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# A Matter of Chivalry: C.S. Lewis's Response to Pacifism and the Just War Theory

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# A Matter of Chivalry: C.S. Lewis's Response to Pacifism and the Just War Theory

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

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C.S. Lewis's Response to Pacifism and the Just War Theory**

Peter Barrett

**SECOND PLACE STUDENT ESSAY**

**A Matter of Chivalry: C.S. Lewis's Response to Pacifism  
and the Just War Theory**

Peter Barrett

*There is no political solution to the problem of sin. Not even a justified war could end all wars; not even pacifism could bring lasting peace. So our first concern . . . should be what we can do to support ambassadors of the gospel, and those other people of good will, who care for the people who suffer.*

—J. Budziszewski

*“Whenever the actual historical situation sharpens the issue, the debate whether the Christian Church is, or ought to be, pacifist is carried on with fresh vigor both inside and outside the Christian community.”*

—Reinhold Niebuhr

A new trend in public debate has emerged in recent years. Anymore, when a major issue is discussed or a controversial topic raised, a certain degree of relevance and validity is awarded to one's argumentation when it is put in the context of September 11<sup>th</sup>. “In the wake of 9/11” is a preface heard so often these days. Why is this? Perhaps the geo-political landscape of our present age was altered in such dramatic fashion by the horrific events of September, 2001 that our basic presuppositions of war and peace were challenged. Our views of life and death, violence and justice, and perhaps especially terror and freedom, have been questioned and further examined. The never-ending debate between pacifism and the just-war theory has once again gained significant attention. In order to further clarify and contextualize the core creeds and values Christians hold, it is essential that these important issues are fully explored and understood. The ambiguous ‘war on terror’ has elicited questions over the morality of ensuring liberty through the use of violence. The recent U.S. military intervention in Iraq has stimulated a renewed interest in the discussion of the possibility of a just war. As Christians search for biblically grounded answers to these complex questions, they naturally turn to the great thinkers and theologians of the past. Since church history boasts a rich tradition in both pacifism and just war, one must approach this topic with great vigilance and discernment. One of the most enlightening scholars on

this subject is C.S. Lewis. As David Downing notes: “In Christian circles, where an apt quotation by C.S. Lewis lends a great deal of authority to one's opinion, it should not be surprising to hear Lewis cited by both sides of this issue.”<sup>1</sup> Despite Lewis's clear bias towards the just war theory, a further reflection of his writings reveal a wisdom and perspective that can prove valuable for all.

C.S. Lewis did not often address political issues. Besides his well-known essay on pacifism and some comments on the nature of the state scattered throughout his works, Lewis attempted to maintain a decidedly apolitical stance. As Richard John Neuhaus comments, “Indeed, in many ways he took his stand, and encouraged others to take their stand, over and against politics—especially politics as dominated by the machinations of the modern State.”<sup>2</sup> Lewis prefers to concentrate on reason and virtue in the hope that they might ultimately be reflected in the political and societal structures. His concern was with principles, not partisan politics or policies. Hence, it is precisely because Lewis was so detached from the political scene, that he was able to offer such insight into the larger issues relating to politics. Though Lewis stayed away from direct political conversation and was uninterested in ordinary political affairs, he often commented on issues of human nature, war and peace, and justice and morality. He understood that people are not free floating individuals but must belong to a society. Lewis

warned that “Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, they are mortal and finite.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, he still understood the need to make judgments about governments. Lewis writes that “the practical problem in Christian politics is not that of drawing up schemes for a Christian society, but that of living as innocently as we can with unbelieving fellow—subjects under unbelieving rules who will never be perfectly wise and good and who will sometimes be very wicked and very foolish.”<sup>4</sup> He warned of the all-consuming nature of the search for political answers and solutions. Lewis writes that “a man may have to die for his country: but no man must in any exclusive sense live for his country. He who surrenders himself without reservation to the temporal claims of a nation, or a party, or a class is rendering to Caesar that which, of all things, most emphatically belongs to God: himself.”<sup>5</sup> Instead of dwelling on things temporary, he encourages man to pursue the more significant and eternal issues of the soul. Lewis implied that it is love and morality that should define politics, not *visa versa*.

Lewis recognizes that an inherent danger exists in the state. For when man attempts to mix a personal quest for virtue with power politics he is likely to deify himself. When fallen man decrees morality, nothing less than a dictatorship is created. For the political realm should seek justice, not virtue. On this point Lewis notes, “Of all tyrannies a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies.”<sup>6</sup> Although Lewis warned against the distractions and potential dangers inherent in politics, he certainly saw the need for government. He also saw the moral importance of issues relating to war and peace. It can be deduced from Lewis's writings that he regarded the conflict within the souls of men to have equal if not higher importance than discussing the viability of one political position over another. “Christianity, with its claims in one way personal and in another way ecumenical and both ways antithetical to omniscient government, must always in fact . . . be treated as an enemy. Like learning, like the family, like any ancient and liberal profession, like the common law, it gives the individual a standing ground against the state.”<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to issues of war and peace, Lewis observed that the same principles of morality must apply to the injustices of war as to injustices inherent in daily life. He noted that war does not create any new situations, instead “it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it.”<sup>8</sup> To assume that the ideas and essential questions associated with the pacifist and just war debate are any different than those which our souls must wrestle with daily, is according to Lewis clearly lacking any sort of

perspective. This question of just war and peace simply takes the issues of morality and applies them to the larger national level. The same themes of immorality which are present in wartime make up the sins of everyday life.

