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A Historian's Reflection on Reading *War and Peace*: A Bibliographic Essay

Tim Dillon

"More I Cannot Wish You"

Frank Loesser (Guys and Dolls)

Certain specific moments require the recapitulation of our lives—those personally historic moments when, proverbially, our life passes before our eyes. Often they trigger Joyce-like epiphanies, clarifying confusions horribly or wonderfully. For me, these include a cold January day back in 1971 when I had to decide whether to sign up for the draft on my eighteenth birthday as the law required, or resist, picking a path after Christ rather than Caesar.

This is not even to mention the night I told a dear friend I had unexpectedly "fallen in love" with her, realizing almost immediately that she could not let Eros pass, that her friendship was not strong enough to keep her from reading my behavior in every false way, and from plumbing my heart rightly. It seems all too often that E. A. Robinson was right, "most things break."

For a lot of people, the tragedy of September 11 was one of the times when life broke. In the wake of the destruction, my students began to ask what they should think of it as Christians and as young scholars.

I am not a theologian or a philosopher. I am a Christian and a historian trained in the telling of true stories about the past of the United States. So I searched for resources that would help all of us think more clearly about terrorism brought home and how to respond as people who call Jesus Lord. I pulled books from shelves all over the house and piled them in the middle of the living room floor. Should I limit the bibliography to historical approaches to understanding violence as Christians and remain in my own discipline? No, I decided that I could and should dabble in allied fields as well, as long as friends who know more about this than I, expert in fields such as church history, philosophy, and theology would help the cause. So it was that I compiled a list of books that would guide the search for answers about how Christians have and may approach the questions surrounding the innocent deaths and real destruction rendered too close to home.

Has the world changed somehow since September 11? Or, rather, has it not changed nearly enough? The response of the United States has been roughly identical to that of any tribe, people, nation, or state attacked from the beginning of time, recorded. Not only have U.S. military forces exacted an "eye for an eye," but further are threatening vengeance on all those who do not support its "war on terrorism." This has cost human destruction beyond the lives of the Taliban, the lives of noncombatant Afghans. Indeed it is most likely that the U.S. (read you and I) has been directly responsible for as much death of the innocents as the terrorists themselves.

The most immediate problem may not be all of this death, for war has never discriminated between the innocent and the guilty, armed and unarmed, warrior and noncombatant. No, an essential sadness rises from silence, from the absence of any substantial complaint or argument about the rightness of this "war." We hear no conversation at any broad level among Christians about the range of possible Christian responses to the attack, no thoughtful effort on the part of national leaders (particularly those who espouse Christian faith) to engage complex ethical questions. Nor do we hear distinctions by analysts between "holy war" and the natural law right of a state to self-defense, let alone discussion of the historical roster of approaches Christians have embraced historically to the problem of deliberate and deadly violence. Where is this kind of

debate in a society that prizes freedom of thought, speech, and religion? Why has there been so little questioning, even explaining in light of the multiple historical and ethical, if not theological possibilities?

The lack of such certainly adds to the difficulty of my job. As a Christian, historian, and teacher, my obligation at times such as this is to develop my students' intellectual tools to help prepare them to make difficult decisions. At any broad, collective level I have gotten little help in this instance. Oh yes, Christian confessions, denominations, sects, and particular religious venues have advertised their "party lines." In at least one case, First Things published Stanley Hauerwas' criticism of its own consistent and predictable nationalism, "First Approach." But even there, the two sides passed "like ships in the night," without actually getting down to the business of examining a priori assumptions, of rendering "first things." What do I say then to students who honestly seek the broad and the best ways to things about war as Christians bearing mixed sorts of citizenships?

Setting out for answers behind Jesus, it strikes me that a good way to begin is to explore the ways in which ancient Israel went about making—or not making—war. For a good basic theological perspective read Millard C. Lind's *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Herald Press, 1980). Peter Craigie, in his *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978) comes at the matter from a structural and developmental angle, making historians happy. Measuring Israelite war from the standpoint of a Christian pacifist, Jacob Enz finds glimmers of profound upheaval in the usual patterns of war-making in the ancient Near East with the rise of the Israelite people in *The Christian and Warfare: The Roots of Warfare in the Old Testament* (Herald Press, 1972). Scholars all, the three write for more than a specialized audience, providing bibliographical aid for those inclined.

With basic outlines of the issue of moral and mortal force in mind, I move on to the New Testament and the Christian conviction and behavior towards the subject in the first centuries. Pick up John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (William B. Eerdmans, second edition 1994) and read the portions which set out Jesus' attitude and actions pertaining to human violence. Yoder takes the striking attitude that Jesus meant what he said to affect all the relations among people without respect to distinctions between private and public spheres, a literal invention of the modern world. This perspective is echoed and deepened by Richard Hays in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, and the New Covenant: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Harper Collins, 1996).

