



# FACE . . .

## Called to Take Up Arms? When Morality and Legality Collide

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SIXTY-THREE YEARS AGO AMERICAN CHRISTIANS WATCHED JAPAN INVADE Manchuria and wondered what, if anything, the United States might do to aid the victims of that brutal aggression. *The Christian Century* published an exchange of articles by two of America's most prominent theologians. H. Richard Niebuhr's essay, "The Grace of Doing Nothing" (March 23, 1932), bespoke the frustration of those "eager to do something constructive [when] there is nothing constructive to be done." He recalled that "righteously indignant utterances" often preceded American involvement in conflicts which history showed to have been motivated more by national self-interest than by morality. And the methods by which we sought to set things right were no more righteous than our rhetoric. We would do better, he suggested, to repent—engage in national self-analysis, renounce our self-interest, hope that in God's future a lasting peace might be possible—and in the meantime to recognize that "China [read Bosnia?] is being crucified...by our sins and those of the whole world." That may be so, his brother Reinhold replied, but "Must We Do Nothing?" (March 30, 1932). It is true that motives and methods are never pure but amid "the perennial tragedy" of human history, coercive—even violent—means must be employed in the service of human progress or, as in today's case of Bosnia, to prevent social regress to barbarism. Doubtless many Christians identify with one or both of these perspectives.

Some of the reasons (other than self-defense) a country might involve itself in armed conflict (e.g., greed, conquest, enmity, domestic politics) are manifestly illegitimate. But what about humanitarian intervention in response to acts "that shock the moral conscience of [hu]mankind" (e.g., massacres, concentration camps, mass rape, siege warfare aimed at the starvation of civilian populations, ethnic or religious "cleansing")?

Morality and legality do not always coincide. To violate national sovereignty even for humanitarian reasons is a breach of international law unless, it is sometimes argued, the international community of states has authorized the interven-

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# TO FACE

## Called to Take Up Arms? The Service of the Other

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**W**HEN SHOULD A COUNTRY FOUNDED ON LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES USE armed force? This is a difficult question to answer, for classical liberalism provides few moral resources to determine when and how armed force should be used. Within a monarchy the answer was a bit more simple. As the articles of religion in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer stipulated, "It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars." But what happens when we are all putatively understood as the magistrate? In a liberal democracy, government is a matter of each individual submitting his or her individual will to the will of the majority. In return, each individual's freedom is maximized. Life is secured through liberty for the pursuit of happiness. Once this becomes the basis for government, how can we ask individuals to put at risk these lives which it is the purpose of government to protect? The standard answer is that this can be done only when the self-interest of the nation is at stake. For only then is the freedom of each individual will jeopardized.

Self-interest, and therefore self-defense, is the only reason available to a liberal democracy to engage in armed conflict. Therefore, the "moral" debate engaged in by Congress will inevitably center on the question, "What national interest is at stake?" Yet the reason available for a liberal democracy to engage in warcraft and the possible reasons a Christian might so engage are directly opposed. For what reason might a Christian involve him- or herself in armed conflict? Self-defense is not an available answer. Our Christian commonwealth was not founded upon a rebellious act of violence, but by the gentle leading of our Savior, who refused the sword for the purposes of self-defense. In the garden, when Peter took up the sword, Jesus undid its disastrous effects and then commanded his disciples, "No more of this." How can those of us who have been baptized into his life, death, and resurrection fail to follow as he commanded?

I recognize that many Christians do not find Jesus' command binding when faced with the question of warcraft. Early in Christian tradition an exception was

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tion. Yet suppose Hitler had not invaded Czechoslovakia or Poland but had just set out to annihilate all of the Jews, Gypsies, gays, and handicapped he could get his hands on in Germany. Notwithstanding Nuremberg's subsequent identification of "crimes against humanity," any unilateral attempt to interfere with the actions of a sovereign state within its own borders would not have been lawful. But who would deny that such action would have been morally justified or even obligatory? Vietnam's invasion of Pol Pot's Cambodia, Tanzania's intervention in Idi Amin's Uganda, and India's rescue of the Bengali people in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) are sometimes cited as examples of justified humanitarian intervention.

