpretation of values. But not always, as Dr. van den Dungen clearly has demonstrated, fundamentalists tend to solve the problem of balance through apostacy.

The inconsistencies in attitudes with regard to the sacredness of human life then is not merely caused by a lack of moral maturity or lack of reflection, but faithfully project the true nature of social life. Although fundamental values may in the process of moral reflection and social development eventually emerge, the soundest attitude at our present stage of insight and experience seems to be a conscious acceptance of the fact that absolute values can only be pursued in a fundamentalist way by offending other absolute values.

Only if one of our second values should be shown to take priority over every other in an exclusive sense could apparent contradictions be solved. May be love can be shown to be a value of this nature, but the sacredness of human life cannot, if it means life-preservation regardless of the circumstances.

This may be going somewhat beyond dr. van den Dungen's balanced paper, yet a temptation promoted by the author's glow of restrained inspiration which easily fires the imagination of the reader.