For an excellent and accessible analysis of two crucial texts outside of the gospels, read *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 in Light of the Second Coming* (Word Books, 1977) by William Stringfellow. In this essay, not only does Stringfellow place Romans 13 soundly in the context of the entire epistle, but he also lays out the long-term historical context of a Christian kingdom, "not of this world."

Unfortunately, I have found no general and exclusive treatment of Jesus' teaching about human violence and the state in the New Testament to recommend. I have, however, found a clutch of excellent and readable stories of how the early church understood Jesus' teaching about mortal violence and how the early Christians acted upon that conception. You will find a decent selection of these recounted by Susan Clemmer Steiner in her *The Army That Sheds No Blood* (Herald Press, 1982) and by John Helgeland, Robert Daly, and J. Patout Burns in their *Christians and the Military Experience* (Fortress Press, 1985). The retelling of these kinds of experiences can more importantly be found embedded in thoughtful analysis in a group of more broadly explanatory explorations, the most accessible of which are: John Driver, *How Christians Made Peace with War: Early Christian Understandings of War* (Herald Press, 1988), and Jean-Michael Hornus, *"It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight:" Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence, and the State* (Fortress Press, 1985). Finally, two collections of original documents may serve well to round out an introduction to the way early Christians addressed these difficult matters. *The Early Church and the State* (Series: Sources of Early Christian Thought, General Editor, William G. Rusch: Fortress Press, 1982), edited by Agnes Cunningham, and *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* (Series: Messages of the Fathers of the Church, no. 19: Michael Glazier, 1983) edited by Louis J. Swift will help do this.

A tectonic plate shift of sorts moves the thinking of many historians about relations between Christianity and the state with the advent of the "Constantinian Revolution," with all that the converted Emperor's coerced and formal "Christianization" of the Roman Empire entailed. This new state of affairs paralleled

new attitudes among Christians toward war. James Turner Johnson offers a good introduction to holy war in his *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions* (Pennsylvania University Press, 1997).

The second approach rising along with this new and much "cozier" relationship between Christianity and the Roman state finds expression in the tradition most often called "just war." Most historians interested in this kind of thing trace the origins of the concept to Augustine. Read Gary Wills' brilliant little biography of the Saint (*Saint Augustine*, Viking Press, 1999) as well as William R. Stevenson's fine work, *Christian Love and Just War: Moral Paradox and Political Life in St. Augustine and His Modern Interpreters* (Mercer University Press, 1987), and you will find what the great saint of the church did and did not contribute to the tradition of "just war." To explore how that tradition grew and developed over time, examine James Turner Johnson's brace of longitudinal studies: *Ideology, Reason, and the Limitation of War: Religious and Secular Concepts, 1200–1740* (Princeton University Press, 1975), and *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton University Press, 1981). You will find further valuable thinking about the tradition in Ralph Potter's *War and Moral Discourse* (John Knox Press, 1969), and in two essays by Paul Ramsey: *War and the Christian Conscience* (Duke University Press, 1961), and *The Just War* (Scribners Brothers Press, 1968).

Anabaptists associated with the religious Reformation of the sixteenth century found much in their study of the early church to support their opposition to war. This approach goes variously by the names Nonresistance and Pacifism. Though hardly monolithic, the Anabaptists did agree in their opposition to both "holy war" and "just war" traditions. A good way to come to terms with their approach is to read the appropriate portions of Franklin H. Littell's classic study, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 2001). For the Anabaptist conception of pacifism, read Harold S. Bender, "The Pacifism of the Sixteenth-Century Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXX (January 1956), 5–18. More recently, James M. Stayer has made the case for a more diverse view of the subject among Anabaptists. For his perspective, one which has gained significant favor among historians, read *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Coronado Press, 2nd, revised edition, 1976). Finally, read Richard McMaster, Samuel L. Horst, and Robert F. Uhle, *Conscience and Crisis: Mennonites and Other Peace Churches in America, 1739–1789* (Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, Herald Press, 1979).

By the modern historical era holy war, just war, and nonresistance or pacifist attitudes toward warfare had all established places as versions of Christian positions toward the use of mortal force. All would continue to play significant if not conscious roles during the last two centuries. Two other distinguishable Christian approaches to war would join them.

