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Title: Fighting at the command of God: Reassessing the borderline case in Karl
Barth's account of war in the *Church Dogmatics*

Date: 2004

Originally published in: *Conversing with Barth*

Example citation: Clough, D. (2004). Fighting at the command of God: Reassessing
the borderline case in Karl Barth's account of war in the *Church Dogmatics*. In J. C.
McDowell & M. Higon (Eds.), *Conversing with Barth* (pp. 214-226). Aldershot:
Ashgate.

Version of item: Author's post-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/134592>

Clough, David. 'Fighting at the Command of God: Reassessing the Borderline Case in Karl Barth's Account of War in the *Church Dogmatics*.' in *Conversing with Barth*. Edited by John C. McDowell and Mike Higton. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 214-226.

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Fighting at the Command of God:

Reassessing the Borderline Case in Karl Barth's Account of War in the Church Dogmatics

'To the memory of one who faithfully fulfilled the office of teacher in the church' is the dedication that begins John H. Yoder's Karl Barth and the Problem of War, but in his extended interrogation of Barth's attitude to warfare Yoder does not allow his respect to stand in the way of strong and impassioned critique. Yoder draws on personal conversations with Barth and transcriptions of Barth's conversations with others in addition to Barth's published writings, and there are passages where Yoder makes it clear he is responding to Barth's comments on the draft of his manuscript. This makes the book an account of an interchange between two theologians, albeit reported by only one of them.

Yoder's account divides my sympathies: I troubled as he is by Barth's description in Church Dogmatics III/4 of the exceptional case in which warfare is commanded by God, but I disagree with Yoder that the problems here are the result of a fundamental problem with Barth's ethical method. In addition to recounting Yoder's conversation with Barth, therefore, I will also in this essay enter the dialogue as a third participant, suggesting a resolution of the difficulties in Barth's treatment of war with which neither of the other participants would wholly agree.

It may seem surprising that Yoder was prepared to engage so comprehensively with a passage of the Church Dogmatics that Barth conceded 'is perhaps not one of the most

felicitous'.¹ The discussion is fruitful in spite of the infelicities of the text because, in addition to being novel and provocative, Barth's account contains insights that go beyond the tired opposition of pacifism and Just War theory. Yoder is impressed by 'the monumental body of theologically integrated Protestant ethical thought which [the twentieth] century has seen'.² There are good reasons not to adopt the entirety of Barth's view of the ethics of warfare as expressed in the Church Dogmatics, as the following pages will make clear. Engaging with his position, however, is enlightening in key areas and clarifies both the issues at stake and the options available for a theological assessment of war.

In the Dogmatics, Barth treats pacifism and warfare in volume III/4. He completed it in 1951, and recent European history had given him ample opportunity both to

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reflect on the proper attitude of the Church to war, and to act on the result of his convictions. He vigorously supported the war against Hitler, and wrote to Christians in England, France, the United States, and elsewhere to urge them to do so.³ Barth discusses war under the heading of 'The Protection of Life', which he describes as the elucidation of the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. All human life belongs to God, so respect and protection is demanded for it. The commandment to protect it, however, is has its horizon

¹ Stimme der Gemeinde, 1963, 750 ff., cited by John H. Yoder, Karl Barth and the Problem of War (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 117 n.

² Yoder, Karl Barth, 15.

³ Barth's wartime letters are available in Karl Barth, Eine Schweitzer Stimme, 1938-1945 (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1945). Several are translated in Karl Barth, The Christian Cause (New York: Macmillan, 1941). Busch's biography (Eberhard Busch, Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts, trans. John Bowden [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976]) gives an account of Barth's activity in this period, and Will Herberg provides a short survey of a few of the letters in Will Herberg, 'The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth', introduction to Karl Barth, Community, State, and Church: Three Essays (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 11-67. Yoder includes a critique of Herberg's essay in John H. Yoder, Karl Barth and the Problem of War (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 119-131.

in the will of God the Creator, so the protection of life is limited and not absolute. To think otherwise would be to treat human life as ‘a kind of second God’.⁴ Barth notes that the main theme of the section on the protection of life is the exceptional case (Grenzfall) where ‘the Lord of life may further its protection even in the strange form of its conclusion and termination’.⁵ He discusses the possibility of this Grenzfall in relation to suicide, abortion, euthanasia, killing in self-defence, capital punishment, and tyrannicide before turning to a consideration of killing in warfare.

