



William Penn

Lecture 1917

*The
Christian
Patriot*

Norman M. Thomas

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The Christian Patriot
A Discussion of the Relation between
Christianity and Patriotism

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by
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The name of William Penn has been chosen because he was a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring “to live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed,” that these might become the laws and habits of the State.

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The Christian Patriot

A Discussion of the Relation between Christianity and Patriotism

It is interesting to recall the general picture which I venture to believe would come before our eyes if we were thinking about the subject you have assigned me, ten years ago. Instinctively we would see a worthy citizen, eminently respectable, “the husband of one wife,” sober, prompt in paying his debts, reasonably prosperous, a pillar in church or meeting, moderately interested in philanthropy and missions, not concerned very deeply with politics though somewhat given to deploring the country’s loss of pristine virtues – in short a man estimable and often lovable in personal life, but a bit smug, narrow and superficial, without any adequate conception of the social and economic forces which gave rise to labor unions and other more radical movements which he too often denounced without understanding. Perhaps the more radical would have assigned to our Christian Patriot certain deeper interests in social justice than those of my typical picture and the more ardent or romantic would have found the phrase suggestive of Washington at Valley Forge rather than of any staid citizen in the piping times of peace.

The point is that practically all of us, men and women, who honestly thought we were lovers of Christ, of our country, and of mankind, were really fairly content with a social order which contained in it the seeds of this world

catastrophe and innumerable fruits of evil and injustice. We were blind to the terrible contrasts of the principles of self-seeking which inspired business and national life and the self-forgetting love incarnated in the Christ to whom we professed allegiance.

In the midst of the tragedy around us we can look with some confidence to the future because as never before men see that the very walls which buttressed our civilization have crumbled, and that the city of God must be built anew upon foundations of goodwill, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.

No task is more imperative for the Christian than an examination of true Christian patriotism. How far are the terms compatible? What are the marks of the Christian in his social relations? What sort of state shall be the ideal for one who is trying to think in terms of the Kingdom of God?

By the lurid flames of this conflict we can see with appalling vividness the utter opposition between Jesus' way and the world's. We have sought in the organization of life, first security for ourselves and then power over others. Our business and political life is fundamentally based on maxims like these: self-preservation is nature's first law; competition is the life of trade; every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost; a man can do as he will with his own. We measure the worth of men in money and even in our republic Christ's bitter commentary on the Kings of the Gentiles remains true: "they that have authority over them are called benefactors."

The law of social life is still largely the law of the jungle and we have developed a sort of pseudo-science to justify the brutality and injustice of civilization by talk of the survival of the fittest. Does this statement seem too harsh? I grant that the world has shrunk from the logic of its own theories; mercy and compassion have crept in; notorious abuses have been cropped off; humanity has made headway. Nineteen Christian centuries have not been utterly in vain. The jungle has been fenced and caged and the self-seeking beast in men has been somewhat tamed by law, by custom, and by love.

But how slow has been the progress and how strong the old principles show themselves! We shall not, for the moment, stop to think of the hideous proof given by war, by the utter depravity of nations who until recently forced opium on China for the sake of gain, or by the black iniquity of men who grow rich by selling women's honor and corrupting the manhood of the nation with drink. Rather think of average business, its motives and values in the light of the Golden Rule – in the light of any high idealism. Only the other day the "New York Times" contained the following statement:

“Two of the best-known private bankers in New York said a system of taxation such as had been proposed by Amos Pinchot would stop the wheels of commerce by removing any incentive to work.”

What is that system? Briefly, it is a scheme for war finance which would allow no man an income over \$100,000 per annum. These same men doubtless favored the conscription

of life! In plain English, the God of business is unlimited profit, Mammon, not Christ – not even patriotism!

These false principles work out their inevitable results in the hideous wastes of our civilization, in its derelict classes, both among the very rich and the very poor, in its mediocrity in the fields of art and of thought. We who belong to the more comfortable classes, who can afford to indulge in the amenities of life, often fail to realize how little our so-called Christian civilization means to great numbers of our fellow-countrymen. In spite of our enormous material progress and national wealth, the masses of laborers cannot possibly earn for themselves or their children the minimum necessary for decent subsistence. To give a single illustration: the average annual income in the garment trades of New York is estimated to be one-half of the amount (now said to be \$980) needed for a man to support a family of five.

We have abolished slavery but still have industrial autocracy; we have reformed our tenements but they are still barracks, not homes, which put the heaviest possible handicap upon family life. In one school near my home thirteen per cent of the boys were arrested from one to six times before they finished the sixth grade, and this is not because of unusual inherent depravity, but because economic conditions and the home environment denied them a fair chance.

Manifestly it is impossible to discuss in any adequate fashion our industrial situation; fortunately there is a growing body of literature on the subject. My only

intention in making this indictment of our social order is that in it, in its principles of self-seeking and its practical denial of brotherhood, are buried the roots of war; and the awful horror of war itself is not more terrible than the daily wastes of life and the worse sacrifices of what makes life glorious, which are the fruits of a system of the exploitation of the weak by the strong. The oppression of backward peoples, child labor, the terrible toil of women, prostitution – these are not singular evidences of individual depravity in a Christian civilization but the inevitable results of an un-Christian civilization which daily crucifies Christ afresh.

Before we speak of war or of the state in any detail we cannot too clearly understand that the religion of Jesus is profoundly revolutionary. It would substitute co-operation for competition, greatness in service for worldly gain, the blessedness of giving for the joy of acquisition. Under it men and nations which seek life must be willing to lose it. In the twentieth Christian century men still laugh at Jesus the dreamer, or wistfully sigh for ideals beyond their grasp; yet the dreamer has the only hope for the world, the only medicine for its mortal sickness.

