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Ethical Problems of the War.

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ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF THE WAR.

BY

GILBERT MURRAY.

(Reprinted from "The Inquirer," of the
30th October, 1915.)

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ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF THE WAR.

AN ADDRESS

BY

Professor GILBERT MURRAY

(Regius Professor of Greek in the University of Oxford)

DELIVERED AT

THE TRIENNIAL MEETINGS OF THE NATIONAL
CONFERENCE OF UNITARIAN, LIBERAL CHRISTIAN,
FREE CHRISTIAN, PRESBYTERIAN, AND OTHER
NON-SUBSCRIBING OR KINDRED CONGREGATIONS,
IN LONDON, OCTOBER 27th, 1915.

Reprinted from "The Inquirer."

against the policy of the war in South Africa. I little imagined then that I should live to speak in favour of the policy of a much greater and more disastrous war, but that is what, on the whole, I shall do. But I want to begin by facing certain facts. Don't let us attempt to blind ourselves or be blinded by phrases into thinking that the war is anything but a disaster, and an appalling disaster. Don't let us be led away by views which have some gleam of truth in them into believing that this war will put an end to war—that it will convert Germany, and certainly convert Russia to liberal opinions, that it will establish natural frontiers throughout Europe or that it will work a moral regeneration in nations which were somehow sapped by too many years of easy living in peace. There is some truth, and very valuable truth, in all those considerations, but they do not alter the fact that the war is, as I said, an appalling disaster. We knew when we entered upon it that it was a disaster—we knew that we should suffer, and that all Europe would suffer.

Now let us run over very briefly the ways in which it is doing evil. Let us face the evil first. There is, first, the mere suffering, the leagues and leagues of human suffering that is

now spreading across Europe, the suffering of the soldiers, the actual wounded combatants, and behind them the suffering of non-combatants, the suffering of people dispossessed, of refugees, of people turned suddenly homeless into a world without pity. Behind that you have the sufferings of dumb animals. We are not likely to forget that. There is another side which we are even less likely to forget, and that is our own personal losses. There are very few people in this room who have not suffered in that direct, personal way ; there will be still fewer by the end of the war. I don't want to dwell upon that question : the tears are very close behind our eyes when we begin to think of that aspect of things, and it is not for me to bring them forward. Think, again, of the State's loss, the loss of all those chosen men, not mere men taken haphazard, but young, strong men, largely men of the most generous and self-sacrificing impulses who responded most swiftly to the call for their loyalty and their lives. Some of them are dead, some will come back injured, maimed, invalided, in various ways broken. There is an old Greek proverb which exactly expresses the experience that we shall be forced to go through, "The spring is taken out of your year." For a good time ahead the years of England and of most

of Europe will be without a spring. In that consideration I think it is only fair, and I am certain that an audience like this will agree with me, to add all the nations together. It is not only we and our Allies who are suffering the loss there ; it is a loss to humanity. According to the Russian proverb "They are all sons of mothers," the wildest Senegalese, the most angry Prussian. And that is the state that we are in. We rejoice, of course we rejoice to hear of great German losses ; we face the fact. We do rejoice ; yet it is terrible that we should have to ; for the loss of these young Germans is also a great and a terrible loss to humanity. It seems almost trivial after these considerations of life and death, but think too of our monetary losses ; of the fact that we have spent 1,595 millions and that we are throwing away money at the rate of nearly five millions a day. Yet just think what it means, that precious surplus with which we meant to make England finer in every way—that surplus is gone.

From a rich, generous, sanguine nation putting her hopes in the future, we shall emerge a rather poverty stricken nation, bound to consider every penny of increased expenditure ; a harassed nation only fortunate if we are still free. Just think of

all our schemes of reform and how they are blown to the four winds—schemes of social improvement, of industrial improvement; a scheme like Lord Haldane's great education scheme which was to begin by caring for the health of the small child, and then lead him up by a great ladder from the primary school to the University! How some of us who were specially interested in education revelled in the thought of that great idea; but it was going to cost such a lot of money. It would cost nearly as much as half a week of the war! Think what riches we had then, and on the whole, although we are perhaps the most generous nation in Europe, what little use we made of them. We speak of spiritual regeneration as one of the results of war, but here too there is the spiritual evil to be faced. I do not speak merely of the danger of reaction. There will be a grave danger of political reaction and of religious reaction, and you will all have your work cut out for you in that matter. The political reaction, I believe, will not take the form of a mere wave of extreme Conservatism; the real danger will be a reaction against anything that can be called mellow and wise in politics; the real danger will be a struggle between crude militarist reaction and violent unthinking democracy. As