Barth’s first words on warfare call for an unflinching realism about the nature of modern national conflict. He identifies three illusions that we can no longer entertain. First, there are no longer uncommitted spectators in a nation at war. All members of a nation are now military personnel and therefore belligerents, directly or indirectly: no longer is war fought by small armies from the ‘military classes’. Second, it is now clear that the issue in modern warfare is economic power: ‘the struggle for coal, potash, ore, oil and rubber, for markets and communications, for more stable frontiers and spheres of influence as bases from which to deploy power for the acquisition of more power’. In the past, it was easier to believe that wars were fought for more noble motives, such as honour, justice, freedom, and other supreme values, but it is now difficult to believe this sincerely. The armaments industry, which its close links to science and industry ‘imperiously demands that war should break out from time to time to use up existing stocks and create the demand for new ones’. Barth amends the Roman proverb ‘if you want peace, prepare for war’ to ‘if you do not want war, prepare for peace’, but claims that the way in which we are possessed by economic power means that neither of these is applicable. We want a form of war even in peacetime, so our mobilization for war, and

⁴ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (subsequently CD), vol. III/4, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. A. T. MacKay et al., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 398 (Karl Barth, Kirchliche Dogmatik, vol. III/4 [Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1993], 453: page references to the English translation are followed by page references to the German edition in parentheses in all citations that follow).

⁵ CD III/4, 398 (454).

the outbreak of war, are inevitable. The third illusion Barth identifies is that war requires anything other than 'quite nakedly and brutally the killing of as many as possible of the men who make up the opposing forces'.⁶ Previously, it was easier to focus on the skill, courage, and readiness for self-sacrifice that war demanded of the individual, and to believe that the individual confronted by an individual enemy was in an unavoidable position of self-defence.

To-day, however, the increasing scientific objectivity of military killing, the development, appalling effectiveness and dreadful nature of the methods, instruments and machines employed, and the extension of the conflict to the civilian population, have made it quite clear that war does in fact mean no more and no less than killing, with neither glory, dignity nor chivalry, with neither restraint nor consideration in any respect...Much is already gained if only we do

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at last soberly admit that, whatever may be the purpose or possible justice of a war, it now means that, without disguise or shame, not only individuals or even armies, but whole nations are out to destroy one another by every possible means. It only needed the atom and hydrogen bomb to complete the self-disclosure of war in this regard.⁷

I interrupt Barth here to question whether the illusions he identified accurately characterize war as it is fought fifty years on. In relation to the first illusion, that there is a meaningful category of noncombatants, the evidence is mixed. Contemporary military techniques used by technologically advanced nations reduce the need for large-scale conscription, so there has been a movement back to smaller professional armies, but the recent increase in smaller scale wars, such as those in the Afghanistan, the former USSR and the former Yugoslavia, have made combatants of significant proportions of the

⁶ CD III/4, 452 (518).

⁷ CD III/4, 453 (518-9).

population. The military-industrial complex continues to require the daily involvement of many citizens in preparations for wars by their own nation, or by others via the lucrative trade in armaments.⁸ In addition, the sizable proportion of tax revenues devoted to military spending by most governments involves all members of society in war preparations at a different level.⁹ Barth's observations here are a useful reminder, then, of the involvement of the whole nation in preparing for and carrying out military operations. There is also a clear difficulty, however, in dismissing the distinction between combatants and noncombatants, traditionally known as the principle of discrimination in Just War theory: it removes a widely acknowledged—if less widely observed—check on the conduct of war. If war can be morally legitimate, as Barth will go on to claim, the absence of this principle would inevitably make it more destructive to a wider group of persons than it would be if the principle continued to be observed. While this point is rhetorically fruitful, then, spoken by the non-pacifist it is also morally irresponsible.

