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A Time to Kill?
Christian Perspectives on War and Peace

War and the American Difference
Stanley Hauerwas

Just Peacemaking and Terrorism
Glen Stassen

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Love and War in the Early Church

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>section</th>
<th>page</th>
<th>title</th>
<th>authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Dispatch II: When Should Christians Go To War?</td>
<td>Hans Anderson, Charles Clark, Samir Paul, and Jinju Pottenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bonhoeffer and Pacifism</td>
<td>Anne Goetz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Just Peacemaking in the Context of Terrorism and Nuclear Threat</td>
<td>Glen H. Stassen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Love and War in the Early Church</td>
<td>Andrew Forsyth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>War as the Perversion of Creation</td>
<td>Matthew Cavedon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Let Them Sing: Being Christian in a World of War</td>
<td>Rachel Wagley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>features</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Must Christians be Pacifists?</td>
<td>J. Joseph Porter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>War and the American Difference</td>
<td>Stanley Hauerwas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Seven Swans: Elliott Smith Transfigured?</td>
<td>Andrew Chen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiction</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>The Red Sweater</td>
<td>Ann Chao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>last things</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Against Death Itself</td>
<td>Cameron D. Kirk-Giannini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poetry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kevin McGrath (3) Michael Yashinsky (14) Judith Huang (23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editor’s Note

What is it Good For?

I was seven when I first saw war. It was 1995, and NATO had recently entered Bosnia, joining a conflict marked by incredibly brazen war crimes, including ethnic cleansing and brutal mass rape.

As the conflict raged on that September, I watched from the safety of my living room in DC’s posh suburbs. All I could see of the war — indeed, all most of America could see — was whatever news-media outlets relayed to us from the front. So the night-vision footage that CNN talking heads analyzed over and over again didn’t really feel like war; it might as well have been a green-and-black fireworks show that was taking place “somewhere else.”

I’ll chalk it up in part to my age, but I don’t think my detachment was unique. My distance from the violence left me unshaken by war’s gruesome realities and perversions. The Gospel should snap us out of this placidity and demand that we recognize the way war deforms the soul, even when it is happening halfway around the world.

We look ahead, of course, to a new heaven and a new earth in which all Creation is freed of such ills. But if we resign ourselves either to a purely apocalyptic eschatology (waiting idly for God to act because the world is so wracked by sin) or to a purely realized eschatology (not expecting God to act ever because it’s all up to us), we cheapen the Gospel. Instead, Christians should hope constantly for God’s return to, as NT Wright says, “put things to rights,” all the while living into the Kingdom and anticipating life under the final reign of Jesus. The Cross and the Resurrection call Christians out of passive hope into active, missional hope.

This means living in such a way as to bear witness to the world as it will be — that is, living as a people that loves peace as much as God does. We ought to consider Isaiah 2 and take seriously what it means to hope actively for a world in which the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and tanks into tractors. What does it mean to live faithfully to Jesus’ proclamation of a new and perpetual Jubilee in a world as yet unredeemed?

It’s not a simple question to answer, and so we tackle one particular aspect of it — war and what Christians ought to think of it — in this issue. We’re particularly pleased to feature Professors Stanley Hauerwas and Glen Stassen in this issue. Stassen, of Fuller Theological Seminary, applies his “Just Peacemaking” theory to terrorism to ask what Christians can actively do to seek peace (p. 8). And Hauerwas, one of the world’s sharpest and most provocative theologians, examines the ties between American civil religion and war (p. 24). Join us as we think critically and Christianly about war and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Peace,
Samir Paul
Editor-in-Chief
I AM the voice of the unseen
You shall never know me,
Listen as my words evaporate
What I say refers to nothing.

All the days of life vanish
Each one polishing your soul,
When the last morning arrives
Then you see through time.

There I stand always waiting
As your prayers glimpse me,
Or perhaps in love you saw
My perfect form more closely.

Pursuing all the ways
Complete in our division,
We shall become so true
Just you and I together:

Glittering, benign, transparent
Empty and fully spacious,
Without death or any ruin
I am more than you conceived.

A gracious sun in hiding,
Where love is undivided,
We are lacking in distinction
A passionate love compulsive
One duration just the same.

Kevin McGrath is an associate of the Sanskrit Department and poet in residence at Lowell House, Harvard University.
Let us reframe the question: Do we take the hope of Christ seriously enough actually to trust in it?

Nonviolence is a consequence of hearing the glad tidings of the Gospel. It follows from obedience to the messiah who would rather die than take up the sword of revolutionary violence, the God who does not wish for us to pursue temporal peace and justice in the way of Pharoah.¹

We reject the modernist compromise of Schleiermacher and Niebuhr, and we will not accept a sanitized “realist” Christianity that has been run through the meat-grinder to be made palatable to the liberal democratic establishment.² Karl Barth initiates this project of liberating God-talk: He puts forth a totalizing Christian vision of how the universe is and ought to be, wresting lordship from convenience and returning it to Christ Jesus. And his student, the Mennonite John Howard Yoder, finishes the fight, demanding that the Church recognize Jesus as Lord of not just our hearts, but our politics, as well.

We must believe so fiercely in this lordship and in the truth of the Gospel — indeed, to the exclusion of many things that others believe — that we adopt nonviolence in part to protect the God-breathed lives of those who disagree with us. But even more, we must reject violence to protect ourselves from doing as sinners do: killing. We are violent creatures; avowing nonviolence acknowledges our impulse to dominate the weak and meets it head-on. A commitment to peace frees us to claim the truth of the Gospel without becoming Caesar.

Most of all, we must choose nonviolence because we bear witness to a peace that is yet to come, and so we remain faithful to that hope even as we work toward what should be right now: Active nonviolence is how we steadfastly live in anticipation of the Kingdom, already knowing how the story ends: Love wins. Such an ethic trusts in God and affirms our commitment neither to give up nor to idolize our own agency in the drama of history. And in the face of the ultimate sacrifice, as my brother says, “Christians who trust in the Prince of Peace must pray that they will be faithful when the time comes for them to bear witness to the power of God rather than to the power of violence.” Some things are worth dying for — even if for once we actually do have to turn the other cheek.

Samir Paul, Harvard

Samir Paul ‘10, Editor-in-Chief of The Harvard Ichthus, is a senior computer science concentrator in Mather House.

Charles Clark, Dartmouth

The question, “When should Christians go to war?” suggests two principal readings. The first reading is, “When should Christians support a war politically?” and the second is, “When should Christians fight as soldiers?” Just War Theory, pioneered by Augustine and Aquinas, is primarily concerned with the former, that is, with the actions of nations in forming and executing policies regarding the use of force. One facet of Just War Theory is a set of principles for evaluating the justice of a nation’s entrance into war. These principles mandate that a nation going to war must possess just cause, proper authority, right intention and reasonable hope for success. I accept these principles on the grounds that they discourage self-serving, unnecessarily violent conflicts, which are contrary to the Christian’s responsibility to cultivate peace, while allowing Christians to support wars that seek to address wrongs committed against themselves and others with the measured use of force, which is in keeping with a Christian’s responsibility to enact and defend justice. Moreover, Just War Theory allows cooperation on war policy between Christians and non-Christians, which is evidenced by its influence on the United Nations Charter. Christians are responsible for exercising their political rights and praying for those in authority in order that peace may be disrupted only when necessary to establish justice.

As to when individuals should participate in a war directly, the New Testament presents Cornelius, a Roman centurion who becomes a Christian. Centurions were career military men with years of experience in battle. Even prior to his conversion, Cornelius is described as “righteous,” and he is not commanded to leave the military in order to follow Christ. So his occupation excludes neither righteousness nor Christian discipleship. And in 2 Timothy 2, Paul compares Timothy’s role as a servant of the Gospel to that of a soldier who dutifully serves his commanding officer. My conclusion from these passages is that the profession of a soldier is as moral or immoral as the actions of the individual soldier in the performance of his duty, which could be said for any profession. Put another way, the question of when Christians should become soldiers is little different from the question of when Christians should become doctors, lawyers, or bankers.

Charles Clark ’11, Editor-in-Chief of the Dartmouth Apologia, is a Dartmouth junior studying Literary Theory and Classical Archaeology.
Jinju Pottenger, Princeton

Murder is strongly condemned in the Bible, from the very first murder of Abel by Cain up through the Ten Commandments and countless times in the New Testament. However, does war fall under the prohibition of murder? The ancient Israelites, under God’s direction, waged wars that offend the secular reader who rejects God’s sovereignty over all life. But elsewhere the Bible comes down strongly on the side of peace, from the Psalms to the Benedictions. In fact, it appears that Ecclesiastes 3:8b, “There is a time for war, and a time for peace,” sums up our relationship with war: Sometimes, war is God’s will and waging it is part of His greater purpose and plan.

However, war as it is fought today could not be fought for purposes further from those of God. Wars of genocide and greed are clearly sinful. Wars that are fought brutally, with the maximization of suffering, are also not condoned. Jus ad bellum and jus in bello both matter.

I would go so far as to say that all wars waged in a modern nation-state system are against God’s will, and ones in which Christians should not participate. The state primarily protects its own interests, which is in radical contrast to God’s call to His children — namely, to act oppositely to our own interests for His sake. Although war is permissible when directly led by God, war for the sake of national security is the same as war for the sake of territorial expansion or other illegitimate reasons. War as nation-states wage it today is sin.

By way of analogy, a nation-state going to war is like an individual whose job requires murder. Both the state and the individual are made more secure by their actions: the former against state failure by warring with threats; the latter against poverty. However, there are other, less sinful options for the individual seeking provision and for the state seeking security.

While war may be permissible for Christians under certain circumstances, in the modern age, it is not so because of the tension between God’s command that we love our enemies and the state’s command that we kill them for the sake of national security. Human life is God-given and God-breathed and can only be taken at His command and without error — namely, not through the system we have now.

Hans Anderson, Yale

There is a war which we Christians must wage always and in all places: Jesus announced, “I came not to send peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34; cf. Luke 12:51), while Paul clarified, “We do not wage war as the world does; the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world” (II Corinthians 6:3-4). Christians wage the war of the Spirit, the war against sin and evil (cf. Ephesians 6:12; 1 Peter 2:11). This war is not one from which Christians may choose to abstain, for when a Christian gives her life to Christ, the fallen world declares war upon her (cf. Matthew 24:9; John 15:18). Nor can Christians expect this war to cease (cf. II Corinthians 6:14-16) until darkness is at last dispelled and all things are made new in Christ.

Precisely because Christians wage war against the very kingdom of darkness binding up the world, the perfect Christian life excludes war either of the world or for the world. Jesus blessed the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), but He did not bless the warriors. Why? “My kingdom is not of this world,” He said; “if it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest” (John 18:36). When Peter cut off a man’s ear to defend Jesus, Jesus rebuked him and healed the victim (inter alia, Luke 22:50-51). If Christ would not permit Peter to fight in His own righteous defense, how could we ever presume to fight in defense of any worldly cause? Jesus healed the servant’s ear to show Christians our proper place vis-à-vis worldly war: We are to minister to the victims of violence rather than to combat even unjust violence with our own.

Of course, certain Christians hold a doctrine of “just war”, as if murder ceased to be sin whenever certain conditions are met. This doctrine is an invention foreign to the faith of the apostles, patristic writers (e.g. John Chrysostom, “On The Priesthood”), and early martyrs (cf. Acts 7:59-60, 14:19-22). There is one condition alone which supersedes God’s interdiction against murder: God’s extraordinary authorization. Otherwise, Christ calls us to peace. More precisely, He calls us to spiritual war always and in all places against the very temptation which would draw us into worldly war.

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[1] For a comprehensive case for Christian pacifism, see Yoder’s The Politics of Jesus.
[2] “Liberal democracy” here does not refer to a political party, but rather to the political philosophy.

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Bonhoeffer and Pacifism

Anne Goetz

Courage and cruelty, honor and horror, miraculous escapes and damning coincidences are the stuff of film and novel, but also — at singular moments of history, for some few people — the stuff of life. In the wild days of World War II, a mild-mannered young German pastor, a theologian of some note and a staunch pacifist, joined a group of conspirators plotting to assassinate Hitler. When the attempt failed, he was brought to Flossenbürg concentration camp and there executed on April 9, 1945, just three weeks before the camp was liberated. The example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s action is inspiring, but it would be a mistake to study it without paying attention to the thought that lay behind it. His decision to participate in the resistance movement was not a simple one; even under Hitler’s dictatorship he does not admit easy answers to the problem of responding to the competing claims of personal holiness and worldly justice. Bonhoeffer’s rationale for resistance is a profoundly complicated rejection both of the categorical refusal of all violence whatsoever and of the acceptance of violence as an ordinary part of life. Such a nuanced discussion is necessary in our time as much as ever.

The key to Bonhoeffer’s thought is an understanding of what he means by “deeds of free responsibility for the sake of the other.” The necessity of a situation can call for acts of violence (hence, an individual is called to be “responsible”), but this does not mitigate the sin entailed in violence (hence, the act is “free”, not ordered by the law of God).

