

“Just War”

Fourth in a series on Thinking Faith-fully about War

St Olaf College Chapel

November 19, 2007

Hymns:

805; Lead On, O King Eternal

705: Grant us Wisdom, Grant us Courage

Scripture (NIV):

Joshua 8:20-27

The setting is the conquering of the promised land. For the city of Ai, Joshua sets up an ambush: part of his army pretends to retreat to the desert, enticing the soldiers to leave Ai and chase after the Israelites; meanwhile the rest of his army comes out of hiding and enters the city and sets it on fire. Then, in a scene reminiscent of Moses, God tells Joshua to hold up his javelin toward the burning city, and here's what happens: "The men of Ai looked back and saw the smoke of the city rising against the sky, but they had no chance to escape in any direction, for the Israelites who had been fleeing toward the desert had turned back against their pursuers. For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going up from the city, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai. The men of the ambush also came out of the city against them, so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives....When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the desert where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder to this city, as the Lord had instructed Joshua."

Joshua 11: 19-20

Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took all of them in battle. For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage

war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Luke 6: 27-29

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also.

Romans 12: 17-18, 21

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone....Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

There is tension here; I hope you noticed it in the hymn we just sang and also in the juxtaposition of these texts. It would be too simple to say that the tension is between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Last week Professor Stansell drew our attention to counter-voices for peace in the Hebrew prophets and proverbs, and Jesus says in Matthew 10:34, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.”

Juxtaposing these texts provokes some of the arguments in the Judeo-Christian tradition for, on the one hand, holy war and, on the other, pacifism, and, in between, what is called the just war theory.

Holy war: Now I personally don't think for a minute that God *ordered* Moses or Joshua to do these things; however, I think I do understand something of why the writer of Joshua *thought* that God did order it. And that's the enduring connotation of holy war: it's not just that God is on our side, and it's not just that the enemy is demonized and that Geneva-Convention-type scruples are flouted, it's primarily that God *orders* us to kill these enemies. And we must obey God without flinching.

Pacifism: The enduring connotation of pacifism is non-violence, but there are at least three variations.¹ Strict and simple pacifism is the stance that it is morally wrong for *me* to use violence, though I might serve as a medic to those who feel permitted or even obliged to

¹ See Theodore Koontz, “Christian Nonviolence: An Interpretation,” *The Ethics of War and Peace*, ed. Terry Nardin (Princeton University Press, 1996), pp.169-96. My later reference to “functional atheism” also comes from this article.

use it. However what we might call “war abolitionists” are committed to abolishing war for *everyone*, somewhat like earlier abolitionists didn’t merely refuse to own slaves; they opposed slavery for everyone. Overlapping both of these is what we might call “non-violent *resistance*,” the active use of non-violent methods, such as Gandhi used in India and Martin Luther King used in this country. Active resistance, in fact, is one way to interpret sermon on the mount ethics; non-violence is not only morally required, it’s also a much smarter way to get your way!

Well, when we have both holy war and non-violence in our scriptures and our history, it’s not wonder that we have hymns like we just sang. To a spritely martial tune, our day of marching has come, in fields of conquest, no less, we lift our battle song. *But* our weapons are not swords—they are deeds of love and mercy! As Professor Alice Hanson pointed out here last Tuesday, it comes off as a paradox. It reminds us of some of those medieval epics—like *Beowulf* or *The Song of Roland* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—in which the heroic virtues involving physical conquest are juxtaposed, rather than integrated, with the amiable virtues of Jesus and St Paul. It’s rather like putting the beatitudes to a John Philip Sousa march!

Just War: In Judeo-Christian history, it’s the just war tradition that seeks to relieve this tension by insisting that sometimes war and violence is justified, but only under strict conditions. These conditions apply to *starting* a war, as well as to *conducting* a war. Strict conditions for conducting a war include protecting civilian non-combatants as well as avoiding unnecessary harm to enemy combatants. And these guidelines have been embraced by the military. For example, all soldiers in the 82nd Airborne Division carry laminated cards with the rules of engagement and expectations for troopers. These include such rules as, “Fight only enemy combatants,” “Do not harm enemies who surrender; treat them humanely,” “Protect all detainees in accordance with the Geneva Conventions,” “Collect and care for the wounded, whether friend or foe,” “Destroy only what the mission requires, nothing more,” and so on.² Our soldiers must fight as saints!

The *problem* is that everything we know about human nature in wartime is that hatred takes over. In fact, Carl von Clausewitz, an authority who is still read carefully by the military, says that hatred for the enemy is essential for war – our natural disinclination to kill

² See “We Happy Few: The U.S. Soldier’s Laws of War, in Principle and Practice,” Paul Maliszewski and Hadley Ross, *Harper’s Magazine*, May, 2003, pp. 56-57.

folks must be overcome, and hatred is what does that. So atrocities must be expected, to be countered with atrocities from the other side, and so on. Thus Prince Andrey, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a truly decent man, after seeing his destroyed estate, says to himself, "I wouldn't take prisoners. What sense is there in taking prisoners? That's chivalry. The French have destroyed my home and are coming to destroy Moscow; they have outraged and are outraging me at every second. They are my enemies, they are all criminals to my way of thinking..."

