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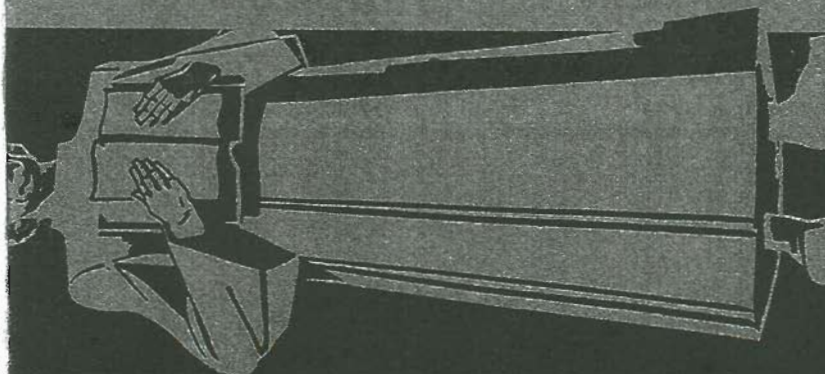
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VOL. XXXIV

NO. 1

JUNE, 1970



# The Moral Aspects of War

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*(Author's Note: The present manuscript is a revision of a talk taken down on tape. Its content, therefore, is not so tightly organized as it would be if the matter had been prepared in the form of an essay.)*

**M**Y JOB IS to talk on the moral aspects of warfare. Some might say, well that ought to be a very short speech. You cannot talk about ethics or moral principles in connection with warfare. There are such people. They will tell you, "You can talk about ethics all you wish; you can talk about warfare for hours, but you can't combine the two into one discussion." I should like to say at once that such a reaction stems from an over simplification of reality.

The basic presupposition is false. The man who begins at this base starts with the general assumption that all war is evil. He says it in terms of syllogism. It goes like this, "All war is evil; nobody ought to engage in evil; therefore one ought not to take up arms." Permit me to suggest that the major premise is false, especially for us Christians who are expected to know reality. There are very few human actions of any kind, especially when it comes to the affairs of nations, which are good. The proper choice we have in most cases is between what is less evil than some other course of action. Right at the beginning I should like to put down the proposition that sometimes engaging in war is less evil than some other course of action.

There come moments in history when it is not only possible but imperative to support war as an act of conscience. The people who trouble me very much are conscientious objectors, not because I disrespect their position, but because they often operate with the notion that they are the only people who have a conscience. So when they come to me, one of the first things we've got to clear away is this particular point. I insist that I, too, have a conscience. It is very sensitive to what would happen if we should withdraw from Viet Nam too quickly. I know what would happen. There would be a blood bath, the like of which we haven't had for many years. There come times when warfare is less evil than something else. That's why we took up arms against the Nazis; for the kind regime with which they threatened humanity was very very evil indeed.

That's the first point I want to make about those who oversimplify things. The second is that very often the pacifist, if we may use that term rather loosely at the moment, does not really under-



stand the role of force—as distinguished from violence—in sustaining the structures of existence. The man who does not believe in force will soon be a slave. We happen to live in the kind of world where you cannot have peace without force, simply because there are evil men in the world who can be restrained only by the controlled application of force. Sometimes force is applied within a nation to solve an internal problem. The military is called upon to do its job, namely, to be the instrument for the controlled application of force. Little Rock, Arkansas, might serve as an example. That city got all gummed up on the problem of school integration. In fact, the issue became so complicated and so complex that President Eisenhower had to call in the paratroopers to cut through the issue by military might. One of the reasons a nation has a military establishment may be seen in the realization that there are such junctures in existence. This is especially true when it comes to the relationship of nations with each other.

If we did not live in a multi-state system, where every nation is all the time trying to gather more power to itself, perhaps the potentials of evil would be less. But we have not yet been able to create some other system. Some day we may. In the meantime, the best thing that can happen to the world is for the United States to be strong enough for regional clusters of nations to develop. Out of such a process there may eventually come some kind of world government, if that is really what we want.

