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CHRISTIANITY AND PACIFISM

Richard J. Mouw

My colleague Nicholas Wolterstorff recently published an excellent book with the title *Until Peace and Justice Embrace*.[1] Wolterstorff's title is itself instructive, because it points to the fact that what Psalm 95 describes in the present tense—the embrace of peace and justice—is actually an eschatological promise.

The Roman Catholic bishops also made much of this eschatological dimension in their recent pastoral. Only in the coming kingdom, they tell us, will peace and justice be "fully realized." Until then we will experience a "tension" between the struggle for justice and the quest for peace.

The ongoing debates between Christian pacifists and Christian Just War theorists can be viewed as an important argument over how we should deal with this experienced tension, with one side arguing that in the present dispensation the primary emphasis must be placed on a consistently non-violent witness to the promise of peace, and the other side insisting that the doing of justice requires us on occasion to commit acts of violence.

I will offer here some observations about the present status of this important debate from the point of view of a Christian who subscribes to Just War theory, with special attention to the role of Christian philosophers in helping to clarify the issues at stake. I will begin by offering a brief review of the reasons why many of us are not ready to embrace a consistent pacifism. Then I will go on to offer some comments in support of the contention that, while a significant gap in moral thinking still separates the pacifist from the Just War theorist, that gap ought not to be viewed as being as wide as it has sometimes been thought to be.

Many of us are not pacifists. We believe that governments have been invested by God with the legitimate authority to use the sword in both the internal policing of the affairs of nations and in the defense of nations against external enemies. We also believe that there are circumstances in which citizens are justified in wielding the sword against their own governments, when those governments have become agents of systematic oppression. Furthermore, we believe that it is permissible—perhaps even obligatory on occasion—for *Christian* citizens to participate in these violent activities.

In allowing for these kinds of activities, it is not necessary for us to insist that all such violence takes place "outside the perfection of Christ"—to use an Anabaptist phrase. Some Christians may, of course, want to argue that kind of case.

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But there are some of us who prefer to think that some Christian acts of violence are legitimate exercises of Christian discipleship.

At the same time, those of us who endorse some Christian acts of violence want to insist that there are limits to the legitimate use of violence on the part of governments and revolutionary groups. This is the source of the criteria associated with Just War and Just Revolution theory. These criteria are a means of fleshing out a basic moral conviction that the use of lethal violence is under certain conditions morally justified.

This conviction is, of course, challenged by pacifists. But to many of us it seems a proper conviction to act upon, for several reasons. Each of these reasons requires a much lengthier defense than I can give here. I will limit myself to stating the reasons and providing a few brief comments on them.

First, this conviction seems to be one which comports well with the overall thrust of the Biblical witness. In debates with pacifists, we Just War defenders are fond of pointing to God's sanctioning of violence in the Old Testament. This line of argument seems convincing to me. However we interpret God's *intentions* in permitting, and sometimes even commanding, Israel to engage in military campaigns, it seems to many of us that it is a clear fact of Old Testament history that God did endorse the use of violence.

Many pacifists counter this appeal to the Old Testament by pointing to the New Testament, and especially the teachings and example of Jesus. When the argument focuses exclusively on such data many of us who are Just War defenders must admit—if we are honest—to some awkward moments. Nonetheless this sense of awkwardness does not succeed in shaking our basic confidence that the use of lethal violence is on occasion morally justified. We want an understanding of the Sermon on the Mount which fits into what we take to be the overall sense of the Scriptures. This involves not only looking at Jesus' teachings in the light of the Old Testament background, but also in relationship to the apostolic witness and the life of the early church.

Second, this conviction that lethal violence is on occasion morally justified seems to square with our moral intuitions. When we think of situations in which innocent neighbors are being brutally oppressed, and in which it is possible for us to put an end to this oppression only by violent means, many of us are inclined to insist on the need for violent intervention. And we believe that these inclinations are shaped by authentically Christian sensitivities—sensitivities which are shared by others whom we believe to possess sanctified consciences.

Third, our conviction regarding the proper use of lethal violence seems to provide us with a helpful basis for offering practical Christian advice with regard to military policies. In many historical situations, the practical issue faced by governments is not *whether* or not to employ violence but how *much* violence is to be employed. Our conviction permits us to enter into that kind of discussion.

It permits us to acknowledge as Christians that governments do have a legitimate right to use the sword in pursuing the work of justice and peace and to offer policy prescriptions based on the acknowledgement.