for religion, you are probably all anxious as to what is going to happen there. Every narrow form of religion is lifting up its horns again, rank superstition is beginning to flourish. I am told that fortune tellers and crystal gazers are really having now the time of their lives. It will be for bodies like yourselves to be careful about all that. But besides that there is another more direct spiritual danger. We cannot go on living an abnormal life without getting fundamentally disorganised. We have seen that, especially in Germany; with them it seems to be a much stronger tendency, much worse than it is with us; but clearly you cannot permanently concentrate your mind on injuring your fellow creatures without habituating yourself to evil thoughts. In Germany, of course, there is a deliberate cult of hatred. There is a process, which I won't stop to analyse, a process utterly amazing, by which a highly civilised and ordinarily humane nation has gone on from what I can only call atrocity to atrocity. How these people have ever induced themselves to commit the crimes in Belgium which are attested by Lord Bryce's Commission, even to organising the flood of calculated mendacity that they pour out day by day, and last of all to stand by passive and apparently approving, while

deeds like the new Armenian massacres are going on under their ægis and in the very presence of their Consuls, all this passes one's imagination. Now we do not act like that ; there is something or other in the English nature which will not allow it. We shall show anger and passion, but we are probably not capable of that organized cruelty, and I hope we never shall be. Yet the same forces are at work. I do not want to dwell upon this subject too long, but when people talk of national regeneration or the reverse, there is one very obvious and plain test which one looks at first and that is the drink bill. We have made a great effort to restrain our drinking ; large numbers of people have given up consuming wine and spirits altogether following the King's example. We have made a great effort and what is the result ? The drink bill is up seven millions as compared with the last year of peace ! That seven millions is partly due to the increased price ; but at the old prices it would still be up rather over two millions. And ahead, at the end of all this what prospect is there ? There is sure to be poverty and unemployment, great and long continued, just as there was after 1815. I trust we shall be better able to face it ; we shall have thought out the

difficulties more : we who are left with any reasonable margin of subsistence will, I hope, be more generous and more clear-sighted than our ancestors a century earlier. But in any case there is coming a time of great social distress and very little money indeed to meet it with. We shall achieve no doubt peace in Europe, we shall have probably some better arrangement of frontiers, but underneath the peace there will be terrific hatred. And in the heart of Europe, instead of a treacherous and grasping neighbour we shall be left with a deadly enemy, living for revenge.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I do not think that I have shirked the indictment of this war. It is a terrible indictment ; and you will ask me perhaps, after that description, if I still believe that our policy in declaring war was right. Yes, I do. Have I any doubt in any corner of my mind that the war was right ? I have none. We took the path of duty and the only path we could take. Some people speak now as if going on with the war was a kind of indulgence of our evil passions. The war is not an indulgence of our evil passions ; the war is a martyrdom.

Now, let us not exaggerate here. It is not a martyrdom for Christianity. I saw a phrase

the other day that we were fighting for the nailed hand of One crucified against the "nailed fist." That description is an ideal a man may carry in his own heart, but, of course, it is an exaggeration to apply to our national position, to the position of any nation in international politics. We are not saints, we are not a nation of early Christians. Yet we are fighting for a great cause. How shall I express it? We are a country of ripe political experience, of ancient freedom; we are, with all our faults, I think, a country of kindly record and generous ideals, and we stand for the established tradition of good behaviour between nations. We stand for the observance of treaties and the recognition of mutual rights, for the tradition of common honesty and common kindness between nation and nation; we stand for the old decencies, the old humanities, "the old ordinance," as the King's letter put it, "the old ordinance that has bound civilised Europe together." And against us there is a power which, as the King says, has changed that ordinance. Europe is no longer held together by the old decencies as it was. The enemy has substituted for it some rule which we cannot yet fathom to its full depth. You can call it militarism or *Realpolitik* if you like; it seems to involve the domination of force and fraud, it seems to involve organised

ruthlessness, organised terrorism, organised mendacity. The phrase that comes back to my mind when I think of it is Mr. Gladstone's description of another evil rule—it is the negation of God erected into a system of government. The sort of thing for which we are fighting, the old ordinance, the old kindness and the old humanities—is it too much to say that, if there is God in man, it is in these things after all that God in man speaks ?

