

1 | Just war revisited

1 Antagonistic praxis and evangelical counter-praxis

On the famous Ghent altarpiece, on which the Van Eyck brothers depicted the adoration of the Lamb of God standing upon an altar on a greensward in front of the Heavenly Jerusalem, there appear in the lower left-hand panel two groups of people at the edge of the worshipping crowd. They are separated from each other by a rocky outcrop, but share a common urban background; and that contrasts them with a balancing pair of groups on the lower right-hand panel, set against a wilderness landscape. Those on the right are the hermits and the pilgrims of the church; but the groups on the left are identified as the church's just judges and *milites Christi*, 'soldiers of Christ'. To our modern sensibilities this is immediately shocking. How, we wonder, could the lay service exercised in a civil context by Christian judges come to be extended to soldiers? The one group serves peace, the other war; this seems enough to set an infinite spiritual distance between them. Can one who fights offer worship to the sacrificed Lamb? Our sense of shock is excusable. Yet the idea that these two roles, judges and soldiers, are analogous, an idea that grew out of the twelfth-century romanticisation of the Christian knight such as we meet in the legends of the Round Table, was one of the great achievements of the late middle ages. Today we commonly call it the 'just war theory'.

There are good reasons to hesitate over this achievement. The will of God for humankind is peace: that all-determining truth contains, and shapes, any further truths that we may hope to learn on this

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subject. And from it flow three further propositions. First, God's peace is the original *ontological* truth of creation. We must deny the sceptical proposition that competition and what metaphysicians call 'difference' are the fundamental realities of the universe, a proposition which the creation, preservation and redemption of the world make impossible to entertain. Secondly, God's peace is the goal of *history*. We must deny the supposed cultural value of war, its heroic glorification as an advancement of civilisation. For war serves the ends of history only as evil serves good, and the power to bring good out of evil belongs to God alone. Thirdly, God's peace is a *practical demand* laid upon us. We must deny any 'right' to the pursuit of war, any claim on the part of a people that it may sacrifice its neighbours in the cause of its own survival or prosperity. For the Gospel demands that we renounce goods that can only be won at the cost of our neighbours' good.

Philologically, *bellum* is *duellum*, the confrontation of two, the simple and unmediated difference of opposites. No Christian believes that *duellum* can be 'just' or 'necessary', because no Christian believes that opposition can in fact be unmediated. All oppositions are subject to the pacific judgment of God, of which neither party is independent. To this extent every Christian is, to use a term which had some currency early in the twentieth century, a 'pacifist', rejecting antagonistic praxis, the praxis of unmediated conflict. All Christians, therefore, can recognise something like a sin of belligerence or a 'crime against peace'. That crime consists in making antagonistic praxis a goal of politics, whether as means or end; that sin consists in cultivating antagonism as a form of self-perfection.

Against what moral standard is war a crime or a sin? Here, indeed, is a puzzle. For there is universal evidence of a connection between warlike behaviour and the development of culture. Antagonistic praxis is strongly tied to the cultivation of certain human virtues; it is the occasion of achievement, self-discipline and virtuosity. This is made possible by a psychological fact, that the peril of confrontation with a mortal enemy may evoke a sudden access of courage

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and capacity. Within his interpretation of the human passions, St Thomas spoke of what he called an 'irascible contrariety', by which he meant that our passionate reactions to good and evil not only take the form of an instinctive attraction and repulsion, but also, as we see good and evil as presenting a challenge to our own capacities, of a reflective contrary movement, shrinking from or pressing towards action.¹ So faced with an immediate threat to our lives, there is released within us a dialectical response, not only of extreme fear but of extreme boldness, on the basis of which a culture of the virtue of courage may be perfected.

From Achilles to Patton, war offers its rich and varied crop of military heroes, for whom the destruction of enemies has been the stuff of outstanding performance, whether in brutal hand-to-hand assault or in elegant tactical ingenuity. But the satisfaction of disposing of an enemy is not confined to the hero himself, nor even to those who fight alongside him and aspire to imitate him. The hero is, in fact, never as solitary as the songs that celebrate him make him seem. His combat is a moment in the building of a society; his enterprise furthers the life of a community of men, women and children, for whom the warrior's deeds are a common point of reference, a 'transcendental representation', and who reinforce with passionate self-censure the narrowed moral perspectives which pave the way for heroic virtues. The unbridled excess of war, the ritual mutilation of corpses, the slaughter of non-combatants, the rape of women, the destruction of property, every kind of violent display, in fact, are all indivisibly of a piece with its constructive, culture-building and virtue-perfecting aspects. They are the rituals through which the mortal conflict of a few becomes the common object of love within a political society.