The world has sought safety and power by the way of individual and national aggrandizement; men and women have accumulated property and built high and strong their walls and the end is destruction. Civilization hangs in the balance. The world's way has failed and its power and its marvelous mastery over nature are turned to its own ruin. In the light of this situation we must face the problem of Christianity. In the twentieth century scarcely more than in the first is true Christianity a bulwark of the existing order;

rather is it the prophet and pioneer of the Kingdom of God; but in the twentieth century as in the first Christianity seeks to change the old ways, not because of scorn for humanity, but out of passionate love for mankind, and its weapons are not those of cynicism or violence but the terrible might of love.

It is because of this belief that Christ came not merely to proclaim a glorious ideal and challenge us with a splendid vision, but to reveal a new way of attainment of our goal that we are utterly opposed to war as a method even in the service of righteousness. We can not make it too clear to the world that of course we recognize the difference between wars for liberty and for conquest; for defense and for aggression: between Germany and Belgium or France. We recognize reverently the heroism and idealism which have inspired soldiers on many a battlefield in the days that are gone and which are now summoning our friends to go forth gladly in service for their country as their conscience leads them to see that service.

But we are compelled to challenge them to face unanswerable facts: all the investment of idealism and heroism in the wars of history has left us where we are today. Imperialism has followed imperialism, feudalism perished and capitalism arose. Men say – God grant they say truly – that now the free nations of earth fight for liberty and democracy and “the privilege of free men every where to choose their way of life and obedience.” Yet that struggle for freedom has seen in England the rigors of an absurd and arbitrary censorship and the imprisonment of men who lived by what they and we think is Christianity. In

America it has already meant our entrance into a war for democracy without any referendum of the people, our adoption of conscription without referendum and without adequate exemption even for conscientious objectors, the introduction of an espionage bill which denied absolutely fundamental rights of information and discussion, and a determined effort in various states to break down all the laws safeguarding conditions of labor.

In the field of international affairs the story of Greece and Rumania sadly reminds us that not all disregard for the real interests of small nations has been on the side of the Central Powers. But is it not such examination of the affairs of nations that best shows the ghastly denial of righteous ends involved in the method of war.

We Christians believe in the supreme worth of personality. War demands that I give my conscience – that which proves my sonship of God – into the keeping of my superior officer. It knows no crime but disobedience. It sanctions deception and countenances the buying of treason. It organizes all the triumphs of science for the killing of men. It denies to me any force in dealing with the enemy save death and destruction, and it sends me forth to kill, not individual criminals, but their dupes who seek my life even as I seek theirs, for ideals of patriotism and of liberty. Its invariable accompaniments are the lowering of standards of the sanctities of the home and epidemics of unmentionable vice and disease. Before this audience it is not necessary to argue these points but only to remind you of them.

In the December number of “The Atlantic Monthly” there is the self-told story of a young Canadian officer, a likable chap, a lover of clean sports and of comradeship. He describes a bombing party in the trenches undertaken with skill and heroism. Two of his men were killed in the attack. He says:

“We had been in six minutes! What happened was that our men spread right and left, and cleaned up three or four bays altogether. We had run slam into a ‘stand to’ and men were thick. We killed between forty and fifty of them. The men were so wild about Bates and Brown that they killed everyone, altho they squealed and yelled, ‘Please, mister!’ and ‘Kamerade.’ We got two prisoners and they were both killed getting them out. We sure got even for the mine explosion in October that night.”

This is war, and to this brutalizing horror of battle are we subjecting our young men in the name of humanity. Really we have not dared face facts but have glossed them over with sentiment. We have sung “*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*” but in reality we have sent men out not to die, but to kill for their country, and from a military standpoint their death is a regrettable incident in the effort to kill the enemy.

The oft-repeated comparison of the soldier’s sacrifice with Calvary is an even more terrible sentimentalizing of war. Christ indeed laid down His life; He did not first try to kill as many others as possible. No righteous end can justify unholy means; no righteous end can be permanently

attained by such means. You cannot conquer hate by hate, cruelty by cruelty. You cannot cast out Satan by Satan. Is it not really the supreme atheism for the Christian to say that there is no recourse save to the way of war? We believe in a God of Love, whose way of dealing with evil was revealed in Christ. Is He so weak that we must save His cause by such violations of every one of His laws as war requires? Then our faith is vain and our God is tragically inadequate to our needs. Or is He after all so little a God of Love that he willingly countenances this monstrous horror of war? Then He is not worthy of the love of the least human being who has ever felt compassion.

Nor is it an answer to challenge us to show definitely and precisely a program in the history of Christendom by which each war might have been avoided and justice served. We can reply that most wars were worse than useless; none was wholly righteous; even those most righteous have left behind legacies of hate and unsolved problems. Moreover, we can point out that the blood of the martyrs has been far more effective than that of soldiers, and the triumphs of love which suffers wrong rather than resort to violence have been astonishingly great when one considers how rarely men have dared to try that way of overcoming evil.

But our real answer from a Christian standpoint is found in this fact: God reveals His will to men or to nations only as they try to do it. We cannot refuse to follow the light we have and expect God to reveal His perfect day; we cannot stand outside His paths and wonder that we do not see how His roads lead over the mountains of difficulty; we can not follow commercial practices that lead to war, pile up

armaments as a national duty, be comparatively indifferent to the cry of the starving, and then complain that God has not shown us the way of salvation from war. Events have shown that we can trust in huge armaments or in organizing good will – not both. The trust in armaments has led to this catastrophe. Why not try as a means of national security the organizing of good will?

The church has haltingly recognized a high ethical standard in dealing with individuals. We do not preach that the end justifies the means for the individual Christian or that a man must know all God's teaching before he dares trust himself to God's will. It is true also in dealing with the conflict of social classes that the church with some consistency has refused to endorse the doctrine that the end justifies the means. She has said to the working class: You may be the victims of injustice and oppression, you may see your children stunted in development or actually suffering from malnutrition because you have not enough for food, but in your struggle for justice you must not use the organized violence of bloodshed.

