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# The Lies of War: Building an Ethics of Peace

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# The Lies of War

## – *Building an Ethics of Peace*

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*I dedicate my comments to a ten-year-old Afghan boy, Mohammed Noor. He was having his Sunday dinner when an American bomb struck. He lost both eyes and both hands. Who, with this child in mind, would dare sing 'God bless America', the hymn that would make God a co-conspirator with American war-makers? The sightless eyes of this child should haunt us to the end of our days and sear on our souls the absolute need to not just pray for peace, but to do something to make it happen.*

The Prussian officer Karl von Clausewitz famously saw war as an entirely rational undertaking, a 'continuation of policy ... by other means'. The sanitizing implication, as Barbara Ehrenreich noted, was that war involves 'the kind of clear-headed deliberation one might apply to a game of chess no more disturbing and irrational than, say a difficult trade negotiation – except perhaps to those who lay dying on the battlefield.'<sup>1</sup> The disguisers of war, who have framed it in such non-toxic tones, have so successfully defanged and anointed 'war' with respectability that we use it in all sorts of innocent and lovely contexts: 'the war on poverty', 'the war on cancer', etc. War can be armchair spectator entertainment. It is acceptable for people to become 'civil war buffs', or 'revolutionary war buffs'. If people were to announce themselves as 'prostitution buffs' or 'rape buffs' their perverted absorption in such moral disasters would raise eyebrows.

'WAR' ... WHAT IS IT REALLY?

The reality that 'war' euphemizes is *state sponsored violence*. That description opens the door to an honest moral evaluation of

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1. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 7.

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what it really is we are talking about. We are talking about violence, and violence kills people and wrecks the earth and the ethical question before us is whether that kind of destruction can ever be called 'just'.

What contributed to the facile acceptance and even sanctification of war was the venerable and all too unchallenged 'just war theory'. Putting the word 'war' alongside the word 'just' helped to baptize war, making it seem rational and good as long as certain amenities are observed. The reality it covers is sneakily hidden from view since the abused word 'war' is no longer descriptive of the mayhem and slaughter we are wreaking when we 'go to war'.

Military strategists, and ethicists embedded with them, drape an even thicker tissue of lies around military violence. They like to call it 'the use of force'. That sugar-coats it handsomely. 'Force', after all, is nice. A forceful personality, a forceful argument – these can be quite admirable. But the brutal levelling of Falluja in Iraq or of settlements in Palestine needs a more honest word than 'force'. 'Force', like war, is a malicious euphemism. It averts our eyes from the horrors described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: 'Some two million children have died in dozens of wars during the past decade ... This is more than three times the number of battlefield deaths of American soldiers in all their wars since 1776 ... Today, civilians account for more than 90 percent of war casualties.'

#### THE POLICING PARADIGM

The real and honestly stated question is this: *is state sponsored violence, involving as it does slaughter and environmental destruction, ever justifiable?* It is quite possible that it may be. I will argue that it might be justified to respond to actual (not imagined) threats and attacks. However – and this is key – it can only be justified the same way that violent action by police is justified: in a communitarian context within an enforceable framework of law. Justifications for war, however, are often shady rationalizations for the failure to build peace. It would be more truthful to say that war tends to be the pit we fall into by avoiding the tedious unglamorous work of peace-making and justice-building. Maybe some slaughter to prevent greater slaughter might have been necessary in 1994 in Rwanda because there was no international interest in supporting the peace and reform efforts in Rwanda in the years preceding that. But that failure should not be hidden by facile 'just war' arguments for the 'use of force'. The allegedly 'justified war' is usually the mask of an unconscionable failure to do the advance work of peace and to

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hide the total embarrassment of statecraft that state-sponsored violence tends to be.<sup>2</sup>

The policing paradigm for justifying state(s) sponsored war is brilliantly enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. That Charter was meant to put an end to the vigilante approach to war illustrated by Adolf Hitler as well as by the 'pre-emptive war' policy of George W. Bush. In the civilizing view of the United Nations, state sponsored violence could only be just in a communitarian setting under the restraints of enforceable international law. The United Nations was founded to make this possible. Nations, such as the United States, long accustomed to vigilante warring, have frustrated the United Nations and its Charter. This is a sad irony since the United States was a principal shaper of this policing paradigm for justifying war.