When the moment comes for a nation to use its military—to get back to the main argument—it puts its troops on the line. We create this military organization by means of the Selective Service Act, on the philosophy that the defense of the nation is the responsibility of every citizen. Now, since national defense is not just a matter of taking up weapons but involves such things as research, economic resources and who knows what, therefore, we use a system under which we say that this man takes up the uniform, that man is exempt. I am fully aware of many of the injustices that have developed under this system. Yet the philosophy of it is that, under the Constitution of the United States, the defense of this nation is the responsibility of the militia. The militia is specifically defined as every male citizen between the ages of seventeen and forty-five. It would be folly to draft everyone, because there are many more sides to national defense today than military operations.

Once a nation has committed its troops then the individual soldier, airman, or sailor faces a very raw question. I'm going to put it to you in the form that it confronts the man in combat. It is the question, "Is it ever right to kill a human being in battle?" That's the way the issue comes to you when you are in uniform and on the battle field.

To weigh this question intelligently and to come up with some kind of guiding principles let me talk about the question in terms

of its source, its context and then try to set forth some basic observations. The last thing I would want to do is to give the impression that I was providing some kind of school answer. I'm not interested in doing that. You still have to weigh the individual factors and make up your own mind as I've had to make up mine.

I've noted that not too many people have the wherewithall to take a position. They haven't ever sat down, for instance, to figure out the principles that govern the question of a just war. Students come to me and say, "I'm against the war in Viet Nam; it's immoral." "That's very interesting," I usually respond; and then I ask, "How do you come to that conclusion? Have you ever asked yourself what a just war is? Do you know the seven questions which have been developed in the history of Christian Theology to determine this issue?" As a rule, they haven't heard about a single one. They haven't read up on it. But, now, how can a man make up his mind before considering every aspect of a particular problem?

My purpose is to set forth a kind of context in which this is possible. The first section deals with the source of our question. I believe it is very significant that the matter comes to us and to the man in uniform as a problem in conscience. There have been many periods in history and many cultures in which this was not a problem in conscience at all. The ancient Greeks, in the days of Pericles or Homer, for that matter, talked about the tragedy of it and Euripides has a gripping play on that point (*The Trojan Woman*), but they did not discuss it in terms of moral right and wrong. They just felt that war is part of the burden of existence.

It came up as a problem in conscience especially in Judaism or the first century B.C. Julius Caesar was wise enough to see the dimensions of the problem, so he exempted all Jewish males from service in the Roman army. Fortunately, there were enough people around from other tribes who were willing and able to defend the borders of the empire against the invaders. By the time Augustus Caesar and the senate party got through with their little war, the new emperor continued the policy of Julius Caesar. For once peace prevailed for almost ninety years because the Roman Army was strong enough to preserve it.

The problem of war spilled over into the Church Fathers. They discussed the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." At times, though, they introduced the matter of idolatry. For when a man entered the Roman Army he had to burn a pinch of incense to the statue of Caesar. Tertullian, particularly, worried about idolatry, concluding that it was not possible for a Christian to be in military service because of the requirement to engage in idolatry. By the time of Saint Augustine, when various tribes of Barbarians were threatening the Roman Empire, something of a shift had taken place. The Bishop himself wrote to Count Boniface, who was the commander of Roman troops in North Africa, and had decided to leave military

service for work in the church. Augustine suggested that probably the Count could do much more good by staying in the military. Then he observed, "We must not before the time, live with the saints alone."

In the Middle Ages, Europe got the Peace of God, an instrument by which the number of persons engaged in conflict was limited. Then came the Truce of God, which eliminated all conflict between Saturday evening and Monday morning. The same rule applied to the various holy days. By the time there were some 150 holidays besides Sundays, quite a bit of the year was closed to fighting. Now, you know men well enough to realize what happened: They fought more ferociously in the open season than they might have done if there had been no limiting regulations.