The second illusion about war from which Barth wishes to free us is that its motive is anything but the acquisition of economic power. Here, again, we have a useful reminder that the criterion of just cause in Just War theory is all too often a fig leaf barely covering the naked pursuit of national self-interest. Almost invariably, a purportedly just cause can be found to legitimize a war fought with baser intentions, and the difficulty of judging intentions from the outside make it difficult to gainsay such claims. We will make significant gains in realistic understanding of national motives if we accept that gaining economic power is very often the motive for war. This is not Barth's point, however. Barth wants us to accept that there is no other motive but gain of economic power for war. Were this a face-to-face conversation, we could argue about whether

⁸ For example, in the UK 672 000 of my fellow citizens (4 % of the UK working population) are employed either by the Ministry of Defence, or in arms-related industries (source: UK Defence Statistics 2000, published by the Ministry of Defence, London).

⁹ For example, in 2001 the UK devoted over 6 % of its public expenditure to the military (source: Budget Report 2001, H M Treasury, London).

motives for particular wars could be subsumed under this description. As I write in November 2001, the US is continuing its 'War on terrorism' in Afghanistan, and seems likely soon to carry out attacks in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan with apparent assent from the UK.¹⁰ Motives seem inextricably mixed here: most nations would accept the right of the US to use limited force in self-defence, yet given the scale and breadth of the US military aggression it is hard to escape the conclusion that its aims are much wider than this. It is not hard to find, however, to find examples of military actions where attributing

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economic gain as the sole motive is more implausible, such as the US military support of the UN distribution of famine relief in Somalia in 1992-3. Again, therefore, Barth's attempt to disabuse us of the illusion that war can be fought for noble motives is a valuable reminder of the need for an hermeneutic of suspicion in assessing motives for going to war, but its force is weakened by overstatement.

Barth's third illusion, that war is always total war, falls into a similar category. The refined objectivity of the methods used to kill has gone far beyond that of the 1950s, so that the act of initiating an attack that will kill and maim on a small or large scale can resemble participation in a video game. We have not yet thought through the implications of this for a theological assessment of war. Barth's claim, however, that war is always nations set on the complete destruction of each other, is unconvincing. We have certainly seen recent examples of this kind of total war: the systematic rape of Bosnian and Croatian women in the early 1990s; the massacre of the Tutsi people in Rwanda in 1994. Yet there are also counter-examples: neither Argentina nor the UK was set on the

¹⁰ *The Guardian*, November 29th, 2001.

complete destruction of the other in the war over the Falklands/Malvenas, and the US could have entirely destroyed the nation of Iraq at the end of the Gulf War, but did not. Barth's third illusion is perhaps the least plausible of the three.

Having stated these reservations about the three illusions about war Barth identified, I will return to Barth's contribution to the discussion. Following this blunt assessment of contemporary warfare, Barth states that the Grenzfall in relation to warfare must be stated with even stricter reserve than in the other cases of killing he considered previously. This is so for three reasons: first, war involves a whole nation in killing, making everyone responsible for whether this is commanded killing or forbidden murder; second, it involves killing those who are only enemies in the sense that they are fighting for their country; and third, war demands almost everything that God has forbidden be done by millions on a broad scale: 'To kill effectively, and in connexion therewith, must not those who wage war steal, rob, commit arson, lie, deceive, slander, and unfortunately to a large extent fornicate, not to speak of the almost inevitable repression of all the finer and weightier forms of obedience?'¹¹

All affirmative answers to the question of whether war can be commanded by God 'are wrong if they do not start with the assumption that the inflexible negative of pacifism has almost infinite arguments in its favour and is almost overpoweringly strong'.¹² Barth agrees with those who lament the Church's change of political theology after Constantine: 'in a kind of panic at all costs to give the emperor or other ruler his due there has been a complete surrender of the wholesome detachment from this imperial or national undertaking which the early Church had been able in its own way and for good reasons to maintain'.¹³ For Barth the mistake here is in eschatology: the Church's justification of war is an indication that 'the realities and laws of this passing aeon...have come to be

¹¹ CD III/4, 454 (519-20).

¹² CD III/4, 455 (520).

¹³ CD III/4, 456 (521).

rated more highly than the passing of this world and the coming of the Lord. The criterion has thus been

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lost without the application of which there can be no controlling Christian will and action within this passing aeon'. We have lost a sense of the 'unheard-of and extraordinary' idea of killing for the state: the primary task of Christian ethics in this context is 'to recover and manifest a distinctive horror of war and aloofness from it'.¹⁴

The exercise of power is an opus alienum for the state, Barth claims: the state possesses power and is able to exercise it, but Christian ethics must always challenge the state with the question of whether the exercise of power is necessary. The normal task of the state is 'to fashion peace in such a way that life is served and war kept at bay':¹⁵ it is when a state does not pursue this normal task that it is compelled to take up the abnormal task of war. It 'requires no great faith, insight nor courage' to condemn war absolutely, or to 'howl with the wolves that unfortunately war belongs no less to the present world order, historical life and the nature of the state than does peace'.

