

THE CATHOLIC AND A FUTURE WAR¹

“THE horror of the war of to-morrow is that no fever of collective exaltation, no lyricism of poet or orator, will be able to ennoble it or mark it with the authentic sign of the spirit. The apparent ideological character with which no doubt it will be invested will not long obscure its true nature: the conflict of the selfishness of classes, adding a new complication to the selfishness of nationalisms, will make it wholly inhuman. Not only in its furies, but in its very causes, the war will be wholly barbarous: the bankruptcy of the spirit giving over to the chances of force the care of making a world, the bloody clash of a too numerous population in a too narrow peninsular, the drama of fear and hunger. Such perhaps will be our destiny: to die in a catastrophe, in a medley of causes so confused and of results so dubious for our country itself that we shall really not know for what good we have given our lives” (pp. 11, 12). This is perhaps the chief cause of our present distress and despair in face of the future: the knowledge that it is so easy to give our allegiance to a cause which to-morrow may reveal as either wholly or in part the wrong cause: “We are afraid of learning that ultimate bitterness of the dying soldier who does not understand the point of his death; more, we fear lest one day orators stand over our tombs to proclaim us, not what we would have wished but what events have decided for us, or worse still, what the interests of a party will demand should be said” (p. 12).

We must not speak of “the coming war”—this is only to make war in fact inevitable: the call to arms “will surely sound if we believe it inevitable”; but we cannot blind ourselves to its menace, to the fact of rearmament, of diplomatic embroilment, above all perhaps, to the fact that the psychological cause of war is present amongst us: the point is reached at which people “feel that peace is so unstable and so false that they come secretly to prefer war” (p. 6), so that

¹ Pierre-Henri Simon: *Discours sur la guerre possible*. Editions du Cerf.

the outbreak of war when it comes is "precisely the gesture of despair: everything occurs as though men found themselves to-day confronted by a problem of mechanics so difficult that no intelligence could solve it, and there remained only one solution—to set free of all control and all rational prevision the forces concerned" (p. 10).

It is well, with the threat of this ending to our civilization before us to see that our ideas at least are clear. And there is a practical paradox to face. The modern State considers every man a potential soldier: it claims the right to ask of its subjects the sacrifice of their lives, but the "worst is not that it asks them to die, but that it asks them to kill," though men are "always ingenious in hiding this homicidal aspect of the soldier's job." "If assassination means the voluntary killing of a person in a state either of physical inferiority or of surprise, one cannot call it assassination when a warrior falls fully armed before an equal adversary. But what of the poor remnants of humanity, stupefied by the din, buried by a shell, or crushed in the mud under the twelve or fifteen tons of steel of the tank, that toy of modern mechanics; still more, what of the old men and the children coughing out their lungs in cellars infected by gas-bombs—how can we but see these as murdered? And if they are murdered, what are we to call the immediate or remote agents of their death?" (p. 16). And the man whom I shall kill: "I know nothing of him; all that I know is that I don't hate him." But this indeed is the "profoundest crime of war, that before it takes a man's life from him, it mutilates him in the most intimate core of his personality . . . Who speaks of killing men? There are no men, but only automata" (p. 20). But then there is the other side: "Hardly has the mind conceived the consequences of an absolute refusal of armed force but, beyond its repugnance for war, arises a more violent revulsion in the depths of one's being . . . When I set myself the problem of war, what I find in myself is first a dull horror for the absurd butchery of battles and a distress of spirit in face of the complete reversal of moral values by the law of force; but there arises also the certainty that I shall not rebel from that law, if my country

impose it on me. A repugnance and an acceptance. But while the repugnance appears to me logical and simple, immediately commanded by the principles of my culture and my religious faith, the acceptance, on the contrary, irks me, troubles me, like a decision in which I engage myself completely without clear grasp of the motives involved" (p. 24). What is to be done? We can but examine the origin of this acceptance which reason finds to be suspect; and realizing that it must rest upon the validity of war to uphold certain superior values—national integrity, the safety of civilization, the progress of humanity—examine that validity in the light of a consideration of these three.

