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## What is really going on?

### Narratives and ethical assessments in recent Anglophone debates over peace and war

#### *Zusammenfassung*

Der Aufsatz präsentiert eine Reihe von zeitgenössischen Ansichten über die Theorie des gerechten Krieges, Gewaltfreiheit und nukleare Abschreckung, um daran zu veranschaulichen, wie moralische Urteile von der empirischen Bewertung darüber abhängen, was in der Welt vor sich geht. Angesichts der Komplexität der modernen Gewalt erkennen Befürworter des Pazifismus und der Theorie des gerechten Krieges an, dass es unmöglich ist, eine moralische Haltung zu finden, die jede Komplizenschaft mit Gewalt vermeidet. Aber gewaltfreie Ansätze können, wenn sie ethisch genutzt werden, Hoffnung auf authentischere christliche – und auch effektivere – Wege zur Friedenssicherung mit Gerechtigkeit bieten.

#### *Abstract*

This paper presents a range of contemporary views about just war theory, nonviolence, and nuclear deterrence, to illustrate how moral judgments depend upon empirical assessments of what is going on in the world. Given the complexity of modern violence, advocates of both pacifism and just war theory acknowledge that it is impossible to find a moral stance that avoids all complicity with violence. Yet nonviolent approaches, if used ethically, can offer hope for more authentically Christian – and also more effective – ways of pursuing peace with justice.

## 1 Introduction

It is quite difficult for ethicists to draw conclusions about how best to promote peace in the world, and whether just war or humanitarian interventions might be ways to do so, when we cannot agree on the facts of the cases involved. What are the greatest threats to peace? What is the best way to pursue peace with justice? Anyone who is serious about the vocation of peacemaking must take into consideration what actually is effective in bringing about genuine peace in the world, even if effectiveness is not the sole criterion that concerns ethicists. Nevertheless, some of the most important questions in peace ethics now are how to deal with empirical questions. Frequently, the ways that these empirical questions

become most evident is in the narratives that we use to describe both historical and contemporary ideas and events. Thus, this paper will focus on some of the key narratives that have appeared in recent Anglophone conversations about peace and war.

## 2 Narratives about peace and war, from the early church to the contemporary situation

How do we tell the story of war and peace? Whether we are talking about the past or the present, events and their moral significance can be part of very different types of stories. One way this appears is in accounts of the history of Christian thought about war and peace. There is the account of a pure early Church, unsullied by war, which was corrupted by Constantine and Augustine and the rise of just war theory. Here, the trajectory is clearly one of decline. On the other hand, there is the story of Christians struggling, through history, to reconcile the Gospel with their increasing political responsibilities and desire to protect the vulnerable. In this second “story”, the principles of just war theory are developed as ways of guiding those political leaders who were attempting to protect their neighbors. (See Prusak 2018)

These narratives about peace and war are not new, of course, but it is interesting to see how they are playing out in the contemporary context. For instance, these stories are being re-told amidst the current, lively debate about the status of nonviolence and just war theory in the Catholic Church. Some ethicists describe the recent trajectory of Catholic teaching as moving towards a rejection of all war, and an endorsement of nonviolence as the sole acceptable stance. The formal appeal released by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative after their conference at the Vatican in 2016 called for the Catholic Church to “re-commit” to the centrality of Gospel nonviolence. The word “re-commit” recalls the presumed pacifism of the early Church. And in the statement itself, there is a call for the Church to “no longer use or teach ‘just war theory’”, because the drafters believe the recent trajectory of Catholic teaching is moving in a different direction:

“We need a new framework that is consistent with Gospel nonviolence. A different path is clearly unfolding in recent Catholic social teaching. Pope John XXIII wrote that war is not a suitable way to restore rights; Pope Paul VI linked peace and development, and told the UN ‘no more war’; Pope John Paul II said that

‘war belongs to the tragic past, to history’; Pope Benedict XVI said that ‘loving the enemy is the nucleus of the Christian revolution’; and Pope Francis said ‘the true strength of the Christian is the power of truth and love, which leads to the renunciation of all violence. Faith and violence are incompatible’. He has also urged the ‘abolition of war’.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the focus on papal teaching, particularly the Second Vatican Council and *Pacem in Terris*, has been on the condemnation of the horrors of war, and not on the discussion of what might constitute a just war. Lisa Cahill (2018) writes that “no pope since Vatican II has explicitly defended just war theory or used just war criteria to validate a specific use of force. In fact, the popes often sound as if they are condemning armed force entirely and under any circumstances.” However, papal teaching has never explicitly rejected just war theory, and Cahill goes on to say that “[...] paradoxically, these same popes all retain a place for self-defense and/or humanitarian intervention, at least in principle.” Cahill is certainly correct that the emphasis in recent papal teaching is on finding alternatives to war. Yet is this a story of a doctrinal change? Or is it the natural evolution of a consistent teaching that is responding to shifts in the reality of modern warfare?