Jumping quickly to the past century, the Geneva Convention of 1864 incorporated specifically three items of humane interest; namely, that medics were to be considered as non-combatants; that the wounded were to be treated humanely; and any civilians who volunteered to help in the care of the wounded should be treated as neutrals. A hundred years ago, when this convention was adopted, it was very easy to draw a line between the combatants and non-combatants. That time is past. When the airplane was invented, the cities were exposed and the centers of our cultures lay open to view. Then we developed nuclear power, and John Foster Dulles threatened the enemy with talk about reducing that country to a howling wilderness. You will recall the reaction. Those of us who are older will remember. The American people rejected this kind of boasting about indiscriminate destruction.

Into our culture there has been built a concern for right. This brings about the fact that the problem of killing in battle is a matter of conscience. As Americans we are not about to approve the indiscriminate use of force. That's why, for instance, we engage in a limited war in Viet Nam, much to the handicap of the troops. Out of this very tradition of ours there has developed the doctrine of the just war.

As Lutherans we have a particular responsibility in this area, because our Confessions operate with the notion of the just war. They do not state this matter as a doctrine but as a Biblical concept. For that reason, we must list the seven criteria which are used to determine what a just war is. I'll just read them real fast. Is a particular conflict being waged under legitimate authority? Is there a moral purpose involved? Is there excessive violence? What will be the conditions after the war? Will such conditions be better than if no war had been waged? Have all other means of solving a particular problem been exhausted? Is there selective immunity? Have arrangements been made, for instance, to avoid wholesale slaughter? And finally, when it is all over, will there be a restoration of the moral order?



Against this kind of background, where right is still an item when it comes to using force, our previous Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara, developed two doctrines on which we still operate. These are, first, the doctrine of controlled response. This teaches that we are going to ride out a nuclear attack and not be the first to attack. We will respond in counterforce and not in terms of destroying enemy cities. We propose to avoid a hair-trigger response. The second doctrine is that of conventional option. This means that the decision to use tactical nuclear weapons will not be forced upon us. We hope never to have to use them. We are never going to act from panic, but only as a matter of deliberate choice. You see, in our culture we have retained an awareness that wholesale destruction is immoral. That fact, in turn, testifies to the importance of the right, in the affairs of men. You may be sure that this was not a problem for Genghis Khan. Joseph Stalin never worried about the question, "Is it ever right to kill a human being in battle?" These men did not view life as a gift the way you and I do.

So much for the source of our question. We move on to the question of context. The question doesn't come to us out of the blue. We live in a particular historical context, which has its own peculiarities and characteristics. In our present context, nothing less is at stake in the present conflict than the future of mankind. The concept of freedom lies at the heart of the whole problem. This is no fake issue, as people on the other side of the iron curtain know very well. Let me give you two examples. The Russian poet, Evtushenko, was here three years ago. He got to see many things, including the Blue Fox Farms in Alaska. When he got back he wrote what is called "The Monologue of the Blue Fox on an Alaskan Farm."

It is a devastating piece of satire on totalitarianism. It describes a blue fox in his cage, howling, shrieking, either for a change of fur or for freedom. He doesn't like the prospect of growing up to be skinned so that his fur can be sold. One night the fox finds the cage door open. He sneaks out to experience freedom. A week later he is tired of freedom with its burden of having to make up one's own mind. The fox slinks back into the cage and pulls the door shut. Then he says to himself, "A child of captivity is too weak for freedom."

The next item is a play with the title, *The Dragon*. This is the first stage production to be shown on this side of the iron curtain but written on the other side. It was just put on in Paris during June of 1966. It was done by an East German, Yugeny Schwartz. It's a very simple fairy story and tells of a country that has been under the control of a monster for years and years. A knight-errant on horseback comes riding across the stage, like Saint George, to do battle with this beast. He wants to set this oppressed people free. He discovers that they don't want liberty. They have been reduced to the point where they prefer servitude. They have lived so long in an

ant-hill type of society that they have become somewhat less than human. They do not want the burden of personal choice.