By patriotism we mean more than a love of something merely geographical: "the first thing, in the attempt to justify war, is to involve in the defence of one's country the defence of a culture." In other words, the most compelling propaganda, as the last war showed, is that which makes war the guardian of culture against the barbarian. "Is this possible? How can the destiny of a culture depend on the result of a battle?" In point of fact, "subjugated Greece triumphed over its subjugator, and Rome in its turn, submerged by the barbarians, imposed on its invaders its laws, its customs, its language, its genius." One race may be superior to another culturally; but what follows? "If it must result in a conflict and a triumph of one way of thought over the other, this must evidently be in the dialectical not in the military order. Because we have different ways of viewing the world, we must fight one another—what a method." Let them leave us to meditate in peace, to create and compare and exchange our fruits. Culture is not the prize of battles; it must not be the pretext" (p. 30).

The issue is more complicated than this, it is true. A country is not essentially a culture, and not merely a territory: it is a nation, a state; and national autonomy may need the force of arms for the upholding of its integrity. Here we are met by a practical objection. "Suppose that France, in August 1914, had not mobilized its armies, what would have been its loss? Less, certainly, than that brought

by the fury of battles, both politically and economically—the greatest absurdity is the simple acceptance of militarism as though war were a good solution, as though it were not habitually more burdensome and more costly than the evils it claims to remedy” (p. 40). But we have also to consider a fact which this line of argument neglects: “alienation of independence not only creates a situation hard to tolerate, but leads quickly enough to a disintegration of personalities” (p. 41). And this of course is the root of the matter. (But M. Simon has not, it would seem, followed the line of thought to its last conclusion: loss of independence is in fact not the lot of the defeated in the case of conflict between the big Powers (how much we heard during the last war about the Kaiser in Buckingham Palace, and yet, as has so often been pointed out, it was never suggested, after the war, that Mr. Lloyd George be housed in the Wilhelmstrasse); and moreover, even loss of independence has to be weighed nowadays against the possibility of complete extermination, which is after all a worse evil).

The fact remains, that nationalism is not the last criterion: we have to try and steer our way between a narrow nationalism which divinizes a race, a culture, a nation, and a false universalism which neglects altogether the reality of these things (p. 42). Each nation is a part of a larger whole: the human race; and must see its duty in the light of the progress of the human race—the problem of nationalism must be viewed in the larger perspective of the problem of civilization.

Here it is easy, first of all, to give the lie to the argument that war is justified for the part it has played in the building of our civilization. “Is it so certain, after all, that the political unity of the Roman Empire favoured the conquests of Christianity? . . . There is no reason to suppose that a Gaul left to the free movement of its Celtic genius would have found less quickly the Christian way, or that its civilization would have been less successful, than a Gaul romanized by its proconsuls” (p. 47). Our civilization is in fact a *civilization impure*; and it has been built largely by recourse to war, to *moyens impurs*—what reason have

we to suppose that the impure means have brought about the good results, and not merely the evil? "Why not suppose that violence and injustice, if they are historical causes, are the causes not of the good things but of the impurities of our civilization?" (p. 88).

It remains true, however, that a civilization means something in part material: the material embodiment of a culture; and for this material setting force is necessary in some degree if it is to be maintained. How measure and limit this use of force? For "war is always, and would be pre-eminently to-day, the contrary of civilization. To uphold it or provoke it in the name of civilization would be reasonable and licit only in so far as the cause of civilization was clearly in question; and such a justification, always bold, would be particularly illicit in the conditions of the modern world . . . in a conflict between two States each the heritor of a long tradition" (p. 54). But a civilization is also a political order; and war is a possible means of imposing or defending a political order; a war to-morrow might decide "whether Europe should be fascist or communist." On what conditions in this respect can recourse to arms be justified? First, the nation which took up arms would have to be unanimously in favour of the political order in question. (This, for most countries to-day, is an impossibility.) But this is not enough to justify it: the principles involved would have to be of universal validity and absolutely necessary for the well-being of *all* men (and here we have to guard against the false principle that the conditions of life, and consequently the principles governing social life, are everywhere identical; too easily we think it our duty to try and impose on others the political ideas we find right and suitable for ourselves). If we are to defend one historical type of civilization against another, let us be sure that in so doing we are serving the cause of humanity: the problem of civilization leads us to the problem of human progress.

