



War has always been a difficult subject for worshippers of the Prince of Peace. Is there such a thing as a 'just war', that it is right for Christians to support, and even participate in?

In this special essay section, Andrew Cameron interacts with two recent important books on the subject, and Karl Hand (winner of our essay competition) suggests that the 'just war' tradition needs some updating.

# War: A time to fight?

REVIEWER | ANDREW CAMERON

*Should we fight? Andrew Cameron thinks about the question of 'just war', and weighs up two books on the subject by Tom Frame and Oliver O'Donovan.*



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**E**rnst Juenger fought in the final German offensive of World War I. Here is his account of his unit's advance:

The great moment had come. The curtain of fire lifted from the front trenches. We stood up.

With a mixture of feelings, evoked by bloodthirstiness, rage, and intoxication, we moved in step, ponderously but irresistibly toward the enemy lines. I was well ahead of the company ... My right hand embraced the shaft of my pistol ... I was boiling with a mad rage, which had taken hold of me and all the others in an incomprehensible fashion. The overwhelming wish to kill gave wings to my feet. Rage pressed bitter tears from my eyes.

The monstrous desire for annihilation, which hovered over the battlefield, thickened the brains of the men and submerged them in a red fog. We called to each other in sobs and stammered disconnected sentences. A neutral observer might have perhaps believed that we were seized by an excess of happiness.<sup>1</sup>

After the twentieth century, it is hard to imagine anyone wanting war. Even for those who have never experienced it, we can understand why so many insist that war is insane, irrational and pointless. The very thought of going to war is terrifying for some, while others, supported by descriptions

like that of Juenger's, conclude that war is a form of madness. How should a Christian respond? The brilliant Swiss German theologian Karl Barth, to take one example, argued that the default position for Christians ought to be pacifism.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this, he also acknowledged that sometimes, the violence of war *could* legitimately be employed to protect something—whatever that something was, and "something" could include the nation-state.<sup>3</sup>

Welcome to the messy, difficult world of Christian discourse about war. The purpose of this article is to shed a little more light on it, mainly by pointing to two recent helpful books on the subject. But before getting to those

books, let us pause to consider Barth's account in slightly more detail. Barth is a useful starting point because he saw himself as struggling to understand and apply God's word, and as a Swiss-German who lived through the midst of the major conflicts of the twentieth century (the World Wars and the Cold War), he couldn't possibly approach the question merely as a detached academic.

## War and nationhood

Barth does not simply assume that all and every instance of national self-defence is justified. Not that he was a fence-sitter: despite his attraction to pacifism, he would've fought on behalf of the Swiss Confederation if necessary, and there exist pictures of Barth wearing the helmet and wielding the rifle of the Swiss national guard to prove it.

Barth believed, and was prepared to put into practice, the idea that there may exist the kind of nation-state which, due to its service of God, might need to protect itself.

But what sort of service of God? Barth obviously thought that the Swiss confederation fitted the bill as a nation-state worth defending—but it's also fair enough to ask whether he was simply using a sophisticated version of the age-old claim that 'God is on our side'. How do we decide which nation-state is worth defending (as a Christian), and which isn't? Would we be confident to use Barth's argument as a justification for the defence of, say, Australia or the UK?

One way forward is simply to insist that no-one has the right to make any judgment against the validity of nations or their governments. So Article 2 of the 1945 UN Charter, building on a centuries-old tradition,<sup>4</sup> takes this line, and reads as follows:

All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state ...

This would possibly be a neat enough solution, *if* it was applied consistently. Yet, to take just one example, in the washup of the 2003 war against Iraq, the claim has since been made that the Ba'athist government under Saddam Hussein was evil and that therefore 'regime change' should

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be seen as a good thing (leaving aside for a moment any discussion about the original rationale of seeking to remove the threat of weapons of mass destruction). This is very much a moral judgment on the validity of a particular national government. Yet those who make the judgment see it as justified by the specific circumstances—even though they may in theory agree that, as a general rule, we ought not go around passing these sorts of judgments. We begin to see the extraordinary complexity in thinking straight about war!

Tom Frame's recent book *Living By the Sword? The Ethics of Armed Intervention* shows one helpful approach to this complexity. He insists that we need to think through problems relating to war in a way that is not just abstract, but actually pays close attention to the historical and political detail of the situation. He criticises one pacifist writer as making "generalisations [that] are so general that they do not seem to relate to any particular war or any particular group of people" (pp. 124-125).