Christian Braun argues that the just war theory has not been abandoned; he suggests that the shift is a rhetorical one, rather than a substantive one. Recent popes, he explains, have chosen to speak primarily in a prophetic mode and focus on nonviolence. This is indeed a significant shift in emphasis, but Pope Francis has chosen to “[...] forcefully stress the tools of nonviolence within the just war framework [...]. The Holy Father follows the path determined by his immediate predecessors. While he thus continues to uphold the just war framework, Francis can concentrate exclusively on the virtue of nonviolence in his role as Vicar of Christ.” (Braun 2018, 64) Braun’s narrative, then, is one which retains a sense of continuity, even as he acknowledges the new prominence of nonviolence.

It is not only the history of Catholic teaching which is being told and re-told in rather different ways. Recent historical events can also be narrated in divergent ways. For many years, the stories of the Holocaust

1 Available at <<https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/final-statement-an-appeal-to-the-catholic-church-to-re-commit-to-the-centrality-of-gospel-nonviolence>>.

and World War II profoundly shaped ethics and theology. Today, the stories of Srebrenica, the Rwandan genocide, the war in Syria, and the Rohingya genocide loom large. These stories – including those that are ongoing – are often highlighted by those who would advocate the possibility of using military force for humanitarian interventions. Even for pacifists, these are important stories that raise difficult questions. For example, William O’Neill describes how his visit to churches that had been the sites of massacres during the Rwandan genocide led him to acknowledge that there may be a place for just-war thinking in Christian discipleship. He writes,

“As I visited these churches, filled with bodies still, bodies left as a memorial, my own pacifist convictions were deeply challenged. For had U.N. peacekeepers not summarily been withdrawn at the behest of the U.S. and the former colonial regimes, countless lives most likely would have been saved [...]. I remain a pacifist, in part as a consecrated religious Jesuit. But I am not prepared to condemn those who think otherwise, e.g., troops who would defend the innocent. Indeed, I would endorse their doing so.” (O’Neill 2018, 116)

O’Neill is not the only theologian who has re-thought his perspective in light of Rwanda. Many other thinkers are wrestling with the role of military intervention in attempting to stop atrocities and promote a just peace. The conclusions they draw are often very much related to how they tell the stories. The proponents of military intervention point to Srebrenica, Rwanda and Syria as examples of situations in which a more robust military intervention might have saved many lives. Yet others focus on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, where interventions have led mostly to failed states. This shows, they argue, that interventions – particularly those that are not authorized by the UN – are doomed to fail.

The UN is a frequent actor in these stories, particularly in its peace-keeping role. Nigel Biggar tells the stories of the Rwandan genocide and the Srebrenica massacre as examples of the failures of the UN and international law to provide a robust enough framework for the promotion of justice. He argues that unilateral military interventions may be moral, according to the just war theory, even if they violate international law. (See Biggar 2015) Mary Ellen O’Connell disagrees, arguing that respect for international law is the best way to promote peace with justice. She cites the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a story in which the US failed to respect international law – a

decision which has had many repercussions for peace in the Middle East. (See O’Connell 2015) One of the most interesting aspects of the debate between O’Connell and Biggar, however, is that both clearly acknowledge that they are telling different stories. O’Connell says that Biggar simply has the facts wrong about Rwanda and Srebrenica. (See *ibid.*, 41–42) Biggar, too, says that their disagreement is primarily an empirical one, about whether or not military intervention is likely to be effective. He disputes her claim that “[a]mple evidence demonstrates that outside intervention in civil wars does not lead to the positive outcomes predicted by unilateral intervention advocates.” (Biggar 2015, 59) Thus, they are both making arguments about what is most likely to promote peace, based on their assessments of recent history – but they describe that history differently and therefore draw very different conclusions.