And now that same church with but rare exceptions is bidding those same workmen in the name of patriotism to go out to wage organized warfare surpassing in violence and fury of destruction all the riots of class conflict, and calls it holy. To one who thinks, who sees how much more nearly human well-being for multitudes is bound up in questions of economic justice than in questions of government between nations, this inconsistency of the church is a cause for the utmost foreboding. After the war, when class conflict will inevitably run high, how can the

church say that the way of readjustment is not the way of organized killing?

Not long ago I attended a meeting of the most violent of working class radicals. They were men with a grievance, and that grievance had stirred up hate in their souls. Most of us whose lives have been lived in more gracious surroundings would have shuddered at the feeling revealed that night. I came home to hear my own friends, men and women trained in our churches, educated in our universities, express perhaps more violent feeling, not merely against Germany, but against certain pacifists, groups of willful men who they felt were blocking the war. As Christians and as patriots there is no greater service we can render than to cry out ere it be too late against this fatal inconsistency of sanctioning between nations those methods which the church has condemned between classes.

I am not speaking as an absolute non-resistant. I believe that there are occasions when force, even physical force, may be justified, but not the hideous violence of war. One fair test is whether that force can be harmonized with a redemptive purpose for the individual. This is never true of the wholesale slaughter of war. I believe in police force, but war is essentially anarchistic, and denies precisely those elements of regulated and controlled force exerted against a known offender, if possible for his ultimate redemption, which characterize police force in its ideal form. Just what methods a Christian nation may develop in resisting organized injustice no one man can foretell, but it is safe to say that such a nation can find methods infinitely more

effective than war in promoting ends of righteousness and protecting the weak.

Striking confirmation of the failure of war has come from men who did not at all speak on Christian premises. The famous passage from Nietzsche upon the nation brave enough to lay down its arms is well known. The daily papers reported a more modern expression in a recent speech of Mr. Seitz, of the "New York World," before the American Academy of Political Science:

"As to the consummation for which all mankind should wish, a durable peace based upon good will and justice, I frankly believe it will never come. If it does, it will be because some nation is brave enough to lay down its arms, dismantle its ships of war and say to all the world: 'We have put aside the tools of conflict. We will be brothers to mankind and will abide the event, feeling that if our sacrifice fails the red will be on other hands than ours'."

Why not try this way? Is there any higher Christianity or patriotism than to urge this one hope? "Yes," some earnest Christians will reply. "All this may be true... we ought not to be in our present position. That we are there is due to the failure of the church to practice Christianity, but now war is upon us. Doubtless the motives that led to the war were mixed and the ends sought may not all be ideal, but on the whole the country is seeking ideal ends. The thing for us to do is take our part in the struggle, strive to maintain ideal values, and after the world has been rid of the fear of a

ruthless autocracy we will be in a better position to work our Christian ideals – in short, war is the less of two evils.”

Against this reasoning, whether it arises in our own hearts or from our friends, we must earnestly protest. Essentially it is yielding to opportunism and denying principles. We follow not the fixed star of right, but the will-o’-the-wisp of advantage. There is a certain tragedy about the effort of able men to save liberalism and humanity by the denials of democracy and kindness necessitated by war. After all, the surest realities are principles and not attempted interpretations of opportune ways of reaching the goal.

The ultimate hope of the world is not in the victory of this government or of that government, but in the awakening in the heart of the people every where of a passion for democracy and brotherhood. Who knows in God’s providence what is the surest way to that end? Russia has been badly defeated by Germany in battle, yet Russia has won freedom and apparently the leaven of Russian democracy is doing far more to cast down Prussian autocracy than the attacks of the Allies. What we surely know is that war is wrong; we will not try that method; we will try the way of love and leave the result to God.

The Christian is a lover of his country, but he could not love his country so much if he did not love God’s kingdom more. The nation may choose war as a way of righteousness. We should reverence whatever there is of sincerity and heroism in that choice. We should not forget that we are part of that nation for better or for worse, and sharers in the social order out of which has come war. In no

Pharisaic spirit shall we cry out to God in penitence and intercession, but we must not forget that our supreme loyalty is to that will of God which for us absolutely forbids war. Not long since a minister quoted from memory a striking passage in an old address by President Wilson:

“The supreme citizenship of a Christian man is in heaven; it is that fact which makes him free to use, as he thinks best, his citizenship on earth.”

That same truth finds moving expression in that saying of Romain Rolland’s which is already a classic:

“For the finer spirits of Europe there are two dwelling places; our earthly fatherland, and that other city of God. Of the one we are the guests, of the other the builders. To the one let us give our lives and our faithful hearts; but neither family, friend nor fatherland, nor aught that we love has power over the spirit. The spirit is the light. It is our duty to lift it above tempests, and thrust aside the clouds which threaten to obscure it; to build higher and stronger, dominating the injustice and hatred of nations, the walls of that city wherein the souls of the whole world may assemble.” (Romain Rolland: *Above the Battle*, p. 54.)

When the Christian fails to acknowledge this supreme allegiance to the City of God, does he not degrade from its high place his religion, and in the act of exalting patriotism above loyalty to God’s Kingdom really debase that patriotism to a poor and empty thing, barren of ideals and

of hope for the future? The highest patriotism is the patriotism that sees in love of country a means of service to the Kingdom of God, and it is perhaps the deepest of all the tragedies of war that it tends to deny this truth.

There is, therefore, really no greater service that can be rendered by the Christian patriot than the effort to think thru the problem of the State and its relation to the individual. Obviously so large a task quite transcends the bounds of this lecture; yet it is necessary to make the attempt to suggest certain broad lines along which each of us may direct his thought.

