

A DEFENSE OF THE ADVENTIST POSITION

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Donald R. McAdams

Seventh-day Adventists abhor all war. War causes great human suffering and interferes with our primary objective of preparing ourselves for the world to come and carrying the gospel to this generation. But war exists, and we cannot avoid it. Men have been fighting since the beginning of time; they will be fighting when the Lord returns.

How, then, should the Christian relate to war? Certainly he should avoid it if avoidance is possible. The early Christians took no part in war. As long as they were a minority of the Roman Empire, this position was tenable. But when the Roman Empire became Christian (one may assume the Romans were not true Christians, but many thousands must have been sincere believers), Romans had to fight to protect themselves from the barbarian hordes.

From the fall of the ancient world until the present, the states of western Europe have called themselves Christian; but Christian nations, as other nations, have to be defended. The medieval Christian states had two alternatives: defend themselves or, barring the direct intervention of God on their behalf, be gobbled up by their less Christian neighbors. The logic of the situation forced the feudal states of Europe to accept war. Even the Catholic Church reconciled itself to reality by condoning just wars. In the feudal wars that followed, both sides claimed that justice resided with them. Faced with the dilemma of not fighting and being destroyed, or of fighting with no assurance that the cause was just, each side assured itself that its side was just.

Fortunately, because war was fought by the few, most medieval Christians could avoid the question of the justness of war. Feudal society was protected by heavily armored knights. Armies of as much as a thousand men were rare, and the heavy armor kept the casualties at a minimum. The great majority of the people took no part in war.

Armies grew in size as Europe entered the modern era, but they were still comparatively small. The

IN SUPPORT OF INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE, 2002

By Donald R. McAdams

Much has changed since I wrote "A Defense of the Adventist Position" for the winter 1969 issue of *Spectrum*. But upon reflection, I am of the same opinion. I believe the Adventist Church should advise young Adventists who are drafted into military service to request noncombatant roles. It should also provide support to those young men and women who choose to bear arms and those who refuse any form of military service.

The issue is moot for Adventists in America. The United States has an all-volunteer army. But the Church must have a policy that serves Adventists everywhere. For the reasons I put forward over thirty years ago, I believe the Adventist position is sound.

I should add that if I were a young man facing conscription into the U. S. military in 2002, I would most likely accept a combatant role. No nation is without fault. America's heart is not totally pure, and America's hands are not totally clean. One can find much to criticize in the foreign policy and military actions of successive American administrations.

Nevertheless, throughout my lifetime, the United States has been a force for good in the world and has stood against evil. And we have handled our power with more restraint than any great power since the creation of nation-states.

Donald R. McAdams is executive director of the Center for Reform of the School System in Houston, Texas.
Mcadams@crss.org

majority of the people could still avoid the crucial problem of how to relate to war. Then in 1517 the Protestant Reformation shattered the superficial religious harmony of Europe. The next century and a half witnessed bitter religious wars. Protestants and Catholics alike fought not only for what they thought was right but for what they knew was just. In doing so they devastated Europe. With entire populations taking part in what they regarded as a just war, the civilization of Europe was almost destroyed.

Fortunately, with the subsiding of religious passions

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in the late seventeenth century and with the growth of the enlightened skepticism of the Age of Reason, war became once more a problem that most people could ignore. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, war was the sport of kings, fought for dynastic goals. Civilian populations were disturbed as little as possible.¹ Citizens from belligerent states could travel freely between countries, and only the scum of society was impressed into military service. Frederick the Great regarded the conscription of artisans as an abuse that no monarch in his right senses would countenance. War was played for small stakes, and theorists thought it right that not justice nor right nor any of the great passions that move people should ever be mixed up with war.²

Morally, war waged from political motives is profoundly shocking. Human conscience cannot condone war, with its waste and misery, except in sheer self-defense or in pursuit of some transcendent moral or social good. War in the eighteenth century, however, was war that killed few; hence most citizens could ignore it. As Edward Gibbon wrote: "The European forces are exercised by temperate and undecisive contests."³

Two forces upset this gentlemanly balance of power and reintroduced human passions: democracy and the industrial revolution. In the War for American Independence and then especially in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, nationalism became the great inspiration for war, and citizen armies now numbered in hundreds of thousands instead of in tens of thousands. Passion was reintroduced into war. The Comte de Mirabeau warned the French National Assembly in 1790 that a representative parliamentary body was likely to prove more bellicose than a monarch.⁴ It was.

The American Civil War and Bismarck's three Prussian wars of aggrandizement added industrialization to democracy as the great force changing the nature of war. War was transformed more than contemporaries realized. The relatively small wars fought in the late nineteenth century did not afford insight into the new nature of warfare. However, with the Great War of 1914-1918 the world finally realized that a new era in warfare had arrived.

The new weapons—machine guns, tanks, airplanes, submarines, gas—and the use of mass armies increased the casualties to unbelievable percentages. Whereas from the twelfth century to the seventeenth century the casualties of war were from 2.5 to 5.9 percent of the strength of armies, in World War One they soared to 38.9 percent of armies that were much increased in size in relation to population.⁵ Industrialization had given

man the weapons of mass destruction; nationalism had given him the desire to use them to annihilate the enemy. In this first modern total war, nine million soldiers were killed, and ten million civilians lay dead.⁶ Civilian populations not only suffered greatly; they also contributed greatly to the war efforts of their countries. With total war, workers were needed for munitions factories and the other jobs necessary to enable industrial states to function. Propaganda on both sides kept citizens inflamed. With this war, wrote a contemporary observer, "war had passed out of the phase of a mere battle. It is now a contest between the will and determination of whole nations to continue a life-and-death struggle in which 'battle' takes a very small part."⁷

All that has been said about World War One was doubly true about World War Two. In this most bloody of human conflicts, fifty-five million human beings were killed as a direct consequence of war.⁸ Civilians suffered terribly, and their importance to the war efforts of their countries increased.