Now the point of both of these literary items is very obvious. Given enough time, it is possible with instruments developed by modern technology to reduce people to being less than what their Creator intended them to be. And whenever that happens, you have the demonic at work in the social order. Now, admittedly, we have many demonic forces at work also in our society here in America; yet, I want to propose that the demonic has become especially incarnate in the Marxist movement of our day. Why? Consider what is at stake in the concept of freedom.

Three notions of freedom are abroad today. One of them is the notion that freedom is my right to do as I jolly well please. That, of course, is not freedom at all. It is license. Freedom is always limited. It is always channeled, the way a river is harnessed. As soon as it breaks out of its banks it becomes destructive. That is not the understanding of freedom on which our country has been built. Another notion is the totalitarian one; namely, that freedom is my responsibility to do what I must do. How do I know what I must do? The party tells me; that's its job. It has been given the assignment under the Marxist system to analyze the historical context where people live and then to prescribe. The only job I have as a subject in that way of life is to say, "Yes, I'll do it."

I have an aunt who lives in East Germany. A few summers ago she had a chance to visit her son, my cousin, in Bochum, Germany, which is in the West. One day she said, "You have no idea what it means to live in a totalitarian society." She proposed the following working description, "Imagine yourself living in a society where everything not specifically commanded is prohibited. That's the way we live in East Germany."

I hear among our students in St. Louis the nonsense that life in the ghetto is like living in Czechoslovakia. Yet to live in Czechoslovakia is to be where everything not specifically commanded by the party, is prohibited. Mr. Dubecek can give you a long speech on that subject. He has found out what that means.

With that we get to the third understanding of freedom. It is the one on which our country was built. It is the kind of notion about freedom that would develop in a culture heavily indebted to Christian values. In this view, freedom is my opportunity to do what I ought to be doing. When I say that, I am implying two things. First, that I've got the job of choosing, which in turn means, that I am a person. That's what a person is; a being with the faculty of choice. Secondly, there is a set of moral principles which exists independent of that historical context where an individual happens to be living. That's what we've been saying in our traditions in America.

Our understanding of freedom — and here I'm taking three ideas from James Truslow Adams' famous essay on *Freedom*, written

back in 1938 when the Nazis were threatening the world—this notion of freedom is derived from man's nature, his need and his destiny. Let's think about these items.

Freedom is related to man's nature. What is man? Is he just a thing? Is he like a bar of gold which loses its value when it sinks to the bottom of the ocean? Of course not! In our culture, and this is highly Christian in background, man is of value even when he is useless. Think of the billions of dollars we spend each year on old people in nursing homes. Why don't we let them die? Because man is not a thing.

Furthermore, man needs freedom as part of his working climate. The most despicable development behind the iron curtain is the attempt to reduce man to being a thing. You cannot grow an oak tree in a two-gallon pail. Either the pail will burst or the tree will shrivel. Just so you cannot keep a human being working as a person unless he has enough opportunity for choice. That's our quarrel with the ghetto. Many of these people do not have enough room for choice to be persons. The individual who wrote most eloquently on this subject was Feodor Dostoevski. He described life in Siberia, where he didn't have one choice to make. He put on the only set of clothes he had. He ate what was put before him. When he and his comrades went out to fell trees, they discovered that the trees had been marked by someone else. They didn't even have that choice to make. The title of the book very significantly is *The House of the Dead*. Of course, these people walked around a while and felled a few trees, but as persons they were dead. The opportunity of choice had been taken away from them.