What does require Christian faith, insight and courage—and the Christian Church and Christian ethics are there to show them—is to tell nations and governments that peace is the real emergency to which all our time, powers and ability must be devoted from the very outset in order that men may live and live properly, so that no refuge need be sought in war, nor need there be expected in it what peace has denied. Pacifists and militarists are usually agreed in the fact that for them the fashioning of peace as the fashioning of the state for democracy, and of democracy for social democracy, is a secondary

¹⁴ CD III/4, 456 (521-2).

¹⁵ CD III/4, 456 (524).

concern as compared with rearmament or disarmament. It is for this reason that Christian ethics must be opposed to both.¹⁶

Barth suggests that ‘the cogent element of truth in the pacifist position’ will benefit if it is not presented as the total truth ‘but is deliberately qualified, perhaps at the expense of logical consistency’. The consistency of theological ethics ‘may for once differ from that of logic’.¹⁷

Yoder objects, as we will see, to the concept of the Grenzfall in Barth’s ethics, but up to this point he has been sympathetic to the substance of Barth’s discussion of war. When Barth turns to his critique of pacifism, however, Yoder is compelled to speak. He applauds Barth for taking a position ‘very near that of Christian pacifism...nearer in fact than of any really prominent theologian in the history of European Protestant dogmatics’,¹⁸ but notes that Barth has little understanding of the pacifist position he all but endorses. Yoder suggests that Barth’s knowledge of Christian pacifism when he wrote Church Dogmatics III/4 was restricted to the writings of Leo Tolstoy, acquaintance with the school of Leonhard Ragaz, and one book by G. J. Deering. Barth seems to believe, Yoder says, that the pacifist he opposes is a legalist, believes the state should immediately abandon violence, is not specifically Christian in his position, and takes principles from the Decalogue or the Sermon on the Mount as exceptionless norms. Yoder disclaims this ‘absolutist’ pacifism and claims that his dispute with Barth

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is therefore not a debate between pacifism and militarism, nor even between pacifism and non-pacifism. It is rather a debate to be carried on within the pacifist camp, between one position which is pacifist in all the general statements it can make but announces in advance that it is willing to make

¹⁶ CD III/4, 459 (525-6).

¹⁷ CD III/4, 461 (527).

¹⁸ Yoder, Karl Barth, 19.

major exceptions, and another position, nearly the same in theory, which is not able to affirm in advance the possibility of the exceptional case.¹⁹

After this interjection from Yoder, we will follow Barth a little further. After describing the horror of war, and the Church's responsibility for building peace, Barth moves on to describe the Grenzfall in which war may be commanded by God. The first criterion he provides to identify this possibility is that the existence or autonomy of a state must be attacked, so that a nation finds itself forced to choose to surrender or assert itself. Barth then asks why this possibility should be allowed, and responds 'that there may well be bound up with the independent life of a nation the responsibility for the whole physical, intellectual and spiritual life of the people comprising it, and therefore their relationship to God'. He continues:

It may well be that they are forbidden by God to renounce the independent status of their nation, and that they must therefore defend it without considering either their own lives or the lives of those who threaten it. Christian ethics cannot possibly deny that this case may sometimes occur. The divine command itself posits and presents it as a case of extreme urgency.

In a surprising single sentence small-print paragraph, Barth adds

I may remark in passing that I myself should see it as such a case if there were any attack on the independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Swiss Confederation, and I should speak and act accordingly.²⁰

Barth makes three further brief points about this exceptional case in the three pages he devotes to it. First, he suggests that a nation may be called to go to war to help a weaker neighbour, as well as if its own existence is threatened. Second, he recognizes that if a state is to be ready to go to war in these cases, it must prepare itself to do so even in peacetime, and arm itself accordingly. Third, Barth claims that the 'distinctively Christian note in the acceptance of this demand is that it is quite unconditional. That is to say, it is independent of the success or failure of the enterprise, and therefore of the strength of

¹⁹ Yoder, Karl Barth, 51-3.

