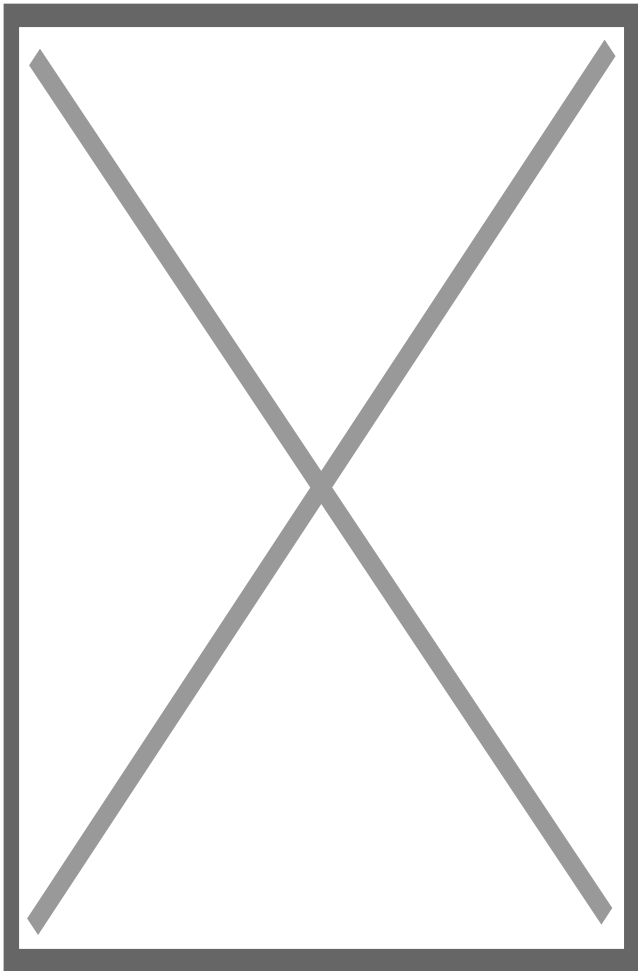


Blessed Are the Pacifists/The Horrors We Bless/Just Peacemaking

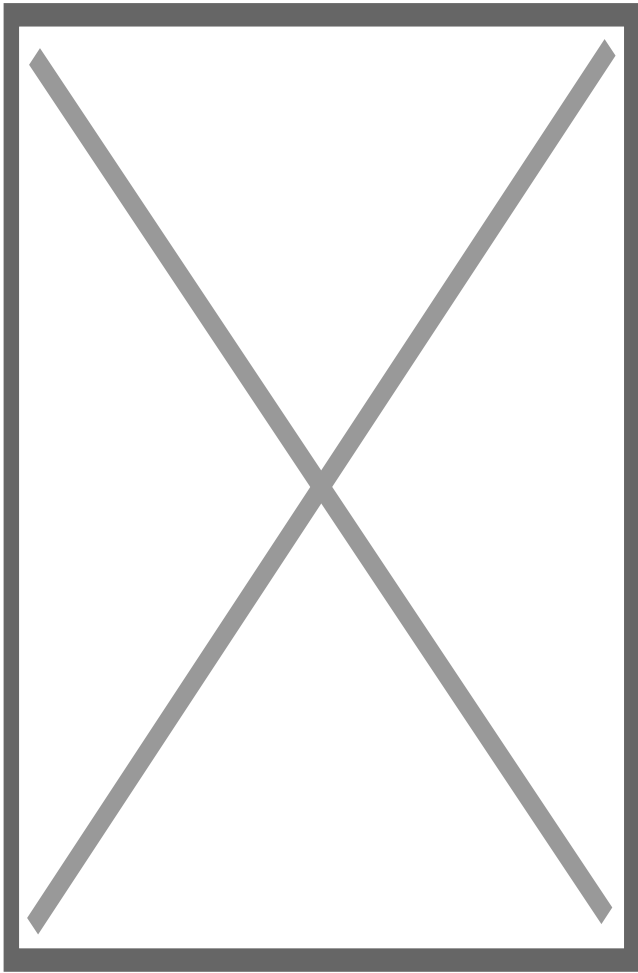
reviewed by [Tobias Winright](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

