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# THE SPIRITUALITY OF WAR Paul Valliere

One of the contributions which theologians and students of religion can make to the contemporary discussion of nuclear war is to introduce a comparative analysis of the spirituality of war. As a human phenomenon, war is always something more than biological aggression. It is a matrix of values, and as such it displays a conceptual structure and is rooted in some type of spirituality. A comparative analysis is required because of the variety of spiritual values which may find expression in war. Theologians and students of religion, trained to distinguish types of spirituality and to relate them to each other, have an important role to play in this enterprise.

A comparative approach helps preserve crucial distinctions as well as fundamental unities which may be obscured by the current tendency to view nuclear war as a phenomenon unique to itself, radically different from the "conventional" war of pre-nuclear times. As understandable as this tendency is in the light of the monstrosity of the means of war in the nuclear age, it should not be cultivated in such a way as to lead us to assume that there is such a thing as "conventional" or "ordinary" war, at least not without saying exactly what we mean by it; or to assume that in the nuclear age human action will cease to manifest recurrent spiritual patterns and ethical problems connected with war since ancient times. The history of cultures, ancient and modern, western and eastern, is rich in works of enduring value which seek to explore and clarify the spirituality of war. The most comprehensive of these is the great book of war and peace which theologians and church people have a responsibility to search, heed, and interpret: the Bible.

What are some of the main types of war disclosed by a comparative analysis of war's spirituality? At least three types would probably be distinguished in any analysis: holy war, heroic war, and political war. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief sketch of each type and to pay some attention to the interaction between them.

#### Holy War

"Holy war" means something quite specific although the words are often used loosely. A clear definition is needed.

Portions of this article are adapted from Mr. Valliere's forthcoming book, Holy War and Pentecostal Peace, to be published in November 1983, by The Seabury Press, Inc.

Holy war should not be defined as a war which God approves of, a war fought for God or in the name of God, least of all as a war of religion. Holy war is a war which God fights. God presides over holy war not as arbiter of the justice of the cause or the policy maker whose decisions are carried out by others, but as the Presence encountered in the action. The event at the Red Sea (Ex. 14), the supreme paradigm of holy war, illustrates this clearly. A real encounter has taken place. The dead Egyptians and the sunken chariots are the proof. Someone has conquered. What is peculiar about the encounter is that the conqueror does not appear to be the other side. God did not help the Israelites triumph by strengthening their hands, for there is no mention of arms, or feats of arms, on their part. God and God alone won. Indeed, God and God alone fought.

To be sure, the miraculous element in the encounter at the Red Sea has been emphasized in the biblical story to enhance the sense of awe that we feel about the founding event of historic Israel. Later scenes of holy war, such as some of the battles of Joshua and Deborah, have a more ordinary and earthly character, at least at first glance. Israel sends out a soldiery to fight the enemy. Still, if one pauses to consider the details of almost any of the more "ordinary" encounters, the peculiar structure and spirit of holy war immediately stand out. The inequality —as opposed to parity—of the contestants is always a major theme. Holy war is never a fair fight. Israel always lags far behind its enemies in strength and supply of weaponry and, remarkably, does not win by catching up in the arms race. Israel wins because God fights on the field in person. The point of the story of Deborah's campaign, for example, is that Israel fought against Sisera's nine hundred chariots of iron with nothing but swords, and yet won (Jg. 4-5). It would be a travesty of the story to imagine a sequel in which Deborah was depicted taking measures to ensure parity next time around. The whole point is that holy war does not require chariots or "mighty men," i.e., a professional mercenary army. Holy war does not require a war machine. Another peculiarity is that holy war offers little in the way of rewards to the fighters. The strictures against taking private booty and the practice of "devoting" booty to God by destroying it impose extremely ascetical limits on the enjoyment of the fruits of war. The attraction of holy war seems to lie not in its profitableness, which is minimal, but in the sheer purity of the action, in ascetical and mystical participation in the Presence of the encounter.