The prime challenge to contemporary ethics is to rethink and reframe the morality of war. Let's face it: Catholic moral theology has never risen to the challenge put to it by Pope John XXIII in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in terris*. He said that in our age, 'it is irrational to believe that war is still an apt means of vindicating violated rights',<sup>3</sup> The Second Vatican Council called for 'an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude'.<sup>4</sup> It is a scandal that these appeals to Catholic moral theology have gone almost unheeded, while an inordinate and embarrassing amount of attention has been paid to what I call 'the pelvic issues' of masturbation, homosexuality, and abortion.

### IS THERE ANY HOPE?

Is there any hope for this blundering species that dares to call itself *sapiens*, or are we destined to drown in the blood of our own belligerence? We have created the end of the world and stored it in our nuclear silos, planes and submarines while double basting our planet with heat trapping carbon dioxide. Having extinguished many species we are technically poised to extinguish our own.

And yet there is hope.

It may be drawn from both the present and the past. There are stirrings today of what has been called a 'moral globalization'. In happy irony, the US atrocity being wreaked on Iraq has birthed a fervid and growing cry for peace seen in the largest call for peace in human history, on 15 February 2003. In the past two years, too,

2. See Stanley Hauerwas, Linda Hogan, Enda McDonagh, 'The Case for the Abolition of War in the Twenty-first Century', forthcoming in *The Annual of The Society of Christian Ethics*. This paper argues brilliantly that 'war possesses our imaginations, our everyday habits, and our scholarly assumptions'.

3. John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, 11 April 1963: AAS 55, p. 291.

4. Walter M Abbott, SJ (general editor), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 'The Church Today', 80, p. 293.

sixteen tribunals of conscience have met in Barcelona, Tokyo, Brussels, Seoul, New York, London, Mumbai, Istanbul, and in other cities showing 'faith in the consciences of millions of people across the world who do not wish to stand by and watch while the people of Iraq are being slaughtered, subjugated and humiliated'.<sup>5</sup>

Also encouraging are the heroic Israeli soldiers, dubbed the 'refuseniks', who are asserting that conscientious objection is also the right of soldiers. The idea of the soldier as automaton, with no more conscience than a fired bullet, is the keystone of military culture and these soldiers are challenging it in a revolutionary way. In the spirit of the prophets of ancient Israel they are asserting that soldiers are persons not pawns. Jail will be their portion, but veneration is their desert. Some US soldiers are beginning to assert the same, saying that blind obedience is as immoral as slavery (see [www.swiftsmartveterans.com](http://www.swiftsmartveterans.com)).

Failure also, in an ironic twist, is teaching peace. The United States, the alleged 'superpower', is losing two wars simultaneously in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is nothing in these two debacles that merits the name of victory or even an understanding of what 'victory' could possibly mean. The fact that the alleged 'superpower' is having a streak of losses to guerilla-based insurgencies is very suggestive of the power shifts that are in play. First of all, it shows that war has mutated. Guerillas with the unmatched trinity of advantages – invisibility, versatility, and patience – have 'put to rout' the 'arrogant of heart and mind' and the supposedly weak have 'brought down monarchs from their thrones' (Luke 1:51-52) if I may quote Mary, the radical mother of Jesus.

Secondly it is a wake-up call for Americans *re* their declining democracy. As Yale professor of international relations Bruce Russett says, democracies 'more often win their wars – 80 percent of the time'. The reason is 'they are more prudent about what wars they get into'.<sup>6</sup> That doesn't describe our six billion dollar a month tragic fiasco in Iraq or our Afghanistan and Vietnam quagmires.<sup>7</sup> It appears we now go to war like autocracies do. The ingredients of a democracy are missing: a free and seriously critical press, broad participation in any war effort by the citizens, and proper declaration of war according to the Constitution. Add an indifferent public minimally inconvenienced by the war fought by the children of the poor, a group of ruthless ideologues in high office,

5. Quoted in Richard Falk, 'The World Speaks on Iraq', *The Nation*, 281 #4, 1/8 August 2005, 10.

6. Glen Stassen (editor), *Just Peacemaking. Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), 106.

7. Cf. Linda Bilmes, 'The Trillion-Dollar War', *The New York Times*, 20 August 2005. Projecting out to the year 2010 Bilmes shows that the cost of the war will reach the 1.372 trillion mark.