### 3 Just war theory and what is really going on

In recent conversations about just war theory, the most crucial questions have been about whether or not just war theory is an effective way of promoting peace and justice in the world today. What is really going on when we discuss whether or not a war is just? There is no question that just war theory has frequently been abused. Pope Francis has referred explicitly to this danger: “we [...] need to remember how many times, using this excuse of stopping an unjust aggressor, the powerful nations have dominated other peoples, made a real war of conquest.” (Rocca 2014) Yet some advocates of the just war theory maintain that it continues to serve as an important restraint, and so should continue to be used and taught. The basic disagreement here often is an empirical one.

Gerald Schlabach (2017) is one of those who believes the Catholic Church should dispense with the just war theory because he believes that, more often than not, it does not succeed in limiting war or promoting peace. “Even when just-war discourse aims to limit war,” he writes, “it undermines its own best intentions with a meta-message of support for war.” Though in theory it can and should be helpful in creating a more moral international system, Schlabach believes that in reality, this is not what is taking place. He writes,

“the logical principle that *abusus non tollit usum* (misuse of something is no argument against its proper use) is simply not convincing as applied to the just-war theory. For in order to override both the plain words of Jesus and early Christian scruples against all bloodshed, and to justify exceptional recourse to violence in order to prevent more violence, the best and perhaps only argument has always been some claim of greater realism. But...the persistent manipulation of just-war discourse is itself a data point concerning reality, a ‘hard fact’ with which its advocates must grapple far more. To evade such grappling by insisting it could still work in theory is something of a bait and switch.” (Schlabach 2017)

Schlabach’s appeal to “a data point concerning reality” is striking here. If just war theory is indeed abused to this extent, he may be correct that it is too risky to espouse, even in its more restrictive forms.

However, other ethicists seem to regard just war theory as still an important tool in preserving peace by limiting the resort to war. This seems to be particularly true of thinkers who themselves have direct experience with the military or police. They find that just war theory provides important moral guidance for people in their positions. Tobias Winright (2018, 147), for instance – a former corrections officer in the US – argues that just war theory played an important role in Catholics’ argumentation and advocacy against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, there is no avoiding the fact that these arguments did not succeed in convincing the US president. They may also have been undermined by a few thinkers who argued that President Bush’s proposed war could be legitimate according to the just war theory.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is not clear whether this incident is a story about the utility of just war theory – or about its failures.

When there are widely varying perceptions about what is really going on with just war theory, one approach might be to try to give priority to the perspective of those who are most vulnerable to the threat of war. The preferential option for the poor is partly a hermeneutical approach, calling Catholics to attend to the most marginalized perspectives first. Lisa Cahill attempts to do this in her reflections on the utility of just war theory when she writes,

2 Among these thinkers were George Weigel and Jean Bethke Elshtain.

“While academics in the U. S. may find just war theory to be a useful tool with which to analyze and critique national military initiatives, people in conflict zones in the global South see just war theory as spectacularly ineffective in restraining violence, much less building a just peace. Concepts like ‘just cause’ are more likely to be in use in the ideological validation of violence than in its restraint or condemnation.” (Sowle Cahill 2018b, 104)

This is a compelling statement indeed, and it is commendable that Cahill is attending to this important perspective. Yet of course there are exceptions to it. Surely some of the Christian leaders in the Middle East who were appealing to the outside world for protection from ISIS in the past few years would have urged would-be interveners to see the cause as a just war.<sup>3</sup> Even Pope Francis himself acknowledged the need for some sort of protective intervention against ISIS, though he avoided speaking directly about military force. Still, other Vatican officials were more direct, including Silvio Tomasi, who used the language of just war theory when he said, “When all other means have been exhausted, to save human beings the international community must act. This can include disarming the aggressor.” (Wooden 2014) In the same speech, he invoked the story of Rwanda as well: “Tomasi recalled the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the fact that the massacre of Tutsis by the majority Hutus was on the front page of newspapers and was a topic of repeated discussions regionally and internationally, but international action was extremely limited. ‘People met, but did nothing,’ the archbishop said.” (Ibid.) Indeed, the advocates of just war theory cannot be sure that it will always be used appropriately – and it is important to listen first to those who are most vulnerable to its abuses. But those pacifists who would reject all use of the just war theory are hard-pressed to explain how else to shape a moral response to the hard cases such as genocide. If we are to genuinely pursue peace with justice, it seems that we cannot yet dispense entirely with the guidance that the just war theory provides.