Inevitably in war time the tendency is to magnify the State, to make of it a metaphysical entity, a sort of god, to whom the individual should cheerfully offer his life. To be sure, we are going to war in part to conquer the Prussian ideal of the state, but in war we adopt a large measure of the Prussian ideal; for the difference between the Prussian and the democratic ideal of the state is only partially that one has an hereditary Kaiser and the other an elective president; it is mainly in that the Prussian ideal teaches that the individual exists for the State which is above the ordinary moral law; while the true democratic ideal is that the State exists for the well-being of individuals and must be judged by the moral law.

But we are hearing all about us that men who have enjoyed the equal benefits of government must be prepared without question, even at the cost of conscience, to give their lives to the order of government, and this in spite of the fact that the benefits of government are really far from equal and

that the government has decided without any real appeal to the people on the policy of war. Moreover, as we have seen, the very act of engaging in war means that we set up the state as a law unto itself, so that what is hideously immoral for the individual or for groups of individuals becomes righteous when done by the order and in the name of the state. What is this but the beginning of Prussianism?

In part, this doctrine of the state is due to a wholesome reaction against an unreal individualism. It is perfectly true that no man is self-made, but that we owe what we are to society. However, society and the state are by no means synonymous. I am not merely indebted to my country, but to humanity. Paul stated that great truth when he said, "I am debtor both to the Greek and to the barbarian, both to the wise and the foolish." I am dependent literally upon the labors of men of all races thruout the world for the material basis of life, for food and for clothing; while all that makes for the glory of the life of the spirit – science, art, music, knowledge, religion, these are international and supranational or they are nothing.

I am a humble member not only of my nation, but of the great toiling human brotherhood, of the group of seekers after truth and beauty, of the glorious company of the church invisible and universal. For me and those of my generation the wise and the foolish of every race since time began have toiled; and we shall pass on the better or the worse for our fidelity this heritage to unnumbered generations of nations that may be yet unborn. Nations are but creatures of a day – humanity endures; and to make me transfer to my nation all the debt I owe to mankind is

fundamentally unjust and a striking example of that loose thinking which helps to make war possible.

At this hour we must emphasize this truth, tho at another time or in other company we might rather dwell upon the deep, pure springs of love of country. There is a cheap and shallow cosmopolitanism which has no roots in the soil, no strong affections for one's kin. It loves all men and places equally because it loves no men or places deeply. Americans are not now in danger of this thing. We do not need to be warned of the sorry and empty life of the man without a country.

There is another distinction we must make in speaking of the state and the individual. It is a distinction obvious enough in times of peace, tho somewhat confused in times of war. The government and the country are not identical. Love and loyalty to the country do not necessarily mean implicit support of the government; rather, they may necessitate all honorable means to change that government. Service to one's country is by no means always and everywhere the same as service to one's government; tho, of course, save in extraordinary circumstances, obedience to a constitutional government of which one does not wholly approve is a necessity for the life of the nation and a logical implication of love of country.

With these necessary distinctions in mind, let us look for a little while at certain just and unjust functions of the state. By all odds the most stimulating modern thinker on this subject is Bertrand Russell, from whom I shall frequently quote in this section of my address. In modern theory and

practice the state exercises two functions almost unquestioned: the preservation of internal order and of external security against foreign foes. The prevention of internal anarchy and the imposition of some checks upon the might of the strong, are very great achievements; yet we need to have a care lest our devotion to order make us feel too great a reverence for the status quo.

The problem for the Christian patriot is to try to bring about a state sufficiently intelligent and flexible to maintain order without ruthlessly repressing men's search for justice. When extreme fear of disorder makes the state – as happens so often – the blind ally of the property-holding, power-possessing class, it really becomes the agent of injustice and creates, in turn, a blind hate of itself on the part of the workers which bodes ill for the future. Here in our own land the history of the West Virginia strike, the Colorado strike terminating in the tragedy of Ludlow, and the disgraceful handling of the strike of foreign workers in Bayonne, are vivid illustrations not only of the faults of our industrial system, but of the state's management of matters of vital importance.

Again, the vastness of the modern state lies like a load upon the average citizen and tends to crush his initiative, and leaves him with a hopeless sense of the inevitable. The history of the efforts of the past few months gives striking proof of this fact. There can be little doubt that the more articulate upper classes which controlled the press forced a war upon the people which large masses either did not want or did not understand, but before which they felt themselves helpless. No effort ought to be more appealing

to the intelligent citizen than the quest for a doctrine and practice of the state which will both maintain order without forbidding progress and leave larger room for local action where the individual can make himself and his ideals felt.

These and other internal changes will not come until we can deal more effectively with what is commonly assumed to be the chief function of the state – namely, the preservation of security against foreign foes. Heretofore need of such security has led men to tolerate injustice in order that a strong government may be feared abroad. Nations have piled up armaments always on the plea of defense.

“But the armaments which are nominally intended to repel invasion may also be used to invade. And so the means adopted to diminish the external fear have the effect of increasing it, and of enormously enhancing the destructiveness of war when it does break out. In this way a reign of terror becomes universal, and the state acquires everywhere something of the character of the Comité du Salut Public.” (Bertrand Russell : *Why Men Fight*, p. 54.)

The state whose main purpose is safety from a dreaded foe, still more than the state whose governing class ruthlessly seeks power, simply cannot grant real individual liberty, even in the sacred matter of conscience. It can and does – perhaps it must – take poet and scientist and artist, men made to be leaders of the life of the human spirit, and sacrifices them as cannon-fodder in nationalistic wars. It exercises a tyranny upon conscience more ruthless than that

claimed by any church, for it takes all young men at a formative period and drills them in the habit of automatic and unquestioning obedience. When young men are forming ideals and convictions, it subjects them to the iron bonds of the philosophy and practice of war. Under these circumstances, it is absurd to talk about freedom of conscience in any state where universal military service prevails, no matter what exemptions may be made to the adult conscientious objector in time of war. We begin with the school boy and regiment conscience and ideals to support the doctrine of the glory of the supreme atrocity of war. Nor can we hope for anything else:

“So long as war remains a daily imminent danger, the state will remain a Moloch, sacrificing sometimes the life of the individual, and always his unfettered development to the barren struggle for mastery in the competition with other states. In internal as in external affairs, the worst enemy of freedom is war.” (Bertrand Russell : *Why Men Fight*, p. 77.)