After the Nazi invasion of Poland and England's declaration of war on Germany, Lewis cautioned his brother about making the assumption that God is on 'our side'. In a letter to his brother, he wrote about his experience in church that day: “In the litany this morning we had some extra petitions, one of which was ‘prosper, O Lord, our righteous cause . . .’ When I met the [the reverend] on the porch, I ventured to protest against the audacity of informing God that our cause was righteous.”<sup>9</sup> Lewis insightfully observes that there is a natural inclination for man to assume that the Scriptures mandate a particular political action. Each person can error in assuming that his way is the correct method for social change. By too fiercely arguing the validity of one side, man often falls into the trap of attempting to “turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul”<sup>10</sup> Lewis warns against relying on the ideologies of the world to change society.

Even though he clearly sees war as a viable option, he nonetheless recognizes that “all parties [admit] that war is very disagreeable”<sup>11</sup>. Pacifists regard war as inherently doing more harm than good. Thus, it can be argued, that they are simply striving to live a moral life void of evil. Lewis disagrees with this line of reasoning and notes that fallen human beings are prone to justify their actions in order that they need not suffer hardships. He warns us to be on our guard against rationalizing and reducing complexities for the sake of comfort and ease. Lewis personally experienced war and remembers the pain and suffering he went through. In a letter written to his brother, Warren, Lewis recalls his military days: “My memories of the last war haunted my dreams for years. Military service, to be plain, includes the threat of every temporal evil; pain and death, which is what we fear from sickness; isolation from those we love, which is what we fear from exile; toil under arbitrary masters . . . which is what we fear from slavery: hunger, thirst and exposure which is what we fear from poverty. I'm not a pacifist. If its got to be, it's got to be. But the flesh is weak and selfish, and I think death would be much better than to live through another war.”<sup>12</sup>

Lewis was personally acquainted with the hellish conditions of war and therefore he understood what drove people to argue their personal view of correct conduct during war. He realized that pacifists were under the assumption that war could not lead to anything good. For Lewis, however, war was certainly disagreeable, as his personal experience proved, but not necessarily evil. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis deals with

the concept of how love can, and in some situations, must be forceful. "For loving myself does not mean that I ought not to subject myself to punishment—even to death. If one had committed a murder, the right Christian thing to do would be to give yourself up to the police and be hanged. It is therefore perfectly right for a Christian judge to sentence a man to death or a Christian to kill an enemy."<sup>13</sup> Implied in Lewis's argument is the assumption that God has given man authority and power to maintain order. The political and societal structure should be set up so that "The law must rise to our standards when we improve and sink to them when we decay."<sup>14</sup> Sometimes this necessitates the use of force when a just cause needs to be defended. Love does not always mean that one must relinquish arms, for sometimes love is best expressed in war when justice is truly accomplished. As Lewis notes in his essay, *Why I am not a Pacifist*: "The doctrine that war is always a greater evil seems to imply a materialist ethic, a belief that death and pain are the greatest evils."<sup>15</sup> So despite the fact that war is dreadful, Lewis argues that sometimes it is necessary to ensure justice and peace. The pain and suffering that comes from war, he submits, "shatters the illusion that all is well . . . [and] that what we have, whether good or bad in itself, is our own and enough for us."<sup>16</sup>

C.S. Lewis also dealt with the issue of war and peace in his *Screwtape Letters*. In this book, the extremes of pacifism and patriotism present the elderly tempter, Screwtape, and his accomplice, Wormwood, with a plethora of diabolical possibilities. The more sophisticated and experienced Screwtape encourages his pupil to "consider whether we should make the patient an extreme patriot or an extreme pacifist. All extremes . . . are to be encouraged."<sup>17</sup> Lewis warns that when a firm conviction of either pacifism or just-war dictates how and to whom one shows love, then surely we have allowed evil to conquer love. Later the author expands on the partisanship that often accompanies extreme beliefs. Wormwood writes: "let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of the partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him into the stage at which religion becomes merely part of the 'cause' and his [faith] is valued chiefly for the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war effort or of Pacifism."<sup>18</sup> Lewis wanted to ensure that in the end a belief in pacifism or the just-war theory would complement a person's faith and not undermine it. Love fails when an adamant belief in a side of an argument, causes one to hate and disregard the value of another person, simply because they happen to hold the opposite opinion. Lewis disagreed with Pacifism, but he did not hate the pacifist. He comments, "War is a dreadful thing, and I can respect an honest pacifist,