3 See, for example, “Christian leaders call for help in face of ISIS onslaught in Syria,” *Catholic Herald*, 3/10/15. <<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/03/10/christian-leaders-call-for-help-in-face-of-isis-onslaught-in-syria>>. And, “Syrian Catholic leader demands the West step up against ISIS,” *Crux*, 1/29/2016. <<https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/01/29/syrian-catholic-leader-demands-the-west-step-up-against-isis/>>.

#### 4 “Jus in bello” and what is really going on

While much of the recent debate about just war theory has focused on the *jus ad bellum* as a potential threat to peace, it is also important to attend to conversations about the *jus in bello*. These are two very different discussions, as Bernard Prusak reminds us:

“the principles of *jus ad bellum*—the criteria that need to be satisfied before going to war can be considered morally permissible—and the principles of *jus in bello*—the criteria concerning morally permissible conduct in war—historically derive from quite different traditions: ‘*Jus in bello* is the product of the medieval chivalric code, the self-regulation of the warrior classes. *Jus ad bellum*, on the other hand, is the invention of churchmen and lawyers and represents a fundamental challenge to the assumptions build into chivalry’, namely, that ‘military life and warfare are an acceptable and potentially noble form of activity.’” (Prusak 2018, 2. Citing Rodin 2002, 167)

The problem with speaking about *jus in bello*, then, is that it involves an implicit acknowledgment of the legitimacy of being a soldier. If one speaks about how knights should behave, one is legitimating knighthood. As a recent article on the medieval “Peace of God” movement shows, efforts to create rules and standards for dueling and warfare have sometimes worked to reduce overall violence in short term ways. (See Carney 2018) But the results are rather mixed; the “Peace of God” standards were themselves enforced at the point of the sword. And Carney has pointed out that one consequence of the “Peace of God” movement was simply the transfer of intra-Christian violence into the violence of the Crusades. (Ibid.)

In the contemporary context, *jus in bello* has also produced mixed results. Some efforts to reduce civilian casualties in the short run simply produce more civilian casualties in the long run. The US military engaged in precision bombing in the first Gulf War that avoided killing many civilians directly. But many facilities such as power plants and water treatment facilities were bombed instead. Thus, while casualties during the hostilities were relatively low, “[b]y the end of 1992, more than a hundred thousand Iraqi civilians died from the lack of clean water and sewage disposal, and the breakdown of electrical service to hospitals.” (Lopez 2004) A similar terrible irony exists in the recent battles against ISIS. In the name of protecting civilian populations from ISIS, the US



and Iraqi forces fighting in the battle to retake Mosul apparently killed more than ten thousand civilians. (See George et al. 2017)

Despite these hypocrisies and unintended consequences, even many skeptics of just war theory have acknowledged recently that the *jus in bello* criteria still may be the best possibility that exists for limiting the savagery of war. Damon Linker (2018), a journalist and author, argues that just war thinking has a very mixed record in general, but says that *jus in bello* thinking “has unquestionably had positive consequences, leading to efforts to distinguish legitimate (usually military) targets from illegitimate (usually civilian) ones, as well as inspiring serious thinking about proportionality in the use of force.” He laments that recent events, including the shootings of Gaza protestors by the Israeli military, show that support for *jus in bello* among the US and other governments is waning. This is, he says, “the latest in a series of signs that the brief period in which the world had reason to hope that warfare was being hemmed in by moral considerations may well be drawing to a close. Welcome to the post-just-war world.” (Linker 2018)

Linker’s lament is echoed in a different way by Phil Klay, in a deeply moving New York Times opinion essay. Klay, a former US Marine, appeals to a sense of military honor that is reminiscent of medieval codes of chivalry. However, he traces it to the founding of the US and key American ideals. After describing how his unit provided medical treatment to a wounded enemy sniper, he explains that such consideration for the enemy is a key element of the moral standards the US should be fighting to uphold. He traces this back to George Washington, who “ordered every soldier in the Continental Army to sign a copy of rules intended to limit harm to civilians and ensure that their conduct respected what he called ‘the rights of humanity,’ so that their restraint ‘justly secured to us the attachment of all good men.’” (Klay 2017) In Klay’s mind, military action can only be regarded as legitimate – and as serving the cause of peace – if it upholds basic standards of *jus in bello*. These standards are a core aspect of Klay’s identity as a Marine. He writes that enemies should expect good treatment from the US military because Marines behave “in accordance with the rules of law [...]. Because they’re American soldiers, because they swore an oath, because they have principles, because they have honor. And because without that, there’s nothing worth fighting for.” Indeed, Klay knows well that there have been violations of these standards – he discusses Abu Ghraib at length. But in his mind, that only reinforces the need to cultivate a sense of honor and morality in

