



Catholic Theological Association 2014 Conference Papers

Church, Theology and War: Remembrance and Collusion

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INTRODUCTION

August 2014 marked the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, the Great War, the war to end all other wars, and the British government intends to commemorate not only its beginning and its end but several battles in between. In spite of this official overkill, the Catholic Theological Association took the year as an opportunity to reflect not only on that war and its background but war in general in a theological and moral context. And peace too. Christianity is unusual in that, if you look at its foundation documents – its scriptures – you find that it is not big on warfare. It is true that authors in the NT occasionally resort to metaphors like “sword of the spirit” and the “breastplate of righteousness” as here in Ephesians, and there is some warlike imagery in Revelation in its imagining of final judgment, but the NT does not recommend that Christians go into battle for their beliefs. On the contrary, the teaching of Jesus is marked by an extraordinary demand to wage peace. Apart from historical aberrations like the crusades, there is no territory that the Christian church feels it must possess, for here we have no abiding city (Hebrews 13.14), “our *politeuma* is in the heavens” (Philippians 3.20). Yet there is a long established tradition that Christians – and anyone else, because is an issue for natural law ethics – may go to war, but only in clearly defined circumstances (*jus ad bellum*). And there are limitations on how war may be conducted (*jus in bello*). The military life, then, can be an honourable one, but one fraught with dangers, moral as well as physical.

Was the 1914–18 war an honourable war, or at least a just one? Pope Benedict XV thought not, and it is a truism that someone must behave dishonourably for any war to break out. The question of honour or, better, justice, concerns the response to initial aggression. A just war has normally been thought of as a matter of self-defence against an aggressor but Nigel Biggar, in his defence of the just war

tradition, thinks we should look at it rather in terms of the defence of the innocent, which allows wars of intervention where a country is not actually defending itself. Britain has been involved in a number of these in recent years in controversial circumstances. And what of modern weapons? The 1914–18 War was primarily a war of attrition by artillery and machine guns; the 1939–45 War was a mobile war of tanks and aerial bombardment. Now we have nuclear bombs and drones, both of which present new problems for just war theory.

We begin with a paper on the teaching of the Catholic Church on warfare and how it has changed in the last one hundred years, for it has changed. **Ashley Beck** begins with the vigorous opposition of Benedict XV to the 1914–18 War to track the changes in the church's attitude to wars in general and finds that not only does the church no longer condemn or even criticize pacifism but, the author claims, it now teaches a "virtual pacifism", even though this has hardly trickled down to lower levels, even that of Bishops' Conferences. This paper takes a hard critical line on the possession of nuclear weapons and on the pretensions of modern nation states.

John Pollard is the author of a recent study of Benedict XV and focuses on his role in pursuing peace in 1914 and during the war. Although Pope Benedict was unsuccessful in the end, unsuccessful even in changing the attitudes of many Catholics, Pollard stresses the importance of Benedict's legacy for the church by examining the content of the famous Peace Note of 1917 and his humanitarian efforts for the victims of war.

Taking his cue from Stephen Pinker's recent *The Better Angels of Our Nature* that demonstrates that the modern period (hard as it might be to believe) is considerably less violent than all previous periods of human history, **Nicholas Boyle**, after forays into ethology and anthropology, argues that "this deeper inclination to murderous male-on-male violence in human societies is part of the material out of which states are formed, that in the state violence is turned in on itself so that its people can live in peace... and therefore that it is not unreasonable to hope that... the state's capacity for making war may itself be an instrument by which war is made unnecessary, perhaps even, in the end, obsolete." For this to happen he looks for a feminization of society that might also creep into the Catholic Church. For learning about how the Church is already developing practical strategies of peace-making in violent situations we turn to **Mgr Hector Fabio Henao** who is Secretary of the charity Caritas in Columbia. He outlines the background of 50 years of violence and guerrilla warfare in his country and shows how pastoral concern and theological reflection are bearing the fruits, against all the odds, of pacification.

With **Nigel Biggar** we turn towards just war theory. He first summarises the main points of his recent book *In Defence of War*, which,

of course, is not a book that recommends belligerence. But against some trends in recent writing on the ethics of war, he makes a vigorous defence of the idea that there can be just wars. In the latter part of his paper, he discusses what he regards as four controversial issues: love in warfare, proportionality, Britain's entry into the 1914–18 War, and justifying the 2003 invasion of Iraq. **Esther Reed** also argues that, far from being redundant, just war theory is needed more than ever as new forms of warfare develop, and she is conscious that people do not think well when they are fearful of war. She is particularly concerned with cyber-attacks: when they might count as commercial criminality and when as full warfare. She wonders whether new principles are now required in the theory.

Michael Snape adds a different dimension by looking at how the religious dispositions of soldiers were affected by combat, so-called “foxhole religion”. He looks at evidence from the 1914–18 War but mainly from the testimonies of chaplains and GIs in the US army in the Second World War. Finally **Michael Kirwan** pulls many of these reflections into a theological context by drawing on the ideas of Girard on sacrifice and Schillebeeckx's understanding of the *humanum*, what it is to be human. He goes about this quite concretely by looking at the problems we have with our recently initiated “war on terror” and, within that, the use of “smart technology” particularly drones (problems recently dramatized on television in the American series *Homeland*).

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