Critics of United States involvement in distant conflicts say we cannot and/or should not try to be the world's policeman. They point out that we have been inconsistent and arbitrary in choosing our engagements. But such selectivity is justifiable and probably inevitable. In any case, few readers of *Word & World* would endorse the spurious reasoning whereby repeated failure to fulfill one or another of the ten commandments absolves someone from any further obligation or undermines the *bona fides* of future efforts. The fact that one does not always accept this responsibility doesn't mean one should never accept it.

So when and how ought one intervene? Only after the following questions have been thoroughly explored: Who are the victims? What are they suffering? Where is the conflict? Have our past actions contributed to the situation? What are our interests? Do the victims want our assistance? Is there anything we could do to help them? Are those actions intrinsically justifiable? How long might it take? What are likely to be the costs in both human and economic terms? Would intervention win popular support in this country? Would intervention win international support?

These questions require political and military expertise, prudential judgment, and proportionate reasoning. In most cases, an honest, sober analysis will recommend restraint. In those few instances where intervention seems to be justifiable, extreme caution is in order.

The first draft of the proposed social statement on peace by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognizes that "to help the neighbor may require protecting the innocent from injustice and aggression." Embargoes and trade sanctions are preferred remedies; however, "there may be no other way to do so in some circumstances than by forcibly restraining those harming the innocent....We must determine in particular circumstances whether or not military action is the lesser evil." The proposed statement explicitly "supports the necessity of the involvement in collective security by the United States' armed forces." No social statement could eliminate the perplexing ambiguity and no *Lutheran* statement should even try, because the experience of justification by faith teaches us, as Reinhold Niebuhr once observed, "that we can not purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice" (*The Nature and Destiny of Man* 2:284). ⊕

made whereby Christians could arm themselves. In truth, the practice was in place long before the church's bishops provided theological reasons for the practice. Out of their concern for pastoral oversight, they sought to explicate both the reasons for, and the means by which, Christians could practice war. This theological reflection became known as the just-war tradition.

The just-war tradition is not a seamless whole. In fact, so many different options exist within it that a probable opinion could be found for nearly any action. Even the crusades were ruled legitimate by many theologians on the basis of the just war. This makes it difficult to know how one is using just-war criteria faithfully. Yet this tradition remains an important pastoral tool to help Christians who have chosen the sword to live in the time between the times. This tradition reminds us that Christians cannot affirm that anything goes in a time of war. Warcraft remains a dangerous activity that can result in the loss of our souls.

Within the just-war tradition a just cause must exist before Christians can take up arms. According to Paul Ramsey, just cause is grounded in the command to love one's neighbor. Self-defense is illicit, for we cannot love our neighbors by killing them to protect ourselves. However, in a tragic world, where our neighbors are often threatened by others, Christians can use force to protect one neighbor against aggression from another.

Along with a just cause, warfare must be a last resort: there are no *peaceful* alternatives. Months or years of economic blockades can be more indiscriminate than a strategic use of air power. Innocent noncombatants are more likely to be the first casualties of an extended embargo than are the powerful combatants of a society. Surely a devastating economic blockade is a graver violation of the love commandment than a strategic air attack. Last resort does not even imply that we must wait till they shoot first. If an aggression is inevitable and something can be done to prevent it, the just-war criteria do not rule out a preventative strike. If the purpose of the just war is to protect a neighbor then the probability of success in accomplishing that purpose can be greater with a preventative strike than when the aggressor's military is well-entrenched in our neighbor's territory.

Probability of success is another just-war criterion which should be met before Christians employ violent means. Christians are not heroes. We do not stand and fight to the last person for the sake of honor. We have inherited a strange history where God sometimes gives us into the hands of our enemies so that we can convert them from within. Ours is a history of exile and captivity which requires the virtues of patience and hope rather than the martial virtues of honor and courage. As H. Richard Niebuhr reminded us more than a half-century ago, Christians often practice "the grace of doing nothing" (*The Christian Century*, March 23, 1932). Especially is this the case when nothing militarily can be done that has any hope of success. Of course, in doing nothing, Niebuhr meant doing nothing militarily. We should not forget that the weapons of prayer are always open to us. As we look at the situation in Bosnia today and feel a sense of outrage, this may be a time to turn to the psalter and pray Psalm 137. Only someone who does not understand the power of prayer could suggest that prayer is a political retreat. ⊕