



Pursuing Peace without Illusions

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THE TITLE, OF COURSE, IS PRESUMPTUOUS. WE ARE NEVER FREE OF ILLUSIONS, especially about our own righteousness or grasp of things. What is true and certain is that we and all people are God's creatures, sinners for whom Christ died. God intends and calls all people to live together in peace, but we do not do that very well. Efforts for peace that come from faith active in love should rest on these truths, not on illusions that neglect or deny either God-given human dignity or human sinfulness.

I. THIS CENTURY AND THE NEXT

"Will our century go down as the worst one ever?" an historian was asked during the commemoration of the end of World War II. "That depends on the next century," he replied. The 100 million lives lost in the wars of the twentieth century testify to how bad a time it has been. Mass warfare, total warfare, and the holocaust showed human destructiveness on an unprecedented scale. Hitler and Stalin became new representatives of radical evil. The killing fields have not gone away, as today's thirty or so vicious internal wars remind us. Drawings of war and peace by the children of Sarajevo tell much of the story of our century.¹

The thought that the next century could be worse than the present one is

¹UNICEF, *I Dream of Peace: Images of War by Children of Former Yugoslavia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

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unbearable. The thought is true, for there is no historical or ethical inevitability that guarantees a better future, just as there is none that determines that the future must be worse. Let the thought of what we cannot bear deepen our dread and revulsion of modern warfare. If anything still does, this horrendous possibility stirs numbed hearts to moral defiance. It must not be, it will not be.

Bad as it was, our century could have been worse. Tyranny did not conquer the world, nor did nuclear war destroy the earth. Moreover, the century's achievements for peace have been significant. Old-style colonialism ran its course. The cold war ended in a surprising and amazing way. War among major powers has been avoided for fifty years. Developments in relation to human rights; international law, agreements, and organizations; nonviolent movements; democracy; and nongovernmental organizations have contributed to peace. Knowing human potential for evil, we have reason to be grateful for the evil not done and the good done in our century.

A new historical period dates from the events of 1989-1991, although we still have no compelling name for it other than "post-cold war." Scholars offer remarkably different interpretations of what is going on: the triumph of democratic capitalism, an out-of-control world of ethnic conflict, the clash of civilizations, a world divided between zones of peace and zones of turmoil. The century's movement toward greater global integration intensifies, joined with the counter dynamic toward increased fragmentation. Faith calls us for the sake of the neighbor to care for peace in the world in which we live. We share with all others the uncertainty, complexity, and challenge of our unsettled time. All are searchers for the least inadequate approach to peace for the rest of the century and the next.

II. A CONTEXT FROM FAITH

Two centuries is a broad context for viewing peace today. Christian faith places us in an even broader context: "In the beginning when God..." (Gen 1:1); "...Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

We pursue peace in a world that still awaits the coming in fullness of God's reign. As long as death and mourning and crying and pain have not passed away (Rev 21:4) and righteousness is not at home (2 Pet 2:13), even the most peaceful and just of earthly orders will fall short and contradict God's promised kingdom. Until creation has found its true destiny in God's reign, sin, death, and evil will make themselves felt in human affairs. Faithlessness, idolatry, pride, sloth, cruelty, and the will to dominate will accompany human efforts to build earthly peace before the kingdom comes.

Let us not forget an irony of the twentieth century: widespread dismissal of a sober assessment of the human predicament went hand-in-hand with overwhelming evidence for its truth. Instead of realizing confident schemes to fix human brokenness, our century ranks among the most violent. Self-deception about human innocence has confirmed sin's power; arrogant illusions about creating true human community have themselves become signs that the kingdom is not yet.

We pursue peace in a world where nonetheless God is graciously present.

Paul, in addressing the idol worshipers in Lystra, speaks of this nonetheless: “The living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them....has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:15-17). God is not absent from history; there is no divine vacuum. Nature’s order and human cooperation for food—and shelter, health, government, family, art, and peace—witness to God’s doing good for all people, believer and unbeliever alike, in the time before the kingdom’s coming.