Of course, the cure for this is some sort of world organization for the regulation of international affairs. We are tolerably familiar with the ideals of the League to Enforce Peace, and one of the good results of this war will undoubtedly be that the world will turn in self-preservation to some such new form of organization.

Yet there are certain dangers in the form in which the doctrine of this League is often propagated. No mere organization of new and greater alliances will bring us

permanent salvation; still less, a situation wherein each nation drills all its young men for war. We must strike into the roots of the matter. What are those roots?

1. In general, as we have seen, they lie buried in the unchristian social order of which we are a part. In particular, they are found in the existence in all powerful nations of classes possessing surplus capital and not surplus morality. These classes covet the marvelous profit to be made by exploiting weaker peoples in China, India, Africa, Morocco, Mesopotamia, Tripoli, Mexico. Our system of secret diplomacy and our false national pride make it easy for such groups to use nations as their tools. "The place in the sun" that every great power in the world including ourselves has sought with shameful disregard of treaties and fundamental morality, is not really a place for anyone in the nation but a group of financiers who seek enormous concessions and in credible dividends. Such studies as Brailsford's "War of Steel and Gold" and Howe's "Why War" have laid the facts before us. A league of nations which leaves unchecked this sort of alliance of states and exploiting capitalists will never heal the open sores of the world. It will be the duty of some sort of international commission to protect the weaker peoples from exploitation and aid them in their development like brothers. No other policy will bring just or lasting peace.

2. But the roots of war lie in a false psychology as well as in the self-interest of certain classes. Mr. Russell has shown how war springs from a deep-seated impulse, rather than from a calculation of advantage.

“The impulse to quarreling and self-assertion, the pleasure of getting one’s own way in spite of opposition, is native to most men. It is this impulse, rather than any motive of calculated self-interest, which produces war and causes the difficulty of bringing about a world state. And this impulse is not confined to one nation; it exists, in varying degrees, in all the vigorous nations of the world.” (Bertrand Russell: *Why Men Fight*, p. 113)

These impulses become further organized in a kind of religion of patriotism.

“Patriotism is a very complex feeling, built up out of primitive instincts and highly intellectual convictions. There is love of home and family and friends, making us peculiarly anxious to preserve our own country from invasion. There is the mild, instinctive liking for compatriots as against foreigners. There is pride, which is bound up with the success of the community to which we feel we must belong. There is a belief suggested by pride but reinforced by history that one’s own nation represents a great tradition and stands for ideals that are important to the human race. But besides all these, there is another element at once nobler and more open to attack, an element of worship, of willing sacrifice, of joyful merging of the individual life in the life of the nation. This religious element in patriotism is essential to the strength of the state, since it enlists the best that is in most men on the side of national sacrifice.

“The religious element in patriotism is reinforced by education, especially by a knowledge of the history and literature of one’s own country, provided it is not accompanied by much knowledge of the history and literature of other countries. In every civilized country all instruction of the young emphasizes the merits of their own nation, which because of its superiority, deserves support in a quarrel however the quarrel may have originated. This belief is so genuine and deep that it makes men endure patiently, almost gladly, the losses and hardships and sufferings entailed by war. Like all sincerely believed religions, it gives an outlook on life, based upon instinct but sublimating it, causing a devotion to an end greater than any personal end, but containing many personal ends as it were in solution.” (Bertrand Russell : *Why Men Fight*, pp. 55-56.)

It is one of the terrible inadequacies of this religion of patriotism that usually it only functions strongly against foreign danger. Men will give their lives for their country in battle who pay taxes with exceeding reluctance and cry out against all effort to make the state an efficient social servant.

I know a woman who glories in her patriotism and saw her son enlist with pride, who was offended when she was advised not to go in her automobile to a certain district of the New York East Side at the time of the food riots, and could not understand that patriotism might in any way be

involved in solving the desperate need of the people for fairer and more economical distribution of food.

About that same time a distinguished American, an ex-cabinet minister, spoke to a crowded public forum urging that humanity and patriotism demanded our entrance into war, but he grew angry when in the course of discussion it was urged that thousands of his fellow-citizens thought there was at least an equal urgency for patriotic and intelligent dealing with the food problem.

In short, our religion of patriotism with all its noble elements is based upon certain selfish impulses, it lacks the universality which is the mark of all true religion, and heretofore it has only applied with force to the external security and power of the state and not to the internal well-being of the people. Is it not a sad commentary that so many nations including our own are adopting or considering social reforms simply because they are necessary war measures?

If ever we are to have peace it will be because Christianity, which has shown such extraordinary power in substituting impulses of righteousness in the individual for the old selfish desires, will do the same for the nation. It will go on and cleanse and purify patriotism. It will take all that is noble in it and apply it to the removal of ancient abuses within our common life. It will make it the servant of mankind. The things that the Christian patriot will desire for his country, "Will no longer be things which can be acquired only at the expense of others, but rather those things in which the excellence of anyone country is to the

advantage of all the world. He will wish his own country to be great in the arts of peace, to be eminent in thought and science, to be magnanimous and just and generous. He will wish it to help mankind on the way toward that better world of liberty and international concord which must be realized if any happiness is to be left to man. He will not desire for his country the passing triumphs of a narrow possessiveness, but rather the enduring triumph of having helped to embody in human affairs something of that spirit of brotherhood which Christ taught and which the Christian churches have forgotten. He will see that this spirit embodies not only the highest morality, but also the truest wisdom and the only road by which the nations, torn and bleeding with the wounds which scientific madness has inflicted, can emerge into a life where growth is possible and joy is not banished at the frenzied call of unreal and fictitious duties. Deeds inspired by hate are not duties, whatever pain and self-sacrifice they may involve. Life and hope for the world are to be found only in the deeds of love.” (Bertrand Russell, *Atlantic Monthly*, May, 1917, p. 628.)

