

Pacifism and Just War: Beyond the Stereotypes

BY ERIN DUFAULT-HUNTER

How do we negotiate our dual identities, as followers of Christ and citizens of a democratic state, when the state goes to war? Two books offer insights—one from a study of contemporary religious perspectives, another through a survey of Christian tradition. Both challenge us to reflect deeply on our discipleship in a pluralistic and war-torn world.

When I lecture on violence and the Christian tradition in a secular university, I often begin by asking the students if they believe that they should live in accordance with the commands of Christ in the Bible. Invariably, several hands shoot into the air. Then I read from the Sermon on the Mount the portion about loving enemies and turning the other cheek. I ask all those who raised their hands to the previous question, “How many of you are pacifists, especially in light of September 11?” Inevitably, the number dwindles considerably if not entirely.

The students are fairly sophisticated about why they are not pacifists. They raise important points, like how can we stand on the sidelines while others defend our freedoms, and how can we be loving neighbors if we allow innocents to suffer at the hands of those who are evil? I ask them how a Christian president can order the killing of his enemies as Commander in Chief, and at least one will point out that the President is acting primarily as a statesman, as the leader of a nation, and not merely as an individual.

These students focus on a fundamental issue for believers. As Lisa Sowle Cahill puts it in *Love Your Enemies*, “the question is *how* the mandate

to live in love, peace, and forgiveness is to function in the practical moral life" (p. 13). More specifically, how are we to negotiate our dual identities, as followers of Christ and citizens of a democratic state, particularly when the state goes to war?

Two books offer insights into the complexities of war and peace, one from a comparative ethics perspective and another from a specifically Christian perspective. Both provide believers with valuable information and challenge us to reflect deeply on our "practical moral life" in a pluralistic and war-torn world.

Terry Nardin's edited collection, *The Ethics of War and Peace: Secular and Religious Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 296 pp., \$22.95), examines war and peace from diverse points of view. The book is structured in sections, beginning with the "classic debate" between political realism (which sometimes allows for morality to be subordinated to expedience in warfare) and Catholic natural law (which says that even for just causes, morality can never be ignored). While this section can be slow going, it offers valuable insight into how politicians and international relations specialists critically analyze war in light of ethical considerations. This is especially helpful in an era of carpet bombs, suicide attacks, and preemptive strikes. The book expands the discussion to include Jewish and Islamic views as well as the "critical perspectives" of Christian pacifism and feminism. The authors not only explain their perspectives, but highlight ways they differ from others who share a broad tradition.

A good place to begin reading this collection is at the end. Here you will find two articles—one by Nardin on "Comparative Ethics" and the other by Richard B. Miller on "Divine Justice, Evil, and Tradition"—that helpfully summarize arguments of other authors and provide conceptual handles for the novice. For example, distinctions between and within religious faiths, Miller suggests, often flow from differences in their "hermeneutical" or interpretative orientation to their scriptures. For example, how do we understand the Bible to function: as a revelation of law, a series of paradigmatic events, or a collection of snippets of good advice? Depending on how we approach our sacred text—or how a Jew or Muslim approaches theirs—we come up with different answers to our questions about war and peace. Indeed, due to this orientation, we might find ourselves closer in practice to those of another tradition than to those in our own—as when a Christian just war theorist finds camaraderie with a secular realist, or a Christian pacifist with some branches of feminism. One of the most helpful contributions of this book is an appreciation of how and why such alliances might form.

This book originated with a conference in 1993 at the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center. The aim of the conference and, largely, that of the book is to "facilitate a useful exchange of ideas between authorities on different

ethical traditions and between communities shaped by those traditions” (p. vii). Some might find the emphasis on dispassionate dialogue without judgment the epitome of relativism, and at least one of the authors, Mennonite Ted Koontz, questions the assumptions inherent in this methodology. Yet this collection can serve Christians not only as a resource of theories regarding war and peace, but in at least two other crucial ways. First, it delineates theories such as political realism so that we can see where this tradition often creeps into the Church’s discussions of war. We can then question whether or how such a philosophy should influence our choices as Christian citizens. Secondly, the essays by Jews and Muslims help us to appreciate how our traditions’ approaches to warfare are distinct from one another yet share a desire to authentically embody our faith in this particular time and place.

The Ethics of War and Peace makes this second point—the quite distinct way each monotheistic religion approaches war—by reminding us that European Christians have had a unique relationship to the state, at least since the time of Constantine. Historically, Jewish rabbis writing on “just” war usually did so within the context of regimes in which they had little if any political influence, and their application of Old Testament teachings and rabbinic thought was almost wholly theoretical. Not until 1948 is there a Jewish nation again, and scholars continue to wrestle with how old teachings apply in this setting.

Islamic thought, on the other hand, developed within tribal culture, in a society uninfluenced by the political structure of the nation state. Teachings on warfare divided the world neatly into *dar-al-harb* (the house of war and of non-Muslims) and *dar-al-Islam* (the home of peace and of believers). In addition, many modern Islamic states were recently European colonies. Americans are known for being forgetful of the past or, more positively, focused on the present and future. As such, we might need to recall that European (“Christian”) oppression and aggression going back to the Crusades remains poignant for many Muslims. It still figures prominently into their discussion of how to be faithful to Allah in a world no longer easily divided into the above categories, such as when two Muslim states (e.g., Iraq and Iran) are at war with one another.