Nowhere is the character of holy war plainer to see than in the encounter at Jericho (Jos. 6). The battle was one of the greatest of Joshua's victories as measured by the slaughter of the enemy and the amount of booty captured. But what makes it truly remarkable lies elsewhere, namely in the paradox that Jericho fell without actually being taken. Joshua "fi't the battle of Jericho" in a strange way to say the least. The people of Israel, led by priests blowing on horns, marched around the city for six days, and on the seventh day the same sort of "attack" was repeated except that when the priests blew their horns all the people shouted, "and the walls came tumblin' down." Joshua and the people then ran into the city. But do we really want to say that they "took" it? The point of the story is that Jericho, and indeed the whole land of Canaan, fell to a power greater than the

sword of flesh. Joshua himself was insistent upon this point in his last testament to Israel in which, transmitting the words of God, he told the people:

"And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the men of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I gave them into your hand. And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; and it was not by your sword or by your bow." (Jos. 24: 11-12.)

For the ordinary fighting man, interested in booty and adventure, Joshua's army was a frustrating and dangerous place to be, as poor Achan, son of Carmi, found out (Jos. 7). Even in victory the holy warriors behaved strangely. In the great triumph over the kings allied with Jabin of Hazor, Joshua executed God's command to hamstring all the horses and burn all the chariots captured in the rout (Jos. 11: 1-9). Such utter carelessness about the resources of war is eloquent testimony to the existence of a special conceptuality of holy war.

The goal, or telos, of holy war is also distinctive. The goal is rest from war in the promised land. "And the land had rest from war" serves to mark the conclusion of the several episodes of holy war in Canaan (Jos. 11: 23; 14: 15. Cf. Jg. 3: 30; 5: 31). The conceptuality parallels that which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews discerns in Genesis 14, which shows that the road to Salem, the city of peace, passes by way of the slaughter of kings (Heb. 7: 1-3). Joshua, too, slaughters kings in order to bring peace to the land. An example is the campaign to relieve the Gibeonites, who had been attacked by five neighboring kings as punishment for making peace with the Hebrews (Jos. 10: 1-27). Here, as elsewhere in the early holy war traditions, the violence is extravagant. Joshua is not interested in bargaining with the kings but in exterminating them from the face of the land. The same orientation extends by and large to their peoples. The peace intended to result from such a war is as militant and absolute as the violence of its prosecution. The Bible seems interested only in permanent peace. Nothing less then the perfect rest of the chosen people in the promised land will do. Alternatives such as an armed truce, a gradual reduction of forces, a division of spheres of influence, a live-and-let-live policy, or any other compromise settlement, are ruled out in principle.

Possibly the best illustration of the uncompromising character of the peace demanded by holy war is the unforgettable confrontation between Samuel and King Agag. Samuel, last of the judges, had sent King Saul out against the Amalekites with orders from the Lord of Hosts to spare neither people nor livestock. Saul and his men did as they were instructed to do with the people, but they spared most of the animals and also the enemy king, Agag. Their motive was probably the all-too-human thought of gain. The animals could be sold or consumed, and Agag, a royal personage, could be exchanged for ransom. But when Samuel learned what they had done he called down curses on Saul's kingship and ordered Agag into his presence. Agag, a man for all seasons, approached Judge Samuel with the smile and handshake of a worldly politician greeting another at a peace conference:

Then Samuel said, "Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amale-kites." And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, "Surely the bitterness of death is past." And Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women." And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal. (1 Sam. 15: 32-33)

As a leader of men King Agag must have seen all kinds in his time, but one has to believe that he was surprised by Samuel.