Again, none of these arguments will be convincing, as stated, to pacifist Christians. They will respond by arguing that we Just War defenders have not in fact properly grasped the overall sense of the Scriptures, nor are our consciences properly sanctified, nor are we giving good Christian advice to governments. These are challenges which we must all take seriously—even though I am convinced that a plausible case can be made for the three considerations which I have briefly outlined.

Those, then, are some of the important issues at stake for many of us who have been involved as Christians in the discussion of pacifism versus Just War theory. But it is not enough to rehearse these kinds of issues which usually arise when the question of the permissibility of violence is discussed. It is important also to stress those fundamental commitments and concerns which all Christian thinkers ought to hold in common when they approach these issues. I will offer, then, four observations about matters which, if they are kept in mind, might bring about a greater degree of rapprochement between Christian pacifists and Christian Just War theorists.

First, all Christian thinkers, whatever their specific views about violent and non-violent strategies, ought to be committed to the task of peace-making. Indeed, this is an area of discussion in which the terminology used is somewhat unfortunate. Some Christian groups are referred to as "peace churches" and the rest of use are thought of as "Just War defenders." Thus the impression is given that some of us have a vested interest in defending and promoting warfare.

All Christians are called to be followers of the Prince of Peace. A concern for peace-making ought not to be viewed as the exclusive property of pacifists. The real debate, properly understood, is about the most fitting strategies for peace-making. Just War theory was developed in response to the unbridled, no-holds-barred militarism of ancient times. It was intended as an instrument for reducing the number of wars, and for placing limits on the violence employed withing military campaigns. It was intended, in short, as an instrument of peace-making.

In his discussion of Just War criteria in the *Institutes*, John Calvin—who was no friend of the Christian pacifists of his day—insisted nonetheless that Christians, in dealing with the issues of violence, "must perform much more than the heathen philosopher required when he wanted war to seem a seeking of peace."[2] This is also good advice for contemporary Christian philosophers who espouse a Just War perspective: we must perform much more than our non-Christian colleagues in insisting that war is to be justified only as a means to peace.

Thus all of us, whether we are pacifists or non-pacifists, must oppose the

sinful spirit of militarism. In its worst form, militarism is a blatant form of idolatry, an ultimate devotion to the gods of war. But there are less "absolute" forms of militarism, which manifest themselves in a fondness for military solutions to international problems or which foster a spirit of vengeance which can only be satisfied by military victories.

For some of us, the legitimate struggle against militarism does not require us to oppose the military as such, but rather to work for the "taming" of the military. But we should at least all agree that the phenomenon of militarism is one which must be addressed by those who have been commanded not to rely on horses or to trust in chariots but to look to the Holy One of Israel for help and to trust the Lord (Isaiah 31:1).

Second, we can all agree that the advocacy of the use of violence is, from a Christian point of view, a very dangerous business—even though some of us believe that it is a danger that we must live with.

One can admit that a doctrine is dangerous without thereby meaning to repudiate that doctrine. Doctrines can be true yet dangerous. A theory may be accurate in itself but difficult to apply accurately. Consider a parallel moral example. Suppose that a German Christian male had the opportunity during Hitler's reign to form an adulterous relationship with Eva Braun, Hitler's mistress, and thereby gain important information which might well lead to the downfall of the Third Reich. It is at least conceivable, I believe, that this might constitute a case of Just Adultery. But suppose—and it is very interesting that we have often been much stricter with the adultery commandment than we have with the killing commandment—that having recognized the legitimacy of such a rare undertaking, Christians went on to formulate a Just Adultery doctrine, specifying those rare conditions under which a Christian might justifiably commit an act of adultery for a noble and righteous cause.

Such a doctrine on my hypothesis might very well be legitimate and proper. But suppose that this doctrine also created a tendency toward unjustified adultery—merely by officially acknowledging the fact that under certain conditions adultery might be morally justified. Suppose further that people were then trained to commit adultery in the event that their services might become necessary. Suppose also that special medals of honor were awarded to outstanding adulterers.

Well, we need not follow through on the implications of such a doctrine. But the point should be clear, and this is the only point I mean to be illustrating here: some doctrines, however true and appropriate they might be in application to rare cases, become dangerous when they are propagated and institutionalized. They can themselves become a lure to sin. They can themselves become instruments of our rebellion before the face of God. And Just War defenders would do well to consider the actual historical uses and the psychological tendencies of their Just War teaching.

