

## CHAPTER 3

# Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and Just War Theory A Critique

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This chapter examines how Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism departs in fundamental and profound ways from the classical just war tradition and explains why this matters. In short, Niebuhrian realism proceeds from a liberal theology that rejects much of the theological and philosophical orthodoxy associated with the broad natural law tradition and its progeny just war theory, resulting in a worldview far different from that of early "Christian realists" like Augustine and Aquinas.

For brevity's sake, this paper defines "classical" or "traditional" just war theory as a theological-philosophical trajectory that runs from Ambrose and Augustine through medieval developments summarized by Aquinas, then reaffirmed by Calvin and the early modern just war theorists, such as Grotius, Vitoria, and Suarez. Contemporary proponents of classical just war theory include Paul Ramsey (who revived the tradition among Protestants following World War II), James Turner Johnson (Ramsey's student), Oliver O'Donovan, George Weigel, and more recently Darrell Cole.

An obvious question is whether this classical just war tradition, contrasted here against Niebuhr's Christian realism, is not also a form of Christian realism. The answer is "yes." Few would object to classifying two millennia of reflection as broadly "Christian realist" if what is meant is "not pacifist," if it takes seriously the Christian doctrine of original sin, and if it declares the inevitable influence of human fallenness in political life and international affairs. Indeed,

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Niebuhr realism shares with older Christian realisms—notably the just war tradition—concerns about power, justice, and the law of love in this world. However, while classical (Augustinian-Thomistic-Calvinistic) and Niebuhr realism forms of Christian realism share a rejection of Christian pacifism of all varieties (with the exception of individual “vocational” pacifism), they differ so profoundly on fundamental issues of moral theology and political morality that one might wonder if the broad label “Christian realism” obscures more than it reveals. Perhaps it is more accurate to speak of two rival forms of Christian realism, one of which can be fairly labeled “classical” or “traditional” (just war) and the other Niebuhr realism. This essay explores three major weaknesses of Niebuhr realism when applied to the use of force: its pacifistic theological foundations, its dissolution of noncombatant immunity (*jus in bello*), and its overrestrictiveness when employing force (*jus ad bellum*) across the entire spectrum of conflict.

### Christian Realists on Pacifism

#### *Niebuhr Realism and Pacifism: Shared Assumptions*

Niebuhr rejected the Christian just war tradition and did so explicitly as part of a polemic against Roman Catholic natural law doctrine. This was largely because Niebuhr’s own intellectual roots were firmly planted in the soil of theological liberalism. He took the classical doctrines of the Christian faith and reinterpreted them as allegories of the human condition. Of course, Niebuhr is famous for his rejection of the “idealism” associated with the Social Gospel, but he rejected its utopian expectations, not its progressive objectives. In fact, Niebuhr never left that side of the political spectrum in American politics, and he remained skeptical of orthodoxy and derisive of “biblical literalism” throughout his life. He wrote, “The biblical symbols cannot be taken literally because it is not possible for finite minds to comprehend that which transcends and fulfills history. . . . The symbols, which point towards the consummation within the temporal flux, cannot be exact in the scientific sense of the word.”<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr’s rejection of classical just war thinking reflected part of his departure from a more traditional Christian realism grounded in natural law. At a superficial level, Niebuhr seemed to be aligned with classical just war theory due to his rejection of pacifism. However, the difference between Niebuhr and that broader classical tradition is evident, not so much in the rejection of pacifism *per se*, but rather in the form of that rejection. The point worth noting here is that although Niebuhr rejected the optimistic liberal pacifism of his early years, he nevertheless simply accepted the biblical exegetical

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premise of the liberal pacifist. That is, Niebuhr simply accepted the liberal Protestant (pacifist) understanding of the Sermon on the Mount, namely, that Jesus radically denounced all resort to force violence and coercion and expected his disciples to follow his example. For the Christian pacifist, the teaching and example of Jesus precludes Christians from the profession of arms and from participation in war. Niebuhr and his disciples conceded that the Gospel ethic, or the ethic of Jesus, is a pure ethic of love and nonviolence, but concluded that the perfect morality modeled by Jesus (and expected of his disciples) is not practical in human society and thus must be moderated by a pragmatic or realistic ethic of responsibility that requires a choice of lesser or necessary evils on behalf of the community.