So far we have considered the attitude of the thoughtful Christian to the usual functions of the state. In modern times there has been a wholesome extension of its powers to what we may call work of social well-being. The state has properly taken over certain services like the post office and the control or regulation of public utilities as the most convenient agent of society. It has required for the common good certain minimum standards of health and education. It is more and more becoming the protector of children.

Another most useful power of the state is that which seeks to diminish economic injustice which is usually connected with the extreme forms of the right of private property. Here we enter on a field of extraordinary interest and of the utmost importance to the Christian patriot. It is so vast as to make any attempt to discuss it in the limits of this lecture ridiculous. May I, however, venture to state the problem somewhat as follows: How shall the state protect its citizens from the inevitable exploitation of a system under which land and public resources pass into the control of a few people? It is said that in America two per cent of the people own sixty-five per cent of the wealth, and the most ardent defender of the competitive order will not argue that this proportion entirely corresponds to differences in ability and energy between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

One answer to this question is, of course, state Socialism, but that raises its own problem. How shall we then protect individual initiative and freedom from the deadly weight, if not the actual tyranny, of an unsympathetic and unimaginative bureaucracy? Only by large dependence within the state upon strong voluntary cooperative organizations of individuals which compete with one another, not for the amassing of private wealth, but in service, can we rescue the individual from the tyranny of our present system on the one hand and state Socialism on the other.

It is not for the Christian to dogmatize on the method; it is his task to try to inspire men with the sense of the joy of service which alone can energize any such program of social righteousness.

I have tried to point out to you the extraordinary and inspiring problems raised when we try to visualize what manner of man the Christian patriot should be and what is involved both in his Christianity and his patriotism. Our discussion of those fundamental problems ought to illuminate for us the particular problem we may have to face of choice between the obedience to the voice of the government of the country which we dearly love, and that voice of conscience which is for us the voice of God. For us in these things there can be but one answer. We will render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but unto God the things that are God's, and conscience is God's.

There is, of course, laid upon us an imperative duty to neglect no means of inward illumination. We shall seek the light that comes in social contacts; in general we may do well to be suspicious of a conviction that sets us at variance with the majority of our fellow Christians. Yet surely we who are here in this room can say with confidence that since all our search into the problem of war and Christianity makes us the more certain that war is the open and absolute denial of Christianity, if ever we are ordered into military service we cannot hesitate to obey God rather than the state, at whatever cost to ourselves. In so doing we are really attesting our love for the soul of the state which perishes when conscience is denied. We who are here apparently will stand in a somewhat favored position which, we are proud to say, is not of our seeking. Members of the Society of Friends and ministers of religion, as such, are exempted from combatant service. This is manifestly absurd. Either the iron logic of war should override all considerations save the necessity of compelling the citizen

to fight, or else exemptions should be granted to the individual on the basis of his own conscience.

The fact of our exemption ought to redouble our efforts for justice and for peace. No conceivable political action at the present time will perfectly embody our ideals. Even peace itself might be a peace of exhaustion, of cowardice, or of indifference, which would fall far short of the peace of a nation devoted to the ideals of the Kingdom of God. There is, therefore, a certain disappointment about all political efforts to save what idealism can be saved in times of war. Yet we are by no means to be forgiven if we do not make every possible effort to incorporate our principles into the life of the state by political action.

The events of the last few weeks demonstrate beyond need of words that it will take the hardest kind of a fight to maintain freedom of conscience, speech, and assemblage here in America. We have held these treasures, bought by the blood of martyrs, very lightly. We have carelessly assumed that a republican form of government was an infallible guarantee of freedom, and certain flagrant denials of those fundamental rights here in America have not yet aroused us.

Personally, I cannot but feel that the conscription bill is subversive of our liberties, and that we should agitate for its repeal. I know that some who share our hatred of war are persuaded that now that war has come, selective conscription is the less of two evils. They argue that its alternative, the volunteer system, is neither a genuine system nor truly voluntary. They point to the disruption of

life, the loss of the most ardent young men, and the enormous recruiting campaign of hate and hysteria which are the inevitable attendants of volunteering. These arguments have weight, yet it seems to me that they are seriously outweighed by other considerations.

Recognition of the conscription principle in America means the triumph of a false and dangerous idea of the state. It is, as we have seen, inevitably opposed to freedom of conscience. It means the monstrous absurdity of expecting conscripts to fight for ideals. They may understand a war for territory or for protection of hearth and home, but only free men can undertake war for ideals. Terrible as war is, for the man who enters it with a sense of embarking on a holy crusade or even with the love of adventure, there is some thing to lift up his soul above the cruelties, the lies and the hatred of the battle line, but the conscript who fights in a war which he does not understand or to which he may be opposed, has no such partial redemption. Hysterical or coercive public opinion is a fearful evil, but to a certain extent it may be fought on its own grounds with weapons of reason, but the principle of coercion is written in the statute book, and one can only oppose it in time of war by seeming disloyalty to the government. Yet even at this risk we cannot allow the American public to forget what is involved by embarking on this policy.