There is now no law behind which the responsible man can take cover, and there is, therefore, also no law which can compel the responsible man to take any particular decision in the face of such necessities. In this situation there can only be the complete renunciation of every law, together with the knowledge that here one must make one’s decision as a free venture, together also with the open admission that here the law is being infringed and violated and that necessity knows no commandment. Bonhoeffer here is talking about “law” in two different senses. In the first sentence, he points out that violence cannot be mandated as part of the normal course of life. The decision to take violent steps for “the greater good” can never be formulated as a strict law to be followed; all violence must be seen as non-normative action. Choosing the lesser of two evils should not be the course charted out in everyday life; it is reserved for extraordinary circumstances, when all other choices fail. The second sentence takes law instead to mean both “generally accepted moral principles” and the call of conscience, which traces itself back to some “universal law of good.” Although these laws must sometimes be broken by the responsible person, necessity does not expiate the guilt of their violation. Bonhoeffer rejects the attitude that places the individual’s own holiness and guiltlessness at the center of his action, rather than the well-being of others.
Living for the other, Bonhoeffer says, is simply following the example of Christ, who is the perfect “man for others”. Because Christ did not live for himself, but lived for us, so too we must not live for ourselves. Bonhoeffer points out, “Jesus is not concerned with the proclamation and realization of new ethical ideals; he is not concerned with Himself being good (Matt. 19:17); he is concerned solely with love for the real man, and for that reason he is able to enter into the fellowship of the guilt of men and take the burden of their guilt upon Himself.” However, Bonhoeffer’s explanation is deeply problematic. The fact remains that Christ was “tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin” (Heb 4:15). Moreover, He calls us to be “perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). If this is so, how can we justify breaking God’s law? How is any possible rationalization of violence adequate?

This is a difficult objection and cannot be sidestepped. It is not right to say that we must give up our convictions and break God’s laws for the sake of the “greatest good.” Similar arguments have been used to justify atrocities. On the other hand, the Great Commandment, to love others as you love yourself, is “the entire law summed up in a single command” (Galatians 5:14). There seems no clear way to decide what to do when absolute purity and love for the other conflict. Bonhoeffer’s answer is that “this does not mean an everlasting conflict, but the winning of ultimate unity; for indeed the foundation, the essence and the goal of concrete responsibility is the same Jesus Christ who is the Lord of conscience.” If one’s conscience, which is bound to the law, is subservient to Christ, who is the ultimate example of free responsibility, then somehow, the two can be reconciled.

Bonhoeffer points not to ideals or principles, but to the person of Jesus, our example and Lord. It is by looking to Him alone, not to a formula, that we can resolve the tension inherent in the decision to violate laws for the sake of others.

How, then, can Bonhoeffer’s thought help us to live our lives? After all, as Bonhoeffer points out, there can be no concrete guidelines set out beforehand to govern when violence should be used. He cannot help us to decide when we must use it, and when to abstain. Perhaps the greatest benefit of Bonhoeffer’s argument is not to give practical help on deciding when violence must be used, but to guard against two different, competing views. The first is the argument of strict pacifists, that we must never stoop to any sort of violence whatsoever, even if it seems to be for the most just cause. Bonhoeffer argues that to refuse to take on guilt for the sake of others is to refuse to follow the example of Christ. On the other hand, his argument also guards against the mistake of those who say that violence should simply be another ordinary aspect of life. Violence of necessity must be used under only extraordinary circumstances. It must not be countenanced except when absolutely necessary for the good of others, and even then it is not a morally easy choice. The difficulty of this is, of course, in the contingency of it all; it would be much easier to simply say that either violence is never acceptable or that it is always acceptable, provided it is used in a well-intentioned way.

However, life constantly presents situations that are not simple or morally clear; the nuance of Bonhoeffer’s thought fits the complexity of the world. Bonhoeffer’s thought, which led to such heroic and costly action done for the sake of others, tells us where we can stand: not fixed in strict obedience to unbending laws, nor in a chaos of relativity without recourse, but looking to the lordship of Jesus Christ.


Anne Goetz ’11, an English concentrator in Pforzheimer House, is Books & Arts Editor of The Ichthus.
For too long, people have interpreted Jesus’ teachings of peacemaking practices as Platonic ideals, high and beautiful, but not practical in real life. But when Jesus taught the leaders in Jerusalem that they needed to practice peacemaking or the temple would be destroyed, he was talking realistically about a real threat and about the practical way to avoid the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem — which happened as Jesus had prophesied in 70 A.D.

For too long, people have treated Jesus’ teachings of peacemaking practices as if they were general principles. This diverts us from building our houses on the rock — actually living out Jesus’ words.

What is Just Peacemaking?

We have fashioned just peacemaking by beginning with Jesus’ teachings of peacemaking practices — as the way of realism — and connecting with analogous effective practices in our time. Our ten just peacemaking practices are concrete practices that are working in real history to prevent the destruction of war. Each just peacemaking practice is a historically contextualized teaching of Jesus analogously contextualized for our time. And each is being demonstrated to work effectively to prevent numerous wars, as attested by recent historical experience and the disciplines of political science and international relations. The new paradigm with its practices was developed by thirty interdenominational Christian ethicists and international relations specialists — the majority supporters of just war theory, and the minority pacifists — and is now being adapted by leading Muslim and Jewish scholars, based on the texts of their faiths.1 We do not agree on the justice of making wars, but we agree on the need to prevent wars by specific practices that work. The ten practices of just peacemaking are:

1. (Mt 5:38-42) Support nonviolent direct action, as practiced by Mohatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nonviolent direct action has toppled dictators such as Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, the Shah in Iran, and Erich Honecker in East Germany. It is based on Jesus’ way of transforming initiatives.
2. (Mt. 5:38-42) Take independent initiatives, as developed by the social psychologist Charles Osgood. This practice is how President George Bush senior and Gorbachev got rid of half their nuclear weapons.
3. (Mt. 5:21-26) Use cooperative conflict resolution. President Carter used this practice to achieve peace in the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel; many other negotiations have prevented wars.2
4. (Mt 7:1-5) Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa used this practice to end longstanding historical injustices, and president Obama is nudging Turkey to use it to heal deep resentment over the Armenian genocide in 1915.
5. (Mt. 6:19-33) Advance human rights, religious liberty, and democracy. During the 20th century, democracies with human rights fought no wars against one another.
6. (Mt. 6:19-33) Foster just and sustainable economic development. Political scientist Ted Gurr has demonstrated that the most frequent cause of intranational violence, civil war, insurgency, and terrorism is not absolute poverty, but deprivation relative to expectations.3

Jesus was no Platonic idealist; he was a Jewish realist.
7. (Mt. 5:43ff.) Work with cooperative forces in the international system. International cooperation is crucial for progress toward abolishing nuclear weapons worldwide.

8. (Mt. 5:43ff.) Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights. Unilateral policies cause more wars. The unilateral policies of the previous U.S. administration have demonstrated the point, engaging the U.S. in the War on Terrorism, the Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War. This calls for the present administration to engage in healing initiatives of cooperation.

9. (Mt. 26:52) Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade. Reducing offensive weapons, especially nuclear weapons, and also the arms trade in weapons to developing countries, makes war less likely.

10. Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups (Jesus’ strategy of gathering disciples and starting groups in villages).4

Just Peacemaking in Today’s World

Can this new paradigm for the ethics of peace and war, Just Peacemaking, guide us to more effective and preventive policy in our time of terrorist threat in the presence of nuclear weapons?

One thing is clear: declaring war on terrorism, on Afghanistan, and on Iraq, while abdicating responsibility for justice for Palestinians and for security for Israel, has not decreased terrorism but increased it. In fact, declaring “war on terrorism” is a euphemism for war on Muslim terrorists and two Muslim nations (Afghanistan and Iraq). The anger of Arabs and Muslims has increased accordingly, along with recruitment of terrorists. The official report of the U. S. Department of State on international terrorism shows the astounding increase in terrorist incidents worldwide since the Iraq War and the torture of prisoners:

- 208 terrorist attacks caused 625 deaths in 2003;
- 3,168 attacks caused 1,907 deaths in 2004.

Approximately 14,500 attacks caused 22,605 deaths in 2007.

The just peacemaking practices of human rights and sustainable economic development are crucial for halting recruitment to terrorism. This is how Turkey has basically ended the PKK terrorism of its Kurds. Economists Alan Krueger and Jitka Malecková5 show that “when Palestinian college enrollment doubled in the early 1980s, coinciding with a sharp increase in the unemployment rate for college graduates,” and “the real daily wage of college graduates fell by around 30 percent,” then frustrated and angry Palestinians turned to the popular intifada of 1988. When “the Israeli occupation of the territories and lack of an effective capital market or banking system…prevented the labor markets in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from equilibrating,” the violent intifada of 2000 broke out.

Another thing is clear: avoiding talking with North Korea for seven years, and avoiding talking with Iran ever since the hostage crisis in 1979, while threatening them as the axis of evil, has not decreased their determination to produce plutonium or enrich uranium. North Korea has produced the plutonium for about nine atomic bombs, and tested one bomb. Iran is now enriching uranium to 3.5 percent, enough to run electricity generators, but not to be fissile material in bombs. They would need to enrich to 85 percent for a bomb. Their level of enrichment is being monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency. If they expel the IAEC monitors and switch their centrifuges to producing highly enriched uranium, it would take them a month or two to have enough to construct a bomb. It would probably take a couple of years to perfect the technology to build a bomb.

Just peacemaking has a better response than refusing to talk. Its practices of justice, cooperative conflict resolution, and international cooperation are crucial. In fact, the Bush administration, led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, finally allowed Christopher Hill to talk with the North Korean
representative, and in two days he worked out the agreement for them to shut down their reactor and hopefully to give up their plutonium, depending on how relations go during the Obama administration.

Influential editorials in *The Wall Street Journal* (January 4 and 13, 2007) by seventeen conservative U.S. former national security policy-makers, including George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, James Goodby, and Sam Nunn, declared that the existence of large numbers of nuclear weapons in the world threatens to destroy untold numbers of humankind; and it decreases U.S. security. Today’s problem is preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons into more dangerous hands. They agree that the United States would be far more secure in a nuclear-free world. The power of the U.S. military to deter a conventional attack is more effective than nuclear weapons are against a nuclear attack. This means that if Christians work toward eliminating nuclear weapons, we have influential allies.6

These conservative national security experts advocate specific steps: extend key provisions of the 1991 and 2002 treaties verifying and reducing the size of nuclear forces internationally, agree with Russia to move away from operational plans for massive nuclear attacks based on short warning times, ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, affirm the development of the fissile materials cutoff treaty to halt production internationally of nuclear fissile materials for weapons, develop an international system that provides reliable supplies of nuclear fuel for electricity so nations like Iran do not have an incentive to enrich uranium unilaterally, accelerate Nunn-Lugar programs for security for nuclear weapons and for preventing terrorists from acquiring a nuclear bomb, strengthen inspections for the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and reach agreement for further reductions in nuclear weapons internationally. The more worldwide reductions in nuclear weapons are achieved, the safer we all are. President Obama has now declared for these steps and has begun to implement them. But unilateral disarmament would not solve the problem. It must be achieved by the just peacemaking practices of international cooperation and cooperative conflict resolution.

**Additional Resources**


See also:


The United States would be far more secure in a nuclear-free world

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Love and War in the Early Church

Andrew Forsyth

We shouldn't be surprised that the early church struggled with the morality of war. Protestants, like myself, too often assume that the return to the sources demanded by Renaissance humanists and the European reformers necessarily renders earlier better, or at least simpler. It is my contention that while we should recognize the important insights of the comparatively powerless early church on the morality of love and war, today we must act responsibly with the power and influence U.S. Christians undoubtedly possess.

In looking for the earliest commentary on war we are met with darkness. We have no accounts of the church's thinking until the late second-century, and when our historical record begins, discernable Christian views are surprisingly subtle. From the 170s A.D. to the time of Constantine, it does seem clear that most Christians were decidedly anti-militarist. An early martyr, Maximilian, was put to death, for instance, for refusing to become a solider, and writings attributed to the third-century bishop Hippolytus demand that Christians should not become soldiers. Yet we have no evidence of the general acceptance of such a principle or, indeed, evidence that, in the inverse situation, Roman soldiers who converted to Christianity were required to leave military service.

It is worth remembering, of course, that we cannot fully distinguish principle and practice in our interpretation of the distant past. The Roman army's role in persecution of Christians or a distrust of the lifestyle of soldiers may have generated Christian anti-militarist sentiment as much as thought-through objections to Christian involvement in potential violence.

For answers, the Early Church engaged with the life and teachings of Jesus to determine a morality of war. In seeking to faithfully interpret scripture in their imperial context, the early church did not to resort to proof-texting: the Sermon on the Mount's injunction to turn the other cheek, for instance, was always interpreted as part of a broader conception of love for God and neighbor. Pastoral concerns, moreover, seemed to play a larger role in developing Christian thinking than systematic theological or ethical inquiry. Specific situations necessitated particular answers: the welcomed reality of soldiers’ conversions was more important, perhaps, than maintaining a single moral position.