Niebuhr's critique of pacifism is set forth in "Why the Church Is Not Pacifist." Originally published in 1939, Niebuhr's thesis is that "the refusal of the Christian Church to espouse pacifism is not apostasy and that most modern forms of pacifism are heresy."<sup>2</sup> The heretical form of pacifism was held by his liberal Protestant contemporaries, who have "reinterpreted the Christian Gospel in terms of the Renaissance faith in man. Modern pacifism is merely a final fruit of this Renaissance spirit, which has pervaded the whole of modern Protestantism. We have interpreted world history as a gradual ascent to the Kingdom of God which waits for the final triumph only upon the willingness of Christians 'to take Christ seriously.'"<sup>3</sup>

The nonheretical form was what Niebuhr identified historically as exemplified in medieval ascetic perfectionism and in "Protestant sectarian perfectionism." In these forms, "the effort to achieve a standard of perfect love in individual life was not presented as a political alternative. On the contrary, the political problem and task were specifically disavowed." Instead, "it was content to set up the most perfect and unselfish individual life as a symbol of the Kingdom of God."<sup>4</sup>

Niebuhr seems to have been referring to what may be called individual "vocational" pacifism, which is not heretical because it does not call upon all Christians or the entire church to embody the ideal of pacifism. However much that may have been the case with "medieval ascetic perfectionism," it reflects a serious misunderstanding of historic Mennonite Christian pacifism.

Niebuhr here is referring to the type of historic Christian pacifism as reflected in the Schleithem Articles of 1527,<sup>5</sup> which are widely regarded as the theological consolidation of Anabaptist pacifism. The authors declared, "We are agreed as follows concerning the sword: The sword is ordained of God *outside the perfection of Christ*. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law the sword was ordained for the punishment of the wicked and for their death, and the same [sword] is [now] ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates."

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Here it is worth noting that the classical pacifist rejection of the profession of soldiering, or armed police work, goes hand in glove with the rejection of political authority for Christians, more generally.

[I]t will be asked concerning the sword, Shall one be a magistrate if one should be chosen as such? The answer is as follows: They wished to make Christ king, but He fled and did not view it as the arrangement of His Father. Thus shall we do as He did, and follow Him, and so shall we not walk in darkness. . . . Also Peter says, Christ has suffered (not ruled) and left us an example, that ye should follow His steps. . . .

Finally, it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christian's is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christian's are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christian's citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christian's weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God.

This form of Christian pacifism is not a heresy, says Niebuhr, because "it is a reminder to the Christian community that the relative norms of social justice, which justify both coercion and resistance to coercion, are not final norms, and that Christians are in constant peril of forgetting their relative and tentative character and of making them too completely normative."<sup>6</sup> But that says more about Niebuhr than it does about how the early Mennonites or the "peace churches," more generally, justified their pacifism. Having not been instructed in the finer points of twentieth century dialectical theology, these early pacifists justified their dualism by a direct appeal to the life and teachings of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus, as they understood them, were taken as normative and therefore required faithful disciples of Jesus to forgo both the sword and political office. Strictly speaking, this was not "vocational" pacifism, for they were indeed calling all believers and the entire church to embody the ideal of pacifism.<sup>7</sup>

The point worth emphasizing is that Niebuhr seems to think these pacifists were right in their biblical interpretation and understanding. "It is," says Niebuhr, "very foolish to deny that the ethic of Jesus is an absolute and uncompromising ethic." The injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount are all (and here he quotes, approvingly, Ernst Troeltsch) "uncompromising and absolute."

Nothing is more futile and pathetic than the effort of some Christian theologians who find it necessary to become involved in the relativities of politics, in resistance to tyranny or in social conflict, to justify themselves by seeking to

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prove that Christ was also involved in these relativities, that he used whips to drive the money-changers out of the Temple, or that he came “not to bring peace but a sword,” or that he asked the disciples to sell a cloak and buy a sword. What could be more futile than to build a whole ethical structure upon the exegetical issue whether Jesus accepted the sword with the words: “It is enough” or whether he really meant: “Enough of this?”<sup>8</sup>

Niebuhr is partially on to something here. Exegetical attempts by liberal protestants to legitimate Christian political participation and to justify the use of force from these passages is, indeed, rather futile and pathetic. But the target of this passage is a straw man (as were so many of Niebuhr’s polemical assaults on Thomists, Lutherans, Calvinists, and sectarian Protestants). The classical Christian tradition, which Niebuhr all too often held in contempt, had far greater exegetical and theological recourses at its disposal.