the conduct of war. Like Damon Linker, Klay thinks that a commitment to *jus in bello* may be the only bulwark against a descent into complete brutality. As long as there are soldiers in the world, we are better off if they have some sense of honor and principle.

## 5 Pacifism and what is really going on

Like the discussion about just war theory, recent discussion about pacifism is also marked by serious consideration of the ambiguity involved in taking a pacifist stance. Even some thinkers who identify themselves as pacifists have questioned the perception of pacifism as a morally superior option. Myles Werntz is a strong critic of those pacifists in the US who would claim a degree of moral purity: “One of the primary temptations facing Christians in thinking about war is that churches are absolved of involvement in war if they are not directly involved [...] this position is not a sustainable claim on economic and political grounds.” (Werntz 2014, 26) Werntz notes that the US economy and society are profoundly shaped by the country’s geopolitical role. US citizens who purchase seemingly innocuous goods are often supporting companies that also manufacture weapons or have contracts with the military: “distancing oneself from involvement with or support of military ventures in America is nearly impossible because the suppliers who provide support and aid to military forces are now the same vendors who supply the vast majority of American groceries, fuel, housing, and entertainment.” (Ibid., 24) In other words, while many Americans might eschew formal cooperation with their country’s military excesses, they cannot avoid forms of material cooperation that are morally problematic.

The pacifist author Dustin Ells Howes makes a similar point about the inevitability of our cooperation with evil. As one reviewer of his book *A Credible Pacifism* summarizes, “all of us are potentially and innately violent, at least in our actions if not our intentions. A kernel of conflict and even force lies at the core of our interpersonal relationships, economic arrangements, legal mechanisms, patterns of consumption, exercises of freedom, and ultimately our very perceptions.” (Amster 2010, 169) Thus, the idea that pacifism is a way to avoid cooperation or complicity with the evils of war is, finally, misguided. Despite our best intentions, Howes points out that our actions frequently contribute to serious forms of injustice and violence.

Other thinkers are also reiterating more traditional critiques of pacifism, particularly in relation to pacifists' refusal to use violence to protect others. As Lisa Cahill writes, even "the absolute renunciation of all potentially mortal force can place the agent in a position of complicity with grievous evils perpetrated against the innocent, turning nonviolent yet responsible agents into 'guilty bystanders.'" (Sowle Cahill 2018a, 106) Nigel Biggar – a staunch critic of pacifism – states it even more strongly when he asks what sort of peace it is that pacifists are seeking:

"Peace is not simple. Like war, it too involves evils, tragedies, ambiguities, risks, and uncertainties. The fact that the United Kingdom and the United States stayed at peace in 1994 left Ratko Mladic at peace to seriously disturb the peace of the seven thousand men and boys he slaughtered at Srebrenica; the fact that we, the international community, stayed at peace in 1995 left the Hutu at peace to seriously disturb the peace of the eight hundred thousand Tutsis they hacked to death in Rwanda; and, were we to stay at peace in 2015, we would leave the self-styled Islamic State at peace to atrociously disturb the peace of the Yazidis, Kurds, and Iraqis [...]. I cannot take 'peace' at face value. I need to know what kind of peace, whose peace, and at whose cost [...]. Those who argue for 'not-war' have to justify themselves, too." (Biggar 2015, 54)<sup>4</sup>

When our neighbors are threatened with violence, there may be no way we can avoid tragic consequences – whether we seek to prevent violence with violence ourselves, or whether we remain nonviolent. While it is easy to point out the many injustices that wars cause, Biggar reminds us that advocating against war may also lead to serious injustice.