The old ordinance is illogical. Of course it is illogical. It means that civilised human beings in the midst of their greatest passions, in the midst of their angers and rages, feel that there is something deeper, something more important than war or victory—that at the bottom of all strife there are some remnants of human brotherhood. Now, I do not want to go into a long list of German atrocities ; much less do I want to denounce the enemy. As Mr. Balfour put it in his whimsical way : “ We take our enemy as we find him.” But it has been the method throughout this war—the method the enemy has followed, to go at each step outside the old conventions. We have sometimes followed. Sometimes we have had to follow. But the whole history of the war is a history of that process. The peoples fought according to certain rules

but one people got outside the rules right from the beginning. The broken treaty, the calculated ferocity in Belgium and Northern France, the killing of women and non-combatants by sea and land and air, the shelling of hospitals, the treatment of wounded prisoners in ways they had never expected ; all the doctoring of weapons with a view to cruelty ; explosive bullets ; the projectile doctored with substances which would produce a gangrenous wound ; the poisoned gases ; the infected wells. It is the same method throughout. The old conventions of humanity, the old arrangements which admitted that beneath our cruelties, beneath our hatreds there was some common humanity and friendliness between us, these have been systematically broken one after another. Now observe ; these things were done not recklessly but to gain a specific advantage ; they were done as Mr. Secretary Zimmermann put it in the case of Miss Cavell, "to inspire fear." And observe that in many places they have been successful. They have inspired fear. Only look at what has recently happened and what is happening now in the Balkans. Every one of these Balkan States has looked at Belgium. The German agents have told them to look at Belgium. They have looked at Belgium and their courage has failed them. Is that

the way in which we wish the government of the world to be conducted in future? It is the way it will be conducted unless we and our Allies stand firm to the end.

All these points, terrible as they are, seem to me to be merely consequences from what happened at the very beginning of the war. There are probably some people here who differ from what I am saying and I am grateful to them for the patient way in which they are listening to me. To all these I would earnestly say: "Do not despise the diplomatic documents." Remember carefully that the diplomacy of July and August, 1914, is a central fact. Remember that it is the one part of the history antecedent to this war which is absolutely clear as daylight. Read the documents and read the serious studies of them. I would recommend specially the book by Mr. William Archer, called 'Thirteen Days.' There is also Mr. Headlam's admirable book, 'The History of Twelve Days,' and the equally admirable book by the American jurist, Mr. Stowell. There the issue is clear and the question is settled. The verdict of history is already given in these negotiations. There was a dispute, a somewhat artificial dispute which

could easily have been settled by a little reasonableness on the part of the two principals. If that failed there was the mediation of friends, that was a conference of the disinterested nations—there was appeal to the concert of Europe. There was the arbitration of the Hague—an arbitration to which Serbia appealed on the very first day and to which the Czar appealed again on the very last. All Europe wanted peace and fair settlement. The Governments of the two central powers refused it. Every sort of settlement was overridden. You will all remember that when every settlement that we could propose had been shoved aside one after another Sir E. Grey made an appeal to Germany to make any proposal herself—any reasonable proposal—and we bound ourselves to accept it, to accept it even at the cost of deserting our associates. No such proposal was made. All Europe wanted peace and fair dealing except one Power, or one pair of Powers if you so call it, who were confident not in the justice of their cause but in the overpowering strength of their war machine. As the semi-official newspaper said: “Germany does not enter conferences in which she is likely to be in a minority.” By fair dealing they might have got their rights or a little more than their rights. By war they expected to get something like