Love does not only call for self-control and individual responsibility, but for constructive action on behalf of others.

Moral discourse about war, therefore, was built from concrete Christian love. Such concreteness led to complexity. While love demands that an individual should not inflict harm, the church came to believe that love calls too for actions that prevent harm, actions that remove harm and actions that promote good. Love does not only call for self-control and individual responsibility but, for constructive action on behalf of others. This would later be classically articulated in the Just-War theory of Augustine.
Christians maintained a strong ethic of self-sacrifice. While most came to accept that love demanded action to prevent harm to others, the use of lethal force was believed unacceptable for self-defense. This logic survived in Christian thought until the middle ages when Thomas Aquinas and others argued that an individual’s own life, as part of God’s good creation, demands protection. To love one’s neighbor as oneself means that one’s life has value. Action to protect one’s life is therefore right, even if it results in the aggressor’s death.

When love is understood as demanding the preventing and removing of harm, human judgment needs to be exercised. There must be discernment of what is just. There must be ways of determining, for example, who is in the wrong when violence occurs. Potential victims need protection.

Now, it seems a certain level of humility is required in any such calculation. All too often in Christian history, there has been too great a certainty in the identification of the transgressor. The zeal to righteous action carries dangers. We should remember, in Ronald Bainton’s words, that in disputes among Christians it is the saints who burn the saints. Caution cannot, however, lead to inaction. There are obvious examples. It would take a particularly brave pacifist to argue that, in principle, the allies’ military action against Hitler’s Germany should not have happened.

There are pitfalls, of course, in looking to the church before Constantine for guidance on the morality of war. Theirs was a very different world. Some recent Christian voices, for instance, often fetishize the early church’s relative powerlessness. These voices respond to the conflicting demands of love by absenting Christians from difficult choices in our current political realities where U.S. Christians have power.

The second-century critic Celsus attacked anti-militarist Christians for enjoying the fruits of Roman order while refusing to play their part in its maintenance. Today, there are Christian voices who too easily appeal to Christianity as a minority position and Christians as resident aliens; just as easily, through the centuries, Christian interests have been equated with national interests.

I am convinced that there is a dangerous avoidance of responsibility when Christians’ duties and interests are understood as peculiarly distinct from those of other citizens’; when others participate in war for an understood common good, while Christians maintain their principles. Such distinctions neglect the pervasiveness of human sin. The structures of our daily lives in communities, institutions and nations continually place us in positions where we harm others even without intention; where any choice, including inaction, brings hurtful consequences for others.

If we accept the intuition of the early church that love demands the prevention of harm to others, we will need to discern and act. We will undoubtedly find ourselves with dirty hands. We will make mistakes. Our choices will be compromised. In such moments, however, our full conception of love will surely allow us to fall back on hope, and the grace and forgiveness we believe comes from God.

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Crescentius

Michael Yashinsky

from the burial ground
at old Copp’s Hill
two clay-daubed ministers rise

floating from their earthen mound
flitting through the red-bricked ville
fleeting in the moonlit skies

their shrouds of Cotton
in breadth Increase
with the billowing gust

their faces forgotten
their breaths long ceased
their bones dust but spirits robust

beyond the lofty chasms
father, son overtake
father-son towers

two new-bloomed phantasms
at last both awake
to smell their concrete flowers.

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Must Christians be Pacifists?

J. Joseph Porter

You see a known murderer break into your neighbor’s house. Your neighbor and his entire family are sound asleep; the only people awake are you and the murderer. You grab your handgun from its hiding place and quietly follow him into the house. You enter to find the murderer poised over your neighbor’s children’s beds. If you do not kill the murderer, he will kill your neighbor’s children. What do you do?

I pose this hypothetical scenario (hereafter referred to as the “murder scenario”) to introduce some of the most difficult questions a Christian can ask: Is killing ever justifiable? Are Christians called to be absolute pacifists who reject killing under any circumstance? In our times, questions such as these are much more than fodder for abstract theological speculation; Christians living in a violent world have had to answer them time and time again. The United States’ recent decision to begin military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq was largely predicated upon Christian formulations of just war theory; based on current geopolitical tensions, the United States may well have to determine whether yet another conflict would be justifiable.

Any discussion of this issue must center around the proverbial just war (or, in the case of the man who must decide whether or not to kill the murderer who has broken into his neighbor’s house, the “just killing”) — the war of good against evil, fought for noble reasons. Country A goes to war with country B because country B seeks to destroy country C; because country A fights solely (or primarily) on behalf of an otherwise defenseless third party (country C), it fulfills the ius ad bellum, and its declaration of warfare is just. A just war, simply put, would be a selfless war — even a loving war — an action performed on behalf of another.

Note that there is a difference between “just wars” and “just killing.” The former concerns a societal or corporate commitment to killing, ostensibly for noble purposes; the latter concerns an individual’s killing another individual for ostensibly noble purposes. In my mind, the two are inseparable; if war can ever possibly be just, then individual killing must also be just, and vice versa. Thus, I will consider the questions of just war and just killing interchangeably.

Admittedly, a few different considerations come into play when pondering each of these questions. For example, calculating the potential consequences of entering into a war can be exponentially more difficult than calculating the potential consequences of perpetrating an individual act of killing. There is also the problem of understanding how personal Christian ethics translates into social, or political, Christian ethics. The New Testament constantly addresses the issue of how persons should behave and rarely addresses the issue of how governments or societies should behave. Finally, it is not entirely certain that war can be construed simply as an aggregation of individual killings. However, because these lines of thought are peripheral to the fundamental question about whether killing is ever right, I will ignore them for the time being.

Note also that I will focus primarily on acts of killing and not on violence in general. I am not sure whether anyone has seriously advanced the position that all violence is always wrong. As a crude but illustrative example, I do not believe that any pacifist would refuse the opportunity to slap Hitler if doing so could have prevented World War II. This thought experiment leads to interesting questions about how categorically different killing is from non-lethal violence — but these are peripheral questions.

At first glance, Jesus’ commands call for a categorical rejection of killing and of all violence. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus says, “for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew v. 9). “Resist not the one who is evil” (Matthew v.
At first glance, Jesus’ commands call for a categorical rejection of killing and of all violence.

Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus says, “for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew v. 9).

Resist not the one who is evil” (Matthew v. 39).

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew v. 44).

“All those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (Matthew xxvi. 52).

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“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew v. 44). “All those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (Matthew xxvi. 52). Such commands are not unique to the Gospels; in his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans xii. 21).

The writings of the pre-Augustinian Church Fathers may appear, if possible, even more definitive. Athenagoras, a second-century Athenian philosopher who converted to Christianity, asks, “How, then, when we do not even look on [at the violence in the Coliseum], lest we should contract guilt and pollution, can we put people to death?” Justin Martyr, another second-century Christian, claims, “We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.” Similarly, Tertullian states that “the Lord, in disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier.” Hippolytus believed that Christians could not enter military service: “The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.” Perhaps most definitively, Lactantius, a Christian who lived in the early fourth century, writes:

For when God forbids us to kill, He not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare, since his warfare is justice itself, nor to accuse any one of a capital charge, because it makes no difference whether you put a man to death by word, or rather by the sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all; but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man, whom God willed to be a sacred animal.”

Significantly, then, the early Church Fathers, direct heirs of the apostle’s teachings, were strongly opposed to violence and killing. However, almost all of these biblical and patristic excerpts refer to violence perpetrated against one’s own enemies (or in the case of Lactantius’ quotation, the death penalty). None of them even address the possibility of a just war or any war fought for selfless reasons. Importantly, Jesus’ command to “resist not the one who is evil,” occurs within a condemnation of vengeance: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew v. 38-39). Likewise, Paul’s exhortation to the Romans to overcome evil with good follows instructions against vengeance and retaliation (cf. Romans xii. 14-21).

The earliest Christian communities were religious minorities whose existence was often threatened by persecution. For them, discussions of violence almost invariably focused on violent persecution of Christians and appropriate, non-violent Christian responses. In fact, they believed their non-violent resistance would only strengthen them, as evidenced by Tertullian’s famous line “Semen est sanguis christianorum” and Origen’s pronouncement that “the more that kings, rulers, and peoples have persecuted them everywhere, the more Christians have increased in number and grown in strength.” (And indeed, two of the most famous modern and successful examples of
advocates of pacifism and non-violence, Martin Luther King and Gandhi, both operated within circumstances of minority non-resistance to majority aggression — in other words, conditions remarkably analogous to those in which the first Christians operated.) Because of this fact, it is not entirely clear that the statements against violence and killing in the New Testament and patristics represent a categorical and universal rejection of violence and killing. They certainly represent a condemnation of aggressive violence and even of violence in self-defense (as Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts, among others, clearly demonstrates) — but I am not sure they say anything much about hypothetically “just” violence, as in the murder scenario. (It is helpful to remember also that the earliest Church Fathers had little conception of anything resembling a Christian state, and thus probably no tangible idea of a Christian collective capable of selflessly defending some other group of people.) One exception I found was a passage from Origen: “Perhaps also the so-called wars among the bees convey instruction as to the manner in which wars, if ever there arise a necessity for them, should be waged in a just and orderly way among men [emphasis added].” Furthermore, he goes on to say that Christians, though they cannot themselves fight, can pray “on behalf of those who are fighting in a righteous cause, and for the king who reigns righteously, that whatever is opposed to those who act righteously may be destroyed!”

Beyond these brief excerpts from patristics, some passages in scripture bear mentioning. In the eighth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel (and again in the seventh chapter of Luke’s), Jesus commends a centurion for his faith without criticizing him for his military position. In Luke iii. 14, when a group of soldiers asks Jesus what they should do, he advises them not to extort or threaten people and to be content with their pay. More crucially, in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, a Roman centurion named Cornelius becomes a Christian; in the entire chapter, there is no indication that Cornelius ever resigns his post.

To understand Jesus’ interactions with soldiers, it is useful to consider his interactions with prostitutes, adulteresses, or otherwise “sinful” women, because the relations between soldiers and violence and between these women and sexual immorality are analogous. In each of Jesus’ main interactions with such women — in Luke vii. 36-50 (with the sinful woman who anoints him), John iv. 1-26 (with the Samaritan woman who was an adulteress), and in John vii. 53-viii. 11 (with a woman caught in adultery) — the wrongness of each woman’s sexual sin is clear. No such clarity exists in Jesus’ free interactions with soldiers; Jesus never condemns their
occupation as inherently wrong, as one would have expected if he were an absolute pacifist.13 In the case of the Roman centurion whose faith Jesus commends in the Gospel of Matthew, the fact that he is a military man appears almost irrelevant; his profession does not overtly affect the substance of the passage at all. If the claim is that war is always wrong, it seems strange that Jesus would make no light of a warrior’s trade. It is even stranger that Jesus’ sole advice to a troupe of soldiers in Luke iii would be to avoid extortion and ingratitude over wages; at the very least, if a group of prostitutes had asked Jesus, “What should we do?”, I cannot imagine that he would have counseled them merely to be content with their pay. (Augustine argued for his theory of just war from this very same passage.)14

“What then shall we do?” Can war ever be a part of the Christian ethic? In my opinion, no definitive conclusion concerning absolute pacifism (the position that all killing is wrong) can be reached solely from the biblical passages directly related to violence.15 However, I cannot agree with the position of the pacifist.

We should remember that the Christian ethic is simple: “The entire Law is fulfilled in one word: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians v. 14). Love your neighbor — and of course, love your enemies (cf. Matthew v. 44, Luke vi. 27).16 The strength of this principle, the Golden Rule, lies partly in its abstractness; morality is not reduced to adherence to a set of rules, but becomes instead a fundamentally spiritual and emotional commitment. But it is not always simple to answer the question, “What does it mean to love my neighbor?” What, for instance, does loving one’s neighbors and enemies entail in the murder scenario? Am I truly loving my neighbor’s children if I let them die at the murderer’s hands? Am I truly loving the murderer if I kill him before he can kill anyone else?

Scenarios such as this one do not exist merely in the realm of imagination; for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a famous twentieth-century German theologian and pacifist for at least a part of his life, famously became involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Indeed, World War II is the archetypal just war — and Adolf Hitler the archetypal villain — for those who are opposed to pacifism.17 Many millions more people would have died had no one resisted Hitler and the Nazis (or so the argument goes); thus, it was just to wage war against Nazi Germany. Appeasement and non-resistance could then be as destructive as war itself. In the words of the Land letter:

How different and how much safer would the history of the twentieth century have been had the allies confronted Hitler when he illegally reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936 in clear violation of Germany’s treaty agreements? It is at least possible that tens of millions of the lives lost in World War II might not have been lost if the Allies had enforced treaty compliance then instead of appeasing a murderous dictator.18 The inference is that the Christian ought to act in such a way as to minimize the number of deaths, even if that entails acts of war.