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and you have autocratic war making – and three lost wars in a row! Democracy is like swimming: you keep working at it or you sink.

### THE POWER OF NON-VIOLENCE

There is some good news: happily in our day, the myth of the inutility of non-violent power and non-violent resistance is being debunked. Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela showed the power of non-violent resistance. Almost bloodlessly dictators such as Ferdinand Marcos and at least seven Latin American despots have been driven out. Gene Sharp lists 198 different types of nonviolent actions that are on the historical record, but neglected by historians and journalists who prefer to report on the flash of war.<sup>8</sup> ‘Britain’s Indian colony of three hundred million people was liberated non-violently at a cost of about eight thousand lives ... France’s Algerian colony of about ten million was liberated by violence, but it cost almost one million lives.’<sup>9</sup>

Compare these successful cases of non-violent resistance with the American quagmires in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq or the Israeli occupation of Palestine and ask: who are the realists, the prophets of Israel, Jesus, the Buddha, and Gandhi – or – the Pentagon and Likud warriors?

Also helpful is the fact that the American empire is being exposed for what it is even as it enters into its decline. The essence of empire is ‘the domination and exploitation of weaker states by stronger ones’.<sup>10</sup> All this is present in the American empire. We have 800 military installations in 130 countries and our Special Forces operate in nearly 170 nations. If nations won’t let us in, we invade them militarily or we tell them we’ll boycott them out of our market. We take up 20 percent of Okinawa’s arable land for our bases and if they protest, they are threatened with being denied access to our purchasing power. What we cannot buy we conquer. We have overthrown twenty-five governments since 1945, but would take a dim view if any nation tried to overthrow ours.<sup>11</sup>

8. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Sargent, 1973); see also Ronald J. Sider and Richard E. Taylor, *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1982).

9. Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 52.

10. Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Holt, 2004), 28.

11. See William Blum, *Rogue State. A Guide to the World’s Only Superpower* (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 2000), and Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Holt, 2000). Johnson’s book, written two years before 11 September 2001, predicted ‘blowback’ (a CIA term) from Osama bin Laden due to US Middle-East presence and politics.

## THE LIES OF WAR

All empires mask their true purposes with noble pretence: to take on, in Kipling's phase, 'the white man's burden', to spread democracy and freedom, and now to 'fight terrorism', while defining terrorists as any who resist by means foul or fair the intrusions of empire. Terrorism is the killing of innocent people to persuade their government to do what we want. Classical examples of 'state terrorism' – the worst kind – were the American bombing of civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Peter Ustinov, actor and playwright said: 'terrorism is the war of the poor and war is the terrorism of the rich'.

Successful empire depends on the illusion of moral and cultural supremacy. That illusion is being vaporized by our bellicosity and penury. The emergence of hard truth is always good news.

### THE RENEWABLE MORAL ENERGIES OF RELIGION

As John Henry Cardinal Newman reminded us, people will die for a dogma who will not stir for a conclusion. Nothing so activates the will as does the tincture of the sacred. This can be negative as well as positive. The poet Alexander Pope reminds us that the worst of madmen is a saint gone mad, and remember that in the past religion has always been invoked and co-opted in support of war.

But let's think positively about religion. It has in the past forced history to turn new corners in the direction of peace. There are success stories back there in which religion played the leading role.

Three hundred years before Jesus was born, a powerful prince Ashoka in India had dominated much of India by military force. After his last big battle, he walked among the dead in the battlefield where a hundred thousand men had fallen and instead of feeling triumph he felt revulsion. He converted to Buddhism and for the next thirty-seven years, he pioneered a new mode of truly compassionate government. He left a legacy of concern for people, animals and the environment. He planted orchards and shade trees along roads, encouraged the arts, built rest houses for travellers, water sheds for animals and he devoted major resources to the poor and the aged and the sick. As Duane Elgin says in this hope-filled book, *Promise Ahead: A vision of Hope and Action for Humanity's Future*, 'Ashoka's political administration was marked by the end of war and an emphasis on peace.'<sup>12</sup> His governmental officers were trained as peacemakers 'building mutual good will among races, sects, and parties'.<sup>13</sup>

12. Duane Elgin, *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity's Future* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000) 117.

