

THE ETHICAL AND SOCIAL IDEAS OF JESUS

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

SEVERAL noteworthy books have lately been written on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth—their essential significance, their originality, and their relation to the time, place and circumstances which gave them birth. Some of the questions raised and treated in these works are of greater importance, historically and scientifically, than the average man who considers himself religious and devout, and who is not averse to candid, searching discussion of everything connected with the life and mission of Jesus, appears to realize. But as superstition, credulity and unthinking acceptance of traditions give way to critical and rational discussion of theological and metaphysical subjects, the study and interpretation of Jesus and his doctrines is bound to assume an increasingly objective and detached character. The elements of permanent value in the Christian faith have nothing to fear from the most rigorous use of the analytical and scientific method; the accidental, ephemeral and superficial elements of that faith will, and should be, placed in the right light and traced to their sources.

Two questions naturally suggest themselves to the earnest and independent student of the New Testament, and these claim a good deal of attention in the new books to which reference has just been made. The answers given are not quite satisfactory, perhaps, but they indicate an advance on previous views and enable the unprejudiced truth-seeking inquirer to make further progress.

The first and obviously important question is this: To what extent, if any, was Jesus consciously and unconsciously influenced in reaching and promulgating his doctrines by the belief that the end of the world was imminent? The second question, old yet ever new, is—Just *what* does Jesus teach and preach in connection with vital and grave problems of human conduct under such conditions as obtain today?

Let it be frankly recognized that opinions may and do diverge widely with reference to the first of these questions. Dogmatism or overconfidence on the point would be as arrogant as it would be vain and foolish. The best we can do is to apply common sense to the injunctions, aphorisms and words of Jesus and determine whether they were intended to apply to normal and stable society or only to a society whose days were numbered and whose dissolution and complete rebirth were inevitable.

Of the many utterances, direct and indirect, which may be cited from the Gospels concerning the impending destruction of the world, the following must suffice:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

"This generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled."

"Watch, therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come."

"Therefore, be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh."

"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe in the gospel."

"Watch ye, therefore. . . . I say unto ye, Watch."

It is impossible to read these and similar sayings in their contexts without recognizing that Jesus believed he was preaching to a doomed world, a world in which *the supreme duty and supreme opportunity was repentance, spiritual preparation for a new heaven and a new earth*. Let sophists assert what they will; simple honesty requires us to give the words of Jesus their natural meaning. We know that he often spoke in parables and freely used symbols, like a true Oriental. But we also know that he could be blunt, downright caustic and laconic. We cannot doubt that, had he known that the world he was seeking to save would last for hundreds of thousands of years; had he conceived his, and its, problem in a modern, scientific, evolutionary spirit, his manner and form and "approach," though not his essential matter, would have been radically different from what they were. He would not have stressed the need of *repentance*; he would have emphasized the necessity and wisdom of conduct conducive to harmony, happiness and peace under normal conditions.

I may add that those who are disposed to doubt the foregoing inference would do well to consider the style, manner and form of those of our own contemporaries in Europe and America who claim to be, and indeed are generally admitted to be, the true, sincere, consistent, frank followers of Jesus. Do these men and women dwell

on repentance, of watching and praying for the coming of the Lord, on the wonders, miracles and calamities that shall attend the end of the world, on angels coming forth to sever the wicked from the just? No; they do nothing of the sort. *They* dwell on the application of the teachings of Jesus to concrete problems, to industrial, social and political relations. They think and speak in terms of service, solidarity, love, positive beneficence. The conclusion is inescapable, then, that if Jesus had not believed in the inevitable, catastrophic end of the world, he would not have painted the gloomy pictures he did paint, would not have spoken of "days of vengeance," of distress and wrath, of signs in the sun, moon, stars. He would have urged and illustrated his gospel with reference to normal, every-day life and its perplexities. He undoubtedly shared some of the notions and superstitions of his time and his race, a fact, by the way, which makes his genius and profound insight all the more extraordinary.

We now come to the second question—namely, what Jesus thought and taught with regard to the proper human way of life generally, and what his doctrines should mean to us and future generations—generations living in a world that is *not* running down like a clock, in a world still evolving and advancing with the aid of science and the better side of our nature.

Of course, candid persons must admit that there are ambiguities, evasions and even flat contradictions in the saying attributed to Jesus. Many books have been written on the "essential" message of Jesus, and each interpreter finds quotations in the new testament to support his particular view. Was Jesus opposed to war? Was Jesus a communist? Did Jesus justify punishment of wrongdoing? Such questions as these have been argued exhaustively, and with little prospect of agreement. But, after all, if we clear our minds of cant and bias, there is no *serious* difficulty in determining what Jesus is said to have said on the cardinal issues with which so-called Christian society is still wrestling. Let us consult the text and give words their reasonable and proper meaning, and, where we find inconsistencies, let us note them and call logic and reason to our aid in order to decide which statement was deliberate and which casual and accidental.