Providing an important background to current debates over how Islam understands warfare, the two articles from Muslim scholars allow us to eavesdrop on an internal debate over the use of this tradition to affirm both violence and peacemaking. While obviously aimed at an academic audience, they offer us a nuanced appreciation of how Muslims, like Christians, argue with one another over the right interpretation of sacred texts and their faithful application to modern dilemmas.

Lisa Sowle Cahill’s *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994, 252 pp., \$20.00) reminds Christians of our on-going struggle to be dedicated believers in an ever-

changing world. Her book carefully reviews various Christian approaches to just war and pacifism from the early church to today. Far from seeking to be merely an academic or disembodied reiteration of theory, she recalls our past in order to motivate us to be faithful today.

She nicely mixes two purposes. First, she provides a historical overview of Christian views of pacifism and just war. This makes the book a fine resource for someone looking for an accessible review of a complex topic. While not agreeing with their theology or tactics, she helps us understand our most appalling and fascinating moments—including the Crusades, Joan of Arc, and the reformer's torture of heretics. We are shocked, for example, that some of our Christian ancestors unhesitatingly killed each other over theological differences, but Cahill notes that religious rhetoric is still invoked by many sides advocating violence against enemies. Perhaps in the future these justifications will read as oddly as the words of Cromwell, who—after his armies massacred defenders and confiscated Irish land—claimed he was an instrument of God's "righteous judgment...upon these barbarous infidels" (quoted on p. 143). These incidents remind us that culture and social setting powerfully influence us, even our ethics that we might usually consider unsullied by our position in history. The chapter recounting these episodes, entitled "War in God's Name," encourages us to humbly return to God and seek the Spirit's guidance today as we wage wars and work for peace.

Though Cahill—a Roman Catholic professor of theological ethics at Boston College—writes as an academic, she also writes as one invested in the community of faith and its obedience to Christ. The book also, then, functions as a persuasive text regarding war and peace, challenging us to wed our theology to our ethics. She avoids simplistic answers, and uses the rubric of the kingdom of God to help us negotiate the various approaches the church has had to these issues.

She explains what theologians call the "eschatological tension" inherent in the New Testament. The key question is how we understand the kingdom of God to be a present reality and/or a future one. Our ethics regarding war and peacemaking—and much if not all of our moral life—is, knowingly or not, rooted in our understanding of this important doctrine. As

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many of my students understand, it impacts how we relate our identity as followers of Christ to our social and national identities. When we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” do we believe that this kingdom is fulfilled in our personal relationships but not in our social and political ones? Does the Sermon on the Mount provide us with an unattainable ideal at which we aim, or does it exhort us in hope to

Does the Sermon on the Mount provide us with an unattainable ideal, or exhort us in hope to embody an alternative to earthly kingdoms that are based on violence? Cahill deals with this crucial link between the kingdom of God and practical Christian discipleship. It’s worth a close read and reminds us of the importance of “theoretical” beliefs for our Christian practice.

embody an alternative to earthly kingdoms that are based on violence? The second chapter of the book deals with this crucial link between the kingdom of God and practical Christian discipleship. It is well worth a close read and reminds us of the importance of “theoretical” beliefs for our Christian practice.

While justification of warfare under certain circumstances continues to dominate Christian history and current thought, Cahill’s book also notes the importance of a pacifist in-

terpretation of the Gospel. Both just war theory and pacifism share a desire to limit violence, but with a key difference. Just war theory is primarily a rule-based morality: it sets conditions for exceptions to the “rule” of peace and criteria for how this violence is to be conducted by Christians. Although many critics of pacifism interpret it as similarly rule-based (e.g., founded on an absolute command against taking human life), Cahill maintains that the heart of pacifism lies elsewhere—in the radical community created when the kingdom of God is preached and embodied. In this way, the practices of peacemaking and nonviolence are not commands *per se*, but rather are integral aspects of a community shaped by the desire to grow into Christ. While most forms of pacifism share this emphasis of the kingdom in the present, Cahill—and two articles on pacifism in Nardin’s collection—also note varieties of Christian pacifism and the differing ways they understand such things as biblical texts, the use of other sources, and the Christian’s participation in government.

Cahill concludes her book by reiterating her chief concern: faithful discipleship. Even in a democratic state, the tension between earthly and heavenly kingdoms remains. She quotes New Testament scholar Ulrich

Mauser, who insists that all Christians are called to “the discipline of being radical,’ by which he means a constant struggle against the idolatries and violence of the public order.... ‘Precisely as a community of peace, the Christian community must constantly be expected to infuse an element of disquietude into public life’” (p. 244).

However we understand this tension between future fulfillment of the kingdom and our present moral life, Christians must live as if the resurrection really matters—or, as some have put it, live a life possible *only* if Christ has been raised from the dead. Our hope finally rests not in our political, social, or military successes, but in our re-identification through our baptism with the risen Jesus, and it is this “‘future’ power in the ‘present’ that sustains compassion, forgiveness, and even nonviolence as the edge of God’s healing action amid the ambiguities, evils, and despair of history” (p. 246).



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