In Review



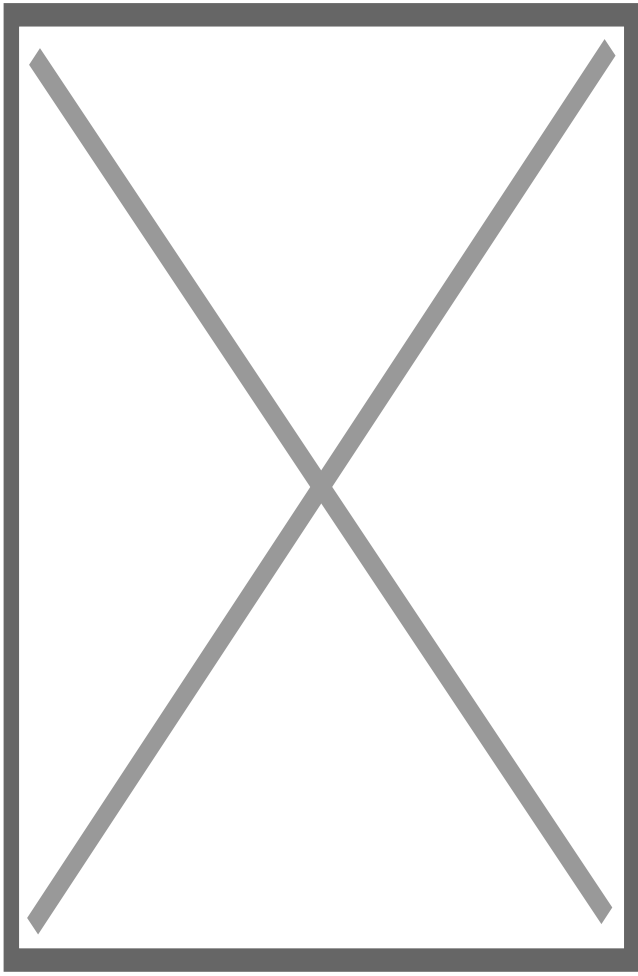
Blessed Are The Pacifists: The Beatitudes and Just War Theory

Thomas Trzyna
Herald



The Horrors We Bless: Rethinking the Just-War Legacy

Daniel C. Maguire
Fortress



Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War, 2nd edition

Glen Stassen, ed.
Pilgrim

It has now been ten years since the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder died. Yoder remains most remembered for his book *The Politics of Jesus* and for providing a profound grounding for a Christian pacifist alternative to just war theory. Yet at times Yoder employed just war reasoning himself to evaluate the Vietnam War, the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. He also regularly taught courses on the just war tradition. Among his students were ROTC cadets at Notre Dame. He even lectured on just war at Culver Military Academy.

As a student I once accompanied Yoder on the trek to Culver, 30 miles south of South Bend, and listened as he emphasized to these youths the importance of maintaining the integrity of the just war tradition. David Weiss, a fellow graduate student who went with us, later reflected, “As I listened to him, the aging, bearded, internationally known Mennonite pacifist, field their sometimes sophisticated but just as often ill-formed and awkward questions—always with unfailing grace—I realized that I was watching something akin to redemptive patience.”

Why would Yoder, a committed pacifist, bother to use just war thinking himself or take the time to teach it to students? For one thing, he ecumenically and dialogically respected the integrity of his nonpacifist interlocutors. Believing that one of his roles was to be a friendly critic of just war theory, Yoder called upon its proponents to

think more seriously about what it would really mean to honor and adhere to this mode of moral reasoning.

The key question Yoder asked just war advocates was this one: “Can the [just war] criteria function in such a way that in a particular case a specified cause, or a specified means, or a specified strategy or tactical move could be excluded? Can the response ever be ‘no’?”

In other words, how do just war proponents make the demands and claims of the tradition truly operational? If proponents would actually “exercise effective discipline and limit the harm they do,” Yoder hoped, then this just war approach “with teeth” would lead to less violence, injustice and loss of life in the world.

In the years since his death and especially as the Iraq war approaches its fifth anniversary, I often find myself wondering what Yoder would have had to say about the terrorist threat, the so-called war on terrorism, the claim that a country has the right to embark on preventive war, the abuse at Abu Ghraib and the transition away from viewing waterboarding as a form of torture. Although Yoder is no longer with us, echoes of his thinking are discernible in the books under review here. Each finds fault with just war theory and offers alternatives to it, but none jettisons it entirely.