Furthermore, the access of heroic courage is surrounded by a wealth of disciplines and restraints. The practical traditions of the

¹ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1–2.23.2. Blackfriars edn, ed. Thomas R. Heath, vol. xxxv, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode and New York, McGraw Hill, 1972, pp. 80–5; also in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999 (hereafter *IG*), p. 354.

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warrior classes, found in many cultures, develop virtues of self-mastery, decisive action and contempt for death, creating an élite to which the combatant rôle is confined. In Israel's traditions, on the other hand, which were comparatively inhospitable to heroic ideals and jealous of the popular militia, a different set of disciplines emerges, sometimes clashing with the heroic ones.² Cultic restraints surrounding warfare present a theological interpretation of battle as a moment of special divine empowerment. Religious law forbids committal to battle without the assurance of prophecy and oracle that the cause is YHWH's own, since such engagements are not available for the pursuit of ordinary human goals, and the temptations of self-enrichment must be offset by a general destruction. In their different ways these two traditions of restraint have a similar aim: to construct a wall around the encounter of battle, to make an unbridgeable difference between the ordinary relations which bind peoples to neighbouring peoples and the exceptional moment of antagonistic confrontation. The heroic ethic demands magnanimity when the critical moment is past; it forbids 'avenging in time of peace blood which had been shed in war' (1 Kings 2:5). The destructiveness of battle may not spill into the subsequent life of the community, and in the greatest celebrations of warrior deeds the heroism of the vanquished is honoured alongside that of the victors. In ancient traditions, then, antagonistic praxis is separated off. It is treated as a special and occasional eventuality, a crisis in which the ordinary rules of social recognition are dissolved in mutual bloodshed, but which in turn is decisively set aside, so that ordinary rules of social recognition may reassert themselves.

This entwining of the pursuit of war with the growth of civilisation directs us to the moment of truth in the old assertion that self-defence was a natural right. The praxis of mortal combat is not destructive to human sociality as such; it is simply a moment at which human

² 1 Sam. 14 demonstrates a clash between the cultic and heroic schools within Israel's interpretation of war. Cf. my *The Desire of the Nations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 55f.

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sociality regroups and renews itself. The rejection of war, then, is no demand of natural law. It is a distinctively *evangelical* rejection. Christians refused to go along with this controlled recognition of antagonistic praxis and its associated virtues. They had a message to proclaim about the end of history: the episodic collapse and recovery of sociality was something that God had done away with once for all in the cross and exaltation of Christ. The unification of all rule in his rule, the subordination of all sovereignty under his sovereignty, forbade them to think that sheer unmediated antagonism could, in however carefully defined circumstances, be admitted as a possibility. Since every opposition of hostile parties was subject to the throne of God and of his Christ, there could be no outright duality. Antagonistic praxis was superseded by the climax of salvation-history. To use the phrase of John Milbank, whose framing of the problematic we have to some degree followed, a counter-praxis was demanded, a 'peaceful transmission of difference', that would overcome the confrontation of the two with the rule of the one, revealing the unifying order of the kingdom of God.³

But what is the shape of this counter-praxis? It cannot be the waging of peace *against* violence. Christians believe that violence, in the radical ontological sense, 'is not'; and to oppose violence with peace is to agree that violence 'is'. The praxis which corresponds to the ontology of peace is not a praxis *of peace* simply and as such, but a praxis of winning peace out of opposition. 'Not the simple *being* of peace,' as Bernd Wannenwetsch declares, 'but the *service* of reconciliation'.⁴

³ For the phrase, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, p. 417.

⁴ Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Gottesdienst als Lebensform*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1997, pp. 127–9, drawing attention to Milbank's slide from a 'gigantic claim' at the ontological level into 'seemingly inescapable resignation', and seeing this correctly as the result of a conception of the church's praxis that takes violence too seriously: 'Nicht das *Wesen* des Friedens, sondern das *Amt* der Versöhnung; nicht das *Wesen* des *Friedens*, sondern das *Amt* der *Versöhnung*.'