²⁰ CD III/4, 462 (528-9).

one's own forces in comparison with those of the enemy'. If war 'is ventured in obedience and therefore with a good conscience, it is also ventured in faith and therefore with joyous and reckless determination'.²¹

I cannot help interrupting Barth here. This passage makes clear the distance between Barth and the Just War tradition. Barth dispenses with the criterion of probable success in Just War theory, which states that you must be likely to succeed in your objective for going to war. If observed, this principle reduces bloodshed by avoiding conflicts that are fruitless, which accords with overall aims of Just War theory: to reduce the number of wars and the damage done by them. These laudable and humane objectives are vital if the legitimacy of war is to be affirmed in a Christian context, and for Barth to set them aside puts the wars he foresees as

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permissible exceptional cases into the category of holy wars, or crusades, rather than just wars. Christians must either reject war, or help to win support for principles that minimize the damage it does. Barth does neither here.

Barth's final word on the subject of war in this volume is in relation to conscientious objection: he supports conscientious objection so long as it is in relation to particular wars, rather than absolute, and calls on the Church to guide individuals in these decisions, which may require the Church to counsel individuals not to fight for the state:

In doing so, it might have to accept the odium of unreliability in the eyes of the government or majority. In certain cases, it might have to be prepared to face threats or suffering, bearing for its part the total risk of this kind of revolutionary loyalty. But there have been prophets before, and where does the Church learn that it is absolved from facing the same risk?²²

²¹ CD III/4, 463 (530).

²² CD III/4, 4649 (539).

Yoder notes in relation to this passage the implication that

since the necessary war is very rare and cannot in fact be seen and decided upon in advance, the church should always be ready to enter corporately the ranks of the opposition, expressing here faithfulness to what the state should be though her insubordination to what the state is.²³

Having attended carefully to Barth's position, with only infrequent interruptions, let us now listen to Yoder. His central contention is that Barth's use of the category of Grenzfall is mistaken, and the mistake is particularly evident in the 'non-Barthian' way Barth uses extra-biblical categories to resolve the question of whether war could be commanded by God. Yoder questions the need for the attention Barth gives to exceptional cases in ethics: 'Why should it not be possible for a general statement in Christian ethics to have the same validity as a general statement within some other realm of Christian dogmatics?'²⁴ The concept of the Grenzfall means Barth expects exceptions in advance; the Grenzfall 'does not emerge unpredicted at a point where concrete problems turn out on inspection to be otherwise insoluble; the concrete cases are, rather, found to fit the place prepared for them by the systematic exposition'.²⁵ Barth is wrong that pacifists are less free to obey God: 'the pacifist who in his ethics claims to be bound to the general line of God's revelation without being able or authorized to predict exceptions is no less free for obedience than the theologian who in dogmatics is also bound to the general line of God's revelation in an affirmation about the nature of Christ or about the essence of the Church'.²⁶ Yoder asserts that if human finitude means it is impossible to affirm with complete certainty that God has always forbidden all killing, it

²³ Yoder, Karl Barth, 45.

²⁴ Yoder, Karl Barth, 61.

²⁵ Yoder, Karl Barth, 65.

²⁶ Yoder, Karl Barth, 62.

must be even less possible to affirm that there are places where God will affirm killing.²⁷

This leads him to his strongest charge against Barth:

the Grenzfall is not a formal concept with validity in the discipline of ethics. It is simply the label which Barth has seen fit to attach to the fact that, in some

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situations, he considers himself obliged to make a choice which runs against what all the formal concepts of his own ethics would seem to require. Barth has not constructed in the Grenzfall a reliable method of theological ethics in which it would be possible to found either logically or with relation to the revelation of God in Christ the advocacy of certain deviant ways of acting, such as killing when killing is otherwise forbidden. He has simply found a name for the fact that in certain contexts he is convinced of the necessity of not acting according to the way God seems to have spoken in Christ.²⁸

Yoder substantiates this charge in his consideration of Barth's delimitation of the exceptional case of warfare commanded by God. Barth's claim that a nation may be commanded to fight to ensure its survival is very surprising to Yoder. It reintroduces the idea of a Volk, with an independent moral value and a special relationship to God, which Barth rejected decisively earlier in the Dogmatics.²⁹ Yoder argues that the consequences of admitting the possibility of warfare are disproportionate to its status as an exceptional case. In particular, 'to say that the state should be constantly prepared for war is like saying that an honest man should always be prepared for lying or a faithful husband for divorce; it confuses an extreme eventuality with normality, thus demonstrating the

²⁷ Yoder, Karl Barth, 72-3.