## 6 Nonviolence and what is really going on

Nevertheless, the fact that any course of action may lead to tragic consequences does not mean that we need not prefer some courses of action to others, both for moral and for practical reasons. Many Christian ethicists, in addition to Pope Francis in his World Day of Peace Message for 2017, are calling attention to nonviolence as a method of addressing injustices

<sup>4</sup> Biggar (2013) makes a similar, more extended argument in his book, *In Defence of War*.

that is both effective and morally preferable in many cases. This does not mean that nonviolent action is not also subject to the same moral ambiguities that plague pacifism and just war thinking. Still, new work in the social sciences offers fresh approaches to thinking about how the vocation to be peacemakers can actually be carried out in political terms. The current conversation about nonviolence and peacebuilding, therefore, tends to transcend the traditional dichotomy between “idealistic” pacifists and “realist” just-war theorists, and avoids some of the pitfalls of both approaches.

One important work of social science that has made a major contribution to the conversation about nonviolence is Chenoweth and Stephan’s *Why Civil Resistance Works*. They examined over 300 major political campaigns from 1900 to 2006, around the world. These included regime change movements, secession movements, and anti-occupation movements. They compared movements that were primarily nonviolent with those which were partly or completely violent, and concluded from the data that “nonviolent resistance has been strategically superior to violent resistance.” (Chenoweth/Stephan 2011, 17) They also showed that the key criterion for an effective movement is what percentage of the population participates. Because nonviolent movements have fewer barriers to participation, they can draw a higher percentage of the population. People of all ages and genders can participate, and you need not own a weapon. The diversity of these movements also make them less vulnerable to infiltration by security forces. All of this adds up to a greater likelihood of success. Their research also shows that even unsuccessful nonviolent movements are far more likely than violent ones to lead to democracy in the coming years. Chenoweth and Stephan make clear that their argument is an empirical one, not a religious or ethical one. “Civil resistance does not succeed because it melts the hearts of dictators and secret police,” they write. “It succeeds because it is more likely than armed struggle to attract a larger and more diverse base of participants and impose unsustainable costs on a regime.” (Chenoweth/Stephan 2014, 96) Yet their work – and that of other social scientists writing on nonviolence, peacebuilding, and violence prevention – clearly enlarges the scope of possibilities that must be considered by Christian ethicists.

Yet just like pacifism and just war theory, nonviolence merits a nuanced approach. As thinkers from Gandhi to Niebuhr to James Childress have pointed out, non-violent action is a form of power and, like other forms of power, may be abused. As Dustin Ells Howes (2009, 10) writes,

“Power that does not employ physical violence is still potentially destructive and unjust. And even if physical violence always retains an aspect of immorality [...] sometimes our nonphysical actions are worse than physical harm.” The potential danger inherent in nonviolent action is already acknowledged in *Gaudium et Spes*, even as it affirms its importance: “we cannot fail to praise those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties too, provided this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or of the community itself.” (GS 78)

Still, the moral and political advantages of using nonviolent means to pursue justice are clear. Many writers have noted that nonviolent campaigns tend to provoke less backlash, reducing the chances of creating an ongoing cycle of violence and retribution. Other authors focus on the importance of nonviolence for creating fruitful political dialogue. Howes, for instance, argues that nonviolence allows conversation and dialogue to continue, increasing the chances of creating a just outcome for all. Given “our limited ability to know what to do and the difficulty of attending to the physical and material suffering of others [...], speech, diplomacy, and civil disobedience all ensure that others can at least express that the exercise of nonviolent power is unjust.” (Howes 2009, 10–11) Just as Chenoweth and Stephan affirm, Howes believes that even unsuccessful nonviolent campaigns may produce better outcomes in the long run, because this ongoing dialogue is what is most crucial for justice and democracy. Robert Holmes, too, echoes this focus on dialogue, in terms that are reminiscent of Gandhi’s “experiments with truth”:

“Violence is for the morally infallible. Nonviolence is for those who recognize their own limitations and the possibility that others, with whom they are in disagreement, have hold of certain parts of the truth, and are willing to put forth the effort to uncover and cultivate that truth in the interests of nonviolent conciliation.” (Cicovacki 2013, 197)

Or, to put it quite bluntly, “[r]efraining from killing others ensures that we remain perpetually open to correction.” (Howes 2009, 9)

