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Asking the Right Questions about War: A Lesson from C. H. Spurgeon

Dr. David Duke, who is Chairman of the Department of Religion in William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri, offers us a historical study in the thought of C. H. Spurgeon which turns out to be surprisingly relevant to the modern scene.

Fiction writer Flannery O'Connor tells the story of Asbury Fox, a morose young man who because of failing health must leave New York City and return to the rural American South to live with his hovering mother. Asbury Fox is a young adult with an inflated view of his talents and a snobbish attitude toward his family's humble Southern roots. In an effort to offend his southern Protestant mother, he asks that a Catholic priest visit him. Asbury specifically asks for a Jesuit priest, for he remembers a sophisticated, New York Jesuit who impressed him as being cultured and appropriately cynical. What Asbury gets is Father Finn, an old moth-eaten priest with a no-nonsense, pre-Vatican II temperament. His conversation with Asbury is worth citing in part.

> 'It's so nice to have you come,' Asbury said. 'This place is incredibly dreary. There's no one here an intelligent person can talk to. I wonder what you think of Joyce, Father?'
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> The priest lifted his chair and pushed closer. 'You'll have to shout,' he said. 'Blind in one eye and deaf in one ear.'
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> 'What do you think of Joyce?' Asbury said louder.
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> 'Joyce? Joyce who? asked the priest.
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> 'James Joyce,' Asbury said and laughed.
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> The priest brushed his huge hand in the air as if he were bothered by gnats. 'I haven't met him,' he said. 'Now. Do you say your morning and evening prayers?'
>
> Asbury appeared confused. 'Joyce was a great writer,' he murmured, forgetting to shout.
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> 'You don't, eh?' said the priest. 'Well you will never learn to be good unless you pray regularly. You cannot love Jesus unless you speak to Him.'
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> 'The myth of the dying god has always fascinated me,' Asbury shouted, but the priest did not appear to catch it.
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> 'Do you have trouble with purity?' he demanded, and as Asbury paled, he went on without waiting for an answer.

[The lopsided conversation continues, and once again Asbury tries to gain control.]

'The artist prays by creating.' Asbury ventured.

'Not enough!' snapped the priest. 'If you do not pray daily, you are neglecting your immortal soul. Do you know your catechism?'

'Certainly not,' Asbury muttered.

[Then the priest proceeds to instruct Asbury in the catechism, and despite Asbury's attempts to deflect him from this course of conversation, the old priest persists.]

Asbury saw he had made a mistake and that it was time to get rid of the old fool. 'Listen,' he said, 'I'm not a Roman.'

'A poor excuse for not saying your prayers!' the old man snorted.

Asbury slumped slightly in the bed. 'I'm dying,' he shouted.

[This doesn't impress the priest, and he continues to ask about the condition of the young man's soul.]

'How can the Holy Ghost fill your soul when it's full of trash?' the priest roared. 'The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are—a lazy ignorant conceited youth!' he said, pounding his fist on the little bedside table.[1]

This is a familiar situation in an O'Connor story: someone whom the protagonist and the reader almost instinctively dislike becomes the mediator of truth. Here, it is an old-fashioned priest concerned primarily with the catechism, but he understands the truth about Asbury Fox. Asbury Fox is 'a lazy ignorant conceited youth.' In other O'Connor stories, fundamentalist preachers serve the same purpose: like the priest, they may be theologically flawed or even morally faulty, but they speak the truth.

It is in this vein that we ought to consider the nineteenth century Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Spurgeon was the best-known preacher in his day and continues to be admired in our own time, especially by those with a Fundamentalist bent. Indeed one historian states that 'Spurgeon liked to consider himself old-fashioned', and that 'truth, for him was something to be proclaimed, not something to be discussed'.[2] These kinds of reports very likely have deterred scholars in mainstream Christian ethics from taking Spurgeon very seriously. Certainly Spurgeon was egocentric, doctrinally rigid, sometimes bull-headed and uncooperative, and oftentimes appealing to an anti-intellectual constituency. Yet there are surprising elements.

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[1] Flannery O'Connor, 'The Enduring Chill', in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1956), 105–7.