The absoluteness of war and peace in the Bible starts to make sense only when we recognize that both war and peace are regarded as manifestations of the Presence of God. God is working his purpose out. In the intensity of its beginnings in our lives we know it as holy war. As a comprehensive and abiding Presence we know it as peace. Precisely because holy war is not a war fought for or in the name of God but a war which God himself fights, it must not be conceived as a means which is qualitatively different from and subordinate to its end. Peace is the end of holy war in the sense of being its consummation. It is the broader manifestation of the same Presence which makes holy war. "God is with us" is the essence of both. This is why Joshua 6 presents the attack on Jericho as a liturgical encounter, an invocation followed by the manifestation of the Presence of God. The "attack" is led by priests and unfolds to the measure of liturgical time, the seven-day week. The breakthrough occurs when the people shout together on the seventh day. The shout is a liturgical act, a prayer of exultation. The Hebrew verb which Joshua uses to command the people, "Hārī cū/," "Shout!" (Jos. 6: 16), is also found in the Psalms, where it is traditionally rendered into English as "make a joyful noise," "O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise [nari<sup>C</sup>ah] to the rock of our salvation!" (Ps. 95: 1). "Make a joyful noise [Hariculari to the Lord, all the lands!" (Ps. 100: 1). The Presence which breaks out in holy war to shake the battlements of Jericho is the same Presence which shakes the walls of the Temple and the walls of the heart when the faithful people makes psalmody. It is the Presence which to this day speaks in the "shout" of ecstatic worship, an echo of the old holy war cry.

The focus of the liturgical occasion described in Joshua 6 is of course the seventh day itself. Jericho falls on the day that commemorates the rest of God after the creation of the world. No clearer example could be found of the connection between God's warfare and God's peace. The triumphant consummation of holy war and the Sabbath rest of God are one and the same. In this perspective we see why the land of Israel was taken "not by your sword or by your bow." The land of Israel was taken by the Word of God just as in the beginning God's Word called the world into being and into peace. The Word of God mediated by the shout of God's holy people, the company of all those who have surrendered to him, is heard by faith as the call of peace.

#### Heroic War

Heroic war is war which human beings fight as an expression of individual dignity in a cosmos which is fundamentally tragic. Heroic war is war without end

and without hope. It can neither heal nor be healed. Its spiritual possibilities lie in the grandeur of self-knowledge and self-affirmation which the hero can attain in the desperate and lonely circumstances of life.

If the mystery of holy war is represented by the walls of Jericho, the pathos of heroic war is represented by the walls of Troy as depicted by Homer in the Iliad, the greatest of heroic poems. Homer's Troy is at one and the same time a city unalterably doomed to fall and a city which will not fall. Troy is doomed by the will of Zeus, which makes the struggle of the defending hero, Hektor, hopeless-and so potentially glorious. Yet there is no consolation for the attacking hero, Achilleus, in the destined doom of Troy. On the personal level which alone matters to him, Achilleus experiences Troy as a city which will not fall, for it consumes both the life of his friend. Patroklos, and his own life. To the extent that their actions are to have personal significance, Achilleus and Patroklos must find it elsewhere than in the external objectives of the Trojan war. As the action of the poem unfolds, the putative aims of the war such as the sack of Troy, the recovery of Helen, the punishment of Paris, or the vindication of the honor of the Greek kings are reduced to relative insignificance by the recognition on the part of the heroes of the deep and permanent place of warfare in the nature of the cosmos itself. The heroes' actions on the plain of Troy represent their participation in this larger, deeper and unresolvable warfare. Whatever happens in the world of men and women, where cities rise and fall, the truth about the human situation seen in heroic terms remains the same: "So they fought on in the likeness of blazing fire." 1 The standard of excellence also remains exactly the same: "To be always among the bravest, and hold my head above others."2

The image of Patroklos on the ramparts of Troy sums up the grandeur and pathos of heroic war. Measured in spiritual terms the distance from the image of Israel at the walls of Jericho is very great. Patroklos comes closer than any other Greek before Achilleus to throwing down the walls of Troy, yet the divinity intervenes to check him:

There the sons of the Achaians might have taken gate-towering Ilion under the hands of Patroklos, who raged with the spear far before them, had not Phoibos Apollo taken his stand on the strong-built tower, with thoughts of death for him, but help for the Trojans. Three times Patroklos tried to mount the angle of the towering wall, and three times Phoibos Apollo battered him backward with the immortal hands beating back the bright shield. As Patroklos for the fourth time, like something more than a man, came at him he called aloud, and spoke winged words in the voice of danger: 'Give way, illustrious Patroklos: it is not destined that the city of the proud Trojans shall fall before your spear nor even at the hand of Achilleus, who is far better than you are.'

