

## WAS JESUS A NON-RESISTANT?

BY REV. JOHN HAYNES HOLMES

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PREVIOUS to the outbreak of the Great War in August, 1914, discussion of the question as to whether Jesus was a non-resistant would have been regarded as needless, not to say ridiculous. For centuries, the tradition of the non-resistant character of the Nazarene's career and teaching has been accepted almost without challenge. Amid the swarming uncertainties of the gospel record, this one fact has stood out with a peculiar impressiveness and beauty. Many have regarded the divine counsel as impracticable; some have denounced it as frankly unworthy. But few have denied its place in Jesus's teaching, and in Christianity as the embodiment of this teaching. Agreement has been general that Jesus was a non-resistant—that while his kingdom could “suffer violence,” it could not be established by it.

Nothing has been more notable in religious circles, however, since the sudden coming of the European cataclysm, than the endeavor of those who believe in war, or at least in this particular war, to prove that the tradition of Jesus as a non-resistant is all a mistake, and that the Christians of Germany, England and France are therefore under no spiritual obligation to refrain from taking up arms against their enemies. Three out of twelve articles, for example, in a single number of the great British theological quarterly, *The Hibbert Journal*, were recently devoted to the thesis that Jesus was an advocate of the use of force under certain conditions, and that the Christian religion, therefore, offered sanction as well as condemnation of war. One author, to be sure, in order to prove his point, has to assert that “the world,” after nearly two thousand years of preoccupation with the subject, has “almost universally misunderstood . . . the precepts of Jesus,” especially the Golden Rule.

Another finds himself forced to abandon the Synoptic Gospels altogether and find his demonstration of Jesus's commendation of war in the unhistorical pages of St. John. But all agree that Jesus was, at certain times and places, not averse to violence as a means to a great end. From the spiritual point of view, this endeavor to cite Jesus as a teacher of "threatening and slaughter" is in a sense encouraging, since it shows that Christianity to-day is not so dead that millions of Christians can lift the sword without compunctions of conscience. But from the point of view of history, the endeavor is wholly regrettable. Facts are facts, after all.

It would be a long and tedious task to search the scriptures for evidence upon the question of Jesus's attitude toward the use of force in human affairs. Therefore it is fortunate that no such exhaustive survey of our problem is required. For all the serious doubts ever raised in contradiction of the assumption that Jesus was a non-resistant are based upon one or all of four brief passages in the Synoptic Gospels. If we dispose of these, the whole case in opposition falls to pieces, and the traditional conception stands.

(1) First among these four passages which seem to invalidate the non-resistant interpretation of Jesus's life and teachings, is the familiar statement in the thirteenth chapter of Mark: "When ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, be not troubled, for such things must needs come to pass." Here, it is argued, Jesus is foretelling the wars that are vexing the earth even in our day, and laying down in so many words the principle of their necessity. How can it be contended that Jesus is a non-resistant when he distinctly says that the very things against which the non-resistant stands fronted in deadly opposition "must needs come to pass?"

The absurdity of this argument is so apparent that it is hardly necessary for one to waste time and strength in answering it. Is it possible that there is no difference between saying that it is inevitable that certain things shall happen in the future, and saying that it is right and proper that such things should happen? I pick up a letter written by Count Tolstoi to the London *Times* some years before his death, in which he states that, under the conditions then prevailing in Europe, it is certain that sooner or later the

Continent will be engulfed in a universal cataclysm of arms. Ergo, I must infer that the rumor that the great Russian was a non-resistant can no longer be credited! I read Romain Rolland's vast novel, *Jean Christophe*, and find in the last volume a startling forecast of the outbreak of the present War of the Nations. Ergo, I must presume that M. Rolland welcomes the conflict and approves of all that Germany and Austria did to precipitate it! I turn the pages of H. G. Wells's *Social Forces in England and America*, and, coming to his essay on "The Possible Collapse of Civilization," find him anticipating the horror which the armaments of modern nations have brought upon the world. Ergo, I must take it for granted that Wells does not hate war, does not believe in disarmament, but on the contrary is to be counted among the Treitschkes and Bernhardis and Crambs of modern times! Is not the folly of such a mode of argument too patent to need serious refutation? When Jesus declared that "wars and rumors of wars . . . must needs come," he simply showed that he understood the stupidity of human reason, the blindness of human greed, the immorality of national statescraft. He simply prophesied that, so long as the temper of the heart and the conditions of society remained as they were, there could be no "peace on earth, goodwill toward men." He said what *would* be—not what *ought* to be! And he coupled this with a grand assurance of faith, that "such things" need not trouble us, since the time must come when "such things" shall not be!