One fundamental tension that seems to emerge between the pacifist and non-pacifist is a clash between consequentialism (the belief that consequences of actions affect their moral status) and moral absolutism (the belief that certain actions are right or wrong regardless of context or consequence). The absolute pacifist would eschew the crude moral calculus of determining whether or not a certain killing is justifiable and instead simply hold that killing is wrong no matter how many lives could potentially be saved. It is this apparent fact about pacifism — its non-consequentialism — that leads many to reject it as idealistic and naïve.

Of course, this entire line of reasoning presupposes a certain view of history that not all pacifists would share, a dysteleological and unguided view of history in which God is relatively inactive; in such a world, “[w]ar does not determine who is right — only who is left.”19 But what if God constantly acted in history? Had the Allies surrendered to Hitler, would God have somehow intervened? Such appears to be the
opinion of many pacifists (who would otherwise be forced to concede the very real possibility of Hitler’s conquering Europe); for example, in his book *Will the Real Heretic Please Stand Up*, author David Bercot argues that the *Pax Romana* — a long period of relative peace for the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries A.D. — came as a result of the pacifistic principles of the earliest Christians. But while it is true that God often protected His people (the Israelites) in the past, it is challenging to extract from scripture the position that non-resistance would act as an absolute guarantor of divine protection; the ancient Israelites always fought to protect themselves, and the martyrdoms of Stephen and other early Christians directly contradict that claim.

It seems, therefore, that the position of the absolute pacifist is not entirely tenable for the Christian. Jesus’ prohibitions of violence were not simple categorical rejections of violence, but condemnations of vengeance, retaliation, and hatred; Jesus’ interactions with soldiers give no indication that he saw all warfare and killing as abominable; and even the anti-militaristic Church Fathers do not seem to have been unanimous in a plenary denunciation of all violence. Chesterton once said, “Idolatry is committed, not merely by setting up false gods, but also by setting up false devils; by making men afraid of war or alcohol, or economic law, when they should be afraid of spiritual corruption and cowardice.”20 And I think war, with all the hellishness surrounding it, can easily become a false devil (though it has just as often become a false idol). Killing itself is not the sin; oppression, rage, coercion, selfishness, cruelty, and lack of empathy are the sins. There is undoubtedly a strong correlation between killing and these sins — but it is not a necessary connection.

This does not mean that the non-pacifist is out of the woods. He still has to demonstrate some means of differentiating between just and unjust wars (and, by extension, between just and unjust killings). The Land Letter offers several criteria, including the intent of the aggressor, the authority of the aggressor, proportionality, and others. These all appear reasonable enough, but it they are much more Ciceronian than biblical in their extraction. And even if they are all sufficient criteria, how is the Christian to analyze them for wars that are inevitably complex and unpredictable? To return to a very contemporary example, would the writers of the Land Letter still maintain that the Iraq conflict was justified, knowing what they know now? Even if wars could be justified in the abstract, can Christians ever know enough about the consequences of a given war to know that it is justified? As a non-pacifist, I am not convinced that I could ever have sufficient knowledge to begin a war. (Importantly, this difficulty does not arise to nearly the same degree when considering just killings, for which the different possibilities and consequences are much more apparent.) And even if I could have such knowledge, what grants me the authority to make such a decision? In whose hands should such a decision be? These questions do not have simple answers.

Furthermore, the non-pacifist must not confuse his rejection of pacifism with a wholesale justification of violence. Even if absolute pacifism does not hold, the bloodstained past (and present) of the Christian world speaks to a remarkable shift in Christendom away from the peace-loving (though not necessarily “pacifistic”) *zeitgeist* of early Christianity and of Christ himself. Judging by our history, Christians have lost sight of that fact, and have grown much too fond of war. But Jesus still said the peacemakers, and not the warmongers, would be blessed (cf. Matthew v. 9). And without question, the aim of Christianity is true peace; the prophet Isaiah (among others) tells us that the nations “will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” in the last days (cf. Isaiah ii. 2-4). War and killing may sometimes be required, but they can never be loved.

I believe that Christians should reject absolute pacifism.
I believe that Jesus’ actions and teachings are compatible with some form of just war theory. But I also believe we must do so with caution, with much reflection and prayer — remembering that our true “struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians vi. 12). In the end, we will only arrive at the truth through repentance and regeneration: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans xii. 2). If we seek first the Kingdom, then we have already won our battle.

[1] One main example of this is the so-called “Land letter.” In 2002, some prominent Evangelical leaders, including the then-chairman of Campus Crusade for Christ, co-signed a letter to President George W. Bush that asserted their theological support for Bush’s “stated policies concerning Saddam Hussein.” According to the letter, the proposed Iraq conflict would “fall well within the time-honored criteria of just war theory as developed by Christian theologians in the late fourth and early fifth centuries A.D.”

[2] “justice to war,” the set of criteria which determine the justifiability of engaging in war. This is contrasted with ius in bello, the set of criteria concerning the conduct of the war itself.

[3] Athenagoras, Legatio Pro Christianis (c. 177 A.D.), Chapter XXXV. Interestingly, Athenagoras seems to consider the possibility of a just execution in the same chapter of Legatio Pro Christianis. I am not certain of his exact meaning; he could mean a legal execution — one performed according to Roman law — or he could mean a morally justifiable execution. If the latter, he explicitly sanctions capital punishment.

[4] Justin Martyr, Apologia Prima (c. 156 A.D.), Chapter XXXIX

[5] Tertullian, De Idolatria (early 200s A.D.), Chapter XIX

[6] Hippolytus, Traditio Apostolica (c. 215 A.D.), Chapter XVI.11

[7] Laertius, Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers (311 A.D.), Book VI – Chapter XX

[8] Tertullian, Apologia (197 A.D.), Chapter L. “The blood of Christians is seed of the Church.”

[9] Origen, Kata Kōnou (248 A.D.), Book VII – Chapter XXVI

[10] Origen, Kata Kōnou (248 A.D.), Book IV – Chapter LXXII

[11] Ibid., Book VIII – Chapter LXXIII

[12] The authenticity of the third passage, traditionally known as the Pericope Adulterae, is in dispute. However, for purposes of this essay, I will assume that it is authentic.

[13] I specify Jesus’ “free interactions” with soldiers because his interactions with soldiers after his arrest are obviously of a very different character.

[14] Augustine, Contra Faustum (c. 400 A.D.), Book XXII.74

[15] We can, I think, conclude that scripture nowhere expressly rejects the possibility of just killing.

[16] G.K. Chesterton once quipped in the Illustrated London News, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.”

[17] I am not committing myself to the position that the Allies’ involvement in World War II was just, only offering it as a useful illustration to consider.


[19] Unsourced comment attributed to Bertrand Russell


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You descended into hell.
You plunged, razed it with your eyes –
This song is in praise of you.

You descended into hell
in a boat
with the outstretched branch of your kindness.
You burned into hell
You pocketed the stone of my death
and flung it at the forehead
of the last lake.

You kissed the cold pennies
of my eyes
And in hell, amongst the slithering tongues,
You take one, and fix
it to the pit
of my mouth
And everywhere lead me
by its wag.

You swag
over the deep
You burst from the ocean
with dry feet
You cast the sinking hook
of my wrong.

And do you know
this corner hurts,
this hurts, this government
bitter as a hook
in my mouth.

I would curse you
Spit the tyranny
of you
If you had not shown me first
The boned flesh of you
Those holes
You will never heal.

You are hell.
You breathe hell. You expel it.
You devour hell.
And I, too, am in hell
Until I love You.

You are fearfully and terribly
You.
You burn bright in the forest,
You made You.
You burn bright in the forest
With red eyes.

Every day I wake up I open
into a scarecrow.
Every day we feel the blow
of the earth’s jitters.
You must scare away my crow
That dark pecking daw
That dark pecking daw
Still at it, still at it
on my sleeve.
Gibber it out
of its wits
Incinerate its beak
Raze the earth
with those eyes.

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WAR AND THE AMERICAN DIFFERENCE

A Theological Assessment

Stanley Hauerwas
America is assumed to be different. We are different because Christianity is thought still to thrive in America. Whereas Christianity is allegedly dying in Europe, it seems alive and well in America. That Christianity still seems a vital faith in America confirms for many the contention that there is an inherent link between Christianity and democracy. For it is assumed that not only is America a Christian nation, it is the paradigmatic exemplification of democracy.

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor tries to explain what in particular accounts for this presumed difference between America and Europe. At least one of the reasons, Taylor suggests, that may account for the difference is America never had an ancient regime in which a hierarchical social order was given legitimacy by the church. Also at work may be the different role of elites in determining general attitudes toward belief and unbelief. For example, the skepticism of academic elites in British society had more effect in England because elites have more prestige in British society than elites in America.

Taylor suggests that the primary reason for the American difference is due to the development of a common civil religion that allowed Americans, as well as immigrants in America, to understand their faiths as contributing to a consensus summed up by the motto, “E pluribus Unum.” This is in marked contrast to Europe where religious identities have been the source of division either between dissenters and the national church or between church and lay forces. But in America religious difference is subordinated to “one nation under God.” Religious people in America may find they are in deep disagreement about abortion or gay marriage, but those disagreements are subordinated to their common loyalty to America. But that subordination also includes their faith in God; that is, whatever kind of Christian (or non-Christian) they may or may not be, their faith should be in harmony with what it means to be an American.

Taylor observes that this difference also accounts for the respective attitudes Europeans and Americans have toward national identities. Europeans generally are quite reticent about national identity. That they are so Taylor attributes to the experience and memory of the First and Second World Wars that devastated Europe. He observes that war, even wars that seem “righteous,” now make most Europeans uneasy. But that is not the case with Americans. Americans’ lack of unease with war may be, Taylor suggests, because they wrongly think there are fewer skeletons in the American closet when compared to the European closet. Yet Taylor thinks the reason for the American support of war is simpler. “It is easier,” Taylor observes, “to be unreservedly confident in your own righteousness when you are the hegemonic power.”

I have no doubt Taylor is right to think America’s unrivaled power in the world gives Americans a sense of confidence about our role as the “world’s policeman,” but I think Taylor does not make articulate — to use one of Taylor’s favorite words — the relationship between American civil religion, our assumption that we are a “religious nation,” and why war for most Americans is unproblematic. War is a moral necessity for America because it provides the experience of the “Unum” that makes the “pluribus” possible. War is America’s central liturgical act necessary to renew our sense that we are a nation unlike other nations. World War I was the decisive moment because it was that war that finally healed the wounds caused by the civil war.

This is well documented by Richard Gamble in his book, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation*. Gamble provides ample evidence to show how liberal Protestants justified the first World War as redemptive for the nation and church. For example, Lyman Abbott, a well known progressive Protestant who had sought to reconcile Christianity with evolution, argued that America as a Christian nation must be willing to be self-sacrificial in service to other nations. Therefore
America rightly opposed “pagan” Germany because Germany is a society in which “the poor serve the rich, the weak serve the strong, the ignorant serve the wise.” By contrast America is a society of “organized Christianity” in which the “rich serve the poor, the strong serve the weak, the wise serve the ignorant.”

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the exemplification of Protestant liberalism, went so far as to suggest in an article in the Atlantic Monthly in 1919, that the returning troops would present a special challenge to the nation and the churches. He argued that the soldiers would have learned the meaning of self-sacrifice through the experience of the war. Moreover they would have experienced the potential of cooperative action through the regenerative power of devotion to a higher cause. Accordingly the returning soldiers would challenge reactionary views of society and the church because they would expect to remake the world to which they returned to correspond to the lessons they learned from the war. War, in short, was seen as the laboratory for more egalitarian social policies advocates of the Protestant social gospel so desperately tried to achieve.

Christianity and democracy in America were and continue to be, through the experience of war, inextricably linked. Becoming socially responsible. “The religion of democracy” he warned, “must cease to minister to selfishness by promising personal salvation, and must cease to impede human progress by turning the attention of religious men from the conditions here to rewards elsewhere.” Such was the lesson to be learned from war.

I call attention to how Americans understood the theological and moral significance of World War I because I think we fail to appreciate what Taylor identifies as the American civil religion if we do not take the American understanding of war into account. For example, Taylor observes that the traditional American synthesis of “civil religion” associated with a non-denominational Christianity with a strong connection to civilized order is still, unlike its British counterpart, in its “hot” phase. That it is so, however, has everything to do with the American experience of war as constitutive of the substance of our civil religion.

The significance of war for American civil religion can be missed even by political theorists as insightful as C.B. Macpherson. Macpherson identified two versions of liberal democracy, which he argued shape American democracy but are in conflict with one another. The first form of liberal democracy is one in which a capitalist market society is assumed to be compatible with democratic processes. This form of democracy, no matter how modified it may be by the rise of the welfare state, remains dominant—particularly in America. It has, of course, been given renewed theoretical legitimacy with the development in American political science of various accounts of balance of power models between groups.