²⁸ Yoder, Karl Barth, 73.

²⁹ Yoder, Karl Barth, 80. Barth wrote 'In this connexion we must consider one of the most curious and tragic events in the whole history of Protestant theology. It took place in Germany in the years between the two world wars. I refer to the novel elevation on a wide front, if with varying emphases, of the term 'people' to the front rank of theological and ethical concepts, and the underlying assertion and teaching that in the national determination of man we have an order of creation no less than in the relationship of man and woman and parents and children' CD 305 (345).

inadequacy of the Grenzfall as a tool for straight thinking'.³⁰ Respect for life itself, Yoder argues, is a philosophical abstraction from the biblical texts, which Barth then uses to justify the destruction of life.³¹

Yoder's conclusion is that 'between Barth and an integral Christian pacifism the only differences lie at points where Barth did not finish working out the implications of his originality'.³² Widening the discussion, he draws on two pieces of evidence to support his view. First, in volume IV/2 of the Dogmatics, Barth briefly revisits the topic of the use of force in his consideration of Jesus' directions to his disciples. Here he observes that Jesus attests to the kingdom of God 'as the end of the fixed idea of the necessity and beneficial value of force'. The kingdom 'invalidates the whole friend-foe relationship' in its call for love of the enemy. There can be no question of a general rule here, but

for the one whom Jesus, in His call to discipleship, places under this particular command and prohibition, there is a concrete and incontestable direction which has to be carried out exactly as given. In conformity with the New Testament one cannot be pacifist in principle, only practically. But let everyone give heed whether, being called to discipleship, it is either possible for him to avoid, or permissible for him to neglect becoming practically pacifist!³³

The second piece of evidence that Barth might have revised his treatment of warfare in III/4 is from a comment Barth made in 1962 concerning it, to which I have already referred: 'Of course that was all written in 1951...I cannot yet completely reject it even now. Nevertheless I would say, that it is perhaps not one of the most felicitous passages in the Kirchliche Dogmatik...I first spoke 99 percent against war and the

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³⁰ Yoder, Karl Barth, 107.

³¹ Yoder, Karl Barth, 112.

³² Yoder, Karl Barth, 118.

³³ CD IV/2, 530 (622), incorporating Yoder's revised translation (Yoder, Karl Barth, 116-7).

military. I hope this impressed you!’ In the same interview, he condemned the mischievous use of the text by some German politicians to prove the possibility of a modern just war.³⁴

Now that I have recounted the substance of the discussion between Barth and Yoder, I will enter the conversation more directly to offer my own assessment of the position we have reached, and a suggestion for a way forward. There are two aspects to Yoder’s criticism of Barth here: first, a general criticism of the structure of Barth’s ethics, centred on the concept of Grenzfall, and, second, a specific criticism of Barth’s discussion of warfare. I agree with the specific criticism, but dispute the general one. Barth’s use of the Grenzfall here is different from the way he uses it in discussing other cases of the protection of life. In each of the accounts of suicide, abortion, euthanasia, killing in self-defence, capital punishment, and tyrannicide, Barth emphasizes the reasons why the command of God will almost always require the protection of life, but he finally allows the possibility of rare exceptions. The openness to these borderline cases does not threaten the line of argument up to that point, and Barth does not call for deliberate preparation for the exceptional case. Yet in the case of war, the Grenzfall overturns and negates Barth’s argument that in 99 per cent of cases the command of God forbids warfare.