A secondary, but important, issue is that of gaining a proper exemption law for individual conscientious objectors. This is more immediately hopeful. Men may be aroused to a sense of shame that the descendants of exiles for conscience's sake should deny the right of conscience to

men on pain of imprisonment. The Pilgrim Fathers were only the first of thousands of men and women in all generations who sought asylum in a new world. For us there are no new worlds save as we can renew this land in allegiance to the ancient loyalties. If we fail in this we can still give legal, material, and spiritual help to the conscientious objectors and their families, for there is no doubt that if the war continues we shall find Americans brave enough to suffer punishment rather than to betray their souls. Conscription of the conscientious objector on whatever ground is worse than chattel slavery, for the slave may still be in heart and conscience free. It raises the grave question whether the state which considers it necessary for its own security is worth the price.

During the fight against conscription and for at least the exemption of conscientious objectors, I was in Washington for a number of days. There is no doubt that the law in its present form passed chiefly because it was an administration measure; many men voted for it even though they did not believe in it. An observer could not but be greatly depressed by the lack of courage and of intelligent understanding in the discussion of principles displayed by Congress. Some men voted under pressure; others with an irritated desire to make objectors fall in line; others from fear that in no other way could an army be raised; others with a rather touching faith in the governmental machinery that somehow or other would take no really useful men from civil life.

In the House fifteen minutes was given to the whole matter of the exemption of conscientious objectors. There was no

real discussion, but after an able speech by Mr. Keating, who proposed an amendment in behalf of this vital principle of liberty, there was along parliamentary wrangle as to the time of taking a vote, so at last when the amendment was voted on many men had forgotten what the issue really was.

To observe all this was to feel one's self stripped of illusions as to the ideal character of our conduct of this war, and yet, after all, probably these mixed motives and this lack of understanding displayed by Congress are fairly typical of the dominant public opinion. It is our task by fearlessly speaking the truth to try to educate our fellow countrymen.

Meanwhile we must steadily work for peace, the only condition under which men can have true liberty. We must insist on democratic control of diplomacy, upon no secret agreement that binds us to fight for nationalistic interests of the various allies: that England may have Mesopotamia; France, Syria; or Italy, the eastern coast of the Adriatic. With whatever influence we have we must see to it that America does not descend into war for revenge or for indemnities or for trade advantages after the war. No just and lasting peace is possible unless men continually discuss its conditions and agitate for it.

Nor is this all. During the war there is bound to be steady assault upon such safe guards as we have painfully erected around the labor of women and children. It is for us to be foremost in the struggle to maintain and strengthen these safeguards and to insist that there is no higher patriotism

than that which would protect the coming generation and generations yet unborn.

These duties of political action, of education and agitation, do not satisfy all the demand laid upon us. What service can we who are steadfastly opposed to war render to our country and to mankind by the way in which we order our daily lives? It is entirely possible that before the end of the war we may face individually our attitude toward the draft for non-combatant service. Now we face the more inspiring search for the best opportunities for voluntary service. We have two perils to avoid. We cannot on the one hand fall in line behind a "win the war" slogan, craving indulgence for individual idiosyncrasies of conscience which make us unwilling to help win it with a gun but not with a hoe; on the other hand, we dare not seem indifferent to the tragedy of the needs of the world.

What principles shall guide us? After all, this is an individual problem. We cannot dictate to one another. All of us, I presume, will avoid direct participation in the war or in military operations. We will not merely refrain from fighting, but from making munitions or cutting trench timbers for the army. Yet by our very membership in the nation we cannot avoid some indirect participation in war unless we commit suicide. I may protest against paying a war tax, but the government can take my property. If I am doing any useful service, I am indirectly adding to the nation's strength, all of which is pledged to winning the war. I can, how ever, avoid even indirect participation *in military operations*, and it is there that I personally would draw the line. I would not voluntarily do non-combatant

service under military control in such a capacity as camp cook, even though feeding men is in itself good. I should, however, gladly do anything in my power to raise more food for the feeding of a world on the verge of starvation, even tho some of that food might benefit the army. If there is a food scarcity it will not be the army that is the first to suffer. I believe our voluntary associations engaged in this problem should do what they can to direct their food supplies to the poor who may be close to the verge of starvation, and to the infinitely more unfortunate refugees of Europe and Asia; but if in the glorious task of helping to create means of life I indirectly aid the army I shall remember that it, too, is composed of men, and that I am the son of a Father who makes His rain to fall upon the just and the unjust. So, too, I might take part in volunteer ambulance service, feeling that it was my concern to save life without too close an inquiry as to whether that life will again be invested in military service.

When it comes to conscription for such service the problem is changed. The conscriptive principle as such has its dangers. Conceivably it could be used to promote a state approaching involuntary servitude among workers. If so we should be obliged to resist it. Moreover, anyone with a sense of a call from God to his own particular task might look with sorrow upon the institution of state regulation of men's labor. But the chief opposition to conscription even for useful civil service under the civil branches of the government will come from men who feel that it is a war measure and that as such they cannot agree to any compulsory change of occupation even if the alternative be imprisonment. I respect but do not now share this view, but

would consent to conscription for some form of useful public service in agriculture, administration of relief, reclamation of waste land, and the like if in so doing I should feel that I was serving not so much a war government as society and my country. It would be my profound hope that I might be found at tasks of such usefulness that even the State could not deny my real social value and would leave me at my task. Each of us must give his own answer to these problems, looking to God for help.

The one thing that the Christian Patriot cannot afford to have said of him in these days is that he is a “slacker” who is uninterested in the well-being of his country and of his comrades. There is a patriotism of saving life, of organizing goodwill, to which we are called alike in times of peace and of war. It is the duty of the Christian to feel that he must at all times invest his life where it will count for the most in the task to which God calls each of His children thru the vision, the opportunities and the capacities which He entrusts to us.

Perhaps the war will present new and urgent opportunities which will temporarily or permanently change our particular calling. It will certainly summon each of us to examine his conscience to see to it that he is rendering the maximum of service. We cannot live in ease and luxury while men and women and little children are perishing and civilization hangs in the balance. It is peculiarly our task to find ways of feeding the starving populations of the world and of reconstructing on a better basis life that is utterly devastated. This will call for a high order of courage which

will show the world that men are not pacifists because they are cowards.