First, as to *war*. Is war compatible with the teachings of Jesus? We are told that it is, because, forsooth, Jesus was very angry with the money changers, drove them out of the temple and called them thieves; and, further, because he denounced hypocrites and lawyers; spoke harshly of the rich, despised the well-fed, complacent and

greedy, and did not hesitate to array set against set, class against class, group against group. We are reminded by professed Christians that Jesus said:

"Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division."—(Luke.)

Or, according to another version:

"I came not to send peace, but a sword."

"And a man's foes shall be they of his own household."—(Matthew.)

And, on the strength of these expressions, chiefly, we are asked to believe that Jesus was *not* opposed to war as a means of settling international disputes and differences!

The suggestion must strike one as absurd. True, Jesus did not directly condemn war. True, he did not even discuss it. But, whatever the explanation of these omissions may be, it is idle and perverse to maintain that opposition to war, to brute physical force, to wholesale slaughter, is not implied in all of his teachings and doctrines.

It is not to be wondered at that, at last, self-respecting churchmen and devout laymen, theological students and other serious-minded young men and women are beginning to protest vehemently against the encouragement, sanction and support of war by the so-called Christian denominations! There are limits to human ingenuity, to human self-deception and to human inconsistency. Consider the following absolutely quint-essential sayings of Jesus:

"But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

"And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

". . . Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you."

Can any decently honest Christian pretend that the foregoing injunctions can be reconciled with justification of war? The answer is plain, and no doubt or cavil is possible.

Some writers, indeed, have affirmed that Jesus, in the foregoing injunctions, had in mind only one's neighbors and fellow-nationals, and that his ethical views were not meant to apply to relations between states or between subjects of one state and those of another. To fortify this contention, we are referred to the episode of the tribute money—the penny—and to Jesus' supposedly adroit avoidance of a dilemma by distinguishing between the things that are

Caesar's and the things that are God's. Diplomacy, foreign affairs, war-and-peace issues between states are declared to be affairs of state, Caesar's concerns, and hence, when the subject or citizen is ordered to fight an enemy of Caesar's, he may do so without disobeying the commandments of God or of Jesus.

The answer to this line of argument is two-fold. In the first place, Jesus would hardly have failed to make the momentous distinction between state ethics and individual and personal ethics clear and emphatic had he intended it. The matter is far too grave to leave to far-fetched inference and guesswork. In the second place, there is no theoretical or practical difference between an order of Caesar—that is, a state or government—that relates to domestic, national matters and an order that has to do with foreign policy. A law is a law, and its sanction is always the same. If the individual is not responsible for the state's foreign policies, he is not responsible for its domestic policies. If he may and must obey treaties and laws growing out of international affairs, he is also bound to obey laws covering relations between neighbors and fellow-citizens. Jesus never said, "Resist not evil, *unless ordered to do so by the state*"; "Love your enemies, *unless the state orders otherwise.*" To argue that this is what he meant is to make a mockery of Christian teaching, to indulge in paradox-mongering and sophistry.

No; Jesus evidently meant what he said, and if he be followed and obeyed, war is out of the question. If his words do not forbid physical force, resort to the duel and arbitrament of the sword, on any and all occasions, they simply mean nothing, and it is idle to talk of a new testament, of fulfilling and bettering the old law, of a kingdom within one's spirit, of a totally revolutionary world-philosophy properly to be called Christian. So far as the so-called Christian nations' theory and practice of war is concerned, they are, and never have been, Christians. That is all!

As to property, communism and the whole complex of economic relations, the writer is satisfied that Jesus' teachings cannot possibly be applied to modern conditions in a literal sense or even in sense approximating the literal. Jesus preached to a primitive and simple community, and to a primitive and simple world. He preached to tillers of the soil, fishermen, journeymen, petty merchants, and to the few aristocrats, landlords, rulers and scholars who lived on the fruits of the toil of the common people. His doctrines, moreover, one must note again, would not have been conveyed in the form in which he did couch them had he not expected an early

destruction of the world and the advent of the kingdom of God. Let us candidly consider these injunctions:

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.”

“Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.”

“Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.”

Even a primitive community could not follow such advice as is contained in the foregoing sentences and live, for there would be no plowing, no planting, no gathering of crops, no building, no sewing, no shoemaking, no trading, no productive labor of any kind. How would mortal men and women subsist under such a regime? The answer is life would soon come to an end. Jesus could not intend race suicide, and such suicide would have been sinful and criminal in any case. Of course, he could provide food miraculously, as he did on certain specified occasions; but he made no such promise to his followers, and his reference to the lilies of the field further precludes the theory of miraculous supplies of all the necessities of life at his express command. The unavoidable conclusion, then, is that he did not use the words quoted in a literal or semi-literal sense. How, then, are they to be interpreted?