Comparison with Barth’s treatment of killing in self-defence is particularly instructive. Barth argues that self-defence is ‘almost entirely excluded’ by Pauline texts and the Sermon on the Mount. The latter puts the attacker in the same category as the beggar and the person who seeks a loan. Self-defence may be natural, but is forbidden to the Christian except in rare cases. Where Christians have been ‘strictly disciplined’, ‘thoroughly disarmed’, and ‘clearly pointed to peace’ it is then possible that they may

³⁴ Stimme der Gemeinde, 1963, 750 ff., cited and translated by Yoder, Karl Barth, 117 n.

hear the exceptional command to defend a third party or themselves.³⁵ If we were to follow the pattern of Barth's discussion of warfare, we would then go on to spell out the consequences of this exceptional case. If we are to be free to defend others and ourselves when we receive the Grenzfall command here, then we must be appropriately prepared. Training in self-defence will clearly be required, and our readiness for self-defence would be further enhanced if we ensure that we are armed at all times and regularly devote time to training in the use of firearms. Barth does not follow this path in the case of killing in self-defence because it is so obviously counter-productive. The command of God will almost always be to refrain from self-defence, so the preparation we require is to learn how to keep ourselves from following our instincts to strike back and how to resolve conflicts peacefully. Spending time in self-defence training and always carrying a firearm to be ready for the exceptional case where a forceful response is commanded by God would make it difficult or impossible to retain a commitment to not resisting one's attacker. Careful preparation for the exceptional case guarantees that it will be unexceptional.

This example is unfortunately not the caricature it seems to be. Barth's treatment of the Grenzfall case in discussing warfare is exactly analogous to training and carrying

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weapons for personal self-defence. He rejects retaining standing armies as a national policy, but requires preparation for war in peacetime if a country has decided only to go to war when commanded by God in an emergency.³⁶ This is in spite of Barth's earlier harsh criticism of national preparations for war in peacetime and its connection with the

³⁵ CD III/4, 427-37 (488-499).

³⁶ Switzerland required and still requires national service of all its male citizens, currently between the ages of 20 and 42. During this time regular training in the use of firearms is required, and arms are kept in the home.

military-industrial complex, and his statement that the task of the Christian Church and Christian ethics ‘is to tell nations and governments that peace is the real emergency to which all our time, powers and ability must be devoted from the very outset’.³⁷ We cannot devote all our powers to the emergency of peace, and at the same time devote some of our powers to making sure we are in a position to win a war if peace fails. The great economic and human resources such preparations for war demand is one of the most powerful arguments in favour of a national policy of pacifism. According to Barth’s discussion, the exceptional case in which we are called to war implies an exceptionless norm that requires us to expend substantial resources on war preparations. Yoder’s comparison with an honest person preparing to lie, or a faithful spouse for divorce—or, better, infidelity—is precisely to the point. Barth’s treatment of the exceptional case here overturns and renders irrelevant the 99 per cent he intended to speak against war and the military. His recommendation of routine preparation for war means that Barth cannot support his contention that war is an opus alienum of the state: it has clearly become the opus proprium he rejected.³⁸

One way of resolving these difficulties in Barth’s account of war would be to work back from this de facto acceptance of war preparations and weaken his earlier commitment to the insights of pacifism and the importance of preparations for peace. This option would clearly be against the major line of argument of this passage. Only 3 of the 20 pages on war in the English translation of Church Dogmatics III/4 are devoted to explicating the exceptional case: the other 17 emphasize the horror of war, the importance of building institutions for peace, and the role of conscientious objection.³⁹ The

³⁷ CD III/4, 459 (525).

³⁸ See Yoder, Karl Barth, 106: ‘Is is realistic, in terms of social psychology and in the light of the experience of highly armed nations, and is it straightforward use of language to retain such phrases as ultima ratio and opus alienum when readiness for war is thus organized?’

³⁹ While I am in strong agreement with Yoder that Barth’s treatment of the exceptional case undermines his statements against war, Yoder is inaccurate in claiming that ‘Barth uses almost as much space defending, defining, and demonstrating the necessity of the extreme case as he does in drawing

recommendation of practical pacifism in Church Dogmatics IV/2 and the interview Yoder cites from Stimme provide further evidence against this line of interpretation. As I have suggested above, to permit warfare while dismissing noncombatant immunity and the criterion of probable success is irresponsible. Thus the only coherent move to make in this direction is to adopt Just War theory, which cannot be reconciled with Barth's position that pacifism has almost infinite arguments in its favour.