(2) Another passage which is cited in this connection is the famous text from the tenth chapter of Matthew, "Think not that I am come to send peace on the earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword." Here is a statement which seems to be conclusive, and therefore incontestable. Jesus declares categorically that his mission is not one of peace at all, but one of war. He comes to earth not to unite men, but to send a sword among them. It is evident that he not only believes that "wars and rumors of wars" shall "come to pass" of their own accord, but that he proposes to make some of these "wars and rumors of wars" himself.

Such a literal interpretation of this martial text seems to be inevitable—at least until we read on in this same chapter a little farther. "I came not to send peace, but a sword," are his words. But immediately thereafter, in the

same passage, he goes on to say, "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." These sentences obviously belong together—they are part of the same thought, a sequence in the same discourse. And are we to infer therefrom that Jesus came into the world for the single, distinct purpose of breaking up families and severing households—that his appointed mission was to turn fathers against their sons, and daughters against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law?

The mere suggestion takes us at once to the *reductio ad absurdum* which is involved in any attempt to interpret literally, "I came not to send peace, but a sword." What Jesus was emphasizing here, in his vivid Oriental fashion, was the radical and therefore divisive character of the gospel which he had come to preach. His message of pure idealism went to the roots of things. It separated instantly the sheep from the goats—the worshippers of Mammon from the worshippers of God. Even in his own household he had seen it divide himself from his mother and his brethren. And what had taken place in his home, he felt certain was bound to take place in many others. The preaching of the Kingdom would sever fathers from sons, and mothers from daughters. Such divisions were not to be welcomed, much less plotted and planned, but were to be accepted when they came. They were simply the altogether regrettable and yet inevitable results of the proclamation of a new truth, a new commandment, a new age! Let no man seek for compromises—or, having put his hand to the plow, look back—or, having enlisted, seek to return and bury his dead. "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me." Thus spoke the Master his awful challenge of allegiance—and thus he lifted the sword that cleaved those who heard from those who would not hear.

(3) More formidable than either of these two passages is the third, which appears in the story of the Last Supper as told by St. Luke. Jesus and his disciples were conversing together after the evening meal, and he was telling them something of the perils which lay before them. "And he said unto them, When I sent you without purse, and scrip,

and shoes, lacked ye anything? and they said, Nothing. Then he said unto them, But now he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip; and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one." And when he had said this, we are told that "they said, Lord, behold, here are two swords. And he said unto them, It is enough."

This passage has always proved troublesome, not only to non-resistants, but to students of the gospels, who have without exception found it difficult to reconcile with the actions of Jesus on other and similar occasions. Apart from all questions of his non-resistant attitude, this speech of the Nazarene simply does not seem to fit in, somehow or other, with the rest of his career. Therefore do we find various attempts to explain it or even argue it away. What these are, we need not here enumerate. Renan, who declares flatly in his *Vie de Jésus* that Jesus was momentarily overcome by fear, and Nathaniel Schmidt, who surmises in his *Prophet of Nazareth* that the incident in all probability never took place as here recorded, are perhaps typical. What is important for us to observe is, that higher critics of the gospel narrative agree that here is something that needs special study and consideration, something that must be explained; and they straightway proceed to find some explanation which is different from that which the passage seems to imply!

What we have here, to my mind, is simply a bold endeavor on the part of Jesus, through the figure of the sword which he had used so many times before, to impress upon his over-sanguine and therefore heedless disciples the seriousness of the situation which was before them, and thus to prepare them for disaster. The whole atmosphere of the Last Supper was that of farewell. Every word of the Master was a foreshadowing of arrest, punishment, death. The spilt wine, the broken bread, the promised betrayal, the judgment of Peter—all pointed straight to Gethsemane, the Sanhedrin, and Calvary. The situation has changed: that was the message of the hour—our enemies are upon us. There was a time when we could go "without purse, and scrip, and shoes," but not now! If therefore there be any one among you who cares particularly about saving his own skin, he cannot do a better thing than sell his cloak and buy a sword, for this is a time for swords! The incomparable irony was at work here, as on so many other occasions in the Master's speech. And, as usual, it was totally misunder-

stood. He may have had in mind many things when he thus instructed his followers. But that he actually bade them to buy swords and defend themselves against arrest, is too preposterous for discussion. It is put absolutely out of court by the great event which occurred only a few moments later in the Garden, when Peter drew a sword against the servant of the High Priest. "Put up thy sword again into its place," said Jesus, "for all they that take the sword shall perish by the sword."