In his brief, nonacademic book *Blessed Are the Pacifists*, Thomas Trzyna, an Episcopalian and an English professor at Seattle Pacific University, contends that though just war theory has “a long and honorable history,” it is “far less useful” today than its proponents admit—especially because most Americans are unfamiliar with it. Furthermore, he charges, the tenets of the theory are “flawed and contradictory.” Quite often, he explains, just war criteria are used to rationalize what is already happening, and they can be invoked “equally well on both sides” of a conflict; they are “little more than a framework for publicity and propaganda.” We do not tend to embark on war only as a last resort, he argues, and noncombatant immunity is impossible in practice in modern warfare. Indeed, Trzyna asks whether we can find any cases in which wars “have been prevented because the theory was applied and discussed.”

Surprisingly, Trzyna does not cast just war completely aside but proposes a reformulation of the theory. First of all, just war theory needs to define more clearly “what is worth fighting about.” Trzyna suggests that “the survival of the world’s core of peoples and values” might count. He also proposes that a new criterion be added requiring that a victorious nation restore a “defeated nation to autonomy, with its cultural identity intact, to the degree that such an identity can be reframed in pacifist terms,” as was done in Germany and Japan following World War II.

Trzyna does not reject the idea that there should be “small police or military powers” that are lightly armed and “sufficient to maintain a generally peaceful world.” Still, Trzyna believes that pacifists, rather than just war theorists, are blessed—and that the Beatitudes, which represent “the heart of Jesus’ teaching,” offer a “pacifist religious philosophy” and provide “a comprehensive, step-by-step argument for a way of life that can create peace.” Trzyna refuses to define pacifism negatively as an absolute refusal to use violence; instead, he portrays it as a reasonable and empirically effective method for preventing and resolving conflict. Drawing on the work of Gandhi’s “first disciple in the West,” Lanza del Vasto (1901-1981), Trzyna refers to the Beatitudes as “the manual” for living, a manual that “may be applied to any size of community” and does not entail separation from the world. Trzyna then proceeds to offer a meditation on each Beatitude, noting how it depicts a way of being in the world that involves putting into practice specific attitudes, dispositions and virtues, such as mercy, gentleness, humility, patience, imagination, honesty and “a willingness to suffer and sacrifice, ‘up to and including the sacrifice of life itself.’”

In Trzyna’s view, pacifism is not only congruent with the Beatitudes, it allows a person to live with integrity; only pacifism is “fully consistent” with Jesus’ teachings, and only pacifism is practical “because it is the only approach to violence that can succeed in the long run.” Pacifism ought to offer proactive practices for avoiding

conflict (Trzyna points to the work of Glen Stassen and others on “just peacemaking”), so that any armed conflict that does occur truly does meet the just war criterion of last resort.

Readers may find Trzyna’s short meditation befuddling in places. Although much of what he says parallels Yoder’s work, the book contains inaccuracies and lacks the nuance and careful analysis that characterized Yoder’s effort.

The Horrors We Bless, by Marquette University ethicist Daniel C. Maguire, is another nonacademic book aimed at a wide audience, and it deals with many of the same topics as Trzyna’s. A nonpacifist Catholic theologian, Maguire undertakes an examination of conscience on behalf of those who ascribe to the just war tradition, and in a balanced way (though with passion and, at times, indignation) he discusses the tradition’s weaknesses and strengths. He writes that Christianity has “succumbed to the supposed ‘normalcy of war’ and borrowed and baptized a set of principles and rules for war that came to be known as ‘the just-war theory,’” and that this has caused serious problems. We now wrongly assume that war is inevitable and part of the nature of things. Moreover, amid the “passions of war” and given “military necessity,” the so-called rules of war “tend to melt away,” and modern technologies, with “increased powers of obliteration,” make it difficult to adhere to the principle of noncombatant immunity.

Like Trzyna, Maguire worries about the bifurcation of moral identity and the dulling of the conscience that occurs when basic military training “is designed to train a nonviolent person into someone who is a willing killer of other people.” In addition, just war theory has often served as a rationalizing mask for justifying something that we are going to do anyway.