No wonder Shakespeare in his play *Julius Caesar* wrote about letting "slip the dogs of war." Once loose, the dogs run out of control, as we have seen even in American soldiers, and not just in Iraq, also in WWII. Abraham Lincoln, in the middle of what he certainly thought was a just war, reflected on the atrocities that even a just war elicits: "Revenge and retaliation follow. And all this...among honest men...Every foul bird comes abroad, and every dirty reptile rises up. These add crime to confusion."

So the sad fact is that once war starts, it is perhaps inexcusably naïve to think that there won't be atrocities on both sides. There can be exceptions: two weeks ago Prof. Nichol told us that our own St. Olaf was willing to suffer defeat rather than do *anything necessary* to win. And in the opening convocation this fall Prof. Santurri noted that General Petraeus insisted that soldiers must be willing to put themselves and their comrades at risk in order to protect civilian non-combatants even the ones that are sympathetic to the enemy. But such exception and hopes do not change the fact that once war is started, horrors will follow. Psalm 137 ends with this bloody thought: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."

In realistic recognition that neither side was free of such feelings for bloody revenge, Abraham Lincoln tried to ratchet the hatred down by proclaiming a day of fasting during the civil war so that we wage it "in sorrowful remembrance of our own faults and crimes." Gary Wills notes that during the Vietnam war Senator Mark Hatfield, Republican from Oregon, "introduced a resolution calling on the nation to repent of its own war crimes. He was

attacked as unpatriotic, as treasonously giving aid and comfort to the enemy – ‘til he revealed that he had been directly quoting Lincoln” during the civil war.”³

Given these facts about what we can realistically expect *during* war, perhaps the crucial element in the just war tradition has to do with the justice of *starting* a war in the first place. The pacifists argue that, given the texts we read earlier from Jesus and Paul, the willingness to engage in violence is functional atheism – it is mistrust in God and the faithless decision that *we*, rather than God, must see to it that history turns out right.

But just war theorists, from Augustine to Aquinas to Luther, insisted that turning the other cheek may be fine when it is only your own skin at risk, but to allow innocent third parties to become the victims of guilty aggressors, well, that is to refuse the responsibility to help the helpers; it is a sin of omission, of refusing to be God’s hands in the world, and thereby becoming responsible for the evil that one *could* prevent but decides not to.

Of course, being God’s hands in the world requires careful and prayerful decision-making. Although Augustine thought that a just war is one that God orders, and although Aquinas approved of the Crusades, today’s just war theorists are very leery about passionate appeals to God’s blessings (if not orders) and about stoking the heated emotions of religious differences. Rather, they urge a cool-headed weighing of specific criteria that have emerged within the tradition. These criteria for the just starting of a war include that it be for a just cause, that it have a reasonable likelihood of success, that it be unlikely to cause more evil than it prevents, that it be declared by proper authority, that it be able to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, and that it be a last resort.

The trouble with this important list of highly credible criteria is that the devil is in the details. Take the first condition, that it be for a just cause. Traditionally this meant a defensive war, after one is attacked. But in a time of Kosovo, Rwanda, and Darfur, we may have to stretch just war to include humanitarian intervention. And what about preemptive and preventive war? Michael Walzer, a highly-regarded just war theorist, approved of some preemptive wars such as when in 1967 the Israeli air force bombed the Egyptian planes while they were on the ground because of the credible threat that in a few hours those planes would otherwise be attacking Israel. Although sometimes the current Iraq war is defended as a

³ “What is a Just War?” *New York Review of Books*, Nov 18, 2004, p. 34. This excellent article also gave me the references to Clausewitz, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Lincoln, the Pope, and Michael Walzer.

preemptive war, Walzer notes that it is a *preventive* war; there was no credible threat of immediate attack; instead there was the worry that eventually the smoking gun might be a mushroom cloud. But it doesn't take a genius to see how tricky these criteria became when trying to justify a preventive war.

For example, the Pope and the Vatican theological ethicists insisted that the criterion of last resort simply could not be met as long as the UN Inspectors were able to do their work in Iraq under the no-fly zone. Hence, although they approved of the Afghanistan mission, they vehemently apposed the Iraq invasion. But some conservative American Catholics, including Michael Novak and John Neuhaus, thought that the Vatican had gone pacifist or had become anti-American or, at any rate, didn't have as much relevant information as did our intelligence services. Now these people are in no way stupid, ignorant, or corrupt, but they were, in my view, too hasty and one-sided in weighing the evidence against the criteria.

Even if you disagree with me about that, we can agree that the just war criteria or rules do not provide an algorithm that clear-headed people of good will can use in a straightforward way and come to agreement.

Rather, discretionary judgment and practical wisdom are necessary to delicately discern the appropriate response, whether it be Rwanda, Iraq, or Darfur. This is not surprising. In ethical theory in general there is a debate between the virtue theorists, who say that ethics should focus on what we should *be* – the sort of character we should have – and the rule theorists, who say we should focus on what we ought to *do* – on the principles for correct action. I myself lean toward the principles approach since I don't know what we should *be* without first knowing what we should *do*. But I also know this: that any plausible set of principles will require broad discernment and deep wisdom to be applied appropriately. In other words, we need principles but we also need moral and intellectual virtues – especially wisdom – to use them well.

So my conclusion is a prayer: Lord, grant us courage! But Lord, first grant us wisdom.

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