

# The Church's Function in War-Time<sup>1</sup>

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What is the Church to do and say in time of war? It is an old problem, which has exercised people's minds over and over again. There are some who take it for granted that where the nation leads the Church must follow, and say there is no question worth discussion. There are others who consider the teaching of the Church and the conduct of war so utterly incompatible that they demand that all churches should be closed for the duration. There are not very many who go so far as this. But we cannot forget the judgment of the historian Lecky in his *History of European Morals*:

“In looking back with our present experience, we are driven to the melancholy conclusion that, instead of diminishing the number of wars, ecclesiastical influence has actually, and very seriously, increased it. We may look in vain for any period since Constantine in which the clergy as a body exerted themselves to repress the military spirit, or to prevent or abridge a particular war with an energy at all comparable to that which they displayed in stimulating the fanaticism of the crusaders, in producing the atrocious massacres of the Albigenses, in embittering the religious contests that followed the Reformation.”

The question is one of peculiar importance. The churches are as a rule much fuller in the first onrush of war. But there are numerous critics, who point the finger at the clergy in the different warring nations when they claim that their nation's cause is the righteous cause, and implore God to bless it, and to give their nation the victory. And when the war is over, there is plenty of disillusionment. Many of the very people who have thronged the churches will be the first to attack the Church, if they think that the Church has simply echoed the popular cry, if the Church leaders have simply said what the statesmen have said, and if the sermons they have heard seem to have been overmuch concerned with the justice of the nation's cause.

It is therefore important to consider the question: What is the function of the Church in war-time? And I am going to urge in this article that it is the function of the Church at all costs to remain the Church.

The war of 1914-1918 was a very testing war from the point of view of the Church. I can speak with first-hand knowledge of the actual exercise of the Church's ministry; for I was the late Archbishop of Canterbury's Chaplain at the time. As I look back I recall the strength of the national uprising in every country. Everywhere, in every people, the national emotions were strong. Germany was great and powerful, and the German national spirit was powerful too. The insistence on the rights of the smaller nations, in face of Germany, fanned the Harnes of nationalism elsewhere. The nationalist spirit grew as the war went on. It grew in all countries. It grew in England. There was the agitation against people with German names; the campaign against aliens, starting in 1915; the demand for reprisals. There were men (including Church leaders in all countries) who stood out against the nationalist fever. But the fever was fierce, and the strain on the national resources great. Nor was there any counterbalancing force resolute enough to resist it. The Church itself in each nation became more and more the Church of the particular nation. It failed to strike the universal note.

It is not difficult to find illustrations. In September 1914, some of the most famous German theologians issued an 'Appeal to Evangelical Christians Abroad,' which was nothing but a

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<sup>1</sup> Fortnightly Review, November, 1939.

lining up of the German Protestant Church with the German State in the conflict with England and France. It contained these words:

“We know that we are at one with all the Christians among our people, that we can and must repudiate on their behalf and on behalf of their Government the responsibility for the terrible crime of this war and all its consequences for the development of the Kingdom of God on earth. With the deepest conviction we must attribute it to those who have long secretly and cunningly been spinning a web of conspiracy against Germany, which now they have flung over us in order to strangle us therein.”

It was immediately met by a reply from eminent British Church leaders, headed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, which, in effect, ranged the British Churches solidly behind the British Government:

“It has not been a light thing for us to give our assent to the action of the Government of our country in this matter. But the facts of the case as we know them have made it impossible for us to do otherwise. . . We have taken our stand for international good faith, for the safeguarding of smaller nationalities, and for the upholding of the essential conditions of brotherhood among the nations of the world.”

It was with this strong national background in each country, that the peace negotiations were conducted in 1919. The temper of the victorious powers was bad. There was no strong counterbalancing body of opinion to resist it. Hence came the Treaty of Versailles. In none of the warring countries had the Church sounded the super-national note. Had it done so, we should have had a different world to-day.

There will be the same issue in the present war. Will the Church in the warring countries strike the universal note, or will it say ditto to the State? If the Church is purely national, it will fail. If it fails in war, it will be powerless in the making of peace. If the Church does not fulfil its function now, how will it ever persuade mankind that it has a function?