Liberty is also related to the question of man's destiny. If you and I only live to be 70 or 80 years of age and if that's the end, then, of course, government outlasts us. And so it is more important. Then it does have the right to decide on the ultimate issues of life. But if you and I have an eternal destiny, then we have certain rights, as Jefferson put it in the Declaration of Independence, which no state can either give or take away. They are unalienable. Some of them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Then the business of the state can never, dare never, enter into the ultimate problems of man's individual existence.

It is primarily the second and the third notions of freedom which are at issue in the present conflict raging throughout the world, whether we like it or not. And what we are trying to do on our side of this contest is keeping the demonic forces at work in our total world society from accomplishing their ends; namely, reducing all mankind to the level of life on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

That's the context. Now let's lay down a few principles, while we're in this business. These are considerations which need to be weighed before you decide, ethically, what your particular stance is. The first thing, perhaps, that we need to say is that life is a gift. Now that in itself is a tremendous insight, which comes to us espe-



cially from the biblical revelation, where we are put into confrontation with our Creator and Redeemer. That life is a gift, the Greeks did not realize. We do. It is a gift and therefore to be used like any other gift from God. It may be given away. When you do that you are engaging in the most important ethical work of sacrificing, in imitation of our Lord who offered himself; giving His life for ours. The sergeant who throws himself on a bomb to save the lives of the men in his unit is doing something noble. It is ethically right for him to do so. He is a hero to us because of his sacrificial act.

Next: Life being a gift, it should be defended and protected, especially if it is the other man's life. This is a good Christian approach. In fact, there come moments when it is immoral not to defend another man's life. And that applies not only on an individual level but also among nations. Let me, at this point, give you just one sentence from Paul Ramsey's great book, *The Just War*: "Anyone who is impressed only by the immorality and probable ineffectiveness of interventionary action should sensitize his conscience to the immorality and probable ineffectiveness of non-intervention." Inaction can also be very immoral. You remember the case of Kitty Genovese of New York, screaming for help when she was being bludgeoned to death in the courtyard of an apartment building? The reaction was that 38 people closed their windows and pulled tight their shutters. There was an outcry in America over such callous indifference, this unwillingness to get involved in the defense of somebody's life. Thank God for the outcry! It was an exhibit of the fact that deep down underneath we still feel there is something wrong about not defending somebody else's life.

We hear it said that we must love our neighbor as ourselves. Of course, that's right. Who could quarrel with it since it is a word of the Lord? But, there is another step to this. In life we have various types of responsibilities, and so the exercise of love is done on the principle of justice. The exercise of love is undertaken according to the various relationships in which we live. Let me give you a very simple example. If a thug should enter my living room and threaten my family, I would have a set of responsibilities toward my family in terms of love that is of greater importance than my responsibility toward the thug. Now apply this to the field of international relations. My relationship to a North Vietnamese soldier is not a one-to-one affair. In between are two sets of loyalties: Mine to my country and his to his. I have a responsibility toward my country which outranks my concern for his; and that's true on his side, too. Now, when he is wounded and when he is in need of my help, then once more he becomes my neighbor in the ethical sense of the New Testament. The one-to-one relationship returns. Then we carry out the words of the Lord at the end of the story of the Good Samaritan, "You go and do likewise."

Next—and this is point four—a good many people cite the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." I am very grateful that they