As long as conscience is not a sufficient guarantor of order, we must not set law and force in opposition (p. 67). Law may be unjust, and force just. But we have to avoid a double source of conflict: the juridicism which treats law as

immutable, and consequently invites war by endeavouring to tie men down to a system which the evolution of society has made insupportable; and, on the other hand, the antinomianism which makes law merely the sum of conditions necessary for the evolution of the life and power of a people at any given moment. The international situation to-day is the result of the clash of these two contrary and false ideas: the *Haves* are on the one side, the *Have-nots* on the other: and equilibrium will be found, or rather be sought, in blood, unless there is a better way out. "The whole question is whether man is or is not capable of orientating the progress of society in the direction of a more and more perfect adaptation to the sentiment of justice." But "if the determinism of the past, which human liberty has to bear, is not total and invincible but partial and regressive, then there is no good, no virtue, except the fidelity of man to the spirit, and every act which offends against this imposes on human progress a halt, whether of a moment, a year, or an age . . . To exalt the sword over against the right on the pretext that only by the sword can the right be established is to sacrifice the end to the means and to empty civilization of its essence" (p. 83, 84).

That this progress of the spirit is possible must necessarily be held by the Christian, "and not only by the Christian but by every man who wishes to merit the name of humanist." And the first thing that we have to remember is that at the beginning of every chain of political cause and effect there is always human responsibility: violence (in the sense of "the use of force not to preserve an established juridical state of affairs but to create a new one") is not necessarily unjust, though it is a *moyen impur*; but every act of unjust violence "engenders a child more violent than itself . . . the first drop of blood which falls without reason poisons the future, sowing other hatreds which inspire other crimes, on and on, indefinitely, until some act of mercy and charity comes to cut the fateful, evil thread" (p. 92).

Our world is, in part, the result of the use our fathers made of their liberty: for us, the duty of so acting as to pass on a better world to those who follow us, by cultivating

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the virtues of the spirit, our will to justice, our horror of the law of force and the exploitation of man; for our responsibility as individuals is not bounded by the saving of our souls: the world is a solidarity, and our duty is to save the world. In this respect, personal holiness, love of spiritual good, is not sufficient: we have need of technical, political, means.

“Germany lies in the middle of Europe like a great suffering angry animal—all the more dangerous because wounded and hungry. We have neither the means, nor the right, nor the desire, to kill her: we must then prevent her from doing harm, but first of all, *we must help her to live*” (p. 119). We put upon her the sole responsibility of the last war (and quite apart from other considerations, “it should be understood that it is not the duty of diplomats but of historians to pronounce verdicts of this sort”); we leave her without colonies and without a solution of the very real grievances which this lack produces; we do nothing to counter the danger with which pangermanism threatens Europe by a constructive policy of assuring political and economic autonomy to Germany, and then, and only then, proposing progressive proportioned disarmament; and our inactivity is cloaked under the clouds of verbiage with which our politicians and our press seek to present us as always offering, with unbounded generosity, and always meeting with refusal. If we had really offered these things, and had really been refused, then, when war followed, we should at least know that our cause was just (p. 124).²

How are we to escape from our present vicious circle of distrust and rearmament? There is the policy of unilateral disarmament—and “it is possible that the world, for which war is the ransom of its crimes, is waiting for a Christ-Nation to redeem it.” But “the will of a people is ultimately expressed in the will of the man who rules it; and how shall