He spoke, and Patroklos gave ground before him a great way, avoiding the anger of him who strikes from afar, Apollo.<sup>3</sup>

Patroklos yields to the god here, but later in the day, "when the sun had gone to the time for unyoking of cattle," the dynamism of heroic action impels

Patroklos to rush at the walls of the city once again, this time with fatal consequence:

Three times he charged in with the force of the running war god, screaming a terrible cry, and three times he cut down nine men; but as for the fourth time he swept in, like something greater than human, there, Patroklos, the end of your life was shown forth, since Phoibos came against you there in the strong encounter dangerously, nor did Patroklos see him as he moved through the battle, and shrouded in a deep mist came in against him and stood behind him, and struck his back and his broad shoulders with a flat stroke of the hand so that his eyes spun. Phoibos Apollo now struck away from his head the helmet four-horned and hollow-eyed, and under the feet of the horses it rolled clattering, and the plumes above it were defiled by blood and dust.<sup>4</sup>

The futility of Patroklos' action in objective terms is clear to see, yet equally clear is its beauty and glory in heroic terms. Consumed by the intensity of his action Patroklos transcends himself and "like something more than human" touches a divine reality. Reaching the divine level destroys his mortal being. Yet in death he has great honor, for it is a god who kills him.

#### Political War

The sharp contrast between the spiritual options represented by holy war and heroic war rules out superficial combinations of them. Holy war traditions reject the values of individual self-realization and the tragic sense of life. Heroic traditions just as consistently reject the values of salvation and permanent peace.

At the same time, holy war and heroic war have something in common over against the type of war which may be called political. Political war is violence organized to serve the ends of states or state-like power structures. It is distinguished by a sharp separation of ends and means and a utilitarian mode of evaluation. War is made for specific and therefore limited objectives such as defense of lands, dependencies, or allies, preservation of an empire or political union, continuance of a particular form of government, protection of international commerce, access to vital natural resources, and so on. Political war is historical and relativistic. It serves a policy. A policy is effective to the degree that it is clear, finite, and obtainable using the resources at hand.

The objectives of political war, while markedly material and often very materialistic, do not necessarily lack ethical significance. This significance is derived from the war-making authority itself, the state or state-like power structure based on some sort of law, whatever it is. Subordinated to law and reduced to the level of a means only, war becomes "just" or "unjust" as the case may be.

Political war stands in marked contrast to both heroic war and holy war. The latter do not have aims which could be organized as "policy." In both cases the aims are too radical, the underlying spirit too threatening to law. We noted

that what happens to the city of Troy is in the last analysis irrelevant to the cosmic and tragic perspective of the *Iliad* on war. In the campaigns of Joshua and Deborah, the refusal to calculate about means and to organize a war machine shows the intensely non-political, if not anti-political, character of holy war. In both holy war and heroic war fulfillment is sought in purity of action, while in political war the quality of action as such is not of particular concern. Although perceiving fulfillment in action quite differently, holy war and heroic war both seek a trans-historical, trans-human ground of action. In holy war the divine ground inspires action. In heroic war action aspires to the divine ground where it is consumed. Political war necessarily binds action to a historical and human context. It seeks to limit the dynamism of action.

The concept of "just" war is a good example of the conceptuality of political war. It is a concept designed to place maximum emphasis on the ethical content of politics, such as it is, while sharply limiting the dynamism of war to make it a safe tool for politicians to use. The long and distinguished history of the Christianized concept of just war must not be allowed to obscure the fact that just war is a form of political war, neither holy nor heroic. Christians had little or no interest in it until the emergence of a Christian state in the late fourth century, and only Christians concerned with statecraft have had much interest in it since then. Political in origin, the concept has remained political in scope and application. It does not clarify politics so much as it depends on a measure of political clarity in order to function at all. It is a useful concept in contexts where there is a working consensus about the legitimate forms of political power. It is much less useful where such a consensus is lacking because conflicting claims to "just authority," always the foremost criterion of just war, make the concept unworkable on the practical level. In other words, the concept of just war functions best where politics, indeed where the meaning of justice itself, is relatively noncontroversial. By its nature, the concept of just war features a justice of surface, not depth; of conventional political relationships, not emotional or personal bonds; of minimal fairness, not comprehensive integrity (shalom).