the supremacy of Europe. In peace, with their neighbours reasonable, in no pressing danger, Germany deliberately preferred war to fair settlement; and thereby in my judgment Germany committed the primal and fundamental sin against the brotherhood of mankind. Of course all great historical events have complicated causes, but on that fact almost alone I should base the justice and the necessity of our cause in this war. Other objects have been suggested: that we are fighting lest Europe should be subject to the hegemony of Germany. If Germany naturally by legitimate means grows to be the most influential power there is no reason for anyone to fight her. It is said we are fighting for democracy against autocratic government. I prefer democracy myself, but one form of government has no right to declare war because it dislikes another form. It is suggested that we are fighting to prevent the break up of the Empire. In that case, from motives of loyalty, of course we should have to fight, and I think the break up of the Empire would be a great disaster to the world. But not for any causes of that description would I use the phrase I have used, or say that in this war we were undergoing a martyrdom. I do use it deliberately now: for I believe no greater evil

could occur than that mankind should submit, or should agree to submit, to the rule of naked force.

Now I would ask again those who are following me, as I say, with patience, but I have no doubt with difficulty, to remember that this situation—in spite of particular details—is on the whole an old story. The Greeks knew all about it when they used the word “Hubris”—that pride engendered by too much success which leads to every crime. Many nations after a career of extraordinary success have become mad or drunk with ambition. “By that sin fell the angels.” They were not so wicked to start with but afterwards they became devils. We should never have said a word against the Germans before this madness entered into them. We liked them. Most of Europe rather liked and admired them. But as I said it is the old story. There have been tyrants. Tyrants are common things in history. Bloody aggression is a common thing in history in its darker periods. But nearly always where there have been tyrants and aggressors there have been men and peoples ready to stand up and suffer and to die rather than submit to the tyrant, and the voice of history speaks pretty clearly about these issues and it says that the men who resisted were right. So that,

ladies and gentlemen, as with our eyes open we entered into this struggle, I say with our eyes open we must go on with it. We must go on with it a united nation, trusting our leaders, obeying our rulers, minding each man his own business, refusing for an instant to lend an ear to the agitated whispers of faction or of hysteria. It may be that we shall have to traverse the valley of death, but we shall traverse it until the cause of humanity is won.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, that being the cause, we are girt up in this war to the performance of a great duty ; and there are many things in it which, evil as they are, can in some way be turned to good. It lies with us to do our best so to turn them.

If we take the old analogy from biology we are a community, a pack, a herd, a flock. We have realised our unity. We are one. I think most of us feel that our lives are not our own ; they belong to England. France has gone through the same process to an even greater degree. Mr. Kipling, who used certainly to be no special lover of France, has told us that there ' the men are wrought to an edge of steel, and the women are a line of fire

behind them.' Our divisions before the war it is a disgrace to think of. They were so great that the enemy calculated upon them, and judged that we should not be able to fight. These divisions have not been killed as we hoped ; the remnants of them are still living. I cannot bear to speak of them. Let us think as little as possible about them, and lend no ear, no patience to the people who try to make them persist. As for the division of class and class, I think there, at least, we have made a great gain. I would ask you to put to yourselves this test. Remember how before the war the ordinary workman spoke of his employer and the employer of his workmen, and think now how the average soldier speaks of his officer and how the officer speaks of his men. The change is almost immeasurable. Inside the country we have gained that unity, outside in our relations with foreign countries we have also made a great gain. Remember we have Allies now, more Allies, and far closer Allies than we have ever had. We have learned to respect and to understand other nations. You cannot read those diplomatic documents of which I spoke without feeling respect for both the French and Russian diplomatists for their steadiness, their extreme reasonableness, their entire loyalty, and as you study them

you are amused to see the little differences of national character all working to one end. Since the war has come on we have learned to admire other nations. There is no man in England who will ever again in his heart dare to speak slightly or with contempt of Belgium or Serbia. It is something that we have had our hearts opened, that we, who were rather an insular people, welcome other nations as friends and comrades. Nay, more, we made these alliances originally about a special principle on which I would like to say a sentence or two. That is the principle of *Entente*, or Cordial Understanding, which is specially connected with the name of our present Foreign Secretary, and, to a slighter extent, with that of his predecessor. The principle of *Entente* has been explained by Sir Edward Grey several times, but I take two phrases of his own particularly. It began because he found that all experience had shown that any two great empires who were touching each other, whose interests rubbed one against another frequently in different parts of the world, had no middle course open to them between continual liability to friction and cordial friendship. He succeeded in establishing that relation of perfect frankness and mutual friendship with the two great