² We could not, however, justifiably, stop short at this assurance; and we might quarrel with M. Simon for leaving the issue here. A just cause is not the only necessary constituent for a just war; and we should have to weigh also the manner in which the war would probably be waged: it would be justifiable to kill the man or men responsible for the refusal of peace; it does not follow that it would be justifiable to kill those whom in fact we should kill in the event of war.

he choose martyrdom for his people?" (p. 125).³ Short of this extreme, there is the possibility that "the spirit of international collaboration should come gradually to be substituted for the spirit of national interest." There is the League of Nations: poisoned indeed from the very beginning because the "victorious nations wished to make of the Covenant an instrument for the preservation of their privileges rather than an instrument of arbitration and adaptation"; built on an exaggerated presumption of cosmopolitanism ("however much our civilization of speed and exchange has fortified the solidarity of the nations, it is not yet true that Chile is interested in the Dantzic corridor, or Turkey in the partition of the Chaco"); and lacking sufficient force of coercion. But these things are not irremediable; and even the dictatorships, the greatest obstacle in the way of an efficient League, are not perhaps more than temporary measures ("history proves that the supreme triumph of a dictatorship is to create a new order . . . to fulfil itself in bringing about its own demise"). Two things, in fine, are necessary: there must be in Europe, if it is to be saved, a political and economic federation; and for this there must be "not only laws, but a soul." That soul and that unity will not be found in fascism, which pins its faith in "the primacy of politics over the spiritual"; nor in communism, which dissipates the passion for solidarity in a class-warfare for the goods of the earth; but only in the third alternative, Christianity, which alone has in it the true principles of peace, since it promises peace on earth only in so far as the earth has found its true unity first in giving glory to God in the heights (p. 136). True, Europe has had its Christendom and has not found peace in it: "that does not prove that Christ lied or the Church betrayed; it proves that the world sins"; it proves that at every moment the lot of the world is dependent on the conduct of individuals;

³ Here again, the author stops short of a full discussion: there is, in theory at least, the possibility, Utopian no doubt, of a referendum; there is also the fact that the first duty of a ruler is to do what is right—and one of the things to be considered in view of the character and effects of war in the future is whether it can ever be right to make war, in view of elements in it which M. Simon himself has considered.

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and it makes it difficult not to despair. Yet the Christian may not despair. "We have not put all our trust in the world, but we shall still hope for the world as long as in some few souls there ripens humbly the fruits of wisdom, so precious that only a few of them suffice to protect the most crime-laden cities against the anger of God."

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The above summary must necessarily fail to do justice to a book which can only be adequately dealt with by transcribing it in full. Its purpose will be fulfilled if it succeeds in performing the function of a successful advertisement. In more ways than those already noticed, one could wish that the author had taken his argument further: particularly is this the case with the ultimate problem, raised at the beginning, of what we are to do if the worst befalls us and we find ourselves involved in the war which we know will be both homicidal and suicidal. The principles indeed are here; but it is good to have the ultimate conclusions more explicitly stated. Yet that would be to ask a much larger book; and also, possibly, to distract attention from the principles themselves, a statement of which is so urgently needed. Now if ever, we need to take stock of our ultimate principles; for we shall never arrive at a just conclusion with regard to conduct in the case of war unless we are really aware of what lies behind the more immediate and practical issue. We shall not understand the moral character of war to-day unless we see it in the light, not merely of national security, but in what is anterior to this, the good of civilization as a whole, the good of the human race and what this, for the Christian, implies, the building up on earth of the Kingdom of God. "Christianity is the truth; and Christianity has no need of the sword: its only conquests which count for anything are the conquests it has made in souls . . . it is Christianity which, by impregnating the consciences of men, will sow in them the only valid principles of peace; it is by becoming Christian again that Europe will rediscover its soul, its unity, and its salvation."

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