Selective memory

By Richard A. Kauffman
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The fourth of July joins Memorial Day and Veterans day as the three times a year I feel out of step with the rest of American culture. While I'm grateful for my country's freedoms and opportunities, and I want to mourn with those who mourn the losses of war, I cannot participate in rituals that glorify war.

Eamon Duffy, who teaches the history of Christianity at Cambridge University, has helped me to better articulate my own discomfort with memorializing war. Remembering the war dead is a highly tribal act, Duffy argued in a speech he gave for Remembrance Day 1998 in the UK (a speech included in his collection *Walking to Emmaus*). We are remembering *our own* war dead. There's no room in our rituals for remembering others' losses, especially not those of our enemies.

The dead themselves are silent; we hijack them and use them for our own purposes. "They become ventriloquist's dummies," says Duffy, "through whom we utter the words we think we need to hear." Behind all the trappings of the ceremonies is a nostalgic longing for the moral clarity of a nation united around war, in which divisions are silenced and people have a clear sense of right and wrong. Or rather, of who is in the right and who is in the wrong—of our enemies' uniform as the embodiment of evil.

Most of the people killed in war aren't heroes. Most of them are victims of war. Though they were fallible, sinful human beings, we make them into secular saints by virtue of them having been killed in war. Of course, the ones who actually fight the wars often have their own misgivings.

We often cover up our misgivings about war by giving the sacrifices of war a theological spin. Winnington Ingram, bishop of London, once said that the English remembering the war dead should have no misgivings. "Christ died on Good Friday for Freedom, Honour, and Chivalry," Ingram said, "and our boys are dying for the same things."

Remembering the war dead isn't about clear remembering, Duffy argues, but about "selective forgetting":

> To remember war, for Christians, is to come face to face with the reality of sin, and the web of failure and compromise which surrounds even our best–intentioned collective action…. There are no innocent combatants, and no victors. There is no true remembrance which is not also, and first of all, repentance.

Duffy reminds Christians that in the Eucharist there is a different kind of remembering. Christ's death was a victory like none other, a victory that rejected violence and didn't come at anyone else's expense. Jesus' victory pushed the meaning of the word to its very limits, for he was a victim. "We have only to lay down our arms," says Duffy, "and to learn to struggle using only his" weapons. After all, "Jesus calls us to be a people founded not on strength, not even the triumph of right over wrong, but on weakness and solidarity with the weak."

Duffy is no pacifist. He claims that sometimes war is the lesser of two evils, but also that "war is never glorious, never a good." Duffy has insights into war, and the memorializing of war, that a Christian pacifist like me can agree with wholeheartedly.