Few of us may find opportunity for actual service among refugee peoples or in prison camps. All of us can find opportunities for unselfish support of this work of brotherhood. The development of the war may bring us face to face with the problem of the Christian treatment of alien enemies within our borders or ultimately of prisoners of war. It will almost surely make more acute many anti-social conditions in our cities; juvenile delinquency has greatly increased in Germany and England. A similar fate may befall us, and we must be prepared to meet it.

I am necessarily speaking in general terms. It would be presumptuous in me to do more, for it is the Committee of the Society of Friends which has taken the lead in constructive suggestions; and yet I cannot close without reminding myself as well as you that in days when many of our friends are showing supreme heroism in leaving homes and families and risking their lives in a cause which they believe to be holy, we cannot for very shame's sake so live that we need defense against the charge of selfishness. Our service will come thru our manner of life, our loyalty to truth, our personal contacts with all men and especially with the suffering, our generosity in giving, our struggle to maintain the rights of freedom of conscience, of speech and assemblage in time of war, and our devotion to God's cause everywhere. It will not be merely a matter of acts but of thought.

There is nothing that our country needs more than the effort of men to think on the problems that confront us. In Washington there is a restaurant upon whose walls hang mottoes of great variety, such as:

“Let us have peace.”

“Don’t give up the ship!”

“My country right or wrong.”

“There is a higher law than the Constitution.”

This is a parable of the state of our minds, which are furnished not so much with clear-cut principles as with conflicting phrases which we bring forth upon occasions without thinking of their implications. It is for us to face the hard task of straight thinking; to know the power of thought “which looks into the pit of hell and is unafraid.” It is for us to use the war both as the text and the occasion for proclaiming by life and by word our faith in a God of Love.

God has called us to set forth upon a high venture. He has granted us an unforgettable vision. Tho we are weak, yet He has chosen us as pioneers of His Kingdom, fellow workers with Him. Can we possibly face this task without a profound sense of our own inadequacy? Shall we not bow ourselves before the Most High in utter humility because in wisdom, in strength and in love we come so far short of His glory? In humility and penitence will be our strength. We are not called to judge our brothers but ourselves. We are called to dedicate ourselves to truth as God gives us to see the truth. So let us press forward. Tho the night be dark

around us, our faces are set toward morning; tho sorrow be our companion, ours shall be the joy of victory, for He who has given to us our heavenly vision will give us strength to be obedient unto it.

God's cause cannot be defeated. Now in the hearts of brave and thoughtful men suffering in the trenches of the battle line, of steadfast and lonely men who have chosen imprisonment rather than disobedience to conscience, of faithful, serviceable men and women of all nations whose compassion goes out to the sorrows of mankind, a new sense of love and brotherhood is arising which shall yet conquer war and make peace glorious. Is there any joy that shall equal our comradeship in this company of God's soldiers?

About the Author

Norman M. Thomas (1884 – 1968) was an American Presbyterian minister who achieved fame as a socialist, pacifist, and six-time presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America.

After some settlement house work and a trip around the world, Thomas decided to follow in his father's footsteps and enrolled in Union Theological Seminary. Union Theological Seminary had been at that time a center of the Social Gospel movement and liberal politics, and as a minister, Thomas preached against American participation in the First World War.

It was Thomas's position as a conscientious objector that drew him to the Socialist Party of America (SPA), a staunchly antimilitarist organization. Thomas was the secretary (then an unpaid position) of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation even before the war. Together with Devere Allen, Thomas helped to make *The World Tomorrow* the leading voice of liberal Christian social activism of its day. In 1921, Thomas moved to secular journalism when he was employed as associate editor of *The Nation* magazine. In 1922 he became co-director of the League for Industrial Democracy. Later, he was one of the founders of the National Civil Liberties Bureau, the precursor of the American Civil Liberties Union.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Thomas

About the Lectures

The William Penn Lectures started as a ministry of the Young Friends' Movement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In the beginning of the last century, "Young Friends" was the community of young adults from both the Hicksite and the Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, which reunited in 1955. The Young Friends Movement began the lecture series "for the purpose of closer fellowship; for the strengthening by such association and the interchange of experience, of loyalty to the ideals of the Society of Friends; and for the preparation by such common ideals for more effective work through the Society of Friends for the growth of the Kingdom of God on Earth." The name of William Penn was chosen because the Young Friends Movement found Penn to be "a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring 'To live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed; and that these might become the laws and habits of the State.'"

The first run of William Penn Lectures were given between 1916 and 1966, and are warmly remembered by Friends who attended them as occasions to look forward to for fellowship with our community, inspiration, and a challenge to live into our faith. The lectures were published by the Book Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has granted Pendle Hill and Quaker Heron Press permission to reproduce the lectures as free ebooks.

Although it was [announced](#) in 1960 that the series would be discontinued several lectures were published in the early '60s. It appears that the lectures given between 1923 and 1931 were never published. If we come upon manuscripts of these lectures, we hope to publish them in future.

In 2010, the Young Adult Friends of PYM revived the series, officially launching the second run of the William Penn Lectures in 2011. [The series was renamed](#) the *Seeking Faithfulness* series in 2016, as part of the Young Adult Friends of PYM's concern for dismantling racism within the yearly meeting and the wider society. It no longer felt rightly ordered to have a major event named after a slaveholder. The [Seeking Faithfulness](#) series is hosted by the Young Adult Friends for the benefit of the whole yearly meeting community, and invites a Friend to challenge us all to explore new ways to practice our Quaker faith. The Seeking Faithfulness series seeks to nourish our spiritual lives and call us to faithful witness in our communities and throughout the world.