Tom Frame is a naval officer and a historian, as well as being an Anglican bishop to the Australian Defence Force, and his clear writing shows how well he knows the detail of his subject. Frame is extremely well-placed to make judg-

ments on the subject of Christians and war. It is impossible to make good ethical decisions without having good information, and it is obvious that he has good information. His frank introduction to his book tells how he moved from the militarism of his youth, through the years in which he tried to hold pacifism as a workable option, through to his sad acceptance that some kind of 'just war' approach is the only position that he can workably espouse (p. 116). (And espouse it he does, courageously reversing his initial affirmation of the Iraq war to a qualified rejection of it as unjust.) Two monumental chapters on war prior to and after AD 450 catalogue, in detail, major Christian thinkers and their reflections upon war; and each chapter helpfully opens with a recollection of Jesus' passion, and the way in which his words and actions have been so central to Christian thought about war.

If Dr Frame's book has a weakness, however, it is that he offers a range of opinions from Christian thinkers on what 'just war' looks like, but in doing this he doesn't help the reader judge between the theological assumptions that these thinkers are relying on. In reading Frame's book we get a fine idea of how complex the issues are. But although

a range of possibilities for a Christian solution are given, it's not clear which of those possibilities we should take, or more importantly, how we can decide between them.

## War and peace

Karl Barth again:

What does require Christian faith, insight and courage—and the Christian church and Christian ethics are there to show them—is to tell nations and governments that peace is the real emergency to which all our time, powers and ability must be devoted ... so that no refuge need be sought in war, nor need there be expected from it what peace has denied.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Barth thinks that Christians should fight the kind of callous indifference and neglect that breeds war and presents it to us as 'inevitable' or 'unavoidable'. In the other helpful book we're considering, *The Just War Revisited*, Oliver O'Donovan tries to apply this thinking to how Christians should behave in wartime.

O'Donovan acknowledges that men can, as in Ernst Juenger's account, become berserkers in war. He also realizes that traditionally the Christian theories of 'just war'



### The Just War Revisited

Prof. Oliver O'Donovan (Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford)  
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 150pp.  
Available from Moore Books  
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have sometimes served to rubberstamp exactly this sort of aggression. But O'Donovan insists that this is not a correct understanding or application of the 'just war' tradition. Rather, Christians are to understand war (in the 'just war' tradition) to be *an extraordinary mode of judgment from God*, whose intention is to restore justice, and thereby bring about peace. War is only ever an unusual mode of judg-

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ment, and is useful only for emergencies. The basic Christian commitment is to peace between nations where possible. In the 'just war' tradition,

Justice in war [stands] in relation to the exercise of domestic justice as an emergency operation, performed in a remote mountain hut with a penknife, stands to the same surgery performed under clinical conditions in a hospital. (p. 18)

By understanding war in this way, the 'just war' tradition represented an evangelical understanding of war, which serves to discipline the practice of war.

In saying this, O'Donovan—explaining 'just war'—is denying two things.

The first thing he denies is the view of war as natural to humanity. We don't need to wage war in order to advance as humans in culture, wisdom or learning, as if war and peace are two necessary sides of the one coin of human experience. This is not a Christian understanding of how God's world operates. War is an expression of humanity operating in a fallen world.

The other option that O'Donovan denies, however, is pacifism. Pacifism is undoubtedly correct in its awareness that God plans peace for humanity, and calls his people to

enjoy peace and to work toward peace. The main biblical objection to pacifism is that the Bible doesn't actually present lasting peace as a permanent possibility in this world, until the day on which God himself establishes peace through final judgment.

His core principle is that war should best be understood as a *judgment against wrongdoers*. On this basic understanding, O'Donovan suggests key ideas for working out whether such a judgment has been legitimately made: *authority, discrimination, and proportion*.

To be a valid act of judgment, warfare must proceed from some basis in authority. This is difficult to work out, since it usually concerns people who are operating outside the usual framework of a government's authority. However, it is not an impossible problem: one sign of legitimate authority will be that in war this authority seeks for justice *in order that* there may be peace.

It follows that the one making war must be able to *discriminate*; that is, to work out who is working for justice and who is working against. The authoritative prosecutor must act so as to make certain that the possibility of peace is not ruined during and after the conflict.