However one understands the advantages or goals of nonviolence, an important area of future development is ethical guidelines for the use of nonviolent force. Just because it is not violent does not mean it is automatically moral or that it is being used in a way that promotes justice

overall; nonviolent force can be used for good or for less good goals, and in proportionate or disproportionate ways. Anna Floerke Scheid's book *Just Revolution* (2015) is very helpful in this regard, as she brings the traditional criteria of just war theory to bear on contemporary campaigns for regime change. While she does not rule out the use of violent force as legitimate in some circumstances, she argues that nonviolent means should always be primary. Her work echoes an earlier argument by James Childress that "the appropriate criteria for evaluating civil disobedience coincide to a great extent with traditional just war criteria such as just cause, good motives and intentions, exhaustion of normal procedures for resolving disputes, reasonable prospect for success, due proportion between probable good and bad consequences, and right means." (Childress 1971, 204) Scheid goes further, though, to adapt the criteria of just war theory for use in situations of nonviolent action. For instance, she proposes a refinement to the criterion of "right intention": not only is it necessary for a revolutionary to intend a just peace as her goal, but the intracommunal nature of a revolution requires that its proponents go even further, and intend reconciliation as the final goal. Furthermore, right intention implies careful thought about what comes after a campaign. As the difficult aftermath of the Arab Spring has shown (particularly in Egypt), to build an effective nonviolent campaign is one thing; building a sustainable democracy is another.

One lingering question is how the morality of nonviolence may relate to its practical effectiveness. While there are many ways to approach that question, it is particularly interesting to see how some pacifists are engaging it, given that pacifists have sometimes been accused of lacking a sense of responsibility for the world. For example, in his book *Bodies of Peace*, Myles Werntz is hesitant to stake his arguments for nonviolence on any claims for its empirical effectiveness. Instead, he argues for nonviolence primarily as a form of Christian discipleship and witness. However, this does not mean that Christians should not attend carefully to the effects and effectiveness of their actions. He rejects the oft-heard claim that Jesus merely calls us to be faithful, not effective. Rather, he explains,

"I am not retreating again into a theoretical account of nonviolence or arguing that those who refuse to participate in war are excused from the burden of accounting for the successes of violence or the failures of nonviolence. Rather, [nonviolence] is a social possibility that begins as a theological reality, to the extent that the act of nonviolence – as a social strategy – is derivative of and is a witness to the work of God." (Werntz 2014, 15)

He urges, therefore, that Christians think carefully about the forms of Christian life and church life which can best reflect and embody our vocations as followers of Christ – and nonviolence is a key element of that.

## 7 Nuclear weapons and what is really going on<sup>5</sup>

One of the most challenging areas of witness for Christians in the world today is in relation to nuclear weapons. Nuclear tensions between the US and North Korea, particularly given the presence of two unstable leaders in these two states, have added urgency to the conversation about nuclear disarmament. Yet there remain disagreements among ethicists about how best to proceed, particularly when it comes to understanding what is going on in two key areas: first, what is going on with nuclear deterrence? And second, what is the function of the recently passed UN nuclear weapons ban treaty?

When the UN passed the ban in July of 2017, the Vatican was a major champion of that treaty and was among the very first countries to ratify it. Subsequently, the Vatican hosted a symposium entitled “Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament” which gathered UN and NATO officials as well as 11 Nobel Peace Prize winners, including representatives of the 2017 awardees, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. During the symposium, Pope Francis made a striking statement about nuclear weapons. Moving well beyond past condemnations of the use of nuclear weapons, he condemned the “very possession” of nuclear weapons. (See Pope Francis 2017)

Many of those who supported the UN ban, and were in attendance at the Vatican symposium, did so because they believed that the ban could be an effective way to stigmatize the possession of nuclear weapons and therefore make it more likely that countries will disarm. They envision a trajectory of increasing rejection of nuclear weapons in international public opinion. And by telling stories of the suffering at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they have sought to highlight the humanitarian consequences of any use of such weapons. The activists with the International Campaign

5 Portions of this section are taken from my blog post “Nuclear Deterrence: When an Interim Ethic Reaches its Expiration Date” on *Political Theology Today*. <<https://politicaltheology.com/nuclear-deterrence-when-an-interim-ethic-reaches-its-expiration-date>>.

to Abolish Nuclear Weapons have thus sought to create a narrative in which all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, come to be regarded as illegal under international law. There is no doubt that their efforts are important and have indeed served to raise awareness of the dangers of nuclear weapons. However, some ethicists suggest that such a ban is not, in fact, an effective way to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons in the world today. Because none of the states which currently possess nuclear weapons will ratify the ban, there is a real question about whether it will have any effect on states' behavior. Thus, some thinkers, particularly from nuclear states, have argued that the ban does more to undermine respect for international law than it actually accomplishes.<sup>6</sup> Instead of creating a ban that will inevitably be ignored, they suggest that it would be more productive for the international community to focus on support for existing legal instruments such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty, or other more incremental efforts.