Christian anarchism sounds odd, rather like an oxymoron, particularly so to those who associate anarchism with inchoate violence and terrorism manifest in waves of political assassinations without apparent purpose. In fact this approach springs from entirely different roots. It draws, as did the Anabaptists' pacifism, from the convictions of Christians in virtual consensus prior to Constantine that the kingdom of God would never arrive by means of violence. It seems to have taken its inspiration as well from the content, not to mention the popularity, of Leo Tolstoy's own Christian pacifism. Departing, however, from the Anabaptist tendency toward communal retreat or withdrawal from "the world," Christian anarchism seems to step into the path of trouble, speaking, as its supporters are wont to say, the truth to power, refusing violence but not confrontation. For instance, it appears to have informed the Catholic Worker Movement attitude toward war. You will find a moving and provocative tale of this kind in Dorothy Day's *Loaves and Fishes: The Story of the Catholic Worker Movement* (Harper and Row, 1963). By the end of his amazing life, Thomas Merton found this sight line essential. Read Merton's *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), his *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New Directions Publishing, 1965), and his "Blessed are The Meek: The Roots of Christian Non-Violence," *Fellowship* (May, 1967). Probably the easiest way to begin making sense of this conception, though, is to read Vernard Eller's *Christian Anarchy* (William B. Eerdmans, 1987). For those theologically challenged, such as I, Jacques Ellul's slender *Anarchy and Christianity* (William B. Eerdmans, 1991) might be a friendlier entryway. My own introduction to the basic attitude came by way of reading *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (The

Seabury Press, 1969), a closely argued but very valuable position by Ellul, one of the century's finest political philosophers and Christians, known more for his work on technology's dangers to the human spirit.

Finally, there is Christian realism. No doubt the personal agony behind this kind of Christian choice about violence reaches back through time to the first Christians facing hard decisions when persecutors insisted upon taking the lives of any who refused to recant the faith. If one enemy died, the logic might well have run, then many Christians would have had more time to live, spread the gospel, and build the foundation of the kingdom to come. Indeed for those who did strike, there was no justification, no denial of wrongdoing. Do temporary, short-term evil in order to protect the many, the innocent, the more spiritually gifted, and the adepts. This kind of "Thermopylaen" spiritual sacrifice finds perhaps its most gripping contemporary voice in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's decision to act against part of his deepest spiritual commitment by joining the officers' plot to kill Hitler. He accepted his arrest and his execution without complaint, faced death as a consequence of the evil he had done in order to halt greater evil. Reading Bonhoeffer's own account of his last days in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Charles Scribners Co., Updated Edition, 1997) will help one understand this way of thinking. For a less personal, but broader summary of this approach about dealing with violence when all the alternatives appear to bear evil, look at Reinhold Niebur, *Christianity and Power Politics* (Charles Scribners Co., 1940).

I know there is much I have left out. I could have mentioned fine historical surveys of these matters such as Roland Bainton's magisterial *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Abingdon Press, 1960), as well as John Howard Yoder's indispensable *Christian Attitudes toward War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Private Publication, Distributed by Co-op Bookstore, Elkhart, Indiana, n.d.); or Peter Brock's excellent brace of surveys of pacifism in Europe and in the United States: *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton University Press, 1972), and *Pacifism in the United States from Colonial Era to the First World War* (Princeton University Press, 1968). I have chosen not to include edited collections of essays—Ronald Well's *The Wars of America: Christian Views* (William B. Eerdmans, 1981) for instance, primarily because of the unevenness of the contributions. Also absent from this brief essay is excellent criticism of one tradition by articulate supporters of another. John Howard Yoder's superb *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just War Thinking* (Orbis Press, Second Edition, 1996) is just such an example. Likewise, I have failed to include excellent theological as well as advocacy essays which probably have equal claim to notice here—works such as *The New Testament Basis of Peacemaking* (out of print, 1985) by Richard McSorley; Robert L. Holmes' *On War and Morality* (Princeton University Press, 1989); Jean Lassere, *War and the Gospel* (Herald Press, 1962); and Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Fortress Press, 1994). Finally I have not even attempted to trace the fine weavings, crossings, and interconnections of the main attitudes referred to here; those such as modern nationalism's propensity for transmuting just war tradition into holy war. In the United States, the theological vehicle for this transformation has been the old Puritan typological crowning of the country as "God's New Israel." For a wonderful introduction to this habit, read historical pieces collected and edited by Conrad Cherry in *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (The University of North Carolina Press, revised and updated, 1998).

Generally speaking, this bibliographic survey of Christians' approaches to violence and war ranges from pieces on the willingness to see war and violence as an extension of God's own intentions if carried out by the right people under the right circumstances (holy war and just war), to accepting war-like violence as necessary but contingent evil (Christian realism), to a pacifism which asked only to be left alone to establish model, peaceful communities (nonresistance), finally to active and social confrontation of power with acts of love and mercy. For the kingdom's sake, Christians must talk at much greater length about these matters. We must talk together, asking hard questions about our various perspectives and points of departure. Yet we must never neglect the historical record of the behavior and words of the faithful who have gone before. I offer this as a way to begin the conversation.

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