Political war is so different in spirit from the other two types that one wonders whether it would be wiser not to include it in the same discussion. Yet we must not be tricked by the illusion which an abstract typology tends to conjure. In actual human experience the relationship between the three types of war is a dynamic one. The types interact and condition each other in significant ways.

Political war is relativistic; its goals are historical, specific and limited. Nevertheless political war remains a form of war. As a mode of social action it retains the extraordinary character which belongs to any manifestation of violence. Political war makes especially heavy demands on the people who actually execute it. For them the salient characteristic of the action required is its absoluteness. For the political mind only *something* can ever be at stake in war, but for the activists themselves *everything* is always at stake because war is a type of social action which wagers on the mortality of humankind. Participation in war raises metaphysical and metahistorical questions, questions of death and dark destiny which the political mind by nature is not equipped to address. However, holy war

and heroic war can address these questions with clarity and rigor. To do so is a large part of their raison d'être. With their totalistic perspectives and emphasis on radical fulfillment in action, holy war and heroic war have an appropriateness to the existential situation of warriors which political war can never have. The result is a tension which makes for instability as political war unfolds. The political mind from time to time dictates a policy of war yet recoils from the extremism of holy or heroic war. Holy war and heroic war, however, provide more adequate frameworks of meaning in the actual situation. Political war always represents a profound spiritual threat to warriors because it demands a total sacrifice of soul as well as body for ends which are easily shown to be relative and partial. If this is not the threat of meaninglessness, what is it? But the human heart recoils from meaninglessness. The result is that while political war can be distinguished from the other types in abstract terms, in practice a tension arises which drives it toward the values of the other types with disruptive effects on political rationality.

The reverse dynamic is also conceivable. Holy war and heroic war, in spite of their absolutism, must still be executed and sustained in a concrete historical context, for this is the only context available for human action. This being the case one cannot resist asking how in the last analysis the execution or continuation of either holy or heroic war can avoid raising questions or creating objective patterns of policy. Such a development does not have to proceed very far before we can expect holy or heroic war to change into a political conflict regardless of the original intentions. This outcome precipitates a crisis for both heroes and holy warriors. Neither has the resources for addressing questions of policy, and the mere prospect of having to think about policy threatens their identity. A cruel fate usually awaits heroes and holy warriors who are forced by the course of events to become politicians.

#### Some Implications

Assuming that the preceding typology of war has as much validity in the present as in the past, what are some of its implications for the current discussion of the morality of nuclear weapons and a defense policy based on them? A number of points may be made.

- 1. Nuclear weapons in their present form are obviously problematical instruments of political or just war because of their gross destructiveness. Political war must be limited. The unlimited violence that would result from the use of nuclear weapons in their present form would annihilate all reasonable political objectives and would even threaten the existence of the body politic which it is the function of political war to serve.
- 2. It does not follow, however, that the concept of just war in our day implies nuclear pacifism. Rather, the concept suggests the need to refine nuclear weapons in such a way as to make limited nuclear war imaginable, which it is not today. Even if such a prospect should appear distant, which would mean that for the indefinite future the concept of just war would weigh heavily against the use of nuclear weapons in any conflict, just war theory would still have to support ever serious effort to find a way to make nuclear weapons useable instruments of

policy. Just war theory is committed to the limitability of war as a matter of principle and cannot afford to abandon any aspect of the search for means of limiting war in practice. To those who object that this approach seems more like justifying war than limiting it, it must be replied that the justification of war has always been a key function of just war theory—indeed, one of the original ones.