[2] R. J. Helmstadter, 'Spurgeon in Outcast London', in *The View From the Pulpit: Victorian Ministers and Society*, ed. P. T. Phillips (Toronto, The Macmillan Company of Canada), 165, 170.

One discovers that his social concern was not an add-on, but crucial for who he was and what he stood for.[3]

He is particularly important as an example of one who usually asked the right questions. Despite his attempt to live in another era, despite being a theological reactionary, Spurgeon, like O'Connor's priest, pointed to the truth by asking the right questions. He is particularly informative in this respect since he embraced the patriotic mythology which claimed a special, God-given destiny for his native land. That is, on the surface Spurgeon resembles the prototype of those contemporary leaders who wed conservative theology with conservative politics. Despite sharing many of their theological assumptions, if he were alive today, he would hold very different views on war and peace than they. Why? Because Spurgeon usually asked the right sorts of questions, what we might call prophetic questions. Perhaps it was his genuine dependence on the Bible which challenged the method of simply Christianizing the political questions of his day, as Christians of the right, middle and left are wont to do. Instead, he usually asked the kinds of questions which Christians of all political camps ought to give prior attention before issuing policy statements.

More specifically, during Spurgeon's years of public prominence, the middle to late 1800's, Britons were concerned about their nation's role and image as a world power. They were concerned that Britain's worldwide commercial interests be maintained and strengthened. There was also concern for the nation's mission, be it interpreted as 'the white man's burden' or simply a kind of God-given destiny to be a leader among nations. Britain was not involved in any major wars during the period, though a number of crises in her empire and in foreign policy made war and peace a prominent concern of the time. The Turkish Empire was fading as a power and an aggressive czar made Russia a threat to stability in eastern and southern Europe. India, the jewel of the British Empire, had become a hotbed of rebellion with the mutiny of Indian troops in 1857. There were uprisings in southern Africa and Afghanistan. Not far from British soil France and Prussia fought each other in the 1870s. It was a time in which Britons were asking questions of national self-interest, questions of national mission, and questions of national self-image.

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[3] See my article, 'Charles Haddon Spurgeon: Social Concern Exceeding an Individualistic, Self-Help Ideology', *Baptist History and Heritage* (October 1987).

> under the thin veil of poetry, romance, and heroism, lay hid the stern facts . . . the suffering of the battle field which fills the air with shrieks, and groans, and agonizing yells, and calls for heaven's vengeance . . . [and] the woe which desolates many a sequestered hamlet and many a humble family, expressed with the widow's moan and the orphan's lamentation.[12]

In contrast to his Victorian ethos which lauded 'manliness' and war heroes,[13] Spurgeon was not much impressed. In his book review of a biography of the great British war hero, General Gordon, Spurgeon was very measured in his appreciation. To be sure, General Gordon exhibited strengths of character which were admirable, but Spurgeon countered that he was repulsed by 'the combination of soldier and Christian which leads to the shooting or hanging of men in cold blood.'[14]

As the question of human suffering preceded questions of war's benefits, so also Spurgeon asked questions concerning war's foundation in sin prior to the more common British questions of a war's contributions to national security and prosperity. Spurgeon identified sin as 'the mother of wars'.[15] Then noting 'how plentiful sin is', he commented that it was not remarkable how frequently wars occurred. War was sin not only because of the suffering it wrought, but also because it went against God's scriptural commands:

> war is a great crime—murder on a huge scale—and little less than hell let loose among men. 'Thou shalt not kill' is as much a divine commandment as 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' No one supposed that adultery on a great scale would be right: then why should killing be?[16]

Nor did Spurgeon mince words as he criticized the sins of his nation's imperialistic ventures:

> . . . they were cases of the mighty assailing the feeble . . . We have invaded one country and then another with no better justification than the law of superior force, on the suspicion of future danger. . . . We have meddled in many things, and have threatened at least three of the great quarters of the globe either with our fleets or our armies. Nothing could content us til we have drawn the sword against a

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1957). 9.

[14] CHS, rev. of Life of General Gordon, n.a., ST, 20 (1884), 508.

[15] CHS, 'The God of Peace', [sermon of 4 November 1855], in NPSP, I, 374.