though I think he is entirely mistaken."<sup>19</sup>

In 1941, C.S. Lewis delivered a lecture to the pacifist society at Oxford University. He attempted to answer the question "whether to serve in the wars at the command of a civil society to which we belong is a wicked action, or an action morally indifferent, or an action morally obligatory."<sup>20</sup> In this lecture, Lewis argued that pacifism fails to persuade on a number of levels of judgment including: facts, intuition, reasoning, and authority. On the issue of authority, Lewis considered Christian tradition to be against the pacifist argument. He wrote, "To be a Pacifist, I must part company with Homer and Virgil, with Plato and Aristotle, with Zarathustra and the Bhagavad-Gita, with Cicero and Montaigne, with Iceland and with Egypt. From this point of view, I am almost tempted to reply to the Pacifist as Johnson replied to Goldsmith, 'Nay Sir, if you will not take the universal opinion of mankind, I have no more to say.'"<sup>21</sup> Lewis points to the many political, religious, and literary figures that have defended the just war theory over the course of history. While he does not base his whole argument on this fact, he certainly sees authority as in the favor of the just war theory. Tony Campolo disagrees. He declares that C.S. Lewis was weakest in his defense against pacifism, "Lewis was a Medievalist and didn't read anything prior to 300 AD. If he had, he would have discovered that Tertullian and Origen were pacifists and the early church was pacifist."<sup>22</sup> If Campolo is correct on this point, Lewis still based his opposition to pacifism on a variety of points. If he had read these authors, it is safe to assume that his position would not have changed. His reasoning behind supporting the just war arguments are fundamentally linked to his thoughts on love, life, and reason.

C.S. Lewis acknowledged that war brings tremendous "misery, suffering, cruelty and unchastity"<sup>23</sup> but he suggests that "it is also an opportunity for virtue." The heated debate between pacifists and just-war theorists will continue as long as social debate continues. The differing, and often contrary, interpretations of violence, justice and love necessitate fundamentally different conclusions. Each side emphasizes different virtues. Yet, together they provide a richer picture of the transcendence and richness of our God. The Pacifist and Just-War theorist both serve a God of Love and a God of Justice, a Prince of Peace and a Consuming Fire. In his book, *Present Concerns*, C.S. Lewis introduces the medieval concept of 'chivalry'.<sup>24</sup> This idea reminds man of "the double demand on human nature" found in the complementing virtues of fierceness and meekness. Chivalry, according to Lewis, is the character that enables man to be "fierce to the nth degree and meek to the nth degree."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, a chivalrous approach to the debate between pacifism and just violence would be enlightening and

appropriate. The Christian community must not allow itself to be divided by its diversity. Instead, let us apply this concept of 'chivalry'. Would it not be better if we allowed the pacifist to defend with 'fierceness' Christ's call for agape love? Would we not all be enriched if we allowed the just-war theorist with 'meekness' to approach the task of combining justice with power? As the proverb goes: in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> David C. Downing. *Neither Patriot nor Pacifist, but "Patient": Lewis on War and Peace*. Elizabethtown College. 1999
- <sup>2</sup> Richard John Neuhaus. *C.S. Lewis in the Public Square*. First Things 88 (Dec 1998): 30
- <sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis. *The Weight of Glory* in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P. 46
- <sup>4</sup> *The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment*. Res Judicatae. (June 1953)
- <sup>5</sup> *Learning in Wartime*. in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P. 53
- <sup>6</sup> *The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment*. Res Judicatae. (June 1953)
- <sup>7</sup> *On the Transmission of Christianity in God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970. P. 118.
- <sup>8</sup> *Learning in Wartime*. in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P. 49
- <sup>9</sup> Letters of C.S. Lewis. Harvest Books 2003. P. 304-3055
- <sup>10</sup> *The Weight of Glory* in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P.
- <sup>11</sup> *Why I Am Not a Pacifist* in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P. 72
- <sup>12</sup> Letters of C.S. Lewis. Harvest Books 2003. P.300
- <sup>13</sup> *Mere Christianity*. Nashville.: Broadman & Holman, 1996. P. 107
- <sup>14</sup> *Sex in Literature* in Present Concerns ed. Walter Hooper. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1988. p. 105.
- <sup>15</sup> *Why I Am Not a Pacifist* in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P. 71
- <sup>16</sup> The Problem of Pain New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. 1962 P. 97-98
- <sup>17</sup> Screwtape Letters. San Francisco: Harper Collins. 2001. P. 40
- <sup>18</sup> Screwtape Letters. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

2001. P. 42-43
- <sup>19</sup> *Mere Christianity*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996. P. 107
- <sup>20</sup> *Why I Am Not a Pacifist* in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P. 64
- <sup>21</sup> *Why I Am Not a Pacifist* in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1980. P.81
- <sup>22</sup> Tony Campolo. *Faith which calls for Social Engagement*. Speech at the C..S. Lewis Summer Institute '98 at Oxford. July 24<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session.
- <sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis. Screwtape Letters. San Francisco: Harper Collins. 2001.
- <sup>24</sup> Darrell Cole introduces this concept in *The Problem of War: C.S. Lewis on Pacifism, War & the Christian Warrior*. Touchstone Magazine.16:3. April 2003. P. 45
- <sup>25</sup> *The Necessity of Chivalry* in Present Concerns, edited by Walter Hooper. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1986. P. 13-16