This matter of functions is vital. The State has a function, and the Church has a function. They are distinct. The State is the guarantor of order, justice and civil liberty. It acts by the power of restraint, legal and physical. The Church, on the other hand, is charged with a gospel of God's redeeming love. It witnesses to a Revelation in history. It speaks of the realities which outlast change. It aims at creating a community founded on love. So when all the resources of the State are concentrated, for example, on winning a war, the Church is not a part of those resources. It stands for something different from these. It possesses an authority independent of the State. It is bound, because of that authority, to proclaim the realities which outlast change. It has to preach the gospel of redemption.

I set this out first, in order that my later remarks may be seen to stand on foundations of principle. Men owe very much to the State. There is no doubt of that. But it does not by any means cover the whole field of human experience, or need. It has to do with changing things, and to make the most of what is practicable. The Church, on the other hand, touches the invisible, the unchanging, the supernatural and the super-national. It is not the nation. It is not the State's spiritual auxiliary with exactly the same ends as the State. To give the impression that it is, is both to do a profound disservice to the nation and to betray its own principles.

When war breaks out, there is always a great marshalling of the nation's forces. The Church which stands within the nation, is expected to express its solidarity with the nation. Indeed, even if it were desired, it would be impossible to make a clean cut between Churchmen and

citizens. There can be no contracting out of the national destiny. It is the Church of men, and there are no men save those belonging to nations. The Church has a share in all that affects the individual nation. It rejoices in the good gifts God gives the nation. It suffers in all the burdens which the nation must bear. What is the Church to do when there is a war?

We must insist on the distinction of functions. The Church has a specific task to perform at all times. It owes it to the nation, as well as to itself, to discharge that function to the best of its ability. If the Church has a function, war is not a time when it should be abandoned.

But we must interpret it further. There is first the question of right and wrong—the moral law. The Church, in the persons of its clergy, primarily represents the Gospel which brings forgiveness and salvation. But it witnesses also to eternal realities; and the moral law is both super-national and supernatural as the Gospel is. The Church then ought to declare both in peace-time and war-time, that there are certain basic principles which can and should be the standards of both international and social order and conduct. Such principles are the equal dignity of all men, respect for human life, the acknowledgment of the solidarity for good and evil of all nations and races of the earth, fidelity to the plighted word, and the appreciation of the fact that power of any kind, political or economic, must be coextensive with responsibility. The Church therefore ought to declare what is just. It has a right to prophesy, to analyse the issues which lie behind a particular conflict, and to rebuke the aggressor. But two conditions are vital. The Church must be humble. It must acknowledge its own share in the guilt of the common injustice and lack of charity. Further, its witness must be disinterested and independent. It should speak only what the moral law compels it to speak, whether that is favourable or unfavourable to its country. Besides, the Church must guard and maintain those moral principles in the war itself. It must not hesitate, if occasion arises, to condemn the infliction of reprisals, or the bombing of civilian populations, by the military forces of its own nation. It should set itself against the propaganda of lies and hatred. It should be ready to encourage a resumption of friendly relations with the enemy nation. It should set its face against any war of extermination or enslavement, and any measures directly aimed at destroying the morale of a population.

But, although it must be free always to witness to basic moral principles, both in the social and in the international order, the characteristic function of the Church is of a different kind. And therefore the characteristic expression of its solidarity with the nation is also different. The Church stands for the Cross, the gospel of redemption. It cannot, therefore, speak of any earthly war as a 'crusade,' for the one thing for which it is impossible to fight with earthly weapons is the Cross. Its supreme concern is not the victory of the national cause. It is a hard thing to say, but it is vital. Its supreme concern is the doing of the Will of God, whoever wins, and the declaring of the Mercy of God to all men and nations. The ministers, especially the leaders of the Church, have a great responsibility for making this plain. It is not only that the Church, if its clergy preach the gospel, offers a counter-balancing force of undoubted authority to the waves of national emotion, and so helps to preserve spiritual integrity. That is important. But what is still more important is the fact that the Church is the trustee of the gospel of redemption; and unless the gospel is preached, the Church is not the Church.