During the Battle of Britain in the autumn of 1940, the morale of the civilian population was as important as the strength of the military forces. In the Soviet Union, having babies contributed to the war effort. Stalin established a fertility prize, the Order of Motherly Glory, for those who bore more than seven children.⁹

As a member of twentieth century society, can the Adventist disassociate himself from this kind of total war? If he refuses to serve in the military forces or to work in any industry related to the war effort, still he supports the military actions of his country, for modern corporations are so diversified that a business machine company or a paper manufacturer may produce the materiel of war. If these jobs could be avoided, one would still contribute to the country's war effort by work in services important to the state, for any educational, medical, or industrial worker helps make the country strong. The United States government recognizes this and gives scholarships called National Defense Fellowships to train literary critics and historians as well as scientists; all contribute to the national strength. If one makes his living painting designs on china, nearly fifty percent of his taxes support our country's military forces. In an age of total war, the only way one can keep from assisting the war effort is by emigrating. And where can he go? War is endemic in the modern world, and even neutral states maintain strong military forces.

The problem is no less complex in the armed forces themselves. The army medic, treating wounded soldiers so they can fight again, contributes to the military strength of his country. So do we all, unless we are hippies.

This is the dilemma of the American Adventist today. He abhors war, but willy-nilly he participates in his country's military efforts. If he must participate, let it be in a humane and compassionate way. Thus the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists recommends, but does not insist, on 1-A-O status for Adventist young men. Those who serve in this noncombatant way serve their country, and they do so with compassion and healing.

One last point. If the citizen cannot help contributing to war effort, why not bear arms? As a citizen of a state, the Adventist, as do all other citizens, receives the benefits of citizenship; he receives the protection of the law and protection from foreign aggression. He should render Caesar's due. Why not bear his share of the obligations of citizenship and do his share of the dirty work of killing? Perhaps if the cause were just, he would. Men of ancient Israel killed in defense of their country, and God was with them. If God commanded today, Adventists would fight also. Even without God's command, we would fight to protect our families from individual acts of violence. But without divine revelation one cannot determine if any country fights a just war.

The diplomacy of our day is so complex that justness is seldom, if ever, on one side. And if it were, we would not know it. For example, if the Pueblo crisis had led to war, which side would have been fighting a just war? Even the guilt of Germany in World War Two can be disputed. (Although that is a historical argument beyond our interest here, the Versailles Treaty and the depression of the 1930's can be used to indicate that Germany was not alone responsible for World War Two.)

A further complication would concern allies. Would it be just to help an ally in a just war? What would one do if during a just war for the defense of an ally the objectives of the war changed and the ally began to fight for personal gain? The difficulties are beyond the competence of the individual citizen. If the individual decided to participate in just wars, he would do so in ignorance of their justness. Nationalistic propaganda convinces all people that they fight for what is just and necessary. Adventist young men from different countries would find themselves killing one another in the name of justice.

The Adventist position is a compromise position. Like most compromises, it is a middle ground open to attack from both sides. If carried to its logical conclusions, the position is even absurd: A country that was one hundred percent Adventist would be defenseless and soon nonexistent. Nevertheless, the position is one that has the virtue of working. We are, and always will be, a small minority of this country. We do owe something to our country for the benefits of citizenship, and we must contribute

whether we like it or not. As a medic, the young man can render willingly to his country, in the compassionate relief of suffering, the allegiance he must give. On the other hand, he need not fear that he will kill unjustly under the hypnotic irrationality of a nationalism that justifies every act of its own country. Because the transformation of war under the impact of democracy and industrialization makes complete conscientious objection impossible, and because the confusion of modern diplomacy makes discovery of the justness of a war equally impossible, the Adventist position is a compromise that works.

Obviously not all Adventist young men will agree with this position. Some will prefer to support with arms what they consider a just war. For these there is no problem. The state does not question the motives of those who serve as combatants. Other Adventists will refuse military service of any kind, preferring social or hospital work here to what they consider the greater evil of noncombatant military duty. The Selective Service laws have made provision for such men. They can serve their country as civilians. To do so they need the support of their church.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church should continue to support those young men who accept noncombatant roles in military service, in accordance with the guidance of the General Conference. The Church should also, recognizing diversity, give encouragement and support to the complete conscientious objector. We are living in an age when the demands of conscience are recognized by government and society, and we no longer need to convince the state of our loyalty. It is commendable that our church gives guidance to our young men. It is necessary that we support those whose consciences lead them in a different path.

References and Notes

1. The following survey of war in the eighteenth century and its transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is taken from Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (volume four of ten volumes. London: Oxford University Press, 1934-1954), pp. 141-156.
2. G. Ferrero, *Peace and War* (translated by Bertha Pritchard. London: MacMillan and Company, Limited, 1933), p. 7.
3. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (volume four of seven volumes. London: Methuen and Company; New York: MacMillan and Company, Limited, 1896-1902), p. 166.
4. Mirabeau in the French National Assembly on May 20, 1790.
5. P. Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity: The Effects of War, Revolution, Famine, Pestilence Upon Human Mind, Behavior, Social Organization and Cultural Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1942), p. 92.
6. Perhaps twenty-two million were wounded.
7. Quoted in F. P. Chambers, *The War Behind the War, 1914-1918: A History of the Political and Civilian Fronts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 473.
8. William Langer and others, *Western Civilization* (volume two of two volumes. New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 775.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 784.