

The Inexorableness of Moral Law

[A selection from Dr. Charles E. Jefferson's recent volume, *WHAT THE WAR IS TEACHING*, copyrighted 1916, and reprinted by permission of the publishers, Fleming H. Revell Company.]

When one looks out upon a continent deluged with human blood, the question leaps to his lips which Gideon asked centuries ago: "If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all His miracles which our fathers told us of?" The question "Why?" has been during these recent months on our lips a thousand times. We have punctuated our reading of the newspaper accounts of carnage with—Why? We have sighed it, and cried it, and moaned it. We have woven it into our prayers.

With us Christians it has been an agonizing question because we are committed to the belief that God lives and reigns, and that He is a God of love. But the heart keeps asking, Where is He? Where was He when the shells screamed and burst over the heads of the multitude of men, women and children who streamed from falling Antwerp? Where was He when Poland was swept with fire and sword? Where was He when the Lusitania sank? Where was He when the Turkish butchers piled up the bodies of the Armenian dead?

The man of the world has also had his perplexity. He, too, has asked Why? Science has trained all of us to think of the universe as being governed according to law. We can not easily think of any phenomenon without seeking its cause. We can not readily believe that events are unrelated. The sequence of things which happen is what it is, for a reason. When a planet refused to keep in the orbit which the astronomer had traced, he had no rest day or night until he had found an explanation for this singular behavior. It was the perturbation of Uranus which led to the finding of Neptune. Men had for generations died of yellow fever at Panama, and when the scientist got on the field he proceeded to investigate the cause of the fever. Cancer continues to slay its victims, and in laboratories all over the world trained investigators are zealously working, determined to find the cause. We can not allow anything in this world of ours to remain unexplained. We wrestle with it and refuse to let it go until it surrenders to us its secret. It is impossible to stand before a phenomenon so vast and appalling as is this European war, without asking the question: "Why has all this befallen us?"

There are various possible explanations. We might say that the war is due to chance. It happened. The universe is a great wheel of fortune, and the dice happened to come out in this particular way. History is a great gamble, and just now we are having a bad streak of luck. The world is a huge kaleidoscope, kept turning ceaselessly in hands we do not see, and one can never tell one moment into what new combinations the human beads are going to fall. The solar system began in a fortuitous concourse of atoms, and the present war is another illustration of the haphazard way in which the cosmos stumbles blindly along its way. That is a possible explanation, but it is so repugnant to the modern mind that we may dismiss it without serious consideration.

PLUNGING HEADLONG INTO ABYSS

Or we may say that the war is due to accident. Accidents do happen, and this is one of them. The European nations were climbing the slippery slope of the Matterhorn of civilization, and the foot of one of them slipping, it fell, dragging with it all the others, and so now you behold eleven of them plunging headlong into the abyss! It is an explanation which will not commend itself to many of us.

We might say that the war is due to fate. All things are in the grip of a mysterious law which compels all men to be what they are and all events to happen as they do. Nobody is responsible for what he does, nobody can be justly censured for what comes to pass. This war was an irrepressible conflict. There was no possible escape. Human wisdom and foresight could not have prevented it. Serbia had to be where she is and she had to do what she did. The same is true of all the other nations. They had to exist, they had to grow, they had to give offense, and finally they had to fight. The destiny of nations is shaped by factors unforeseen and incalculable.

This was the old Greek idea. "Beyond and above the Olympian gods," as Froude says, "lay the silent, brooding fate, of which victim and

tyrant were alike the instruments." The idea finds classic expression in the marble group of Laocoon and his two sons. Two serpents swim in from Tenedos, and encircling the father and his sons crush them to death. It was easy for the ancients to believe in the three goddesses by whose will one's character and career are determined. One of them spins the thread of life, the second determines its length, the third cuts it off.

STRANGE FASCINATION OF HUMAN MIND

This fancy of an inscrutable and irresistible fate has had a strange fascination for the human mind. It has haunted the imagination of many generations. The sanest thinkers of our modern world have repudiated it. Shakespeare tramples on it again and again in his plays. Listen to Cassius:

"Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

Listen to Edmund in "King Lear":

"This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, (often the surfeit of our own behaviour,) we make guilty of our disasters, the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and traitors by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on."

John Milton expressed the conviction of the best minds of the seventeenth century when he said:

"Necessity or chance Approach not me, and what I will is fate."

Samuel Johnson spoke not only for the eighteenth century, but for all centuries when he claimed: "I know I am free, and that is the end of it!"