13. *Ibid.*

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The result? His kingdom lasted more than two thousand years until the military empire of Britain invaded India. Britain's empire based on 'superpower thinking', did not last, nor did that of Alexander the Great, Caesar, Genghis Khan, Napoleon or Hitler. Historian H. G. Wells said that among all the monarchs of history, the star of Ashoka shines almost alone. But it need not shine alone. You can almost hear the prophets of Israel crying out to us: 'Have you ears and cannot hear? Have you eyes and cannot see?'

### THE BIBLICAL DEMURRAL

The ancient world cynically declared what seemed to be the natural law of social evolution: *si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war). The biblical writers entered a major dissent to this logic. They say: *si vis pacem, para pacem!* If you want peace you have to prepare it and build it. 'Seek peace and pursue it' (Ps. 34:14). You have to plan it, and work at it. You can't just pray for it. It is a social, economic and political arrangement that must be ingeniously forged. As the rabbis put it, 'All commandments are to be fulfilled when the right opportunity arrives. But not peace! Peace you must seek out and pursue.'<sup>14</sup> You will not stumble upon it by luck. Like a city, it will come to be only if it is constructed brick by brick.

Abraham Heschel states the dramatic fact: the Israelites 'were the first [people] in history to regard a nation's reliance upon force as evil.'<sup>15</sup> Nothing in their setting was conducive to this insight. Yet the Israelites did not just criticize the security-through-arms illusion; they offered an alternative. Peace can only be the fruit of justice. That is what Isaiah said: justice is the only road to peace, a text that all by itself deserves a Nobel Peace Prize (Isa. 32:17).

The Hebrew Bible does not resort to hints and indirection when it speaks of peace. This epochal breakthrough of moral brilliance is blunt and loud. Also, the writers are not speaking about an internal, spiritual peace of soul as subsequent centuries of Jewish and Christians would rather have it. They are neck high in politics and economics and are out to condemn precisely the reliance of nations on arms. Their position is that trust in arms for safety will not work and represents a moral failure and a collapse of imagination.

The message is drummed home: violence does not work; it bites back at you. As the Jewish Christian Paul put it: 'If you go on fighting one another, tooth and nail, all you can expect is mutual destruction' (Gal. 5:14). The Bible blasts military power.

14. Pinchas Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount. Utopia or Program for Action?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986) 35.

15. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), 166.

‘There is no peace for the wicked’ (Isa. 57:21). The inverse of that is that if you do not have peace, it is your fault. You took the wrong approach. ‘Because you have trusted in your chariots, in the number of your warriors, the tumult of war shall arise against your people and all your fortresses shall be razed’ (Hos. 10:13-14). Arms beget fear, not peace. You cannot build ‘Zion in bloodshed’ (Mic. 3:10). Therefore, ‘I will break bow and sword and weapon of war and sweep them off the earth, so that all living creatures may lie down without fear’ (Hos. 2: 18). Notice, the distrust of arms is seen as a norm for ‘all living creatures’, not just for Israel. War delivers peace to no one. There are many modes of power; in biblical perspective, violent power is the most delusional and least successful.

#### PACIFISM VS. PASSIVE-ISM

The Jesus movement continued the biblical protest against kill-power as the path to security. ‘How blessed are the peacemakers; God shall call them his children’ (Matt 5:9). One text, however, has muddied the Christian contribution, making it appear that Jesus was against resistance to evil. What he opposed was violent resistance but he himself was an active non-violent resister to empire and it was precisely this that got him killed. (It is remarkable that his movement survived longer than Rome.)

We need to attend to this widely misunderstood text: Matt. 5:38-42. ‘You have learned that they were told, “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” But what I tell you is this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two.’ As Walter Wink says, this text has been interpreted so badly that it became ‘the basis for systematic training in cowardice, as Christians are taught to acquiesce to evil’.<sup>16</sup> It has been used to urge co-operation with dictators, submission to wife battering, and helpless passivity in the face of evil. Associating Jesus with such pusillanimity is an outrage.

Wink puts the meaning back into these texts. ‘Turn the other cheek’ was not in reference to a fist fight. The reference is to a backhanded slap of a subordinate where the intention was ‘not to injure but to humiliate’. Abject submission was the goal. Turning the other cheek was the opposite of abject submission. Rather it said: ‘Try again ... I deny you the power to humiliate me.’<sup>17</sup> Gandhi the Hindu understood: ‘The first principle of non-violent

16. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers. Disarmament and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 175.