- 3. An argument of principle against the concept of limited nuclear war can be made if based not on just war theory but on the principle of the inherent instability of political war. If it is generally true that political war tends to become holy or heroic war because of the need of warriors to find greater meaning in war than a political rationale allows—a development which tends to intensify war and to break down its limits—then we have good reason to be dubious of the proposition that limited nuclear war would remain limited in practice even if the technology for it were perfected. A thoroughgoing nuclear pacifism might be one conclusion to draw from this observation.
- 4. The moral justification of nuclear weapons construed as a deterrent, i.e., the argument that the possession of nuclear weapons sufficient to deter their use by an opponent is legitimate, will be upheld in one form or another by just war theory. Indeed, the argument provides a good example of the kind of justice featured in the theory. An uncomplicated sense of fair play will always affirm the prerogative of established polities to possess means of self-defense sufficient to deter aggression by potential adversaries. That the justice of deterrence is superficial, sometimes banal—what's more, that it is morally ambiguous because it rests on threat and counterthreat, fear and distrust—all this will always be disturbing to those who seek a deeper justice before humankind and before God. Yet it must be recognized that just war theory does not and cannot seek a deeper justice than it has traditionally sought precisely because it is a theory of political war, neither holy nor heroic. Those who seek a deeper meaning in war than the all-too-human justice of political war must look elsewhere than to just war theory.
- 5. Nuclear war clearly cannot be holy war as defined above. Its instruments are too human, the logic of the arms race too profane. The nuclear arsenals of the great powers today remind us of nothing so much as Pharoah's or Sisera's chariots of iron-lethal but in the end useless hardware. There is no lightness in them, no implication of transcendence, nothing to counterbalance the heaviness of flesh. They are obviously not the tools of holy war in its pure form. The problem is that in the historical world holy war exists in impure forms, in movements and leaders whose practice is shaped initially or to some extent by traditions of holiness, but becomes politicized. Along the path of politicized holy war, we encounter a type of leader and group who would think about using nuclear weapons should they lie within reach. Too political to renounce all but the purest forms of holy war, yet too "holy" to accept the conventional limits and superficial justice of political war, a leader or group claiming an extraordinary mission might find the extremism of nuclear warfare compatible, a sign rather than a travesty of holiness. The claim occasionally made by right-wing Christians in America that nuclear weapons are God's gift to a nation chosen to do his will is an example of the way in which the mixed type of holy warrior-politician thinks about nuclear weapons. It is a way of thinking that may have more appeal throughout the world

than many political realists recognize. Its prospects for shaping policy in small countries with a strong sense of special mission are better than among the great powers, although the latter are not immune from it as the American case just cited shows.

- 6. Could nuclear war as presently imagined be construed as heroic war? The case is not clear although it is plain that nuclear weapons leave little room for individual heroism in warmaking. Nuclear weapons are an extreme case of the depersonalization of war which has affronted the heroic spirit since early modern times. Nevertheless, while a nuclear conflict would be an improbable field of valor, the heroic spirit might still find ways to manifest itself there. Heroism has a unique affinity with war and a deep understanding of its situations. The possibility of giving meaning to nuclear war in heroic terms cannot be ruled out. For the great mass of people affected by it nuclear war would not be heroic, yet this observation does not rule out the heroism of an elite, which has been the traditional mode of heroic spirituality in any case. Also, heroes would not be moved or deterred by the observation that in a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims. Heroes live already in a world beyond winning and losing, and being heroes they can never become victims.
- 7. One of the results of the recent critique of nuclear weapons and defense policies based on them is the renewed attention to so-called "conventional" means of war. In part because it is vague, the concept of conventional war has a wide appeal today. To the party of political or just war it offers some hope of restoring war-making to a human scale. To nuclear pacifists it suggests an alternative to the hateful defense policies of the present. The problem is that the conventional weapons of our day are scarcely conventional by any traditional standard of measurement. They are far more mechanized than the weapons featured in the Second World War, which was not experienced as a particularly conventional war by the peoples who endured it. If conventional war is going to loom larger in the defense policies and war plans of the near future, something will have to be done to endow this still highly mechanized type of warfare with spiritual significance. The spirituality of heroic war would probably meet this need better than anything else. Thus it may be predicted that a significant revival of interest in the traditions of heroic war will result from the renewed attention to conventional war in our day. Whether a heroic revival will contribute to the general peace or increase the likelihood of war is an interesting, and open, question.

#### **NOTES**

- The Iliad of Homer, trans. with an introduction by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 11. 595. Cf. 13. 673, 17. 366, 18.1.
- 2. Ibid., 6. 208. Cf. 11. 783.
- 3. Ibid., 16. 698-711.
- 4. Ibid., 16. 784-96.