It is implicit in what I have written that the Church is universal. Its message is for all nations. The Church in any country fails to be the Church if it forgets that its members in one nation have a fellowship with its members in every nation. The Church also stands for a supernatural event as the centre of life. That event is the Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection. The Church fails to be the Church if it does not make that the centre of its teaching. It is a God-given reality. It is not a society for exhorting men or peoples to have good aims. It is not even a society for improving international morals. It sees the world lying in the evil one, which

Christ by His Cross has overcome. It declares that the fundamental problem is a spiritual problem, that the deepest need of the social and international Situation is spiritual. Its witness is that so long as life is conducted on a secular basis it will go wrong. It asserts that idealism and humanitarianism are not enough; that no national or international organisation which is without God can be effective. The Church offers the world the gospel of the Incarnate Crucified and Risen Christ. This is no special war-time gospel. It is the gospel for human needs in all times and countries. If it is for us, it is also for our enemies. It applies equally to every time and place.

The Church may have a difficult task in war-time. But it has an extraordinary opportunity. Over against human selfishness and national divisions it sets the gospel of the love of God and the Community of Christians. And the Church is not a figment of man's mind, but a living spiritual reality, created by God.

The Church at present is not visibly united. Christians are nevertheless one in Christ through faith and prayer. The opportunities for expressing and emphasising that unity are greater than they were. The Roman Catholic Church has always been an international Church, though it has not overcome the national cleavages resulting from war. In the non-Roman world, in recent years, an immense step forward has been taken in actual fellowship of Christian with Christian, Church with Church, over-riding both denominational and national boundaries. A Movement, called the Oecumenical Movement, has steadily gathered strength. There is a fundamental distinction between 'oecumenical' and 'international.' The term 'international' necessarily accepts the division of mankind into separate nations as a natural if not a final state of affairs. The term 'oecumenical' refers to the expression within history of the given unity of the Church. The one starts from the fact of division and the other from the fact of unity in Christ. There is a whole literature connected with the Oxford Conference of 1937, with its Report entitled 'The Churches Survey their Tasks.' At this very moment a preliminary organisation of a World Council of Churches exists. Moreover, the very torments of a world stricken by persecution and war, have brought Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants together in a new way, outside the dogmatic field.

The Church, wherever it is found, is the Universal Church. The Roman Catholic Church is universal. So also (in this sense) are the Evangelical and Orthodox, and other Catholic Churches. It is the function of the particular Church, especially in those countries which are at war, to do whatever it can to maintain brotherly relations with all the Churches it can reach, as within the Universal Church. Links should be strengthened between the Churches in warring countries on both sides, in any way that is possible, through the help of the Churches in neutral countries. Every effort should be made, with the same help, to preserve former contacts between Churchmen whose nations are divided by war, not for conspiracy but for spiritual Community. More than this, the Churches should be eager to minister spiritually and materially to prisoners of war, and 'enemy aliens.' They should, by their own energetic goodwill and spirit of active love, counteract and subdue vindictiveness, hatred, the lust of power and the desire for retaliation. In particular, the Churches should work in such ways as are open to them for a just peace, and try, through the Oecumenical Movement itself, to discover what terms of peace would appear right, and likely to be lasting, to Churchmen in enemy countries and in neutral countries.

The Church which I have described above is a preaching and worshipping Church. In the smallest village, as well as in the centre of the national life, the church of the place has its own gift to offer to the whole of such witness and worship. The minister of that local Church will gather the flock to do their part in the common praying and offering. The Church which is his special cure he will regard as a part of the Church Universal; bearing its witness that God is

the supreme Lord over men and nations, and that in Christ alone, and in His Church, even the deepest divisions are overcome. He can, and should, call his own flock, and among them especially the relatives of those on service, to hear the gospel, to proclaim their faith in the Living God and in the Resurrection, and to share in the praises and prayers, and sacraments, week by week, and often day by day. The humble chapel in the village, and the great Cathedral in the town, would each be a fountain of prayer, whether the chapel be in Bavaria, or Sussex, or the Cathedral in Paris or Cologne. The minister will be leading his people in prayer to their Father. He will act as their intercessor who pleads for them and their kin, and for all those serving in the war. But he should never forget the other intercessors in other countries with the same prayers on their lips, and he and they alike should pray each that God's will may be done, and each for the nation to which the other belongs, and for all the nations engaged in the conflict. He should do this, not only because Christ said 'Love your enemies,' but because those others are members of the same Universal Church. It is the function of the Church in war-time to preach the gospel of the Christ. It is its function also to witness to the universal fellowship, and to keep the fellowship of prayers unbroken. In a word, it is the function of the Church in war-time to be still the Church.

Source: George K.A. Bell, *The Church and Humanity (1939-1946)*, London: Longmans-Green 1946, pp. 22-31.