(4) But one passage more remains to be considered, and this the most serious of all. I refer, of course, to the cleansing of the Temple. That this event took place as recorded is unquestionable. That it constitutes an act of open violence is similarly unquestionable. Any such explanation as that once offered by Adin Ballou in his *Christian Non-Resistance*, that Jesus may have driven the money-changers from the court-yard, but that there is no evidence that he struck any one of them, is of course the most flagrant kind of hair-splitting. What we have here is a well-authenticated violation of the principle of non-resistance—and why not accept it as such? The episode is chiefly remarkable in the life of the Nazarene not for anything which it teaches in itself, but for its inconsistency with the rest of his career. Never at any other time, so far as we know, did he precipitate riot or himself assault his enemies. But this time he did—this time he failed to live up to the inordinately exacting demands of his own gospel of brotherhood. Nor is the circumstance difficult to understand! Jesus came to Jerusalem tired, worn, hunted. He knew that he walked straight into the arms of his enemies, and undoubtedly therefore straight to his own death. Weary, desperate, confused, he came to the Temple to pray, and here, right before the altars of his God, were the money-changers—here in the sacred places, the type and symbol of that commercialized religion which he most abhorred and which he knew was certain in the end to destroy him. What wonder that a mighty flood of anger surged up in his soul, and for the moment overwhelmed him! What wonder that he seized the rushes from the floor, and swept the place clean of its profaners! It was magnificent, we grant you, but it was not war, in Jesus's sense of that word. This was a moment of defeat, and not of victory, as is witnessed by the fact that this riot was the very occasion for which his enemies were



waiting, to put their hands upon the Nazarene with impunity.

Much more true to type was Jesus's conduct on the remarkable occasion when he was confronted by the mob with "the woman taken in adultery." On the one side was a wretched offender, who, by all the accepted law and custom of the age, was doomed to death by stoning. On the other side was a crowd of angry men, waiting the word of their leaders to destroy her. If ever there was occasion when human sympathy, scornful of the letter of a cruel law, would seem to have been justified in the use of force, this would seem to have been the one. But what did Jesus do? Did he threaten the crowd with punishment? Did he throw himself between the crowd and its crouching victim in an attitude of menace or defiance? Did he strike madly right and left in the hope of putting the mob to flight, in the sublime determination to die himself rather than stand idly by and see the woman destroyed? Any one of these things he might have done, not without credit to himself. But if so, surely his efforts would have been futile. Instead of resorting to violence of any kind, he simply spoke some words, and then, turning away, began to write upon the sand. Could anything seem more utterly ridiculous! And yet, we are told that when Jesus finished his writing and looked about him, the mob was dispersed and the woman saved!

Such are the passages upon which those who deny that Jesus was a non-resistant found their case. Whether or not we have explained these passages satisfactorily is not, after all, a matter of great importance. For even though every one of the four were to be interpreted as our militant friends would have us believe, and even though the four were to be multiplied to fourteen or forty, we would still be obliged to hold to the non-resistant character of Jesus's life and teaching. Whatever our interpretations of separate speeches and episodes, three general facts in regard to the work of the Nazarene stand unimpeachable.

(1) In the first place, whatever may be said about separate incidents, the whole spirit of Jesus's life, as reflected in the four gospels and in every apocryphal and patristic memory of him that has been preserved to us, is that of a man who believed profoundly in the gospel of love; whatever may be said about isolated passages, the whole burden of Jesus's teaching is that of the gospel of forgiving injuries, doing kindness, and fostering good will. The Naza-

rene had his inconsistent moments, like the rest of us. There is nothing easier than to go through the gospels and point out the contradictions on the record. But whatever his occasional lapses from his own august ideals—his inevitable violations of his own self-imposed precepts—his power, his desire, his spirit, are plain beyond possibility of confusion. He condemned and eschewed violence. He deprecated and avoided the use of force. At his best moments, he sought to “turn the other cheek,” to love his enemies, to do no evil for any cause. Not by one or two, or even four exceptions, which can by hook and crook be found in the story of one of the most stressful careers in history, must the man be judged, but by the whole rule of his life. The workmanship may here and there be defective, but the design is plain. From this point of view, it is easier to believe that Jesus did not live at all, than that he was not a non-resistant.