Although the just war tradition “has tended to be honored in word more than deed,” Maguire points out that it has had “some successes and can be used to limit and block wars.” He does not think the rules of just war theory should be jettisoned; instead, they ought to be updated, and we should “insist on their morally binding necessity.” The ancient saying applies: *abusus non tollit usum* (“Because something can be abused does not mean it cannot be intelligently used”). The just war criteria can function as “an obstacle to the facile resort to violence,” and they can place a “burden of proof on the heads of war-makers.”

The revisions Maguire has in mind include the assertions that just cause should include only defense of a nation or others who are under attack (preventive war is prohibited); that legitimate authority for the power to declare war should be returned to the legislative branch of government; that right intention should be gauged by how a nation concludes a war (the nation should restore a just peace postbellum); and that all of the criteria for just war should be satisfied. Maguire’s efforts here are a good example of seeking the just war theory with teeth that Yoder called for and respected.

Maguire proposes a third way of addressing political violence, “the best way of taming the demons of war and even bringing war to an end”: it is to extend what is done with policing within a nation to the international sphere, the community of nations. Although police sometimes use violent force, “they do so in a community context with legal and enforceable restrictions.” Maguire believes that the Charter of the United Nations enshrines the idea “that no war is ‘just’ unless the violence is patterned on police work.”

Unfortunately, Maguire fails to describe what just policing would look like. As cases of police brutality should remind us, not all policing is just. Any possible use of force in such an international police approach would still require the application of criteria that govern when and how force is justly used. The key difference would be that these criteria would have legally binding status. As Yoder noted, application of the rules governing just police use of force would be an exemplification of the just war tradition at its best.

In his concluding pages, Maguire advocates nonviolent peacemaking, which has its basis in the biblical teaching that “if you want peace you have to prepare it and build it,” addressing problems before they give rise to injustices. Maguire approvingly refers to the work of Walter Wink, which shows that Jesus modeled and taught nonviolent resistance to evil. He also praises Gandhi, King and Mandela for demonstrating the effective power of nonviolence, and he recommends the just peacemaking work of Stassen and others who are exploring alternatives to war.

Just Peacemaking, edited by Stassen, was originally published in 1992 and is now available in a second, slightly revised edition. It contains essays by 23 scholars from multiple disciplines who explore practices that have been empirically shown to be realistic and effective in preventing wars. In the new introduction to the volume, Stassen, Mennonite Duane K. Friesen and Jesuit John Langan propose that just peacemaking practices continue to be appropriate for preventing terrorism, which the authors regard as an international crime rather than an act of war. Contributors include pacifists and just war theorists who worry both about pacifism’s temptation to passivity and withdrawal and about just war theory’s toothlessness with regard to right intention and last resort.

Included among the ten practices for minimizing the likelihood of war are nonviolent direct action, cooperative conflict resolution, support for democracy and human rights, the encouragement of just and sustainable economic development, and the strengthening of the United Nations and other international efforts and institutions. Each chapter helpfully contains historical examples and contemporary cases, along with recommendations for how to apply the practices effectively.

Yoder wished that pacifists and just war theorists would devote less time to attacking each other and would instead “challenge the realists, crusaders, and rambos on their ‘right’ who in fact are shooting up the world.” This volume models what Yoder hoped for.

There is, however, one item about which disagreement lingered. A chapter written by Michael Joseph Smith, a professor of government and foreign affairs at the University of Virginia, calls for strengthening the UN by developing “the capacity to identify, prevent, and, if necessary, intervene in conflicts within and between states that threaten basic human rights,” such as in Rwanda or Darfur. Because the book focuses on prevention rather than justification and on practices rather than theory, Smith’s affirmation of humanitarian intervention was included even though, as the authors of the volume’s introduction admit, not everyone agreed with it.

The UN and the World Council of Churches now refer to humanitarian intervention as an exercise of the “responsibility to protect” that is primarily preventive in orientation, but allows for the use of force in a way that resembles just policing. Perhaps recent support for this emerging norm points a way forward. Yoder would certainly offer his trademark critiques of much of what is being done today by pacifists and just war theorists, but he would be pleased that Christians are beginning to be more honest about not only just war thinking but also the alternatives.