17. *Ibid.*, 175-77.

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action is that of non-co-operation in everything humiliating.’<sup>18</sup> This is courageous resistance, not passivity.

Jesus knew that violent resistance to the Roman empire was fruitless and recent history in his own region showed that. It was like the Danes during World War II who did not try to fight the German army, but allowed them in. Then everyday their king would lead a quiet walk through the city of Copenhagen with the citizens in good order behind him. It was peaceful, but it said to the occupiers, ‘You do not own us and you have not captured our spirits.’ This had to affect even the minds of the occupiers, as non-violent resistance always seeks to do. The same spirit showed through when the Danes got word from a friendly German officer that the Germans were coming for their Jews. Using everything that could float, the Danes transported their Jewish compatriots over to neutral Sweden saving most of them.

What Jesus was saying was ‘don’t retaliate against violence with violence because it will get you nowhere, but you must oppose evil in any way you can’. Even Gandhi said that if there were only two choices in the face of evil, cowardice or violence, he would prefer violence, but there is the third option of ingenious, persistent, creative non-violent resistance, and this, in biblical terms is ‘the way of the Lord’.

This message is concretized in an important book produced by twenty-three Christian ethicists. Its title is *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*<sup>19</sup> and is written to inform the consciences of citizens so that they can meet their prime duty, to be the conscience of the nation and move war-addicted governments toward peacemaking.

Citizenship in religious terms is not a privilege; it is a vocation, a vocation with serious learning duties attached. The Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:29-37) does not condemn the ‘robbers’ (whose sin is obvious) but focuses on ‘the priest’ and ‘the Levite’ who ignored the plight of the half-dead victim and ‘passed by’. Self-indulgent citizens who are politically ignorant are ‘the priest’ and ‘the Levite’. Beguiled by ‘bread and circus’ they treat governmental evil as none of their daily business.<sup>20</sup>

### A CONCLUSION ON TEARS

The tearless are the enemies of peace because they do not respond appropriately to the evils that peace-making must address. Tears,

18. Mahatma Gandhi, in Harijan, 10 March 1946, quote in Mark Juergensmeyer, *Fighting with Gandhi* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 43.

19. Glen Stassen (editor), *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1988).

20. See Daniel C. Maguire, *A Moral Creed for All Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 17.

after all, are very Christic. In that beautiful text, Jesus looked at the city, and he wept, heartbroken over the fact that we do not know the things that make for peace (Luke 19:41-42). I was amazed, as a young Catholic boy, when I saw on the back of the *Missale Romanum* a prayer for the gift of tears. And it said, 'Oh God, strike into the *duritiā*, the hardness of my heart and bring forth a saving flood of tears.' And as a little boy, I thought, 'Who wants tears, when you grow up you don't have them anymore, especially if you are a man?' And that precisely is the problem. If you are without tears, it is a tragedy. You are not Christic. You are not Christian. 'How blest are you who weep ...' (Luke 6:21). Jesus wept. He looked at that city and said, 'If only you knew the things that make for your peace, but you don't.' And he broke down sobbing.

Let us update that text. Let us hear Jesus say, 'America, America, if only you knew the things that make for your peace, if only you could see that the answer is not in your weaponry and economic muscle. If you could use your great talent and wealth to work to end world hunger, world thirst, world illiteracy, no one would hate you, you would know *Shalom*. That is the promise of Isaiah 32:17. Plant justice and compassion, and then and only then will peace grow.'

There is an illness in this land of ours that makes the Bible's peace-making message 'a hard saying'. I will call it ICS: Imperial Comfort Syndrome. This particular illness, ICS, does not result in fever or in cold chills. Its symptoms are tepidity and a dull, crippling kind of depression. It causes such things as this: in many recent elections as many as 60 percent of eligible American voters didn't even show up. That is the sickness of ICS: Imperial Comfort Syndrome. For a searing indictment of it, I would take you to Revelations 3:15, 22, and let us rend our hearts and listen. The author puts these words into the mouth of God. 'I know all your ways. You are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were either hot or cold. But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth ... Hear, you who have ears to hear, what the Spirit says to the Churches.'