empires with whom our interests were always rubbing. Instead of friction, instead of suspicion and intrigue, we established with our two old rivals a permanent habit of fair dealing, frankness and goodwill. The second great principle of the Entente was this, that there is nothing exclusive in these friendships. We began it with France, we continued it with Russia, we achieved it in reality although not in actual diplomatic name with the United States, and practically also with Italy, and any one who has read the diplomatic history will see the effort upon effort we made to establish it with our present enemies. I think we have here some real basis for a sort of Alliance of Europe—that sort of better Concert for which we all hope. One cannot guess details. It is very likely indeed that at the beginning Germany will stay outside and will refuse to come into our kind of concert. If so we must “take our enemies as we find them.” The fact of there being an enemy outside will very likely make us inside hold together all the better for the first few years. When we are once thoroughly in harness, and most nations have the practice of habitually trusting one another and never intriguing against one another, then, no doubt, the others will come in.

Now I spoke at the beginning about the possible dangers of reaction, but there is a very good side also in the reaction. Part of it is right. It is a reaction against superficial things, superficial ways of feeling, and perhaps also superficial ways of thought. We have gone back in our daily experience to deeper and more primitive things. There has been a deepening of the quality of our ordinary life. We are called upon to take up a greater duty than ever before. We have to face more peril, we have to endure greater suffering : death itself has come close to us. It is intimate in the thoughts of every one of us, and it has taught us in some way to love one another. For the first time for many centuries this "unhappy but not inglorious generation," as it has been called, is living and moving daily, waking and sleeping, in the habitual presence of ultimate and tremendous things. We are living now in a great age.

A thing which has struck me, and I have spoken of it elsewhere, is the way in which the language of romance and melodrama has now become true. It is becoming the language of our normal life. The old phrase about "dying for freedom," about "Death being better than dishonour"—phrases that we thought were fitted for the stage or for children's

stories, are now the ordinary truths on which we live. A phrase which happened to strike me was recorded of a Canadian soldier who went down, I think, in the "Arabic" after saving several people; before he sank he turned and said, "I have served my King and country and this is my end." It was the natural way of expressing the plain fact. I read yesterday a letter from a soldier at the front about the death of one of his fellow-soldiers, and the letter ended quite simply: "After all he has done what we all want to do—die for England." The man who wrote it has since then had his wish. Or again if one wants a phrase to live by which would a few years ago have seemed somewhat unreal, or "high falutin'," he can take those words that are now in everybody's mind: "I see now that patriotism is not enough, I must die without hatred or bitterness towards any one."

Romance and melodrama were a memory, broken fragments living on of heroic ages in the past. We live no longer upon fragments and memories, we have entered ourselves upon a heroic age. As for me personally, there is one thought that is always with me as it is with us all I expect—the thought that other men are dying for me, better men, younger, with more hope in their lives, many of

them men whom I have taught and loved. I hope you will allow me to say, and will not be in any way offended by the thought I want to express to you. Some of you will be orthodox Christians, and will be familiar with that thought of One who loved you dying for you. I would like to say that now I seem to be familiar with the feeling that something innocent, something great, something that loves me has died, and is dying daily for me. That is the sort of community that we now are—a community in which one man dies for his brother, and underneath all our hatreds, all our little angers and quarrels we are brothers who are ready to seal our brotherhood with blood. It is for us that these men are dying, for us the women, the old men and the rejected men, and to preserve the civilisation and the common life which we are keeping alive and re-shaping, towards wisdom or unwisdom, towards unity or discord. Well, ladies and gentlemen, let us be worthy of these men, let us be ready each one with our sacrifice when it is asked. Let us try as citizens to live a life which shall not be a mockery to the faith these men have placed in us. Let us build up an England for which these men lying in their scattered graves over the face of the green world would have been proud to die.

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