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This counter-praxis has more than one theatre. Staged against the supportive backdrop of the community of belief and worship, it takes a pastoral shape as mutual forgiveness, by which enemies who believe the Gospel are made enemies no longer. But it must also be staged missiologically against a backdrop of unbelief and disobedience, and here it assumes the secular form of judgment – not final judgment, but judgment as the interim provision of God's common grace, promising the dawning of God's final peace. This, too, is a word (not the first or last word, but an interim word) of evangelical proclamation: God has provided us a *saeculum*, a time to live, to believe and to hope under a régime of provisional judgment; here, too, it is possible to practise reconciliation, since God's patience waits, and preserves the world against its own self-destruction.

The practical content of this interim common grace is the *political act*, the same political act that we encounter in any other political context: government-as-judgment, the exercise of Gospel faith within the theatre of unbelief and disobedience. This may be exercised also in response to the crime of war. The outcome of this act of judgment, when it is successful, is like the outcome of every other successful act of judgment: a law, which regulates relations between the parties and provides the measure for their future peace. The evangelical counter-praxis to war, then, amounts to this: armed conflict can and must be re-conceived as an extraordinary extension of ordinary acts of judgment; it can and must be subject to the limits and disciplines of ordinary acts of judgment. In the face of criminal warmaking, judgment may take effect through armed conflict, but only as armed conflict is conformed to the law-governed and law-generating shape of judgment.

Materially, this proposal may appear to amount simply to another kind of war – a 'just' war. But the name by which the proposal has been universally known in the last generation – 'just-war theory' – is a misnomer, since it is not, in the first place, a 'theory', but a proposal of *practical* reason; and it is not, in the second place, about 'just wars', but about how we may enact just judgment even in the

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theatre of war. The term 'war' itself, subject to every kind of reification and deconstruction, is hardly usable. Formally, what is proposed is *toto caelo* different from the crime of war: it is a provisional witness to the unity of God's rule in the face of the antagonistic praxis of *duellum*. Yet it is no less true in this form than in any other that judgment has only the same material means available to it as crime. Armed conflict is the means it requires, because armed conflict is the means by which the crime of war is practised. To take up *these* means, and to convert them to the service of that law-bound and obedient judgment, was the constructive work of Christian 'poetics', an exercise of the practical imagination in service of international justice, rather than in national self-defence or self-aggrandisement.

'Pacifism' is the name usually given to one of two possible strategies – the more recognisably Christian of the two – for refusing this Christian proposal. It characteristically limits an *active* counter-praxis to within the primary, pastoral theatre, while within the secondary, missiological theatre it restricts itself to a passive counter-praxis of endurance and martyrdom. It has been popular in recent years to say that there are not one but many 'pacifisms', and for the purposes of a sociological typology this is no doubt true.⁵ But for the purposes of practical reason one pacifism is enough: in the face of a praxis of unmediated opposition, it holds that an evangelical counter-praxis of judgment is not to be looked for. The disagreement here, as is rightly said, is not a disagreement about the *means* that may be used to defend peace. It concerns the *nature* of that interim worldly peace that may in fact obtain between communities and individuals without mediating institutions of government, i.e., peace among sovereign nations. Within a pacifist perspective, this peace must be a gift of God beyond the scope of any political art. We

⁵ For the plurality of pacifisms, an idea given popularity by John Howard Yoder's *Nevertheless: the varieties and shortcomings of religious pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa. and Kitchener, Ont., Herald Press, 1971), see most recently Stanley Hauerwas, 'Explaining Christian Nonviolence', in Ken Chase and Alan Jacobs, eds, *Christian Peace in a Violent World*, Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2002.

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may do much, no doubt, to earn, claim and enjoy such a gift when it is given, by 'raising lemurs, sustaining universities, having children, and, of course, playing baseball'; but when it has splintered into a thousand warring fragments, there is no political praxis by which we may pick the fragments up and reunite them.⁶ Does this reflect a theological disagreement about common grace as such? Not necessarily, for the pacifist is by no means bound to deny the operation of common grace through governments and their institutionalised judgment. But it does reflect a fairly profound disagreement about the limits of the operation of common grace. A certain 'statism' is implied in the pacifist position, which will not contemplate the *improvisation* of judgment where it is not provided for within a state structure, and to that extent cannot treat international politics wholly seriously *as* politics, a God-given sphere of peaceful interaction. Here we begin to see why pacifism is a modern development. But to this we return below.

