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We Say NO! The Plain Man’s Guide to Pacifism

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We Say NO! The Plain Man’s Guide to Pacifism

Abstract
A classic defense of Christian pacifism, We Say NO! was published in 1935 by Anglican priest H.R.L. “Dick” Sheppard, who also founded the Peace Pledge Union, still going strong in Britain today. This critical edition includes an historical and thematic introduction, bibliography, and copious explanatory footnotes that annotate the text.

Keywords
pacifism, Peace Pledge Union, Anglican Church, Christianity

Disciplines
Christianity | Philosophy | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments
This is the introduction to Dr. Kerry Walters’ edited book We Say NO! The Plain Man’s Guide to Pacifism.
We Say

NO!

The Plain Man's Guide to Pacifism

H. R. L. Sheppard

Edited by

Kerry Walters

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There has never been a time in history when the desire for Peace has been so strong or so widespread as it is today. Throughout the world men and women are weary of war, and of the waste and suffering of war.

But, paradoxically, we live in imminent danger of a new and more terrible death struggle of the nations. The thing we hate and seek to avoid may yet overwhelm us.

That is because, while we are perfectly sincere in wanting Peace, we don't feel quite so sure of the other fellow's sincerity when he says he wants it too. So we are trying to build up a Peace system on the foundations of force, and hedging it round with military sanctions.

I do not believe that Peace can be established on such a basis. I am afraid that collective security may, in the end, prove a short cut to universal war.

Yet I do not despair. I believe that the world will to Peace may yet be made effective. But this can only happen if we renounce war, not only formally, but absolutely and unconditionally.

I want all the nations to do that. I believe that they would, if only one of the Great Powers had the faith and courage to lead the way. I want Britain to be that Power, and I want her to show that she is in earnest by disarming completely.

Now, this seems a "tall order." It is probably true that no Government would dare to take the "risks" of disarmament unless it were convinced that such was the popular will, that the great mass of thinking men and women in the country demanded it. But I believe that politicians generally underestimate the strength of the Peace Movement, and that the general public is ready to accept very drastic measures if they offer a real hope of the abolition of war.

In order to test this feeling, and to give Pacifist opinion a chance to crystallize, I launched my Peace Pledge, and invited individual men to sign
an undertaking that they would have no part or lot in any future war. I have written this book in order to explain that Pledge, and to put before my countrymen the reasons why I consider it necessary. I have also tried to show why, in my opinion, those people are mistaken who, earnestly desiring Peace, believe that it can be secured by systems of collective security.

I may be told that I am a visionary, and that I am ignoring the facts of the international situation and of human nature. The facts of the international situation are not fixed and immutable. They would be transformed tomorrow if this country disarmed. The very existence here and elsewhere—similar pledges of non-participation in war have been signed extensively in the United States\(^1\)—of large numbers of declared Pacifists is one of the facts of the international situation today. As to human nature, if it is natural to man to kill, it is surely more natural to kill a personal enemy, in the heat of passion, than to slaughter in cold blood someone against whom one has no grievance whatsoever. Yet we have been successful, in every civilized country, in discouraging the killing of personal enemies.

Pacifism seems to me to be common sense. But I believe that war is not merely foolish, it is also wicked. This book has been written primarily from the standpoint of the Christian, who holds that war is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Our Lord.

I am aware that many good Christians, while they abhor war, consider that it may yet be permissible and even necessary in certain circumstances. I have endeavored in these pages to convince them of their error.

One final word. Those associated with the League of Nations Union and the Peace Ballot, or who support the partial systems of collective security embodied in the Pacts, may consider that I have been less than just to their genuine desire for Peace.\(^2\) The more strongly they feel that, the greater are

1. See chapter VI.

2. The League of Nations Union (LNU), founded in 1918 immediately after the end of World War I, was a British peace organization inspired by the formation of the League of Nations. Its guiding conviction was that international justice and peace were necessarily founded on the "collective security" that comes from international treaties that build military alliances. At its peak, the LNU had nearly a half million members. The Peace Ballot was a LNU-sponsored national survey, conducted in late 1935 and early 1936, that asked respondents a series of questions gauging their commitment to the League of Nations' internationalist vision. Thirty-eight percent of the adult population participated in the survey. The result was an overwhelming endorsement of Britain's membership in the League of Nations, international disarmament, international prohibition of for-profit arms sales, and international cooperation to forestall or stop aggression. The irony, as Sheppard saw it, was that the very principle of collective security endorsed by the LNU
the reasons why they should ask themselves: “Are we being similarly unjust to those other people whose will to Peace we doubt, and against whose possible aggression we are trying to guard? And may they not be similarly suspicious of us? And if so, is there not something in the arguments of this book after all?” It would be indeed one of the most tragic blunders in history if a world, passionately desiring Peace, drifted again into war because no nation would believe in the honesty of the others, because every nation was afraid of its neighbors. But that blunder is all too possible if we continue to rely on the sanctions of force.

Twenty-One Years After

H. R. L. S.
Twenty-One Years After

In September 1914 I knelt by a dying soldier. I had just arrived in France. He was the first soldier I saw die.

As I bent to catch his painfully spoken words I discovered that he had little need of my ministry. He was thinking of a life that was still unborn. His wife was expecting a baby about Christmas. And he died thanking God that, if the child was a boy, he would never have to go through the hell of war.

I learned from what the man said that his home was in the East End of London, but I could not ascertain his name. They were too busy where I was to bother about names. So I have never been able to find out if the child was born, and if it was a boy.

That man believed what he had been told—that he was fighting in the war to end war. Innumerable others also believed it and died, as he did, at least happy in the thought that their sons would be spared their Calvary.

These sons are of military age today.

The eleventh of November, 1918. I had heard of the Armistice in advance, just in time to get handbills printed and distributed, inviting all who cared to do so to come to St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

For twenty-four hours we had service after service. We sang simply hymns, offered up simple prayers of thanksgiving. We poured out our hearts in gratitude to God, not so much because He had given us the victory, not

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1. The ceasefire which signaled the end of World War I, took effect at 11 a.m. on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It is commemorated in England each November 11 as Remembrance Day with a ceremony at the Cenotaph monument in Whitehall, not far from Sheppard's church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields.
even because at long last the killing was over, but because there would be no more war.

And today the nations are arming. Twenty-one years after the outbreak of war, seventeen years after the Armistice, the skies are dark once more.

We gave thanks to God that there would be no more war, but we wanted Peace without being willing to pay its price. It is our fault that the world trembles once more on the brink of the madness of blood.

It is our fault—the fault of Christian men and women in all nations, but especially of Christian men, because we have been unwilling to accept the practical implications of our Christianity. Our faith has been a shadow, not a flame. We have worshipped God for an hour or so on Sunday, and tried to safeguard the rest of the week by means of a “gentlemen’s agreement” with the Devil. So we have won the Peace that we deserve—a Peace precariously poised upon the points of bayonets.

Peace cannot depend on armaments. It cannot be preserved by force. It cannot be organized, any more than Love can be organized.

We all know that in our hearts. But we have been afraid to act upon that knowledge. “It is not our business,” we have said. “We have given the politicians a mandate—they know that we want peace, that another war would mean the end of civilization. It is their job, not ours, to see that Peace is maintained, that war does not come again. And they also want Peace. They have told us so, over and over again, in their speeches. Surely we can leave it to them.”

Well, we have left it to them. And they have given us mechanized armies, squadrons of battle planes that darken the sun, bigger and better bombs, more lethal poison gas. God help the Peace that rests on such foundations!

But the fault is not the politicians. It is our own. I believe that the great majority of the world’s statesmen sincerely want Peace. But they are still hypnotized by that Devil’s paradox: “If you want Peace, prepare for war.” They believe in a Peace of penalties—that if only war can be made sufficiently terrible, it will never happen. That a system of Pacts and understanding, which make war automatic in certain eventualities, will prevent these eventualities arising.

I can see their point of view. Their arguments are specious enough. And perhaps, for five, or ten, or twenty years, they will be able to slide from

2. *Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeperet bellum*, often attributed to the fifth-century *De re militari*, a military manual written by one Vegetius, popular from late Antiquity to the Middle Ages.
crisis to crisis, and still stave off the evil day. But it may come suddenly—like a thunderblast.

They know that. But so long as they place “security” before Peace, national interest, national prestige before Peace, they can do no other. They are doing their duty according to their lights.

I do not propose to attack the politicians. I give them every credit for sincerity. They are probably far wiser than I am. But the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, and I am God’s servant, pledged to obey His word. I believe that, at this time, a special responsibility rests upon all individual Christians and upon the Christian Churches. I believe that the world is drifting towards war largely because we have not had the courage of our Christianity, and that, even at the eleventh hour, we may yet transform the situation if we forget all that we have been told about “practical politics” and try instead a little practical religion.

The dangers that the politicians see are real. They are trying to guard against them by measures which seem to them wise and prudent. Let us assume, for the moment, that they are wise and prudent—that, in fact, in the circumstances of today, they are taking the best, and perhaps the only course that is open to them.

That does not affect our duty as Christians in the least. It only makes it more urgent. We have to change those circumstances.

We can do that by stating the Christian attitude towards war, the attitude that is crystallized in the words of the Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill!”

Suppose that the Christian Churches in this country discovered that Commandment, and stated it, and said quite simply that the words meant exactly what they said, and all the flags and the drums and the bugles in the world could not alter or modify them one jot or tittle.

Suppose that all the individual Christians in this country did the same—and pledged themselves publicly, bound themselves by a solemn undertaking that they would have no part or lot in any future war, that no matter what the circumstances of that war might be, they would not take up arms.

Suppose, in short, that we took God’s word seriously, that we decided He meant what He said, and resolved to obey Him.

Do you think that would have no effect? Don’t you think that it would change the circumstances in which the politicians had to act and make their plans? Of course it would. They would be forced to try to find some other method of preserving Peace than armaments and Pacts of mutual assistance, which mean, in effect, agreements to fight.
But other countries...?

Have you ever noticed that, whenever you are involved in a road accident, however slight, it is always the other man who is at fault? That whenever anyone is involved in a road accident it is always the other man who is at fault?

We'd all be safe drivers, and never have any sort of trouble, if there were nobody else on the highway. And everything would go smoothly at home and in business, if it weren't for other people.

But—have you ever tried meeting these other people halfway? It’s wonderful how quickly most of them respond.

Those other nations of whom we’re so much afraid consist of men and women like ourselves. They respond just as we do to “the decent thing,” to an act of trust. They’re just as good Christians as we are. Don't you think they’d be interested in some millions of people deciding that Christianity and war were incompatible and that, at whatever cost to themselves, they must be true to Christ? Don't you think that they might be forced to do some thinking of their own about war in the light of this strange new phenomenon?

And the moment people really think about war, instead of taking it for granted as a necessary evil, that moment war is finished.

Then there are the Churches. If the Christian Churches in this country took the line I have suggested, do you think that the rest of the Christian Churches throughout the world would remain silent? They would commit spiritual suicide if they did.

All very fine and large, you say, but I am forgetting about the Dictatorships.

They are very powerful, these Dictatorships, but their rule rests, in the last analysis, upon the consent of those they govern. And have you noticed what happens when a Dictator invades the sphere of religion, and tries to assert his secular authority in spiritual affairs?

The most remarkable, and the most hopeful, thing in the world today is the way in which, under Dictatorships, religion is finding its feet, Christianity is once more becoming a reality, and not merely an empty form, to those who profess it.

Even of the Dictatorships we need not despair.

But suppose I am unduly optimistic, suppose that we in this country pledge ourselves that never again shall we take part, in any circumstances, in war, and that our action awakens no answering echo in other lands.
Suppose that the other Christian Churches of the world remain silent, that all the individual Christians in other lands merely shrug their shoulders, mutter something about "these mad English," and make no attempt to follow the lead we have given.

Suppose that some Great Power, covetous of our wealth and possessions, takes advantage of our unarmed state, our pledge of non-resistance, to declare war upon us. Suppose we lose, one by one, our Dominions and Colonies overseas and that an enemy invades our shore.

Does that mean that war is right, or that we were wrong when we decided to obey God's Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill?"

Right and wrong aren't fluid. The moral quality of an action doesn't depend on its results.

The fact that I may gain a personal advantage by stealing doesn't make it morally right for me to do so. Even if I stole from people who wouldn't miss the money and handed over the proceeds of my crime to the unemployed, it still wouldn't be morally right.

Still less could I justify killing a man, though I might think that the world would be a better place without him.

Does it make any real difference to the moral quality of this action of killing if I put on uniform to do it, and if the majority of my fellow countrymen consider it praiseworthy? I can't honestly think that it does. I have to answer to my conscience for what I do, and my conscience can't get beyond that injunction, "Thou shalt not kill!"

I believe that, to a certain extent, even the politicians are beginning to realize that. But they can't conceive of a world without war. They want Peace themselves, but they can't credit the statesmen of other countries with wanting it too. And they're convinced it's their duty to prepare for a new and greater Armageddon. So they're up against a double problem. How to increase armaments without alarming the public. And how, when war comes, to dope the consciences of those they send out to slaughter, so that they won't have those inconvenient qualms about killing people.

So we are being told that the only real hope of Peace is to establish a system of Pacts or guarantees, which will automatically bring this country into any future European War. In case we're called upon to fulfill our obligations, we must have armaments. But there's nothing militaristic about these armaments, because their only purpose is to maintain Peace.
Naturally, the statesmen hope that the armaments won't be required—that the Pacts will really prevent war, at least for a time. But I doubt whether any of them really believes that they will give us permanent Peace.

That, in a nutshell, is the position today. In the name of International Cooperation we are being jockeyed into a position in which, sooner or later, war is practically inevitable. Twenty-one years ago, we entered the War to End War. Now we are preparing for the War to Preserve Peace.

I am writing this book to describe what I believe to be the better way—the only way which the Christian can conscientiously take. I am writing it to express not only my own views, but the views of the thousands who have signed the Peace Pledge with me. I am writing it to commend that Peace Pledge to all who profess the religion of Jesus Christ, and to the Christian Churches. I am writing it also for those who, without being attached to any religious organization, and while unable to accept the Divinity of Christ, still recognize in His teaching the highest standard of thought and conduct that has ever been given to the world. I am writing it for all who believe in "something, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness," for all to whom right and wrong are living forces and not dead abstractions of metaphysics.

I am writing it for all men and women of good will.

And the pity is that, twenty-one years after 1914, such a book should be necessary.

3. A paraphrase of Matthew Arnold's minimalist definition of God as "an enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness" (In Literature and Dogma (New York: Macmillan, 1873) 331).