(2) Secondly, at the supreme crisis in his life, when he was put to the ultimate test of his convictions, Jesus made perfectly plain the import of his doctrine. When he was set upon in the Garden of Gethsemane, three things were at stake: First of all, his own life. Secondly, so far as he could foresee at the moment, the lives of his well-beloved disciples who had left all and followed him at his especial bidding. Thirdly, again so far as he could foresee, the whole destiny of the reform movement which, at some cost, he had initiated and carried forward in Israel. Now, had Jesus’s own life alone been placed in jeopardy by the action of Caiaphas, he might well have disdained to resort to arms. This, certainly, is understandable. But what shall we say when we see him refusing to use the sword offered by Peter, to defend his disciples and perpetuate the work which he had established? If ever there is excuse or reason for the use of force, it is in defense of the persons of those whom we love, or of the cause of truth and right which we have espoused. Here, if anywhere, it is agreed, are sanctions for violence. And yet Jesus steadfastly refused to avail himself of them. Any one who can look upon Gethsemane, the Sanhedrin, the house of Pilate, and Calvary, and deny that Jesus was a non-resistant, seems beyond the reach of reason.

(3) Lastly, it is to be noted that the men who knew Jesus, and the men who knew the men who knew Jesus, were so convinced that he was a non-resistant that, even in the face of the cruelest martyrdom the world has known, not one



of them lifted the sword in self-defense. Even when the Christian movement had become extended to the great centers of the Roman world, and fidelity to the Master came into conflict with obedience to the Emperor, not even then did they yield. There was more than one reason, of course, why the early Christians declined to enter the ranks of the Imperial legions. They could not conscientiously take the oath of allegiance to the Emperor which was required of every legionary. They were unwilling to place before the Emperor's throne the offerings exacted of every soldier, and thus worship the ruler as a divine or semi-divine being. Furthermore, they were well aware that, if they enlisted, they were liable to be summoned at any time to arrest their fellow-Christians, torture them and put them to death. But first among all such reasons as these is the simple fact that conversion to Christianity was understood to involve conversion to the ideal of non-resistance. To draw the sword, even in the public service of the country, was known to be a flagrant violation of Jesus's law and example of life. Therefore did they prefer to die rather than to take up arms. And many were those who walked the path of martyrdom in obedience to this knowledge.

In the face of the very general attempt now being made to dissociate the non-resistant idea from the teachings of Jesus, it is to be doubted if it is generally recognized what degree of moral treason is involved in such an undertaking. Jesus died the most terrible of deaths, and exposed his disciples to a like fate, in obedience to his ideal of love and brotherhood. His followers, for generations after his passing, suffered ignominy, ridicule, disgrace, suffering, and death, in obedience to this same ideal. Is it not rather serious business, after all, to rob these martyrs of their crowns—to say that they did not know what they were doing—to steal from the world that which they gladly died in order to give the world? If a person does not believe in non-resistance, why should he not, like Nietzsche, confess honestly that he does not believe in the gospel of Christ? That would seem to be a nobler thing than to seek to remake this gospel on a basis of spiritual idealism lower than that which Jesus and his disciples were willing to recognize, for the sake of saving a somewhat dubious reputation for Christian regularity.

JOHN HAYNES HOLMES.

# FOR TO-DAY

BY ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

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## I

Arm! Arm! . . . and end this thrifty faith in peace,  
Too soon arisen in a savage world.  
Trust not the tenure of our empty lease  
Of safety mid the ruin round us hurled.  
It was a dream; it came and it must go  
Like the great vision which two thousand years  
Has brought at last to final overthrow,  
And Christ is gone, and the stark truth appears.  
Arm! Arm!—or dare to choose the one sole way  
That else remains:—welcome each conquering horde  
That would subject your nation; hail the day  
Of the proud coming of your alien lord;  
And let your country on the wind go by,  
Since all you then could do for her is die.

## II

Strange! that men die for mastery of the gate  
Or council-halls of any earthly land!  
Beyond such phantoms dwells our deeper fate  
And all the treasures of each heart's demand.  
Though this our nation perished without strife  
At any hand that hungered for vain dross,  
Still would the scope of each man's separate life  
Exchange for gain all that it bore of loss.  
If Asia came, and we like Rome went down,  
Our eagle like her eagles slain and done,  
Still would survive all that was once our crown,  
With splendors of the Eastern soul made one.  
If that is dire,—then sound the fierce alarm,  
And wear your folly nobly! Arm! Arm! Arm!

ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE.