

The sin of smugness: A time for regret

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

I never expected *First Things* to give a theologically nuanced interpretation of the current U.S. war on terrorism, and it hasn't disappointed me. Its editor-in-chief, Father Richard Neuhaus, has yet to see a war for which he could not provide theological justification from the magnificent Catholic magisterium—despite what the pope says. Yet I have been astounded by the relentless, unanimous smugness that has characterized *First Things* since September 11. Everyone who writes for the journal is so sure that we are right, so certain of President Bush's sagacity, so damnably smug.

Though Jesus didn't condemn smugness as a sin, he should have.

Even if ours is so obviously a just war, whatever happened to the place of repentance in the execution of such a war? What of the pervasive sense of regret that pervades classical just war theology? It would be a great step forward for these just warriors to repent if not of war then of their lack of discomfort. For whatever good reasons they have felt forced to commend using destructive force against those for whom Jesus died. Is there no cause for regret?

Wisely, in their praise of the war, the writers in *First Things* make much of Augustine, pragmatism and utilitarianism—and scarcely mention Jesus.

At a recent conference at Messiah College on "Spirituality and Social Justice," in which a number of experts articulated the churches' doctrines on matters of justice, a young man rose out of his seat, shaking with emotion, virtually shouting about his experience in Israel's occupied territories. "I'm so frustrated! I've just returned from Jenin and seen there the devastation. I'm not sure what I or my church ought to do, but I know we ought to do something more than sit here and have discussions!"

I felt ashamed that I had lost such youthful frustration. I longed for some gospel-induced sense of disease. God forgive us our middle-aged numbness, our calloused

rationales, our informed complacency, our smugness.

One evening, in a dormitory Bible study group with students, we were taking apart Matthew 22, the passage about Jesus and Caesar's coin.

"Jesus, should we pay taxes to Caesar?" people ask.

Jesus says, "Who's got some of that coinage on him? My pockets are empty."

A coin is produced.

"Whose picture is on it?"

"Er, uh, Caesar's," the people say.

Jesus tells them, "Well, give it to him. But be careful. Don't give to Caesar that which belongs to God."

End of the lesson.

A student asks, "Did I miss something? He didn't answer the question! Should we pay taxes or not?"

"Yea," said another. "What's Caesar's and what's God's?"

There was widespread frustration with Jesus in the group. Finally, a student said something quite wise. "Perhaps," she said, "when it comes to what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, we never can be too sure. Maybe Jesus wants us to be permanently uneasy."

Permanently uneasy. That's not a bad theology of church and state. Pity Thomas Jefferson for not having the moral courage to release his slaves, even though he knew slavery was evil. Yet before he died, as he considered this peculiar institution, Jefferson said, "I tremble when I remember that God is just." At least Jefferson had the ethical insight to be able to tremble. Thank God that Abraham Lincoln learned enough backwoods Calvinism to admit, in his Second Inaugural Address, the ambiguity of even his righteous cause, the tragedy of violence, especially violence in the service of good. God save us from smugness.

A rabbi and I were talking about Jews and their participation in sports. "Basketball, baseball, just about everything except hunting," he noted.

“Why not hunting?” I asked.

“Jews don’t hunt,” he said authoritatively. “We are permitted to kill animals, but never for joy, never out of pleasure. We can kill only with regret.”

Regret? Isn’t that a bit weak to serve as a basis for morality?

“Don’t knock regret,” said the rabbi. “It’s tragedy’s cousin. There are some things that are not so much right or wrong as deeply, unavoidably, regrettable.”

I’ve come to see the rabbi’s wisdom. Don’t knock regret. In a context in which nine out of ten Americans are able, without a twinge of regret, to march forth with banners flying and flags unfurled in righteous indignation to once again fight the war to end all war, where we can urbanely cite some normative doctrine as our justification and then roll over and go back to sleep, God grant us someone who, in the words of that sophomore, has the grace to be “permanently uneasy” about the injustice that infects our earnest efforts to work justice—about, in short, our sin.

Just this past Sunday, after I had preached, someone emerged from our chapel mumbling, “I didn’t get all that you said, but I got enough to be ticked off.”

I replied, “Good.”

Too smug? Mea culpa.