[16] CHS, 'A Letter About His Other Letter . . .,' 433.

> brave though savage people, whose fighting may well be fierce, since it is their invaded father-land.[17]

Not only questions concerning human suffering and sin, but one more question preceded the normal British concerns about the justifiable outcomes of war. Spurgeon put it this way: in times of war the fundamental question must be: How will God's Kingdom prosper?[18] Of primary concern for him was the character of persons and of nations, especially his own nation.

The question of personal and national character began with the question of the character of the God whom these persons and nation worship. Spurgeon noted that although God allows wars and is sometimes described with militaristic attributes, God's character is one which 'abhors bloodshed and strife'. God is a God of peace. Peace throughout the cosmos is God's 'highest wish and . . . greatest delight'.[19] War was not part of God's character, claimed Spurgeon; wars resulted from the freedom allowed Satan and humanity. God

> may from all eternity have foreseen it [war], and it may even be said in some sense that he ordained it to manifest his justice and glory, and to show his mercy and sovereignty in redeeming man; but God had no hand in it whatsoever.[20]

In fact, insisted Spurgeon, God interferes in human history to prevent war. Peace is sustained only by God's help, given the human inclination otherwise.[21] The 'periodical war madness' of his nation was the combination of the human instinct for violence with the British desire for international prestige through bullying smaller nations. Many of his countrymen, he said, called for

> a warlike policy as loudly as if it involved no slaughter, and were rather a boon to mankind than an unmitigated curse. A mysterious argument, founded upon the protection of certain mythical 'British interests' is set up as an excuse, but the fact is that the national bulldog wants to fix his teeth into somebody's leg, and growls because he does not quite see how to do it. The fighting instinct is asking to be gratified, and waxes violent because it is denied indulgence.[22]

Spurgeon's solution to this problem was that this national and

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[17] CHS, 'The Present Crisis,' 387.
[18] CHS, 'War! War! War! [sermon of 1 May 1859], in NPSP, V, 201.
[19] CHS, 'The God of Peace', 371.
[20] *Ibid.*, 373.
[21] *Ibid.*, 374.
[22] CHS, 'Periodical War Madness', ST, April, 1878, 146.

human tendency for war must be challenged by a carefully measured campaign of educating people for peace. This program must not be strident, insisted Spurgeon, for 'bitter contentions for peace' undermine the goal. Those who need to be persuaded by peace only have their worst prejudices confirmed by those who 'fight Christ's battles with the devil's weapons'. This persuasive educational process must not only point out the problems created by war, but must invest much energy in changing the kinds of persons who populate the society.[23]

Spurgeon understood that war was but one manifestation of a society's character. Therefore Christians must work to replace 'the fight-spirit' in all its forms—'cruelty to animals, the lust for destroying living things, the desire for revenge, the indulgence of anger'—and encourage in its place 'pity, compassion, forgiveness, kindness, and goodness in the fear of the Lord'. Thus, argued Spurgeon, 'All soul-saving is a blow at the war-spirit', for a Christian loves humanity and 'becomes ashamed of blows and battles'. This 'peace teaching . . . is but another name for practical gospel teaching.'[24]

It is obvious that Spurgeon's strategy for peace was the traditional evangelical appeal for social change through changing enough persons in that society. Still, he did see that the social order itself did have a kind of character or personality which shaped individuals, though, to be sure, that social character was the result of influential persons and numbers of people who comprised the society. Spurgeon understood that the national character did make a difference in the way the nation dealt with conflict situations. Since Spurgeon accepted that his nation had a special destiny under God, the issue of his nation's character took on additional importance; indeed God seemed to expect more from chosen people. For example, Spurgeon claimed that it was much worse that Britain had engaged in the slave trade than other nations, and likewise Britain ought to be an example to the nations by trying to avoid bloodshed.[25] Spurgeon even suggested that the depressed economy and lack of rain in 1879 might be God's judgement on Britain's economic excesses and its military adventurism. There was a need for national repentance, said Spurgeon, which would require 'a loathing of the principle that British interests are to be our guiding star instead of justice and right.' The 'warlike policy' of the nation must be rejected so that

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[23] *Ibid.*, 148.
[24] *Ibid.*, 148–9.
[25] CHS, 'The Present Crisis', 391–2.