God has created humans as social beings to live in peace. God structures creation so that all people are dependent upon and accountable to God and to others for peace. The unity and value of all creation, the oneness of humanity, and the dignity of every person come from God. The goodness of what God creates remains when sin distorts, corrupts, and disorders creation. Relative peace in and among the nations is made possible because God continues to create, preserve, and direct the world. The just and peaceful ordering of the world is a God-given human responsibility and a divine blessing.

“For peace is a good so great, that even in this earthly and mortal life there is no word we hear with such pleasure, nothing we desire with such zest, or find to be more thoroughly gratifying,” sang Augustine.² When peace is present, the nightmare of war is absent. We desire and rejoice in the tranquility of rightly ordered concord, earthly peace constituted by freedom, security, order, justice, and reconciliation.

Christians hold fast to the difference between the peace of God’s reign and the peace of any earthly order, real or imagined, for the sake of earthly peace as well as for the gospel. All orders of earthly peace are penultimate, partial, precarious, and provisional. They become idolatrous and therefore self-destructive when they take the place of God’s reign. Because they exhibit significantly different measures of well-ordered concord, we must make discerning “more-or-less” judgments in the pursuit of peace. Our faith in God’s promise of eternal peace gives us hope so we may dedicate ourselves for the long haul to maintaining and building earthly peace.

III. POLITICS AND ETHICS—NO SEPARATION

Two narratives set the parameters for public discourse on war and peace, writes Jean Bethke Elshtain. The narrative of “pure war” places people in “a world of war as politics, politics as war, a world that squeezes out persuasion.” For the hard-line realist, “War is as natural as the disorder that requires it.” The narrative of “pure peace” draws from biblical visions of perfect peace, scorning the present in light of its ideal. “Peace discourse seeks to bring the transcendental down to earth in supreme confidence that human beings might enact eschatological feats.”³

²Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Random House) 19:11, 686.

³Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Realism, Just War, and the Witness of Peace,” in *Power Trips and Other Journeys* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1990) 152-156.

Even after Reinhold Niebuhr's withering criticism, pure-peace discourse lures and entraps many people, including Lutherans. By and large, however, Lutherans seem more prone to fall into the grips of pure-war discourse. We who are Lutheran like to pride ourselves that we are not like those foolish idealists who know nothing about the real world. Our lack of passion for peace shows how wise and righteous we are, or so it sometimes seems. Lutherans have never found a war they do not like, says the cynic, whose slander hits too close to home.

Luther's realism, however, was not Hobbesian.⁴ To view life as no more than hostility born of fear, as nothing but domination by brute force, is an illusion. The human-as-warrior image of consistent realism reveals human sinfulness, not human dignity. It does not capture who we are as dependent, independent, and interdependent creatures who live as child, parent, friend, citizen, worker, and believer. The sense of obligation to do what is right and good, the ability to persuade and be persuaded, and the capacity to cooperate for the common good belong to human dignity, enable life together, and counter pure-war discourse.

Not that peace in and among states is voluntary, harmonious, and altruistic cooperation. In providing some measure of peace within their boundaries, states work out ways of relating to one another without a single sovereign authority over them. They pursue their interests through power, the ability to make things happen. They exercise power through persuasion but also through coercion, or most commonly, through coercive persuasion. In so doing, states interact through ever changing combinations of cooperation, competition, and conflict.

The nature of states continues to change in an increasingly integrated world, but they are not likely to disappear soon.⁵ Peace continues to depend on how states as well as other international actors perceive their interests and use their power. Efforts for peace that ignore either national interests or the global common good are inadequate. Visions of a new international order need to address not only how justice should be ordered but also how power will be organized. Focus on the political dimension of international affairs is unrealistic if it excludes economic, cultural, and religious realities.⁶

For there to be well-ordered concord in and among states, evil must be resisted. Political authority is divinely mandated to act with law and sword – through legitimate coercive measures of various degrees – to protect the common good and restrain evildoers. Peace is built in the midst of strife, Lutheran realism says with Augustine. Peace emerges and exists by holding off tyranny and anarchy and by deterring aggression, war, and other threats.