When it comes to the question of nuclear deterrence, there are also differences in how the current situation is described. In the past, Catholic leaders offered a limited acceptance of the morality of nuclear deterrence because of an assessment that deterrence was preventing the actual use of nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, Pope John Paul II wrote, "in current conditions 'deterrence' based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion." (Pope John Paul II 1982) The acceptance of deterrence was therefore conditional. Today, it is not clear that the conditions still apply. There are two reasons for this: first, deterrence was conditionally justified as "a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament," but this disarmament is not taking place in a serious way. As Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the then-Vatican representative at the UN, said in a lecture in 2010: "It is evident that nuclear deterrence is preventing genuine nuclear disarmament. Consequently, the conditions that prevailed during the Cold War, which gave a basis for the Church's limited toleration of nuclear deterrence, no longer apply." (Reese 2010) Second, deterrence was justified on the basis of its utility, and that strategic utility

6 For a detailed debate about the implications of the UN ban treaty, see Shetty/Raynova 2017.



is now being called into serious question by the strategists themselves. In a dramatic series of op-eds over several years, former cold warriors from both political parties have called instead for complete nuclear disarmament, or “Going to Zero”. The so called “Gang of Four” – George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn – have argued that:

“The accelerating spread of nuclear weapons, nuclear know-how and nuclear material has brought us to a nuclear tipping point. We face a very real possibility that the deadliest weapons ever invented could fall into dangerous hands. The steps we are taking now to address these threats are not adequate to the danger. With nuclear weapons more widely available, deterrence is decreasingly effective and increasingly hazardous.” (Shultz et al 2008)

Some observers disagree with this assessment, however, and claim that deterrence remains an important way of stabilizing the international system. “Nuclear disarmament,” Michael Desch argues, “would be a recipe for blackmail by rogue states or even renewed great-power conflict.” (Desch 2018) Until a viable alternative emerges, Desch and others believe that deterrence may still be morally justified as the best option currently available.

How can we promote just peace in a world where nuclear weapons exist? Though there is wide consensus that the use of nuclear weapons is completely immoral, it is not always clear how best to prevent that use. Our ethical assessments are highly dependent on how we see the current status of nuclear deterrence, and whether or not we see value in a treaty that goes unsigned by many of the most powerful states in the world.

## 8 Conclusion

One might think that, after centuries of debate, there would be no new arguments in the Christian conversation about war and peace. However, history is complex and ever changing. Humans are endlessly creative at finding ways to wage war and also to prevent it. The pursuit of just peace is one which will always require innovation and imagination. While there are aspects of the tradition that can be helpful – including, perhaps, just war theory – it is clear that new approaches are also necessary. How can we harness the power of nonviolence in just ways? How can social media become a tool for dialogue rather than division? As Maryann Cusimano Love (2018, 60) recently wrote: “Just war theory tells us how to limit

violence and that force should be a last resort, but it tells us nothing about first resorts, or, in other words, about how to build sustainable peace.” To that end, it is important that Christian communities are spaces in which stories of hope and peace may be told and retold. Yet it is also important that we be open to new stories. As ethicists, our desire to be clear and systematic may sometimes be at odds with understanding what is really going on in the world, and the ways the Holy Spirit may surprise us. In speaking about the ways that Christians should engage in political life today, Luke Bretherton cautions that:

“any attempt to arrive at a definitive classification not only ignores changes in historical context but also the dynamic relationship between the prior actions of Christ and different dimensions of society whereby Christ’s Lordship comes to be exercised in different degrees over different aspect of society at different times. Accordingly, Christians need to develop the ability to improvise faithfully in response to Christ within a variety of different political environments.” (Bretherton 2010, 21)

Faithful improvisation is indeed a helpful way to approach our task. But I would add that we need to carry out such faithful improvisation with as clear a sense as possible of what is going on in the world. To that end, ethicists themselves must continue the ongoing dialogue about the “signs of the times” and what we see in the world around us – informed by many voices and many narratives.

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