The other version of liberal democracy Macpherson associates with John Stuart Mill’s attempt to moralize liberalism by arguing that a liberal society must be one in which all the members of the social order are equally free to realize their capabilities. From Macpherson’s perspective, liberal democracy, particularly the democracy of the United States, has tried to combine both forms of liberalism. Thus at times “liberal” means the stronger can dominate the weak as long as they follow market rules, while at other times it means the attempt, usually through state agency, to achieve freedom for all to develop their capacity. As a result American politics cannot help but appear incoherent as different and contradictory policy alternatives are put forward in the name of “freedom.”

For example, the right of abortion is defended in the name of an individual’s right to have control over her body, but it is still assumed that laws against suicide make sense in the name of preventing harm. Moreover, that portions of the American society think it legitimate to appeal to their religious convictions to address such issues is seen by some to be a threat to the consensus that makes America work. Thus
Taylor’s observation that even though the Protestant character of the original American civil religion has been broadened to include “all faiths” or “no faiths” there is still a strong “religious” character to American public life. That such is the case is confirmed by the very existence of secularist and liberal believers who seek a more secular America.¹⁰

I have no doubt that Macpherson is right that both forms of liberalism shape American life, but the tension between them can go unnoticed exactly because America is so wealthy and has the common moral experience of war. Of course it turns out that wealth makes war necessary. Yet Americans assume that we never go to war to sustain our wealth, because war must be understood as a moral enterprise commensurate with our being a democracy. From such a perspective, September 11 was absolutely necessary for the moral health of the republic. That America must fight an unending war against terrorism means Americans have a common enemy that unites us.

If I am close to being right about the place of war for sustaining the American difference I find that as a Christian I wish America as a nation was more “secular” and the Christianity of America was less American. Put differently I wish America was more like Europe. For I fear the Christianity of America, a Christianity that from a European perspective seems vital, is not capable of being a political challenge to what is done in the name of the American difference. In short, the great difficulty is how to keep America, in the proper sense, secular.

In order to elaborate this observation, I think it helpful to call attention to Mark Lilla’s important new book The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West. Lilla begins his book by giving voice to a sentiment raised after September 11, 2001 and occasioned by the Bush presidency. They simply cannot believe what they thought had been left behind has returned. Lilla observes he had assumed that battles over revelation and reason, dogmatic purity and toleration, divine duty and common decency had been relegated to the scrap heap of history. So “we,” that is, people like Lilla, “find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still inflame the minds of men, stirring up messianic passions that leave societies in ruin. We had assumed that this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong.”¹¹

Lilla seeks, therefore, to do nothing less than to defend what he describes as the great separation, that is, “to develop habits of thinking and talking about politics exclusively in human terms without appeals to divine revelation or cosmological speculation.”¹² Lilla understands this separation to be an extraordinary achievement because political theology is a “primordial form of thought” which for millennia provided the well of ideas and symbols for organizing society and shaping moral lives. In the West Christianity was the source of political theology even though the political theology Christianity represented could not help but create political

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societies that were and are inherently unstable. The instability is the result of the Christian presumption that they are at once in the world but not of it. For example, Christians have always had trouble making sense of an empire they accidentally acquired.¹³

Lilla argues it was Hobbes who found the way, after a millennium of Christian political theology, to discuss religion and the common good without making reference to the nexus between God, man, and the world. He was able to do so because Hobbes, anticipating Feuerbach, had the wisdom to turn questions about God into questions about human behavior; to reduce that behavior to psychological states, and then to portray those states as artifacts of desire, ignorance, and the material environment.¹⁴

For Hobbes the gods are born out of fear of death, poverty, and calamity; but Hobbes knew better than to try to deny such fear. Rather he focused fear on one figure alone, the sovereign. Such a sovereign, Hobbes called him an “earthy God,” could ensure that his subjects should fear no other sovereigns but him. No longer would there be a tension between church and crown because now the sovereign would make clear that salvation depended on obedience to himself.

Lilla thinks Hobbes’ great achievement, this great separation which is crucial for the art of living in a liberal democratic order, is secured by three developments. The first is the intellectual separation made possible by the scientific revolution in which a now-mute natural world is separated from its creator. As a result investigations of nature can be separated from thoughts about God. Secondly, the crucial distinction between the public and the private is developed, relegating religious convictions and practices to the latter. To be sure, Lilla acknowledges, Hobbes made the sovereign responsible for public worship, but not for actually mounting an inquisition to determine if citizens actually believed “Jesus is the Christ.” Thirdly, perhaps less obvious but equally consequential, is Hobbes’ argument for separating academic inquiry from ecclesiastical control. Thus one of the achievements of Hobbes’ project can be seen in theology’s becoming, as it has in modernity, but another academic discipline relegated to divinity schools.¹⁵

Though Hobbes is often thought to legitimize a violent understanding of politics, that is, human existence as a war of all against all, Lilla argues that Hobbes is actually trying to limit the violence that is unleashed by political theology. For when war is undertaken in the name of God there can be no limit to killing because so much is allegedly at stake. That is why human beings who believe in God commit acts in war no animal would commit. Animals kill only to eat and reproduce, but humans fight to get into heaven.¹⁶

Hobbes, on Lilla’s reading, is the first great realist in international affairs. After Hobbes, war at least has the potential to be humanely limited because it can be fought for selfish reasons.

Lilla suggests Locke and Hume provided softer accounts of Hobbes’s Leviathan but in doing so they remained fundamentally Hobbesian. Like Hobbes they wanted to protect modern man from the superstition and violence associated with political theology by developing liberal habits of mind. In particular, Locke thought it possible and necessary to liberalize Christianity itself, which Lilla suggests bore fruit in the work of Rousseau, Kant, and Protestant liberals such as Schleiermacher and Troeltsch. Yet Lilla judges the attempt of Protestant liberals to ground religion in human experience to be a failure because:

It failed to inspire conviction about the Christian faith among nominal Christians, or attachment to Jewish destiny among nominal Jews. Once liberal theologians succeeded, as they did, in portraying biblical faith as the highest expression of moral consciousness and the precondition of modern life, they were unable to explain why modern men and women should still consider themselves to be Christians and Jews rather than simply modern men and women.¹⁷
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Such is the dilemma of Christians in America. Just to the extent Christians try to be “political” by playing by the rules set down by “the great separation” they cannot help but become unintelligible not only to their neighbors but, more importantly, to themselves. I think this helps account for the strident character of the rhetoric of the religious right in America. Though claiming to represent a conservative form of Christianity, the religious right is politically a form of Protestant liberalism. The religious right makes a fetish of this or that belief; e.g. the substitutionary account of the atonement; they think is the hallmark of Christianity, but by doing so they play the game determined by the great separation, that is, Christianity has become primarily a matter of “belief.”

Yet secular people in America fear the religious right. They do so because they think that the rise of the religious right and Islam threaten the “great separation.” Thus Lilla ends his book reminding those who are like him committed to Hobbes’ great achievement that they are the exception. They cannot expect other civilizations to follow the path of the West. But according to Lilla the West has made the choice to protect individuals from the harms they can inflict on one another in the name of religion. It has done so by securing fundamental liberties and by leaving the spiritual destinies of each person in their own hands. In short, Americans have chosen to keep our “politics unilluminated by the light of revelation. If our experiment is to work, we must rely on our own lucidity.”

But Lilla’s account of the great separation does not explain how a country allegedly shaped by Hobbes and Locke is, particularly in reference to war, a nation which understands itself in religious terms. Americans are said to be the beacon of hope for all people, requiring sacrifices for the good of the world. In short, Lilla does not explain why it is very hard to keep the secular secular in America. Once the church has been relegated to the “private” it turns out the nation takes on the language of the church. It is not Christians and Muslims that challenge the great separation, but rather it is “America.”

Yet Lilla’s sense that Hobbes’ achievement may be threatened is widely shared by others in America. For example in his book, Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up On the Meaning of Life, Anthony Kronman sounds themes very similar to Lilla. The university, as Lilla suggested, is the key agent for sustaining the great separation. According to Kronmen it was, of course, true that the early universities in America would have been shaped by Protestant piety. But after the civil war, Kronmen argues, universities in America were organized to be institutions to sustain a secular and humanistic account of life. Students would be initiated into a secular humanistic way of life through reading the great texts of the Western tradition. Through such reading students
would learn “that it is possible to explore the meaning of life in a deliberate and organized way even after its religious foundations have been called into doubt.”

This perspective supplied the grounds for those in the humanities to believe they had the competence and the authority to lead students in a disciplined study of the human condition in order that they might pursue their own personal search for meaning. Such pedagogy assumed that no fixed conception of the end of human life or a single right way to live can be sustained. For according to Kronman there simply is no “vantage point we can ever occupy from which our lives can be seen as a whole.” Secular humanism does not require that God be rejected or even thought to be irrelevant to life as long as such judgments are left to the individual.

Kronman acknowledges that death is the most determinative challenge that confronts the secular humanist. “We all die, and know we will, and must adjust ourselves to the shadow which the foreknowledge of death casts over the whole of our lives.” Yet death also forces us to recognize that whatever meaning life may have depends on us. Accordingly, life for the secular humanist is self-contradictory. For the secular humanist seeks to abolish the limits that give their longings meaning, that is, they seek to be in control, yet in the attempt to seize control they come to recognize that without the limits they seek to overcome the ends they seek could not exist.

Sounding very much like Lilla’s account of Hobbes, Kronman argues that religion, drawing on our fears, seeks to have us revalue the limits of life by accepting those limits as an occasion for gratitude rather than rebellion. The smug cosmopolitan and secular observers of the rise of this religious revival think this development to be shallow and mindless. Kronman thinks such an attitude fails to recognize that the problem is not the death of God but the death of man. It is the task of the university to be the church for the rebirth of a humanism that is more honest and honorable than any religion can offer.

Kronman’s understanding of secular humanism assumes what Lilla calls the great separation, thus confirming Lilla’s contention that the university is the crucial institution to sustain liberal social orders. Yet Kronman fears that the secular university has lost its way by becoming a research university beset by the demands of the politically correct. I certainly think the humanities have lost their centrality in the modern university, but I think that loss is due much more to the humanism Kronman advocates. For once the “great separation” is accepted then a Hobbesian world cannot be avoided, that is, a death determined world committed to the defeat of death. In such a world the university cannot help but become the home of technologies designed to increase our power over fate.

Such a world, and the universities that serve it, must go to war in an effort to defeat those forces in the world that threaten our security. Americans are determined to live in a world of safety even if we have to go to war to make the world safe. That project is often justified, and this is Kronman’s list, in the name of ideals of individual freedom and toleration; of democratic government; of respect for the rights of minorities and for human rights generally; a reliance on markets as a mechanism for the organization of economic life; the acceptance of the truths of modern science and the ubiquitous employment of its technological products as aspirational goals all should want. According to Kronman “to be openly opposed to any of these things is to be a reactionary, a zealot, and obscurantist who refuses to recognize the moral and intellectual authority of this ensemble of modern ideas and institutions.” I have little doubt that Kronman believes this, but that he does so means he simply cannot see what the rest of the world sees, namely, that this is an ideology for a culture of death.

Kronman and Lilla are to be commended for their willingness to advocate secular humanism as a moral, educational, and political project. They simply seem to assume that the secular humanist will be more peace loving. But I find it hard to find any evidence that would support such
a conclusion.

By calling attention to Lilla and Kronman I hope to have helped us see that if we as Christians are to begin to reclaim the political theology required by the truthfulness of Christian convictions we will need to begin by doing theology unapologetically. In particular that means Christians must reclaim theology as a knowledge central for the work of any university worthy of the name “university.” That will require, at least in America, a recovery of the church as a polity capable of challenging the presumptions that the state is the agency of peace. In short, if the analysis I have tried to develop concerning the American difference is close to being right, it should make clear that a commitment to Christian nonviolence is the presumption necessary for the church to reassert its political significance.

In Veritatis Splendor John Paul II claimed that there is an inseparable connection between truth and freedom which if broken results in totalitarianism. America is a society built on the assumption that freedom must precede truth. Therefore America is presumed to be the alternative to totalitarianism. However, if my account of the American difference is correct I think that presumption needs to be reexamined particularly in light of the way war sustains American political life.

See, for example, my essay, “Why War is a Moral Necessity for America or How Realistic is Realism?” Seminary Ridge Review, 9, 2 (Spring, 2007), pp. 25-37.


[12] Lilla, p. 5. Charles Taylor, in a very interesting review of Lilla’s book, argues Lilla’s understanding of political theology fails to do justice to the natural law justifications of early modern thought that did not appeal directly to revelation or to premises drawn from revelation. Taylor observes Lilla’s argument depends on his view of political theology suggested later in his book that a genuine secular politics presumes a mechanistic understanding of the cosmos. Taylor, thus, challenges Lilla’s presumption that “the great separation” has ever been quite the achievement Lilla assumes. Taylor’s review is in the “Immanent Frame” sponsored by the Social Science Research Council.