This concern, in turn, will involve making a right judgment about *proportionate* response. The response must, firstly, fit the crime: air strikes in response to Serbian genocide seems appropriate, but would not have been had the Serbians merely been engaging in, say, DVD piracy. The response must also be fitting to the end in view: conventional air strikes aimed at Serbian military units are of a different order than, say, nuclear strikes against Serbian populations, which would certainly not fit with the task of establishing a lasting peaceful community (since everyone would be dead).

O'Donovan considers a range of specific questions, and reaches some fascinating conclusions throughout the book:

- In 'peacetime', which is morally superior: satellites or spies? Clearly the satellite, which is merely an extension of public observation; whereas when we recruit spies, we generate a class of people who betray their community even though that community has done no obvious injustice (p. 51).
- Is the UN permission that nations may unilaterally go to war in self-defence, a good provision? Emphatically, no: it represents a false view of the sovereignty of nation-states, where the idea of a law that applies to all states has been tossed out in favour of a notion of nations as competing

interest groups. It also forces nations to hide any genuine concern for the good of others within displays of defensive self-interest (pp. 56-57).

- Is the UN a good thing? Its concerted action prior to the first Gulf War hinted at its possibilities. But like any law court, if it continually fails to grant access and consideration to the aggrieved, or to make and enforce judgments, then its authority will certainly erode. The UN was not set up as a quiet sitting room for contemplating the problems of the world.

Reservations about the book include, oddly, that it is too short. Much of O'Donovan's argumentation relies upon his view of government as outlined in *Desire of the Nations*.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of any cross-references to that book, many of the assertions seem bald, and it is unclear what makes them distinctively evangelical. In this respect, O'Donovan risks losing both Christian and secular readers. His consideration of immoral weapons, sanctions and war-crimes trials seems a little hurried at points. More importantly, we are left guessing what might constitute the kinds of injustice that require international action, and how it might be deter-

But what he proposes is breathtaking: an outline for a new conception of 'just war' for soldier, general, politician and citizen alike. It is tempered with wisdom and realism, but offers the possibility that nation-states might no longer act so as to force men like Ernst Juenger into the folly of mindless destruction. O'Donovan's comments at the close of his chapter on international war-crimes tribunals well describe the humility of *The Just War Revisited* and could also be read as a suitable statement about the quest for 'just war' itself:

Only God has a right to carry justice to its limits ... Such a project tempts us to imagine that we can make our justice complete, as God's justice is complete. ... The slow but real progress we have made towards a common understanding of what humanity in war requires of us makes some new markers necessary, simply to protect that gain in understanding. If we can set them up—and I hope we shall be able to—we must be sure to do it without pretentiousness. (p. 123)

Unfortunately, if this review and these books seem difficult, that is because there are no shortcuts in thinking about war. Each war is, in its own way, unique; and so it will not do to

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mined. Although O'Donovan's references to the Gulf War and Kosovo offer some examples to help in making decisions, and although much of what he says easily leads to the conclusion that the second Iraq conflict was a bad and wrong idea, we would still benefit from O'Donovan's further ideas on the nature of international injustice. (Again, he might be assuming that we've read his other books—*Desire of the Nations* and *Resurrection and Moral Order*.)<sup>7</sup>

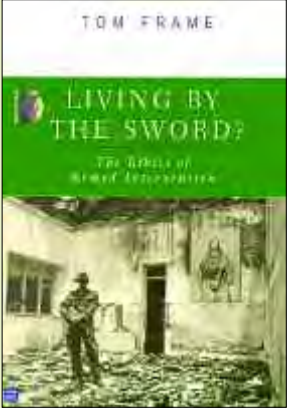
be nutting out our attitude to war on-the-fly. We must take the time to think about it when we can, and both of these books are an excellent starting point. For of one thing we may be sure: that until the Lord returns, there will always be wars and rumours of wars (Mark 13:7).

Let us begin to intellectually prepare for the next one—and in the meantime, talk about the kind of peace that will give our just-war talk meaning when we get to the next war. **B**

Some parts of this article appeared in a more extensive review of O'Donovan's book, 'War and judgment', online at <http://www.case.edu.au/bookcase.php> (under 'Ethics').

#### ENDNOTES

1. Cited in J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections of Men in Battle*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970, p. 52.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol 3: The Doctrine of Creation (Part 4)*, G. W. Bromiley (trans.), T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1961, p. 455.
3. Barth, p. 462.
4. Dating back at least to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1727.
5. Barth, p. 459.
6. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.
7. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, IVP, Leicester, 1994.



**Living By the Sword?  
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