Without illusions about human sinfulness, Lutheran realism still calls for

⁴George W. Forell, "The Political Use of the Law," in *Martin Luther, Theologian of the Church*, ed. William R. Russell, *Word & World* Supplement Series 2 (St. Paul: Luther Seminary, 1994) 86ff.

⁵Michael Mann, "Nation-States in Europe and Other Continents: Diversifying, Developing, Not Dying," *Daedalus* 122/3 (1993) 115-140.

⁶*Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, ed. Douglas Johnson and Cynthia Sampson (New York: Oxford University, 1994).

“civil righteousness.”⁷ In other words, it insists that political activity – activity that orders relations in and among states – is morally accountable. In contrast to consistent realism, Lutheran realism refuses to separate politics from ethics in matters of peace and war. To be sure, morality in politics often leads to hypocrisy. International policy based on high moral ideals may produce negative results. Moral exhortations are frequently innocent of the constraints and complexities of politics. Yet these are not conclusive reasons to divorce politics from ethics but cause to pursue the relationship critically, modestly, and courageously.

IV. A TRADITION OF DISCOURSE ON PEACE AND WAR

The command to love the neighbor, including the enemy, calls us not to harm the other and to do good for her or him. To do good may require that we resist the evil that threatens the good of the neighbor. The Lutheran tradition affirms that when an aggressor poses a threat to an innocent third person, it is more loving to intervene on behalf of the innocent neighbor than to do nothing. “To refuse to intervene on behalf of the innocent is to favor the guilty by default.”⁸

The answer in favor of intervention to protect the innocent often broadens into acceptance of responsibility for the well-being of the social order overall. Such responsibility includes support of constraints, including force, and provision of public defense against armed, unjust aggression. This answer does not by any means yield a ready acceptance of killing. I should acknowledge that the aggressor remains my neighbor by doing only what is strictly necessary to prevent the aggression.⁹

For those who follow this line of reasoning, political activity should not be held accountable to the norm of nonresistance to evil. Political activity should protect the innocent as part of its obligation to do good for all. The responsibility to resist evil arises from the positive requirement to provide peace for the neighbor. These claims lead to the just-war tradition, a conversation over time on politics and ethics whose guiding concern is for peace in a world where evil threatens human community.

The just-war tradition operates with a clear and vigorous preference for non-violent resistance to evil and a strong presumption against war. In distinction from pacifism, it does not morally exclude war in all circumstances. The just-war tradition conveys “the misery of war”¹⁰ and opposes its glorification. The use of military force is never a matter of course but an agonizing, mournful option for the

⁷Augsburg Confession, 13, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 39.

⁸Gene Outka, “Universal Love and Impartiality,” in *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1992) 35. Luther adopts a strong position: “If you see anyone condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you know ways and means to do so, you have killed him”; *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, 391.

⁹Outka, “Universal Love,” 19.

¹⁰Augustine, *The City of God*, 19:7, 683.

lesser evil in a sinful world. In distinction from consistent realism, this tradition places moral constraints on wars' ends and means. "The realist is governed by prudential calculations, the just war thinker by a complex amalgam of normative principles and pragmatic evaluations."¹¹ The just-war tradition calls on people to appraise circumstances that involve coercion with such moral principles as just cause, last resort, right intention, legitimate authority, proportionality, and non-combatant immunity.