A second alternative in interpreting Barth here is that offered by Yoder: reject the concept of Grenzfall and embrace the exceptionless ethical demand of pacifism. This option is counter to Barth's deepest metaethical commitments. All ethical absolutism is idolatrous, according to Barth: Christians must be obediently open to whatever God's command may require of them. Yoder bristles at being labelled an absolutist (see above), but the nub of his difference with Barth is that he does not share Barth's concern that rigid ethical system can interfere with attentive listening to God's command. Abandoning the idea that God might call us to something new would solve the difficulty with Barth's account of war, but at the cost of the greater part of his view of the relationship between theology and ethics.

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The difficulty I have identified with Barth's account of war in the Dogmatics is not with his treatment of pacifism, or the structure of his metaethics, but with his treatment of the exceptional case in relation to warfare. A more promising way of overcoming the difficulty addresses this issue directly. Barth must allow the possibility of the use of force in response to God's command, but he need not treat this possible scenario as he does. Returning to the example of self-defence, we have seen that Barth allows that self-

clearly the main line of his arguments' (Yoder, Karl Barth, 103). Given that Barth wished to delimit an exceptional case, the problem is rather the brevity of his description of it.

defence may be commanded in the Grenzfall case, but he does not recommend preparations for this eventuality. In the context of warfare, Barth stipulates that the exception is harder to justify because of the scale of the evil war creates, which means that preparations in this case would be for a possibility even rarer than self-defence. If we add to this that Barth considers that in peacetime we must devote all our energy to peacemaking, and that preparation for war demands substantial human and economic resources, we have a persuasive case that Christians cannot support preparations for the exceptional case in which they may be called upon to go to war: they are too busy with the emergency of peace to prepare for the distant and unlikely prospect of war, and know that war preparations are incompatible with serious attempts to build a peaceful order. This means there is no mandate to prepare for war. There remains the almost unthinkable possibility that God will call Christians to engage in large scale killing of their fellows, but this Grenzfall case no longer transforms the rest of the existence of the Christian. It is true that a nation governed on this basis will be less likely to succeed in war if it is ever called upon to fight, but the Christian vocation is to peacemaking, not to amassing state-of-the-art tools for killing and destruction, and consigning a significant section of society to manufacturing these armaments or to full-time training in using them without qualms. This development of Barth's position results in a consistent account in which his view of the nature of modern warfare and the insights of pacifism are respected, and the Grenzfall case is restored to its position at the fringe, rather than the centre, of his thought. The interpretation is in accordance with his suggestion of a position of 'practical pacifism' in Church Dogmatics IV/2, and with the evidence from the Stimme interview that he intended to write 99 per cent against war and the military. It also facilitates the task Barth assigns to Christian ethics here: 'to recover and manifest a distinctive horror of war and aloofness from it'.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ CD III/4, 456 (521-2).

The reinterpretation of Barth's treatment of the Grenzfall case in relation to warfare is important because it allows us to hear both his bleak analysis of the reality of modern warfare and his call to the Church to address the emergency of peace without being distracted by his strange account of the borderline case. We do well to pay attention to his reminder that all members of society are complicit in military preparations, that the real issue in warfare is frequently economic power, and that our possession by economic power in the shape of the military-industrial complex demands our continuous preparation for war. In particular, we need to reflect further on the meaning of the Christian vocation to be peacemakers, which Barth characterizes as telling 'nations and governments that peace is the real emergency to which all our time, powers and ability must be devoted from the very outset'.⁴¹

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This is a strong and counter-cultural message at a time when the dominant strain of the churches' contribution to the debate on the legitimacy of wars is a continual sober blessing of national military actions and the preparations that precede them. Barth challenges us to imagine a world in which we devote resources to serious efforts at peace-making: the £30 billion spent on the Kosovo/a war gives some sense of the possibilities here.⁴² He also helps us see beyond this extraordinary scale of expense to the immense and demonic economic forces that lead us to accept it. Such powers and interests will not be easily defeated, but the development of Barth's account of war in the Dogmatics I propose helps us to see clearly that the role of the Church is to prophesy against them, and to call nations to recognize the constant emergency of peace.

⁴¹ CD III/4, 459 (525-6).

⁴² 'Bill for Kosovo war goes over £30bn', Guardian 15th October, 1999, citing the BBC and Jane's Defence Weekly as sources.