[13] Lilla, pp. 42-45. Lilla observes that although Christianity “is inescapably political, it proved incapable of integrating this fact into Christian theology. The political organization of medieval Europe, tottering on that theological ambivalence, could not have been more perfectly arranged to exacerbate the conflict inherent in all political life…Perhaps if Christianity had seen itself as the political religion it really was, presenting the pope as an earthly sovereign with full authority over secular matters, some bloodshed could have been avoided. But living as a Christian means being in the world, including the political world, while somehow not being of it. It means living with a false consciousness.” (p.86) Lilla associates this instability in Christian political theology to the dialectic between transcendence and immanence at the heart of the incarnation. For such an astute reader of Barth it is surprising Lilla fails to understand that what is meant by such a dialectic must be Christologically determined.


[16] Lilla, pp. 84-85.


[18] Lilla, pp. 308-309.


[21] Kronman, p. 34.

[22] Kronman, p. 76.


[24] Kronman, p. 243. Kronman is more than ready to declare that any “religion” at some point must demand a sacrifice of the intellect because a religion finally insists that at some point thinking is not adequate to questions of life’s meaning. So every religion in a basic sense must be fundamentalist because the answers it is prepared to give to life’s questions are anchored in its own convictions. (pp. 198-199) Kronman does not supply the necessary philosophical defense of his understanding of rationality.


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O let none say I Love until aware
What huge resources it will take to nurse
  One ruining speck, one tiny hair
That casts a shadow through the universe:
We are the deaf  immured within a loud
And foreign language of  revolt, a crowd
Of poaching hands and mouths who out of  fear
Have learned a safer life than we can bear.1

New forms are beginning to take shape.
Once occupied minds are activating.
People are waking up
The insurgency is alive and well…
We are building up a new world.2

In the last few minutes before sunset on July 10, 2008, a brilliant golden-red light infused the gymnasium at Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish in Worcester, Massachusetts. Here, a decidedly remarkable group of people had gathered together: Catholic Workers from scores of Catholic Worker communities. Hundreds had traveled from across America and the world to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Catholic Worker movement. After an afternoon of smaller panels on a range of issues, everyone had joined together to collectively discuss “what the Catholic Worker has to say about the making of peace, and what do we need to do now?”3 In those early days of July 2008 — as the American Presidential campaign began to heat up and anxieties ran high about military action...
against Iran — this conversation took on special gravity for a movement grounded in nonviolence. After the three panelists had opened with impassioned expositions of Catholic Worker peace efforts, the conversation shifted to open discussion. Individuals began to line up at the microphone.

The first speaker, an elderly woman who did not give her name, addressed a shocking challenge to the gathering: “What if Iran decides to come after us first, then what? We’re annihilated and that’s the end of it?” The question lingered in the air, charging the room with an unexpected tension. People glanced to one another and to the panel, palpably distraught. The silence, though only a few seconds, felt infinite.

Then — suddenly — someone cried out in a clear, deep voice from the audience: “Forgive ‘em!” The audience broke into loud, sustained applause and cheering. The tension dissolved instantly into a joy whose core reality is relief at having passed an important test. This question and response sparked a sprawling, lively discussion of differing views of the movement’s political future. A common conviction animated all those who rose to speak: For Catholic Workers, the practice of politics, within and beyond the movement, not only can — it must — be nonviolence at all levels of human society.

This refusal of violence poses a radical challenge to the dominant logic of modernity as it understands politics and social movements. While it is one thing to articulate a theory of nonviolence, it is quite another — many argue an inevitably failing thing — to practice nonviolence as the basis of politics and a social movement.

The existence and success of the Catholic Worker represents a riddle in modernity. For over 75 years and in over 200 communities, it has been an American social movement built around this outlook. Today, the contemporary Catholic Worker represents the single most sustained, widespread, and ongoing American social movement of nonviolence.

There are three central areas of Catholic Worker daily practice — community, work, and faith. The interrelation of practices transforms the meaning of each individual practice. These transformations culminate in the archpractice of nonviolence, whose underlying logic is moral unity. All this amounts to what I call an “alternative logic of modernity,” which coheres and sustains the success of the movement at all levels. Yet, before engaging the heart of this argument — and the experience of the contemporary movement — I must provide the project’s historical backdrop, theoretical frameworks, and orientation to where it intervenes in current scholarship.

The Catholic Worker began at a moment of great crisis for modernity and a crisis in the life of an individual. Dorothy Day, a journalist involved with the interwar Greenwich Village Left scene and a recent convert to Catholicism, reached a point of despair when she covered the a massive march of unemployed individuals on Washington, D.C. in 1932. Witnessing the severity of material inequality in Depression America, she felt unable to reconcile her old Left passion for radical social justice and her new religion’s antiquated teachings on social change. Praying in the National Shrine, she returned to New York City to meet, for the first time, Peter Maurin — a wandering French peasant mystic. The two soon began publishing The Catholic Worker newspaper, fusing American radical thought with Catholic theology. Almost unintentionally, Day and Maurin began welcoming homeless people to stay in their makeshift apartment. This became the first Catholic Worker community. The community rapidly expanded into a soup kitchen and a larger house. Soon communities began to appear in other American cities, spread by the newspaper or individuals who had stayed at the New York Worker.

World War II, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the use of nuclear weapons posed a series of challenges to the nascent movement’s nonviolence on scale far beyond the possibility of Iranian war feared by the first speaker at the 2008 National Gathering. In each case, the majority of the movement embraced redoubled advocacy for nonviolence. During the 1950s Civil Air raids in New York City, anti-nuclear activism became even more central to Catholic Worker resistance under the charismatic influence of Ammon Hennacy.

By the early 1960s, the movement had already been opposing American intervention in Vietnam and deeply engaging in the emerging Civil Rights movement. In the late
1960s, Daniel and Philip Berrigan initiated the first acts of ultraresistance with the Catonsville Nine burning of draft files and, a few years later, founded Jonah House as a “community of resistance” with Liz McAllister.9 In the 1980s, ultraresistance would produce the Plowshares movement.10 Workers stood among the first (and few) to publicly oppose the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, and emerged as some of the most committed voices against torture by American forces in Guantanamo and CIA “black sites” during the second Bush Administration.11 Meanwhile, Plowshares actions have continued, with the latest occurring in New Zealand in April 2008.12

Today, as historian Dan McKanan notes, the movement is as strong and vibrant as ever in terms of sheer numbers of communities and range of activity.13 The unofficial movement website, Catholicworker.org, lists 209 communities — 190 in the US and 19 abroad.14 These communities engage in a diverse array of work. While the movement began with mostly Roman Catholics, Workers have come always (and increasingly) from a broad range of faith traditions.

During this time (1933-2008), other movements, ideologies, and groups rose and often faded away within the American Left and America generally: the International Workers of the World, the Communist Party, Civil Rights, Black Power, feminism, environmentalism, the United Farm Workers, Students for Democratic Society (new and old), several anti-war movements, queer liberation, and alter-globalization campaigns. But the Catholic Worker has remained, variously influenced by and influencing many of these movements with a deceptively simple and small witness.

The Catholic Worker movement represents a rejection of the dominant logic of modernity. By “the dominant logic of modernity” I mean the process Max Weber calls “disenchantment” that increasingly regulates the interactions of self and society through rationality in capitalist, liberal, industrialized societies such as the United States.15 In this thesis, I concern myself primarily with the way the dominant logic of modernity shapes understanding of political action and, thus, social movements. The core strategy of this politics is “moral compartmentalization,”16 and the primary tactic is “legitimate violence.”17 The contrasts between these two logics, with an emphasis on the Worker’s critique and alternative to the dominant logic, provides the theoretical framing for the rest of the thesis, manifesting itself differently against the practices of work, community, and faith.

Tactics: Violence v. Nonviolence

Contrasting this primary tactic of violence with the archpractice of nonviolence throws into sharpest relief the contrast between the two logics. The dominant understanding of politics — and the warning against those who seek to replace its violent means with nonviolence — finds one of its most famous expressions in Weber:

Workers stood among the first (and few) to publicly oppose the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, and emerged as some of the most committed voices against torture by American forces in Guantanamo and CIA “black sites” during the second Bush Administration.

Whoever wants to engage in politics at all, and especially in politics as a vocation, has to realize these ethical paradoxes…The decisive means for politics is violence…He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence. The genius or demon of politics lives in an inner tension with the god of love…This tension can at any time lead to an irreconcilable conflict.18

In this passage, Weber culminates his assertion that one must choose between the “irreconcilably opposed maxims” of the “ethic of ultimate ends”19 and the “ethic of responsibility.”20 For Weber and the dominant logic of modernity, a politics whose means are not ultimately violent is not politics at all. However admirable an “ethic of ultimate ends” can be for some to embrace, this ethic “must go to pieces” on any political question because political efforts, even for “good” ends inevitably involve violence.21 Because of this, Weber warns those who embrace an “ethic of ultimate ends...above all things...should not talk of ‘revolution.’”22

A Weberian analysis of politics cannot make sense of the Catholic Worker as a political option or as a social movement.
Any nonviolent project cannot be a social movement because social movements are political. Social movements must have as their ultimate telos seizing or influencing state power to achieve social change, engaging in actual or structural violence. A social movement without a telos in achieving such violence can never “win.” Yet the Worker movement speaks of specifically nonviolent “revolution”; this chorus of Catholic Workers “speaking of revolution” can be summarized most famously in Day’s statement in the early 1960s that “[t]he greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?” It is a revolution that transforms the very meaning of politics in modernity. Through such efforts, the Catholic Worker seeks to overcome the “abysmal” gap between a nonviolent ethic and political change, which Weber thought unbridgeable — the “ultimate Weltanschauungen clash.” But from within the dominant logic of modernity, the possibility of a nonviolent politics seems closed. To activate this possibility, an individual or group must begin to dismantle the moral compartmentalization that legitimates forms of violence.

**Strategy: Moral Compartmentalization v. Moral Unity**

In the dominant logic of modernity, moral compartmentalization is the central moral-cognitive strategy with which individuals and social structures rationalize violence and inequality. Economic theorists, building on Weber, coined the term “moral compartmentalization” to develop a framework that brings the normative claims of morality into a mode of analysis that is quantifiable, “values-free,” empirically verifiable, and objective. Understanding these theoretical re-expressions as distilled evidence of a general social psychology pattern in modernity reveals the core logic of moral compartmentalization.

Economist Timur Kuran asserts that modern social life has produced a tremendous level of “moral overload” through the embrace of liberalism. The goal of economics and sociology, for him, is to find a way to “alleviate” this inevitable byproduct of modernity. He offers several strategies, focusing on moral compartmentalization, which “[restricts] the values relevant to each of many contexts.” Importantly, Kuran posits moral compartmentalization as a laudable strategy for processing moral overload. He writes:

> If the individual can learn to consider two values applying to separate contexts, he may lessen, even eliminate, his guilt…For example, he must enjoy financially motivated work in settings where his operative moral drive is monetary gain; likewise he must enjoy religious activity in settings where he feels morally compelled to worship.

Kuran argues this strategy must expand beyond the individual level into a social ordering of values: “For moral compartmentalization to work, the society’s public discourse must separate the issues that generate moral clashes…it [must partition] human activities into spheres governed by distinct moralities.” These “spheres of distinct morality” make

**Scholarship on American Left social movements is virtually silent on the Catholic Worker movement.**
possible the legitimatization of varying levels of violence in different areas of social life.\textsuperscript{31}

The witness of the Catholic Worker movement has much to teach participants and scholars of the broader Left, America, and social movements. However, current scholarship largely fails to perceive and articulate these points of tension. I argue that this failure is not one of mere neglect. The alternative the Catholic Worker movement presents to the dominant logic of modernity is also a destabilizing challenge to the reigning paradigms of the field that might logically study it: Catholic Studies (and religious studies generally) and studies of the American Left (including scholarship on Left social movement theory and Leftist intentional community.)

Catholic Studies, as a scholarly field, strives to examine all issues — especially cultural productions of Roman Catholics — “through the lens of the Catholic intellectual tradition."\textsuperscript{32} Scholars have pigeonholed the Catholic Worker movement as adequately and completely describable as a form of “Catholic radicalism” and as simply an expression — usually an aberrational one — of Roman Catholicism in America. This simplification marginalizes discussion of “non-Catholic” elements of the movement, such as its deep roots in the American Left. These methodological biases and their attendant conclusions have critically impaired understanding of the movement. These problematic simplifications have been transmitted to studies of American Left social movements where the Catholic Worker movement would be best incorporated.

Scholarship on American Left social movements is virtually silent on the Catholic Worker movement. For example, in \textit{A People’s History of United States} — the definitive work of Leftist social movements in America — historian Howard Zinn does not mention the Catholic Worker once. This omission cannot be ascribed to mere ignorance.\textsuperscript{33} He does briefly mention the ultraresistance of the Berrigan brothers, but renders this as a part of a “general revolt” in the Catholic Church and a “small” subcurrent of American society overall, rather than connecting it more substantially to wider Left anti-war activism.\textsuperscript{34} He subsumes the resistance of the Berrigans into a Roman Catholic framework, even though ultraresistance involved non-Catholics. This suggests that he builds from the conclusions found in Catholic Studies and religious studies scholarship.