Churches that subscribe to the *Augsburg Confession* belong to the just-war tradition of the western church.¹² Yet the just-war teaching has not been a vigorous part of Lutheran history. Lutheranism largely neglected, truncated, or simply abandoned this teaching. Moral discourse on war too often became little more than the command to obey established authority. In recent times Lutherans have drawn upon the just-war tradition in relation to the Vietnam War, selective conscientious objection, revolution, nuclear deterrence, the Gulf War, and other situations. Many, however, know little about this teaching; some long ago placed it in a medieval museum. The number of catechetical classes that teach it and congregations that use it to frame their consideration of international peace is probably not large.

Ignoring the just-war tradition invites its misuse and leaves a void that more inadequate approaches to peace and war are likely to fill. Having been recaptured in the twentieth century as a living theological and ethical tradition, just-war discourse continues to change as it faces new realities and enters into dialogue and dispute with other moral traditions that share its quest for peace.¹³ Lutherans do well in taking responsibility for teaching, developing, interpreting, and using this tradition to which they are publicly accountable.¹⁴

V. THE CALLING TO BE CITIZENS

The just-war tradition provides a structure for public discourse on questions about military force and war. The idea that it is only about war, useful only sporadically, is widespread and mistaken. The tradition's governing drive is maintaining and building peace. Because it rests on theological convictions that embrace all people, its perspective is global. Those who with integrity function within this tradition commit themselves to the quest for policies and practices that will make the next century more peaceful than ours has been. The just-war tradition directs us to pursue realistic efforts that, for example, strengthen international law

¹¹Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Just War as Politics: What the Gulf War Told Us about Contemporary American Life," in *But Was It Just?*, ed. David E. Decose (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 44.

¹²"It is taught among us...that Christians may without sin...engage in just wars, serve as soldiers..." *Augsburg Confession* 16.

¹³James Turner Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1987). Richard B. Miller, *Interpretations of Conflict Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just-War Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991).

¹⁴The ELCA proposed social statement *For Peace in God's World* (1995) follows the just-war tradition in its approach to peace and war.

and agreements on arms control and reduction, foster peaceful conflict resolution, and improve economic conditions in poor nations.¹⁵

None of us float above the traditions and circumstances of specific times and places. We act for global peace in and through the communities of which we are a part. Finite persons, we are indebted to and bound together with others in many overlapping particular communities. We are to affirm our own limited communities and respect the limited communities of others. To be a citizen is to belong to a particular political community. Through the benefits, burdens, rights, obligations, loyalties, and conflicts of this community, God invites and pressures citizens to care for others. Lutherans honor citizenship by affirming that it is a calling, a setting of responsibility where God calls us to serve the neighbor.

Elshtain, who calls the just-war tradition “a compelling and vital civic philosophy,” writes,

Just war thinking...requires much of us. It demands deep reflection by all of us on what our governments are up to, which, in turn, presupposes a self of a certain kind, one attuned to moral reasoning and capable of it, one strong enough to resist the lure of violence’s seductive enthusiasms, one laced through with a sense of responsibility and accountability – in other words, a morally formed civic character.¹⁶

Civic character can hardly be taken for granted in a society whose moral traditions continue to erode, yet its importance for peace is considerable. An indifferent, ill-informed, self-absorbed citizenry in a nation with enormous global responsibilities does not inspire hope for the future. It would be an illusion to believe that the prospects for a more peaceful world do not depend to a significant degree on concerned, knowledgeable, critical, and courageous citizens. Needed are citizens able to resist the idolatries of nationalism and the enthusiasms of easy answers and to create the public will, trust, and wisdom for the sustained efforts, even sacrifices, that will build global peace.

Lutherans, in affirming the calling of citizens, have an obligation to form and support civic character for the next century with its grim threats and wondrous possibilities. Citizens so formed will recognize the God-given dignity and sinfulness of themselves and all people. Forgiven sinners, they will pursue peace under God’s judgment and in need of God’s mercy given in the cross of Christ. ☩

¹⁵*For Peace in God’s World* names a number of tasks and arenas for action for building peace.

¹⁶Elshtain, “Realism, Just War,” 158.