Holy War and Civil Peace:
George Herbert’s Jacobean Politics

Kenneth Alan Hovey

In his major English works George Herbert frequently uses the terminology of war and peace as figures of speech in describing spiritual states. He explains his rationale in The Country Parson:

There is a double state of a Christian even in this Life, the one military, the other peaceable. The military is, when we are assaulted with temptations either from within or without. The Peaceable is, when the Divell for a time leaves us, as he did our Saviour, and the Angels minister to us their owne food, even joy, and peace.¹

In Herbert’s view the Christian life is made up of a repeated series of battles against the “whole Army of Temptations,” after which the Christian repeatedly gains spiritual “victories” (p. 278). Since, however, complete victory for the Christian comes, as for Christ, only after death, the pervasive character of this life is war rather than peace. Battles are ended and victories gained, but the war continues as long as life does, as Herbert makes clear throughout The Temple. In “The Watercourse” Herbert equates “life” and “strife” (5), in “The Church-porch” he depicts the course of man’s existence as “lifes warre” (215), and in “Employment” (11) declares that “Life is a businesse, not good cheer; / Ever in warres” (16-17). Thus, though in poems like “The Quip” and “The Rose” Herbert portrays the self-assured peaceable state of the Christian, he much more frequently portrays the military state, the Christian lacking peace and at odds with God. Peace comes fully only in the other world. This life is “restlesnesse,” Herbert states in “The Pulley,” the next life, alone is “rest” (17, 10).

In “The Church Militant” Herbert uses the same metaphors of war and peace to depict the Church as a whole. The Church attained brief periods of peace and triumph under Solomon, Constantine, Henry VIII, and others, but its over-all history is one of chronic battle against one false religion or another, ancient paganism, Islam, and modern Papism. The Christian must be a spiritual soldier, and the Church must be just as “militant.” Yet in the end, Herbert prophesies in the poem’s envoy, God as “King of Peace” shall “make warre to cease” (1-2), and the Church shall attain triumph as the individual gains rest. What is paradoxical in Herbert’s portrait of both

¹
the Christian life and Church history is that while Herbert constantly glorifies and anticipates the final peace of the Christian and the Church, he never shows it to us directly. Instead, he indulges with loving detail in portraits of the war he wishes would cease.\footnote{2} Though an advocate of spiritual peace, Herbert confines himself to this world and remains, therefore, chiefly a poet of spiritual war.

War was not, however, only a figure of speech to Herbert. He came, in fact, from a family of warriors. His father and grandfather made their fortunes and upheld their honor with their swords, and three of his brothers, following in the footsteps of their kinsman, Sir Philip Sidney, fought along with other Protestants in the Low Countries.\footnote{5} Furthermore, while the British Isles themselves were virtually war-free between the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the first Bishops' War of 1639, fighting on the continent grew more and more intense during this period, and the fuse of religious controversy which was to set off the bomb of the English Civil War was already burning hotly. Thus Herbert was forced to deal not just with the military state of the individual soul and the militant state of the universal Church but with the fact of war itself in the current events of his day. This he did in a series of public works, largely excluded from the more private \textit{Country Parson} and \textit{Temple}. In these writings, for the most part in Latin, Herbert defined his politics in relation to the controversies and wars around him and in doing so displayed a paradoxicality similar to that revealed in his treatment of the metaphorical wars of the spirit.

Herbert's most important public statement on contemporary affairs is the oration which he delivered before Prince Charles on the Prince's return from Spain in 1623. This oration to Charles may not only mark the high point of Herbert's public career but also be the cause of its end. Charles had gone to Spain with Buckingham to arrange his marriage to the Infanta but came back disappointed and eager for war. Herbert's oration cannot have pleased Charles, since the climactic part of it was a panegyric to peace and attack on war. This is what, according to Gardiner, gave the speech historic importance, and what, quite possibly, lost Herbert the favor of the man who was soon to assume the throne on the death of his peace-loving father.\footnote{4} The oration, moreover, states most directly the views of peace and war which dominate all of Herbert's political thinking:

\begin{quote}
I know that the name of war is splendid and glorious . . . .
Nevertheless, since splendid things are generally brittle, . . . it must be confessed that peace is to be preferred to war; for without peace all life is a storm and the world a desert.\footnote{5}
\end{quote}

Though he admits "that war is sometimes necessary,"\footnote{6} the only example that he gives is self-defense against imminent attack.

In support of his argument Herbert points out that "peace has