Third, we should all agree that these issues must be considered in the context of a much larger philosophical discussion. The questions at stake here certainly cannot be dealt with adequately simply by checking out our moral intuitions, or by offering alternative consequentialist calculations. Several years ago Robert L. Holmes wrote a fascinating essay on "Violence and Nonviolence," which was one of the award-winning essays in the Council for Philosophical Studies' competition on the subject of violence. Holmes argued that nonviolence ought to be viewed not as a means to some end, but as "a way of life"; if nonviolence is to be properly thought of as a "means" at all, it is not, he said, as a "means" in the sense of a step on some ladder which leads to "a lofty and remote destination" but rather as a means in the sense of an "ingredient in a recipe, the end or final product of which is made up of what is put into it."[3]

I am not yet as convinced as my friend Stanley Hauerwas is that the whole of the moral life can be understood in terms of an "ethics of virtue." But I do think that Hauerwas and, in the case just mentioned, Robert Holmes, are pointing to an emphasis which must be taken seriously by Christians, especially as it bears on the questions of violence and nonviolence. The question of whether a Christian can commit acts of violence cannot be separated from crucial questions about the kinds of lives we are called to live. And these questions are related to an even broader set of questions which must be explored by Christian philosophers: questions about the nature of created and fallen and redeemed reality, questions about the good life—which cannot, of course, be reduced simply to questions about the *morally* good life—questions about means and ends, ingredients and recipes, and so on.

In thinking about the issues which bear on our decisions regarding the way of life to which we are called as Christians, those of us who are Just War defenders would do well to take seriously the Roman Catholic bishops' recent endorsement of what I will refer to here as "vocational pacifism." This is not, of course, a new emphasis in Roman Catholicism. The existence of special "orders," involving special "vows" in the Roman Catholic community has made it possible for people to pursue alternative lifestyles and commitments without thereby standing in judgment on all those fellow believers who do not exhibit the same patterns of living. A commitment to non-violence has a long history, in monastic communities. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the bishops, in discussing the merits of specific nonviolent experiments, refer to the commitment to nonviolence required of lay members of the Third Order of Franciscans.

To be sure, not all pacifists will appreciate having their perspective "vocationalized" in this manner. But this emphasis, if more widely recognized, and if taken more seriously by other Just War groups, could bring about a practical convergence on the question of whether at least some Christians ought to be committing themselves to a way of life which is consistent with nonviolent

principles.

Fourth, it is important that this kind of discussion also take place in the context of a larger theological dialogue. Philosophical reflection on the issues of violence and nonviolence cannot properly take place without attention to the requirements of a *theology* of peace-making. Our stance with regard to military policies—especially in this time when we are producing weapons of unthinkable destruction—cannot be divorced from our understanding of the creating intentions of the God to whom the earth in all of its fullness belongs. Nor can we think about such matters without acknowledging our human sinfulness, which so often leads us into self-deception and perverse thinking in this area of concern.

Our philosophical reflections on these matters must also be shaped by our ecclesiological sensitivities. As Christians we are members of the one universal church, drawn from every tribe, tongue, people and nation of the earth. An awareness of this fact is not only important for Christians as such, but also for Christian philosophers *in* their philosophizing. Our thoughts and arguments on these matters must display the internationalist and intercultural sensitivities which are appropriate to who we are as servants of Jesus Christ. We desperately need to allow ourselves to be influenced in our philosophizing by the needs and perspectives of the whole church, which is presently dispersed among the peoples and nations of the earth. Of crucial importance here is the fact that we are bound in Christ to the poor and the oppressed of the earth; we must allow their concerns to crowd into our consciousness and to influence our agenda as we address the issues of war and peace.

Our philosophical efforts in this area, if they are properly grounded in a theology of peace-making, will give expression to our hope in, and longing for, the future Reign of Christ—wherein justice and peace will indeed embrace. When that Reign arrives, the debate between pacifists and Just War theorists will presumably come to an end. It is not likely that the debate will end *before* then—and perhaps that is a very good thing. But the knowledge that this particular kind of warfare will also someday cease, says something—I think—about the spirit in which we ought to be conducting our discussions here and now. I hope that my remarks here are accepted as an appropriate manifestation of that spirit.

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NOTES

1. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983.

2. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia:

Westminster, 1960), IV, xx, 12.

3. "Violence and Nonviolence," in (ed.) Jerome A. Shaffer, *Violence: Award-winning Essays in the Council for Philosophical Studies Competition* (New York: David McKay, 1971), p. 128.