Such silences and misinterpretations can be best explained as a confluence of a facile acceptance of the conclusions of Catholic Studies and religious studies scholarship already
discussed and two deep biases within scholarship of the American Left.

First, there is a widely recognized anti-religious bias of scholarship of the Left. Self-identified Leftist scholar Cornel West offers an incisive critique of this phenomenon, writing “most Leftist intellectuals and activists” within the West have displayed an “excessive hostility” towards religion, derived from “Enlightenment prejudices.” These “hermeneutics of suspicion” have kept large strands of Leftist scholarship from “[taking] religious seriously.”

While this bias enters into many studies of the American Left — including Zinn’s — this alone cannot account for the absence of the Catholic Worker. Zinn is sensitive to the role of religion in some social movements, such as abolitionism and Civil Rights. There is something else about the Catholic Worker — at a more fundamental level — that renders it invisible to scholars of Leftists social movements.

The Catholic Worker destabilizes the dominant paradigm of social movement theory — derived from the dominant logic of modernity described above. Social movements theorist Lawrence Goodwyn, in his seminal study of Populism, articulates a paradigm of reading social movements that identifies four steps in movement-building:

1. The creation of autonomous institution where new interpretations can materialize — “the movement forming”;
2. The creation of tactical means to attract masses of people — “the movement recruiting”;
3. The achievement of a heretofore culturally unsanctioned level of social analysis — “the movement educating”;
4. The creation of an institutional means where by the new ideas…can be expressed in an autonomous political way — “the movement politicized.”

Goodwyn argues all four of these steps must be observed to interpret a social dynamic as a “movement.” In the American context, abolitionism and Civil Rights fit easily into the paradigm, culminating in the legislative victories.

The Catholic Worker movement provides ample evidence of the first of Goodwyn’s three “stages” in the formation, spread, and sustained existence of over 200 communities incubating an alternative logic of modernity. Catholics Workers — individuals and individual communities — have supported or even led campaigns with concrete political goals (e.g. the Witness Against Torture). However, no efforts to create a Catholic Worker party, place Workers in positions of state power, or put the stamp of the movement on national legislation have ever been made. This situation is not accidental, but intentional. The Catholic Worker movement’s non-achievement of the fourth goal — “the creation of an institutional means where by the new ideas…can be expressed in an autonomous political way” — is a rejection of the telos and means of dominant social movements theory and practice. But, they provide an alternate telos — radical transformation of society towards greater equality. From this alternative the Catholic Worker derives logic profoundly different from the dominant logic of modernity.

The Catholic Worker defies the narratives of the major scholarly disciplines that could provide a site of study. The very destabilization and confusion generated by the movement within and between these disciplines indicates the challenge it poses to the dominant logic of modernity as a movement. A more comprehensive understanding of the movement
requires the destabilization of disciplinary boundaries around the Catholic Worker. But this destabilization begins with the correction of the error common to most of the flawed scholarship: A re grounding in actual lived experience of contemporary Catholic Worker-inspired communities.

I return to National Gathering Peace-making Panel, where Claire Schaeffer-Duffy offered this articulation of the interrelation of the Catholic Worker practices of community, work, and faith, sparking the question that opened the Introduction:

The beauty, the genius of [the Catholic Worker movement] is that…from its very inception, it’s realized and practiced a…fundamental way of making peace…They embraced the outcast, the poor, the disregarded, the enemy…[T]hey did this by living with them, learning their stories, sharing these stories with others, even taking their side…They included wholeheartedly the excluded ones…Who merited that categorization changed over time, but always Catholic Workers made it their business to attend to the ill-considered, the unpopular…Christ not focused on a single issue or party…a Christ for the whole human person. This willingness, however fumbling…to embrace the outcast, is the first movement toward peace….It really goes to the root…for we know that violence requires walls…reducing the other to an anonymous, one-dimensional entity…less than human.40

This is my message: Keep knowing the outsider, keeping the doors unlocked, crossing the borders…making friends with those we are told are our enemies…people we are asked not to consider…We know this is not easy; people are segregating themselves more and more…The country is at a point where violence is part of our national DNA…It’s deep within us, this idea that we are people that have to have the Bomb, have to have the walls. The way we can break this is to be faithful in a subversive, defiant way…if it’s an us-them reality that we’re in, let us go to the “them.”41

More than any other expression, these words convey for me the beating heart of the contemporary Catholic Worker movement: an interrela tion of the practices of community, work, and faith, culminating in an archpractice of nonviolence and moral unity. This is the alternative logic of modernity the movement offers as a challenge to the dominant understanding of politics and social movements grounded in moral compartmentalization and powered by violence.

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[1] Auden, “In Sickness and In Health” 112
[7] Day, Loaves and Fishes 166-187; Miller 216-302; Pichl, Breaking Bread 210-216

[8] Miller 79-81, 302-351; Pichl, Breaking Bread 216-239
[10] The Plowshares movement, started in 1980 and heir to the ultraresistance tradition, carries out nonviolent property destruction of American military weaponry (especially nuclear-related.)
[14] Catholicworker.org, Accessed November 18, 2008. It is important to note, however, that no process or structures exists to make a community “officially” a Catholic Worker. Furthermore, some communities close for various reasons without notifying the site or the movement at large. Thus, no site or scholarship can immediately or comprehensively take into account every such community change.
[16] McNeal 254
[18] Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” 121, 125-126
[19] For example, a categorical commitment to nonviolence
[23] I hasten to emphasize again that this radical transformation is neither unique nor original to the Catholic Worker—Garrisonian Abolitionism, Gandhi’s Indian independence movement, and Kingian Civil Rights all represent social movements based on this alternative logic of modernity. However, unlike these examples (with the possible exception of Kingian Civil Rights) the Catholic Worker still exists in the contemporary day and far less has been written on it.
[25] Weber foreshadows the notion of moral compartmentalization, writing: “We are placed into various life-spheres, each of which is governed by different laws” (Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” 139).
[26] Kuran 231-267; Ben-Ner and Puttermann 3-73
[27] Kuran 238
[28] Kuran 254
[29] Kuran 254
[31] For example, the American legal principle based on the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 forbids most uses of the military domestically, but poses no threat to its use outside of America.
[33] He is clearly aware of the movement as he includes writings of Dorothy Day in an anthology of nonviolent writings he edited (Zinn, The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace 47-53.)
[34] Zinn, A People’s History of the United States 488-490, 538
[36] West 374-374
[37] Goodhew xviii
[38] In the case of abolitionism, the 13th-15th Amendments. In the case of Civil Rights, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
[39] In this way, the movement is unequivocally Leftist.
[40] Claire Schaeffer-Duffy, Recording by author
[41] Claire Schaeffer-Duffy, Recording by author

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I tend to be cautious about movies produced and directed by their stars. Turning the camera on oneself begets temptations to egotism that few can completely resist. The worst of such films fetishize their leading men, and even the best, like *Braveheart*, feel a bit top-heavy. Mel Gibson might have been manly and epic enough as William Wallace to make my father cry, but he still stuck out like a sore, handsome thumb.

As it ultimately does with so many Hollywood norms, *Gran Torino* toys with our expectations of self-aggrandizement: the sore, handsome thumb is still there, but it’s weathered and wrinkled almost, but not quite, past recognition. That thumb (all right, time to stop calling it a thumb) is Clint Eastwood, who produced and directed the film and stars in it as Walt Kowalski, an embittered widower and Korean War veteran whose Detroit neighborhood has changed beyond his ability to keep up.

This, of course, is a formula we all know and love: members of two vastly different cultures, initially separated by fear of and prejudice against one another, break down the barriers that divide them in a series of lighthearted moments. They realize they aren’t so different after all just in time to confront some evil that has been menacing them both. Said evil is defeated, and everyone else lives happily and harmoniously ever after.

Not everyone is living happily ever after at the end of *Gran Torino*, but the arc is unmistakable. Walt’s increasing interest and involvement in the lives of the Van Lor family — brother Thao (Bee Vang) and sister Sue (Ahney Her), their mother and grandmother and assorted relatives — takes all the expected routes: bitterness and antagonism give way to grudging acceptance and eventual emotional investment as food is exchanged, work is shared, and Walt continually bails the Vang Lors out of trouble, usually by being crankier and more intimidating than their antagonists.

The film’s interactions with Christianity at first seem as trite and superficial as everything else it has going on. Walt battles young the Father Janovich (Christopher Carley) intermittently, refusing to go to Confession despite his late wife’s pleas and insulting the priest repeatedly to his face. Eventually, thanks to Janovich’s persistence, the two wind up sharing a beer and a conversation, and Walt finally agrees to confess. The grumpy old man gets less grumpy and finds God all at once.

It’s certainly nothing new, but the sheer force of Eastwood’s presence carries us through even the baldest of clichés. We may chuckle at the dialogue every now and then, but we still believe it; we still believe the man on the screen, which is all we have to do, because all this, as it turns out, is only rising action, buildup to a climax that wrenches the movie into an entirely new direction and the audience into an entirely different frame of mind.

As Walt gets to know the Vang Lors he also gets to know their enemies, a gang of thugs led by Spider (Doua Moua), whose behavior toward his “cousins” borders on the sociopathic. Despite Walt’s best and increasing efforts to protect his neighbors, Spider’s gang tortures them continually, beating up Thao and eventually (and somewhat inexplicably) shooting up the family’s home and raping Sue. The crimes, and the close-up shots of a bloodied Sue that announce them, cry for action: Someone clearly needs to do something.
What Walt ultimately decides to do is the film’s real statement about Christianity, an affirmation of Christ and a challenge to Christians. Walt doesn’t save the neighborhood by killing the bad guys. He saves it by letting the bad guys kill him. He doesn’t save his friends by fighting for them; he saves them by dying for them. Standing face to face with pure evil, Walt reaches into his coat for a gun he does not have and falls in a hail of bullets. The shots bring the police, who arrest the murderers: the only possible true victory, won by losing.

The worst part is, we feel set up, bait-and-switched. We’re angry; we need our righteous vengeance; we want and expect old Clint Eastwood to open up a can of you-know-what on those you-know-whos. It’s a reasonable expectation: after all, that same Clint Eastwood made a career out of opening said cans on said individuals. It’s a part of our tradition.

But tradition can blind us to reality. The apostles, even as they walked side by side with Christ, expected a conqueror, a Messiah who would vanquish their enemies. What they got was the very picture of humility, a bewildering paradox who rode into Jerusalem like a king only to be led out like a criminal. The gun everyone thought was in his pocket turned out to be a Zippo.

We know the story so well we have a hard time recognizing it. What Gran Torino does in one sense is put us in the shoes of Christ’s friends, setting up an inevitable confrontation between the ultimate good and the ultimate evil and giving victory to good by letting evil win.

But even at its best moment, the moment it’s been building to for two hours, the moment it finally flips the clichés it’s been built on thus far on their ears, Gran Torino can’t seem to help itself. Walt falls to the ground with his arms spread, cruciform. It’s a powerful image, but the Christ-like death scene is, like Eastwood himself, at a point in its life where it only barely escapes self-parody. A moving gesture, yes, but Tony Montana died that way too.

But no matter how Gran Torino goes about making its point, it’s a point worth making. It’s a reminder of the beautiful contradiction at the heart of Christianity, of God’s strength perfected in apparent human weakness. It’s a call to sacrifice, an example of self-denial running parallel to that offered by Jesus on the cross. It’s an affirmation of the Christ who told us “Greater love hath no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends,” and then showed us exactly what he meant.

At least, I hope so.

Because at this point, I was thrown for yet another loop. The warning bells that usually accompany movies like Gran Torino in my mind, so easily silenced by the rest of the film, were set ringing again by the sound of Eastwood’s aged, brittle voice singing the movie’s theme over its final sequence, an ego trip if ever I’ve heard one.

Maybe it’s some kind of meta-cliché; maybe Eastwood is just toying with us one last time, reminding us, his tongue firmly in his cheek, that it’s his movie and no one else’s. The problem is, there’s no way to tell. Gran Torino might be an exercise in the manipulation of standard Hollywood motifs, in the manipulation of manipulation. But it might, just as likely, be the product of the ego of one old man.

I have nothing against Clint Eastwood, so I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt. But I can’t shake the feeling that maybe, just maybe, Gran Torino arrives at its best moments by accident.

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War as the Perversion of Creation

Matt Cavedon

In the beginning, God created all things, and He saw that all of them were good. Above creation, God set man as a steward. We were told to watch over creation and utilize it wisely and responsibly to further God’s purposes. The Lord wills that we be fruitful and multiply, and so we farm the fields and domesticate the beasts of the earth. The Lord wills that we multiply the talents He has given us, and so we work and exchange whatever we produce with one another. The Lord wills that we care for the least among us, and so we build homes and create medicines. In this way, all of creation is inherently ordered towards God’s will. This will itself is love, which Jesus Christ revealed to be the essence of the law and the prophets. Love respects the dignity and liberty of every person, seeing each as made in the image of God. To that end, love demands that we honor peace, practice tolerance, and seek to protect the life of every person until God calls him or her before His throne for the final judgment.

