

THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL AND THE PROFESSION OF ARMS – ARE THEY COMPATIBLE? (Part 1)

By Ian Dobbie

A Soldier and a Christian?

Next to Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square stands the statue of Major General Sir Henry Havelock of Lucknow. Few readers today are likely to have heard of him; and yet in Victorian England he was universally admired as both a soldier and a Christian. His aim had been clear: *"It was the great object of my ambition to be surpassed by none in zeal and determination in the path of my duty; because I was resolved to put down the vile calumny that a Christian cannot be a meritorious soldier."*

The degree to which General Havelock succeeded in his aim is reflected in Lord Hardinge's famous remark about him: *"Every inch a soldier, and every inch a Christian"*. Furthermore his son, who had won a Victoria Cross at Cawnpore and rejected his father's evangelical Christian faith until he witnessed his astounding accomplishment in the relief of Lucknow, was to say after his father's death: *"... that great moral will stand forever, that he proved in his life that a soldier may yet be a Christian – and that he doubly proved it in his death."*

Consequently the compatibility of the military profession with Christian belief went almost unquestioned in England for sixty years after Havelock's death in 1857. Indeed in John Pollock's words: *"He was the 'beau ideal' of Victorian chivalry for the new generation...After Havelock no one seriously maintained that it was impossible to profess to fear God as well as honour the Queen... that no one could at once be a soldier and a Christian."*

Indeed another biographer of a senior Christian commander commissioned at the turn of the 19th century commented that, with the exception of the Quakers, who have held pacifist views since the 17th Century, pacifism in England is a plant of relatively modern growth, rooted in the blood-soaked mud of World War 1.

Modern Trends

This emotive subject has come into the forefront of Christian debate regularly in the last eighty years. In particular I recall hearing twenty years ago some commentators claiming to discern similarities in the situations prevailing in the 1930s and the 1980s. These included the polarization of political opinion on both the left and the right, financial recession and unemployment; the build up of military machinery, fear of war and a rise in pacifist opinion. Among the most dramatic contributions to the pacifist debate in the 1930s were numerous books by men who had been through the horrendous experience of World War 1, and the memorable motion passed by a substantial majority in an Oxford Union debate to the effect that members would not fight for their King and Country, although doubtless many of them fought with distinction and sacrificially only a few years later.

I well recall the tension increasing during the 1980s, chiefly due to the escalation in Nuclear Weapons. The Warsaw Pact sited over 200 SS20 nuclear missiles in Europe and the United States acted in a countermove. The British Government purchased the first Trident system, which was judged to be the minimum to provide a credible and effective deterrent. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was growing at the rate of 500 persons per week at one time and the CND badge was seen in evangelical congregations. Clergy of several denominations were evident on CND

platforms in those days. Several hundred thousand people attended rallies in European capitals under the auspices of the Peace Movement. In Britain the TUC and several political parties supported a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament at their conferences.

A Nation Divided is Weak

When these trends occur it is of great concern to Christians in the military profession; for they believe that a nation divided on issues of defence is as weak as one that is ill equipped. We believe that it is important that in every generation the Christian public must be convinced that the profession is compatible with the historic and authentic faith handed down to us in Holy Scripture; and that Anglicans can endorse the sentiment of Article 37 that *“it is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars”*.

Before providing the evidence which supports the case there is one important disclaimer which must be made. No Bible Christian would wish to suggest that military action is compatible with Christian belief in all circumstances. For example the absence of a just cause would render such action immoral. That is why many Christian people have been deeply doubtful that the current War in Iraq is morally justifiable. Furthermore those of us who are not pacifists would not wish to treat our pacifist brethren with nothing less than brotherly respect; for we are as concerned as they are to take seriously the words of the Lord Jesus: *“Blessed are the peacemakers”* (Matt 5v9).

What then is the Bible case for permitting Christians to be members of the Profession of Arms?

Soldiers in Scripture

It is noteworthy that a soldier's calling and work are frequently mentioned both in the Old and New Testaments, and there is no indication that his calling is either dishonourable or unlawful. The Lord who used force to cast out the money changers from the Temple never levels such a rebuke at soldiers. Those who came to John the Baptist for instruction were commanded to *“rob no one by violence or false accusation, and to be content with your wages”* (Luke 3:14). Although their covetousness was rebuked, there is no hint that their calling was dishonourable or to be forsaken.

It is remarkable also that the four centurions mentioned in the New Testament are all commended in some way or other (Luke 7:9, Luke 23:47, Acts 10 and Acts 27). If the profession of arms was invariably unlawful in God's sight, surely they and their predecessors in the Old Testament, such as Abraham, Joshua, Gideon and David, would be the subject of the Holy Spirit's criticism in the Scriptures he has given to be our guide? However the writer to the Hebrews actually commends in Chapter 12:33 those men of faith who *“became mighty in war, put armies to flight”*.

In the New Testament the Christian life is compared with many lawful and honourable professions – husbandman, athlete, good workman etc – and these are never questioned. There are also comparisons with the life of a soldier (1 Cor 9:7, Eph 6 :11-17, 1 Tim 6:12 and 2 Tim 2:3-4). If the soldier's calling was dishonourable, surely no such comparison would have been permitted by the Holy Spirit who is the Author of Scripture.

Role of Government

It is interesting that Scripture (Rom 13:1-7) provides human governments with authority to maintain law and order, and if necessary force may be used to restrain evil for the sake of society as a whole.

In the Old Testament the prophets rebuked rulers who failed to restrain evil and maintain justice. Thus Governments, whom we are charged to obey (Tit 3:1 and 1 Pet 2:13-14) and for whom we are commanded to pray (1 Tim 2:2), are acting as God's servants when, with the necessary use of military and police forces, they maintain justice. Of course such force can be misused, but when

rightly used it is approved of the Lord for restraining evil. An example of force is the way that the Royal Navy was used to suppress slavery which at its peak involved nearly 200,000 slaves a year being transported from Africa. Up to a quarter of the strength of the Royal Navy was used for nearly a century, ending about a century ago. The Old Testament also shows it is consistent to enlist God's help and to use force when ordered. When Nehemiah was faced by enemies trying to prevent by force the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, he sought the Lord's help in resistance: *"Nevertheless we made our prayer unto God, and set a watch against them day and night"* (Neh 4:9).

In part 2 (Issue 110) Brigadier Dobbie will look at the Biblical texts sometimes used to support pacifism and consider their implications.

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