For a short period at the end of the twentieth century, when representatives of the just-war proposal and pacifism found themselves in common opposition to the Western alliance's policies of massive deterrence, it appeared to some commentators that they converged upon a 'presumption against the use of force', the difference being merely the uncompromising spirit in which pacifists maintained the presumption over against a readiness to make exceptions.⁷ But this was a mere trick of the light, which involved a misreading of the just-war proposal as essentially critical in intent. If 'just war theory' had no purpose but to disprove on a case-by-case basis claims for the justice of particular wars which pacifism had ruled out *a limine*, then it could relate to pacifism like research-assistant to professor, marshalling the detailed evidence in support of the grand hypothesis. But it is not, and never was, the function of the judicial proposal to

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, 'Taking Time for Peace: the moral significance of the trivial', in *Christian Existence Today*, Durham, N.C., Labyrinth Press, 1988, pp. 253–66.

⁷ For an extended critique of the supposed convergence, see Joseph E. Capizzi, 'On Behalf of the Neighbour', *Studies in Christian Ethics* xiv(2), 2001, 87–108.

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allow or disallow historical claims. Its business was to assert a practical claim, that God's mercy and peace may and must be witnessed to in this interim of salvation-history through a praxis of judgment, even beyond the normal reach of states.

From the earliest attempts to understand how armed conflict might be compatible with Christian discipleship, the church has taken its bearings from the evangelical command of love. Augustine's famous letter to Boniface treats the obligation of military action as an obligation of love to the neighbour. St Thomas and his followers locate the discussion of war within the treatise on the virtue of charity.⁸ In the context of war we find in its sharpest and most paradoxical form the thought that love can sometimes smite, and even slay. If this thought marks the parting of the ways with pacifism, it also indicates the point at which Christian thought on war is irreconcilable with the alternative strategy for refusing the judicial proposal, which is to make *survival* the final criterion of what may and may not be done. To take survival as the bottom line is to revert to the antagonistic model of mortal combat, and so inevitably to retreat from the Gospel proclamation of the universal rule of Christ and from the praxis of loving judgment. When self-defence, of state, community or individual, has the last word, paganism is restored. Precisely for this reason a Christian witness to God's peace must always be acted out against the horizon of suffering and martyrdom. Suffering and martyrdom mark the point at which the possibilities of true judgment run out within the conditions of the world. They are necessary components of Christian practical reason, because they demonstrate the vulnerability of the praxis of judgment, and so protect it from serious misunderstanding. Judgment is an undertaking always under

⁸ Augustine, *Epistula* 189, in *IG*, pp. 133–6; also in Augustine, *Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 214–18. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2–2.40, set within the section *de vitiis oppositis caritati* (cf. 34 prol.); Blackfriars edn pp. 80–5. Suárez's treatise on just war forms the final section of his work *De triplici virtute theologica*, the third part of which is *de caritate*.

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threat within the terms of this world, always liable to be overwhelmed by violence. It cannot possibly issue a licence to avoid defeat by all possible means.

Yet the horizon on which we are called to suffer and to die rather than wrong our neighbour is not reached before we actually reach it. The possibilities of active witness to God's peace are not exhausted until we have exhausted them, which we will not have done if we have not explored them. In this context, as in all others, the duties which confront us do not *begin* with martyrdom; they *end* with it, when we have gone as far as we are permitted to go, done as much as we are permitted to do. Martyrdom is not, in fact, a strategy for *doing* anything, but a testimony to God's faithfulness when there is nothing left to do. Which is simply to say that we cannot describe the praxis of international judgment solely by pointing to the moment at which its possibilities run out. A child invited to paint a fish may begin by painting the sea, and when the paper is awash in blue, discover too late that the fish's outline needed to be sketched in first. The praxis of judgment is that of a certain type of *action*, and no account of it can be offered in words with the prefix 'non-'. Non-violence, non-resistance and all the other great watchwords of pacifism evoke a set of limits which circumscribe the possibility of action in the world. They belong to the philosophy of transcendence, the *via negativa*. They frame every Christian witness within the eschatological non-coincidence of worldly success and the triumph of God's kingdom. But they do not describe this witness.

It has often been said that the fault of pacifism lies in a progressivist eschatology, an optimistic hope that sufficiently worthy actions will transform the existing terms of this world into those of the next. This charge may have been an appropriate response to certain religious syntheses with idealist rationalism in the early twentieth century; but it is the opposite of the truth about the Christian pacifism most frequently encountered today, which tends to be preoccupied with the distinction between the two worlds and their different suppositions, unwilling to think in terms other than those of opposition. Yet