Britons 'may no longer be made to appear as a nation of snarlers and growlers, breathing defiance and delighting in war.'[26]

Why then did Spurgeon allow for any war? Throughout his sermons and essays the reader encounters a number of the traditional justifications for war:

1. because governments are God's instruments, and governments have deemed war necessary;[27]

2. because of sin, war will not cease until the reign of Christ with his Second Coming;[28]

3. because wars are permitted by God 'for necessary and useful purposes';[29]

4. because war may be the last resort of an oppressed people.[30]

To these might be added a fifth reason: that some warfare involves the legitimate governmental function of capital punishment, as in his justification of Britain's retaliation against the Sepoy Mutiny. Leading a Fast Day Service following the Mutiny, he prayed for the British soldiers who were to battle the mutinous Indian soldiers:

> bid them remember that they are not warriors merely, but executioners; and may they go with steady tramp to the battle believing that God's will is that they should utterly destroy the enemy . . .[31]

On the surface this appears to be a Holy Crusade argument. Perhaps Spurgeon had such an aversion to war that he resorted to this peculiar Holy Crusade argument, given his suspicion of the abuses of traditional Just War arguments. Or, perhaps Spurgeon was lured into the Holy Crusade line of thinking by way of his infatuation with Puritan theology and its heavy reliance on military imagery for the Christian life. The victor/vanquished theological language does lend itself to misuse and even violent results.

Still, Spurgeon's position on the Mutiny reflects a kind of Just War thinking, for he called on the English nation and her warriors to exercise *God's* vengeance, not theirs, that they should fulfill this executioner's duty with a mournful disposition, being wary not to inflame the all-too-easy human passion for ven-

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[26] *Ibid.*, 389.
[27] CHS, 'Our Soldiers', 107.
[28] *Ibid.*, 108.
[29] CHS, 'The God of Peace', 371.
[30] CHS, 'Periodical War Madness', 148.
[31] CHS, 'Fast-Day Service', [sermon of 7 October 1857], in NPSP, 3, 378.

geance.[32] One is reminded of the mournful magistrate described in Augustine's *City of God*, who recognizes that he *may* be torturing and executing innocent people as he carries out his social responsibility, though nevertheless 'recognize [ing] the misery of these necessities'.[33] As Roland Bainton comments, this Augustinian view of the mournful soldier depicts the Just War tradition's reticence to use violence.[34] An uneasy conscience always characterizes the best in the Just War tradition, and Spurgeon seems to follow this way of thinking, despite this instance of Holy Crusade language. This does not excuse Spurgeon's position, but it does demonstrate that it was not completely inconsistent with his other stances.

In summary, it is important to see what encouraged Spurgeon's aversion for warfare and his suspicion of his nation's imperialism. It was not his political evaluation of policy; it was not a cost-benefit analysis, as we say these days; it was not even concern for his nation's divine mission. Rather, it was some basic questions endemic to Christianity: compassion for human suffering, wariness of human sin, and emphasis on God's intentions for humanity. Even his religiously-biased nationalism could not survive the scrutiny which these fundamental questions raised.

Perhaps Spurgeon, even with all of his personal and theological warts, can serve as appropriate model for a variety of Christians; for whatever their political presuppositions may be, each one ought to begin with these sorts of fundamental questions. Like Spurgeon, they may then move to make policy judgements, but only then. One has to wonder if some of the political debates in the contemporary religious community would not look different somehow if this approach were taken seriously.

Spurgeon's approach brings to mind one preacher's comment about the Cain and Abel story, a story rich in possibilities for grappling with human inclination to violence. Cain is confronted by God and asks, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The preacher said, 'Cain's dilemma was that he didn't even ask the right question, which was, 'Am I my brother's brother?' In the same way Spurgeon reminds us that asking the right questions may be the crucial step for moving us nearer the truth and right action.

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[32] CHS, 'India's Ills and England's Sorrows', [sermon of 6 September 1857], in NPSP, 3, 343; 'Fast-Day Service', 381.

[33] Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York, The Modern Library, 1950), 19, 6, 682–3.

[34] Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: a Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1960), 98–9.