Efforts to use creation for other purposes are sinful. When we seek to use sex for pleasure and not love, we are guilty of lust. When we seek to use money for power and not creation, we are guilty of avarice. When we seek to use creation for destruction and not life, we are guilty of militarism.

We as people are called to share in the work of God, and this includes creating and preserving that which God has made. It is God’s will that we continue to create and that we do not destroy what He has made because He has made everything for a good purpose. The plants of the earth give us nourishment and healing, both of which enable us to have relationships with one another. The rocks and minerals of the soil give us materials with which to build houses and other buildings, enabling us to live in safety and comfort. Our own flesh and blood, as the physical projections of our souls, allow us to be the very temples of God in the world. God desires for us to have comfort, well-being, and physical existence. He calls us through the prophets to pray for the prosperity of the cities in which we live and not to take more of creation than we need, in order that all may enjoy the richness of what God has made.

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Let Them Sing:

Being Christian in a World of War

Rachel Wagley

Gripping his beloved guitar, 20-year-old Bawi Shin Thang arrived in Spokane, Washington in September 2008. A couple years earlier, the Myanmar military junta destroyed Bawi Shin’s ethnic Chin village, captured stray villagers, and forced those they didn’t kill into servitude. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), otherwise known as the Myanmar military junta, is mortal enemies with the Burmese Chin and Karen ethnic groups, native relics of old Burma who refuse to acknowledge its control. The junta forced Bawi Shin to serve as a porter for their militia, where he carried hundred-pound sacks of weapons and supplies and acted as a human landmine tester while enduring continuous beatings and starvation.

Remarkably buoyant and loyal to his people, Bawi Shin escaped to overpopulated militated Kualalampur, Malaysia, hoping to blend in and seek work. Chin and Karen refugees are considered illegal aliens in Malaysia and are arrested and imprisoned if discovered. Bawi Shin served 2 six-month jail terms, escaping each time. The United Nations tries to create channels of assistance for Burmese refugees who are in Malaysia illegally, and Thang was eventually granted an I-94 card affirming official refugee status and passage to the United States. As of today, his mother and extended family in Burma do not know where he is.

I met Bawi Shin Thang during Christmas break while attending a Burmese service. Eager to meet me after bonding with my family, he immediately asked for a picture with me, and he laughed as he articulated his name and made sure I did not mispronounce it. Along with a few other community congregations, my church works closely with World Relief, helping recent Chin and Karen refugees in very practical ways, like finding housing and employment, but more importantly, we are able to foster Christian community for arrivals like Bawi Shin. In collaboration with Spokane sponsor churches, Burmese refugees create tight-knit fellowships, like Karen Community Fellowship and the Chin Christian Church.

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EVERYTHING SEEMS OKAY ON THE OUTSIDE. BUT HOW ARE YOU REALLY FEELING?

Your friends think you have it all together, but what’s really going on inside you? Do you feel like there must be more to life than what you’re now experiencing? Is something missing—purpose? Un-conditional love?

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To talk with a Harvard chaplain or Harvard student about God, please email with your interest or questions.

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“Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.”
Matthew 4:11


In life, Smith’s imprint on acoustic music was unique. On record, his most memorable contribution was his Oscar-nominated song “Miss Misery”, which appeared in 1997’s Good Will Hunting. His five LP’s have achieved an impressive following for their beauty of emotional depiction. Those that have appreciated the authenticity of his music have also felt its burdens of melancholy, particularly striking in his 1997 release Either/Or. Tracks like “Speed Trials” are quiet reflections that, while subdued, carry surprising weight. Smith’s gift of emotional diagnosis allowed him to write powerfully moving songs, true — but that emotion had a very real source. Smith was plagued by a lifetime of depression, which eventually led him to take his own life.

Several artists tried and failed to fill the vacancy left by Elliott Smith’s death. Damien Rice was too transparently sentimental—Damien Jurado, too withdrawn. Older folk artists, like Nick Drake, lacked the freshness that invigorates independent music of our generation.

The year following Elliott Smith’s suicide, relative newcomer Sufjan Stevens released Seven Swans on his independent label Asthmatic Kitty. The record was a gentler, stripped-down successor to the broadly praised Greetings From Michigan, released the previous year.

In a hushed voice reminiscent of Elliott Smith, Stevens begins Seven Swans with the memento mori, “If I am alive this time next year…” — a strange recognition of death. He returns to the same meditation later in “We Won’t Need Legs To Stand”, beginning a stanza with “When we are dead…”

In many ways, we witness Elliott Smith’s reincarnation in Sufjan Stevens. Both in its solemn meditation and its aesthetic quality, Seven Swans evokes the memory of the deceased artist. The record is delicate and honest, unadulterated by studio doctoring. Both artists play a full range of instruments — adding that special sonic cohesion achieved when voice and hands belong to the same person. “The Dress Looks Nice on You”, the second track on Seven Swans, carries the same touch of personality, the same eccentricity of narrative present in so much of Either/Or.

From the very beginning, however, Stevens takes on a different, perhaps surprising, character. Unexpectedly, his first line takes a sharp turn when “If I am alive this time next year…” is followed by “will I have arrived in time to share?” An indelibly spiritual message begins to emerge. The subject of the first track, “All of the Trees of the Field Will Clap Their Hands”, is in fact a direct reference to Isaiah 55:12: “For you will go out with joy and be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

The reference to the gospel is clear, but what else can we learn about Stevens from this song? As in much of Seven Swans, Stevens’s introspective honesty shines through his music. We are intimate spectators to a man questioning his own standing with the Lord. “Will I be invited to the sound?” he asks. In a superposition of self on scripture, he places himself in the context of Isaiah. What is required to be admitted to the festival that was promised?
His interesting scriptural connotations appear again and again throughout the record. “Abraham” is a hushed, meditative song in which Stevens fashions a link between the Father of Nations and the Messiah. In “He Woke Me Up Again”, he thankfully acknowledges the love of a father — in some ways reminiscent of Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays”. “To Be Alone With You” is a couched reflection on the personal life of Jesus. “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” is based on Flannery O’Connor’s short story of the same name; Stevens assumes the role of a character who has abandoned a life in Christ. He explores the difficulties of judgment and the residual effects of a past life as “the good Christian”.

In May 2004, Spin Magazine likened Seven Swans to “Elliot Smith after ten years of Sunday School.” While candid and endearing, the appraisal may not cast Sufjan Stevens’ purposes fairly. Seven Swans contains none of the sweeping religiosity of the church, and it seeks to alienate no one. Instead, it offers an introspective set of personal meditations. One might even say his statements are merely reflections on his own spiritual development — his uncertainties, his struggles. Nowhere does Stevens proselytize or profess to have transcendental knowledge. He offers instead his honest doubts, his bright hopes, his sincere convictions. One can imagine visions of divine procession in Stevens’s mind, musically manifest in gradual crescendos of organ, percussion, and vocal harmonies.

There is, however, an element of truth to the comparison. While Sufjan Stevens’s ability to paint emotion bears a striking similarity to his predecessor, he recasts his introspective challenges into spiritual lessons, a step that Elliott Smith in his melancholy was unable or unwilling to do.

The closing track to Seven Swans, titled “The Transfiguration”, begins with the sound of Sufjan Stevens’s characteristic banjo. Simply orchestrated but elegantly written, the song swells to a chorus of joy. “Consider what’s to come,” sings Stevens. While the intent of this lyric may elude us, it is this sense of expectancy that enlivens all of his music, replacing Elliott Smith’s melancholy with driving optimism.

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The Red Sweater

Ann Chao

She’s a beautiful girl. Red sweater, white shoes, cherub cheeks. Unsmiling eyes. The first time I saw her, I wondered if what George and Nina had said about her was true. That she’d been found on a nameless sidewalk in a blind city, swaddled in red and scraping her tender hands on the rough fibers of the basket she’d been placed in. Her name had been written on a small tag attached to a button on her sweater. A name, not a price. I find all of it easy to believe except the part about the tag — not in the sense that I think her adoptive parents were mistaken, but rather, that it’s hard to accept. People don’t abandon things with price tags on them, but names are apparently expendable.

Red is an auspicious color, and she wears it better than all the children I’ve seen in my years of working at this agency. Red, the color of blessing, the color of blood. The color of festivity, the color of rage. The tint of her unsmiling eyes in photos taken with cheap cameras by her orphanage.

She sits still on the other side of the room, content with her toys. I’m holding a book, but my eyes aren’t in the text; they’re over the edge of the cover, watching her. She fidgets, puzzled by the keyboard that’s just about run out of battery. The notes that come out are stale under her fingers and even at her young age she knows there’s something wrong with that melody. One, she’s realized that pressing one key shouldn’t lead to a whole five seconds of song. Two, it’s a song she likes but not at the moment, because it’s out of tune.

She’s very much loved, as is expected for someone who wears red so well. I’ve always told George and Nina that children don’t need pity-tainted love; they need unconditional love (doesn’t everyone?). But it’s hard for them, just as it’s hard for me, watching her from this side of the room, knowing she prefers to be alone. Nina’s heart hurts much more than mine, because she has to watch this every day. Her lovely daughter, her gift ten months and ten thousand dollars and ten thousand miles in the waiting, doesn’t smile and doesn’t like to be held. Knowing this is a fairly common condition is one thing; dealing with it like it’s a commonly accepted fact is another. Love is difficult. It’s not like her red sweater.

Somehow it makes her all the more beautiful. I hope it’s not the pity reflex speaking; pity shouldn’t shape beauty any more than it should shape love. I imagine her little hands on a real keyboard, one note per tone, infinite songs laid out before her, not the stagnant five-second melodies predestined for children. She clings to the toy, frowning now, her eyes still the same, picking at the black keys, perhaps thinking there is a secret to uncover that will unlock what she wants to hear. I think of how Nina picks at the corners of her notes whenever we speak, perhaps trying to uncover the secret passage to her daughter’s heart.

I set down my obsolete book as she finally moves on from the toy that should not exist. She looks around, knowing to avoid my gaze, but before she can cry I start to hum. My voice isn’t what it used to be, and it must sound too low to her at least with this melody. But it’s the closest thing to what she wants to hear, and my heart trembles when she closes her eyes, leaning her head against the side of the couch. Her unsmiling gaze disappears. I know her well enough to see that the red in her sweater is blessing and happiness. There’s a smile hidden in her hands, and I promise silently that I will teach her how to paint it across a spectrum of keys.

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The Body of Christ is at war. We are at war. Easter is war.

In the winter, when ice descends on Harvard and the birds fall silent, we are quick to forget the promise of new life. We succumb to the slow relentless friction of our academic existence, propelled dumbly forward by fear of failure and appetite for success, heedless of both cross and empty tomb. Purpose is pressed from us by the weight of repetitious days, and a vacant resolve to keep trudging forever forward creeps in to take its place. Spurred by remembrances of authentic living, we look occasionally to God for fulfillment — we go to church, perhaps we read a chapter of the Bible — but we soon turn away again to consider papers and problem sets. Our lives begin to mirror in deadness the anemic grass and skeleton trees. We become lost in our busyness, sprinting Alice-like only to find when we collapse with exhaustion that we have gotten nowhere. In the winter, death comes easily.

I was dead once. The sickness of it sits in you like a stone.

As we Christians live in this little world where everyone is clawing for success, and as we grow in understanding of the culture of spiritual sterility that surrounds us, how can we help but see increasingly clearly the power of the Gospel that has been entrusted to us? This news we bear is the single most powerful cure for all the existential cancers that surround us. Even in the dark heart of winter at Harvard, we are filled with the promise and burgeoning reality of eternal abundant life in Jesus Christ our Lord! The surpassing brightness of this fact — that we have been created to know and love God and each other forever — is the light shining in our eyes when the world squats in six months of night.

But it is easy to forget. If we are not wary, the outer darkness will rapidly quench the inner light. A certain militant vigilance is required. We must strive always to live God’s radical lifestyle in defiance of the things around us. We must struggle with soldiers’ dedication to bring life to those who remain dead in sin. From our several small lights, we must build up a bonfire and cast the darkness away. The Resurrection inspires us to live lives of outrageous, countercultural purpose and immoderate love. Real living is infectious; we are Christ’s redeemed vectors in an epidemic of hope.

We are the soldiers of Easter. We sink our trenches against death itself. May the explosion of blossoms and leaves that surrounds us be a symbol of our coming victory. May the darkness that inevitably follows the light remind us of the many battles still unfought. Above all, may our entire focus both now and forever be the One who leads us in our struggle to nourish the seeds of His kingdom in this inhospitable Cambridge soil. Let us go — much is yet to be done.

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