do, because it means they are still somewhat interested in the biblical revelation. But is a very misleading thing to quote this commandment off-hand, without reflecting on what it really means. It so happens that there are six words in the Old Testament for killing. The one that is in the commandment never occurs when the Old Testament is talking about warfare. Now that ought to have some significance for anyone seriously concerned about biblical interpretation. As a matter of fact, if you want this whole thing concentrated in one passage, just look up I Kings 2:5. There David gives the orders to his new commander-in-chief to do Joab in. Why? Because Joab was guilty of killing people in times of peace. That was wrong, while killing in battle might not be. Then there's the instance of Abraham asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. You see the Creator, the Law-Giver Himself, is above the law he gave. The commandment itself is not absolute in the strictest sense of that word. The Creator alone is absolute; and he has himself revealed that there are exceptions to this rule. There were the cities of refuge, for instance, to which a man could go and have his case decided, whether he was guilty of violating the fifth commandment or whether it was a case of homicide. Why was this opportunity given? Because there was a recognition in Old Testament times of the difference between murder and killing. Now, if you should ask why the Israelites were asked to destroy every Amalekite, man, woman, and child, the answer must be understood in terms of God's holiness. He is not one to brook resistance. It takes him a little longer now to cast people aside who reject Him. The Israelites were called upon to do it at once as God's instruments. The principle is the same: Those who reject the God of life will surely be put to death. An exception is created to the literal sense of the commandment when mankind is threatened by forces which blatantly boast that they will negate the will of the Creator wherever they get control to set up Utopias in reverse, where truth is a lie, freedom is tyranny, democracy is turned into dictatorship, and man becomes a thing. An exception arises when a sovereign nation, through its responsible leaders, decide the moment has come when all other solutions have been exhausted and force must be applied in a controlled way to solve a given situation.

That brings me to point five. I am especially happy about this one, because I am talking to a group of Lutherans. I can't say this everywhere, because as soon as you talk about the distinction between law and gospel, much of the crowd gets lost. But "law and gospel" is a very honorable and ancient Lutheran distinction. This differentiation is one of the things that you and I can contribute to our society, because it will keep people from becoming schizophrenic, trying to figure out what is going on. Under law and gospel we understand the two kingdoms of God, the kingdom of power and the kingdom of grace. Although these two are run by the same Lord our Jesus Christ, they operate on two different principles. The kingdom of power, as the word suggests, is held together by force. The relationship of

nations toward each other is one of power. It is a confusion of law and gospel, when someone comes along to say that nations ought to be run by grace and forgiveness. The latter belong to the business of the church. Hence, St. Paul's symbol for government is the sword and not the chalice. He is very specific, at Romans 13, in saying that government has the job of using the sword when necessary. It is to do so responsibly, of course, and not to get itself mixed up with what is the job of the church.

How does this apply? Let me give you a very simple example: Under law, in the kingdom of power, national self-interest, which is always at work among nations, is a good thing. Under gospel, in the relationship of people toward each other, self-interest may be very wrong. Now, unless you keep these two things apart and realize that nations are not run like the church, you are going to go mad. You will see how impossible and even destructive it is to apply to nations the principles of the gospel. There is no way in which you could produce anarchy faster, than to eliminate the use of force. It so happens that there are these demonic forces which cannot be stopped in any other way than by force. If you need a wholesome commentary on this point, I would like to suggest that you read Luther's explanation of the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," as given in his Large Catechism.

There is a drive on in our day to suggest that peace is the best of all possible conditions. This may not be a fact. Peace, of course, is desirable, under normal circumstances. But there is a kind of peace which is worse than warfare. That's why we took up arms against the Nazis. We didn't want the peace of the cemetery imposed upon us. Today we live under the threat of universal tyranny. Don't make any mistake about that! The situation may well develop where it would be immoral not to engage in conflict.

As you ponder and reflect on these principles, remember, that the vision and purpose of the United States is to create a world order where security, stability, and development apply. Development is a recognition of the fact that you and I and everybody else is a person with a right to freedom. Is it right, then, to take the life of a human being in battle? In summary my answer would be: There are times when it is not only necessary, but when it is good, in the sense of choosing a course of action which may be less evil than something else. We would betray millions today if we did not stand up and get counted against this tyranny. As Kennedy put it in the speech he never got to give in Dallas, "This generation of Americans by destiny and not by choice is called upon to be the watchman, guarding the bastions of liberty." President Johnson put it like this, "We did not choose to be the guardian at the gate, but there is no other." We've got this tragic burden, you and I have. Maybe we'd rather not have it, but we've got it. We can cop out, or we can see it through. That is the choice we need to face.