

CHRISTIANS AND THE MILITARY April 10
A Personal View- Bruce Kent

It took me a long time to move from being an uncritical enthusiast for all things military to becoming a sceptic tending to think that the world military are now a powerful, well funded and on balance negative global force.

I grew up with the armed forces. My father, badly wounded in WW1, had a mutilated leg to show for it. Remembrance Day was observed, and not just by us, with religious solemnity. 11 am on November 11th was a time when all of London came to a silent halt. War toys, cigarette cards of the great ships of the Navy or the uniforms of the Empire were treasured collections. Cadet corps at school were normal.

Even the dropping of the atomic bombs did not disturb my Christian convictions. I remember thinking that those Japanese, sub-human as the current view was, deserved everything they got. Conscientious Objectors? I never heard of one.

I suppose I became a little less wide eyed when I did my own national service but then I was spared any actual conflict. A spell in Belfast taught me retrospectively that what looks like peace can be no more than a lid put on a pot waiting to boil over.

I must have been over 40 when I began to think seriously about the morality of nuclear 'deterrence? How could anyone threaten to do something which it would be wicked to do? The Nigerian Biafran war sharpened things up a lot for me. Why was this country taking such an active part on one side and supplying arms, and thus enforcing a starvation blockade, on a substantial scale?

I began to learn about the international arms trade, one of the inevitable consequences of military industry. Whatever may have been true of the pre Constantine church for most of its life the mainstream Christian church has not been a pacifist community. Self defence is judged legitimate even if, in extreme cases, it may mean the death of an aggressor. I have no problem with that. It seems entirely reasonable that if the only way of protecting an innocent victim is to kill the aggressor then so be it. Some choices in life are not all happy ones. But what a massive edifice of global power we have built on this right to self defence.

Great organisations, primarily of men, armed with weapons which can destroy civilisation on this planet have been created. Their members are willing to obey orders without question even if they cause the deaths of tens of thousands who have never threatened us in any way. Behind these great military organisations, with considerable political power, are the business lobbies with their interest in ever increasing arms production, and the media misinformation stream which, dispensing traditional propaganda, keeps national jingoism alive and well.

All this at massive cost—the global military budget now runs at about a trillion and a quarter dollars a year—half spent by one country alone. (The same country, the United States has about 1000 military bases in other countries.) 'A theft from the poor' President Eisenhower once called such misuse of funds. Sadly the agencies concerned with development and the relief of poverty are themselves intimidated when faced with 'defence' issues and rarely make the connection. In Britain at the moment we are about to spend around £75 billion on yet another generation of nuclear weapons. That is money that could be spent on real human needs yet the major agencies keep silent.

None of this was meant to be. When the UN Charter was signed in 1945 The idea inherited from the League, was Common Security. The world would stand together to discipline aggressors. Primarily it would do it in a non military way. The UN was never a pacifist body. Article 51 of the Charter gave to any country attacked the clear right to immediate military self defence.

That right only lasts however until the great powers of the Security Council have taken measures to restore justice and international order. Only as a very last resort, when all non violent ways of settlement have been exhausted and negotiation have failed, may the Security Council, under Article 42, order military action.

'Real 'politics took us down another road after 1945—the road of the cold war. Rejecting the advice of Lord Louis Mountbatten who called it 'absolute nuclear nonsense' we followed the traditional route. Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum said the old Romans and we followed their advice to the letter. Preparations for war (and thus for peace?) continued enthusiastically. The Cold War was, as a result, a very Hot War in many 3rd world countries.

My problem with all this is not with the armed forces themselves. A world police force is indeed necessary. There is a role for UN Blue Berets and our British armed forces have in that role done very well. There are criminals to be dealt with on the international scene as well as on the national one. That is why we need a fully effective International Criminal Court with enforcement powers. Our British military culture however takes us far beyond policing.

From military tattoos to arms exhibitions, from Royal processions to Battle of Britain events we live in an atmosphere of past military nostalgia. Education for Peace (and therefore for Justice) is rarely taken seriously. Most school children will never see or discuss the UN Charter or indeed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They will leave school convinced that the ' Bombs ' were the only way to end WW11 and that it was only because of the influence of 1930s peace wimps that Hitler could come to be a world threat. They won't know why the 1932 League Disarmament Conference was a failure because they will never even have heard of it.

In all the recent fuss about politicians taking well paid jobs as consultants to firms with whose business they were or are dealing with, nothing has been said about the military equivalent. When senior officers come to retire from active service they are regularly sought out as well paid consultants to arms producing firms ('the defence industry'). They know how to make a good case for a new military piece of equipment. Their views, on how to deal with 'threats', have political power. In the United States the road from military service to the Boards of Lockheed, Boeing and Raytheon are very well marked out. There is of course no parallel peace voice in national inner circles.

Then the culture of military unquestioning obedience needs to be challenged. That there might be limits to military obedience is not an idea usually put into young soldiers heads, certainly not mine. Yet it was General Keitel, hanged in 1946 for war crimes, who said'It is tragic to have to realise that the best I had to give as a soldier, obedience and loyalty, were exploited....I did not see that there is a limit even for a soldiers performance of his duty'. The martyr Blessed Frans Jagersatter was one of the few who did refuse and he paid the price. Could not some of our senior military officers have spoken out when this country was ordered to go to war in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq

in 2003 without an approving Security Council resolution in either case? It is the young squaddies, often recruited in areas of high unemployment, dying in far away in conflicts, who pay the price of that silence.

If some of the points I have made seem to be too critical I end with this straightforward assessment which came from the 2nd Vatican Council.

'All those who enter the military service in loyalty to their country should look upon themselves as custodians of the security and freedom of their fellow countrymen and where they carry out their duty properly they are contributing to the maintenance of peace'.

What exactly is that duty and what is real security today?

On such issues there can be differing points of view.

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