But while we have outgrown the pagan superstition of fatalism in our own individual life, the idea still lingers in circles which discuss international relations. There are philosophers who still live in the twilight of the old Greek mythology. There are university professors so belated as to teach that this war came by fate. One finds occasionally in magazines such nonsense as this: "All great wars are fated." If they are fated, then we are not responsible for them! This is the excellent foppery of a benighted section of the learned world. If we should find a Teuton and a Slav firing at one another in the street, and if on being asked to stop, both should reply that they were fated to do just what they were doing, the policeman would promptly escort them to the jail in order that they might meditate on their absurd philosophy. But when millions of Slavs and millions of Teutons fall to killing one another, men who have a reputation for sanity and the power of thought, begin to tell us that such conduct could not have been avoided. This is the excellent foppery of befuddled professors, that nations become butchers by necessity, brigands and incendiaries by heavenly compulsion, perpetrators of damnable atrocities by a divine thrusting on! This war is not a monster serpent which has swum in from some infernal Tenedos hidden in the mists of the dark and all-surrounding sea. We must seek an explanation more rational.

We might say that war is a school which God opens from time to time for the education of mankind in those virile and conquering virtues in which He delights. War is a feature of the educational program prescribed by the Almighty. It is not an elective, but belongs to the list of compulsory studies. No nation can escape it. It imparts a discipline to be obtained in no other way. This is the teaching of a school of philosophers who, disliking the terminology of Greek mythology, steal phrases from the vocabulary of religion. Some men are greatly impressed when told that war is according to the will of God.

But let us unroll this theory before the face of Jesus of Nazareth, the man who came into the world to teach men of a heavenly Father who is infinite in tenderness and gentleness and love. Let us think of this "school of virtue" in the presence of the man who claimed to have in him the very spirit of God, so that he did not hesitate to say: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Jesus burned like a furnace in the presence of injustice and cruelty. His eyes flashed fire when He saw one man hurt another,

even with words. He could not see a woman wronged, or a child mistreated, without His soul standing up in vehement protest. He was always sympathetic, affectionate, forgiving. His hands were stretched out not to harm but to heal. His life was given not to destroy but to save. He assured men that He did always the things which were pleasing to God. He declared that He was the way to God. He stood before them saying: "I have given you an example."

With the figure of Jesus Christ before us, how dare any man say that war is a school of virtue established by God? How dare he say that human butchery is a divine ordinance for the purpose of building up in men the dispositions of Jesus Christ? Go through the hospitals of Europe and look on the scenes which they present: boys with their legs and arms torn off; other boys with their eyes jabbed out; other boys with their skulls broken and their brains oozing out; other boys with their abdomen ripped open and their bowels protruding; stand in the presence of human beings beaten into pulp by the instruments of war, and say if you can: "This is divinely foreordained. This is the approved method of our Heavenly Father."

The man who says that war is a device chosen by the Almighty for the education of man tramples on the Christian religion. He is a blasphemer. He is worse than an atheist. Better believe in no God at all than in one who has the mind of a fiend. If there is a revelation of God in Jesus Christ, then we can be certain that God hates the mailed fist, He despises shining armor, He loathes all the pomp and circumstance of war. The Hebrew prophet told his countrymen that God despised their feast days, and took no interest in the incense of their solemn assemblies. He would not accept any of their sacrificial offerings. Their religious songs were an abomination to Him. What He wanted was righteousness. If God really speaks to us in Christ, then we may be certain that He says to the nations of our day: "I hate your target practice, I despise your bayonet drills, your military efficiency is an abomination to me. Take away the gilded foolery of the barracks and the bloody atrocity of the battlefield!"

What shall we say then of war? If it is not due to chance or to accident or to fate or to the good pleasure of God, how are we to account for it? Why not think it is retribution? Why not consider it as penalty for violated law? Why not meditate upon it as the content of one of the vials of the wrath of God? Jesus Christ speaks of weeping and gnashing of teeth. He says that certain persons will be beaten with many stripes. He pictures a fire into which transgressors are thrown. May it not be that Europe has been brought to judgment to answer for the deeds done in the body, and that the warring nations are now in what the New Testament calls Gehenna?

MOST RATIONAL INTERPRETATION

To my mind this is the most rational of all the interpretations of the war, and also the most comforting. If this war came by chance, then I am discouraged. If we are living in a universe in which things are so loosely managed that an avalanche like this can fall upon us without cause, then life is not worth living. Why go on and make plans for the future?

If the war is due to accident, then the same accident might happen again. If it is due to fate, then why struggle any longer? If we are doomed to undergo such a catastrophe by a power which we can neither understand nor overcome, then the outlook is disheartening. We are without hope in the world.

If the war is the wise provision of God for the cultivation of virtues and graces, then how can we worship Him? If He can devise no better way for the refining of the human heart than the periodic slaughtering of multitudes of young men, then I for one refuse to bend my knee to Him. How can the heart adore a God who employs the methods of a savage?

But if the war is the consequence of freedom which has been abused, if it is the natural consequence of long-continued and outrageous sinning, if it is the harvest of seeds which men have long been sowing, then, however we may be pained and horrified by the tragedy in which Europe writhes, we can hold up our head and face the future undaunted. If the present distress is the result of sinning, then Europe can repent and sin no more. We Christians have long believed that the Lord God is merciful and gracious, long-suffering in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and if we are now finding out in a fresh and terrible way that He