Suppose we seek light from other utterances and episodes. Jesus told the young man who had great possessions that, if he would be “perfect,” he must sell all he had, give it to the poor, and thus lay up treasures in heaven. But, clearly, this advice could not be meant for everybody, for if everybody followed it, there would be no market and no buyers for the goods and no possible use for them. All would be poor and destitute, and all would have to depend on miracles for food and raiment. Of course, Jesus’ disciples, whom he charged with spreading his gospel, could be perfect in the sense of the words addressed to the young man, for they were to be fed and clothed by their converts; indeed, they were instructed to carry “neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes.” But Jesus knew that he would have but few such self-sacrificing and faithful followers. He said the harvest was great and the laborers few, since they were to be lambs among the wolves. Communism might be highly desirable for small bands of itinerant preachers and prophets; it does not follow that whole communities and societies, with institutions to maintain children to bring up, wealth to conserve, can rationally be expected to seek perfection in communism and a life of asceticism and prayer.

In short, there is nothing in Jesus’ teachings, explicit or implicit, to require his modern followers to adopt communism, socialism, the

single-tax, or any other particular "ism." All that the spirit of his teachings enjoins is generous treatment of one's fellowmen in all relations of life—love and beneficence on a foundation of equality and justice. Opinions may well differ among sincere Christians as to the kind and type of institutions, adjustments, relations—economic and social—which best embody justice, generosity, and love of one's fellowmen. It is even possible to argue that capitalism, freed from abuses and perversions, is more likely to promote human happiness than any form of socialism! An appeal to Jesus' doctrines could not settle a question of that sort; it is purely scientific, and must be settled in accordance with experience, knowledge of individual and social psychology, and the operation of economic laws. Intellectual honesty, sympathy, forbearance and good will Jesus unquestionably demands; the rest is "mere opinion," as Carlyle would say.

Finally, about punishment of crime, or of anti-social conduct when it passes certain limits. Jesus manifestly did not believe in punishment, although he believed in stern reprobation of wrongdoing. In other words, he believed in moral resistance to evil, but not in physical. The driving of the money-changers from the temple cannot be called punishment, but it was not non-resistance, either. It was and always is a form of very effective resistance, for we know that, as a matter of fact, many anti-social acts and habits are repressed or prevented by moral censure alone—by criticism and social ostracism, by scorn, ridicule and contempt.

The true follower of Jesus cannot vote to hang or electrocute or poison the worst of our criminals. He cannot vote to imprison anyone, or to degrade him—save, again, by moral means—or to flog him. On these points Jesus' teaching is emphatic and uncompromising. Punishment is anti-Christian, just as war is anti-Christian. There is no escaping from this conclusion. It is mockery and hypocrisy to kill criminals and ask God to forgive them. Jesus did not recommend so cynical a policy as this. He demanded that *men* should forgive trespassers and criminals; that *men* should return good for evil; that *men* should love even their enemies and translate their sentiments into appropriate deeds.

To say that society and civilization are impossible without jails, executions, and the like, is to say that Jesus' positive teachings are impracticable and incompatible with civilized existence—to say that Jesus did not show a Way of Life, but uttered hollow and meaningless sayings. The religion which does not point to a way of life is no religion worthy of the name. Either Jesus must be accredited

or he must be rejected as to all injunctions and mandates which he patently intended to be taken literally and which reason tells us *can* be so taken. The Christian is bound to try Christianity where such a course is possible. If he refuses to do this, he simply disavows and repudiates Jesus' basic teachings. This, of course, he is privileged to do, but he is *not* privileged to pretend to believe and embrace doctrines which he has no intention of living up to and fearlessly applying.

It should be frankly admitted, however, that those Christian pacifists, lay and clerical alike, who are now condemning all war and bitterly denouncing those who justify national defense and defensive warfare as hypocrites or faint-hearted weaklings are strangely inconsistent themselves. Why, they should be asked, does not their zeal and fervor attack the penal code and the vindictive treatment of crime first? Why their sudden passion for rigorous Christianity in foreign relations and their continued indifference to capital punishment, to solitary confinement, to stripes, lock-steps, floggings, filthy cells, and all the rest of it? Far stronger would their position on war-and-peace issues be today if they had initiated, to begin with, a crusade against punishment, vengeance and judicial killing *at home!*

The back-to-Jesus movement is heartening. The interest in the ethical and social ideas of Jesus is significant and welcome. But the first and last condition of any enduring prosperity for these tendencies is intellectual honesty. It requires courage to clear one's mind of cant and face truth, but without such courage crusades and reforms are short-lived and foredoomed to deserved failure.