But still, Niebuhr and Niebuhrian realists are determined to repudiate the Christian pacifist’s “absolutism” and his refusal to “get his hands dirty.” So, somehow Niebuhr must figure how to compromise and relativize the “uncompromising and absolute” ethic of Jesus. He does so in a manner entirely consonant with his dialectical theology, by elevating that ethic to an impossible and transcendent ideal: “Those of us who regard the ethic of Jesus as finally and ultimately normative, but not as immediately applicable to the task of securing justice in a sinful world, are very foolish if we try to reduce the ethic so that it will cover and justify our prudential and relative standards and strategies.”<sup>9</sup>

To act “responsibly,” the Christian must be willing to engage in what, according to “the ethic of Jesus,” would otherwise be considered vicious or blameworthy acts for the good of the community. Not to put too fine a point on it, because he accepts the pacifist interpretation of the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount, Christians become obliged to do evil (as understood by the ethic of Jesus) so that good may come. Christian support for the political application of lethal force, or the resort to war, may be a *necessary* evil, or it may be a *lesser* evil, but still Christians are expected to do evil so that good may come.

It is here that the modern Niebuhrian form of realism most obviously disents from the classical form of Christian realism embodied in traditional just war theory. The classical just war tradition shares with the pacifist the belief that if Jesus condemns an action as vicious and otherwise prohibits his disciples from engaging in that action, or if Holy Scripture more generally prohibits an action, then Christians are obligated to refrain from that action. The classical Christian just war tradition agrees with Christian pacifists in their insistence that Christians ought not do evil so that good may come.

In this most fundamental issue, Niebuhr’s exegetical strategy repudiates the interpretation of both classical Christian just war teaching and historic

Christian pacifism. Classical Christian just war theologians all explicitly reject the notion that the Sermon on the Mount embodied an “ideal ethic” for the Christian, insisting that Jesus intended to restrain personal or private vengeance, not to restrain the just employment of *political* force, which to the contrary, is understood as an agent of his Father’s wrath and love (always citing the Pauline biblical text of Romans 13:1–7 as the *locus classicus*). Even the pacifists of the *Schleitheim* Confession believed that the sword is ordained by God, albeit “outside the perfection of Christ.” The difference between this “sectarian” or “perfectionistic” pacifism and that of the magisterial Reformers was over whether a Christian could legitimately hold the office of soldier or exercise coercive political authority more generally and still be a faithful and obedient Christian. Classical Christian realism explicitly rejected the pacifist implication that the profession of soldiering is intrinsically evil or that fighting a just war is a lesser or necessary evil. To the contrary, for the classical Christian tradition, *failure* to employ discriminate and proportionate force, including lethal force, when required by demands of justice motivated by charity is blameworthy (or vicious) while the decision to fight in a just war is praiseworthy (or virtuous).

In dispensing with the classical just war tradition, Niebuhr seemed to believe that he was rejecting a political dogma unique to Roman Catholicism and specific to natural law doctrine. However, Niebuhr was actually jettisoning a far broader tradition of reflection on political authority, the use of force, and the ethics of war. Thus, in his classic book *We Hold These Truths*, John Courtney Murray captured nicely the extent to which Niebuhr’s own brand of anti-pacifism was an intramural fight among American liberal Protestants and, more importantly, highlighted the central issue at stake between Niebuhr’s realism and more traditional Christian thinking about force and political responsibility. The “old” Protestant morality, says Murray—referring to the social gospel liberalism against which Niebuhr infamously rebelled—wrongly equated personal with political ethics and therefore applied the simple commands of Jesus, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, to the different world of national and international decision making. Murray shared this criticism of the “old” morality with Niebuhr. But Murray then turned his attack on the “new” Protestant moralist, what Murray labeled “ambiguist.” While Murray does not mention him by name, he unmistakably has Niebuhr in particular and the Niebuhrian realists in general in his sights. Having shattered the simplistic illusions of the “old” morality, they have left a moral vacuum: “Against the absolutism of the old morality, in which the contingent facts got lost under insistence on the absolute precept, the new morality moves toward a situationalism, in which the absoluteness of principle tends to get lost

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amid the contingencies of fact. . . . Whereas the old morality saw things as so simple that moral judgment was always easy, the new morality sees things as so complicated that moral judgment becomes practically impossible.”<sup>10</sup>

In arguing against Niebuhr’s “theoretically false dilemmas” in favor of an understanding of the political order as having distinctive purposes and methods, Murray was not merely situating himself within a narrowly construed, specifically Catholic doctrine of natural law, but also solidly within a broader Catholic and Protestant political theology on political responsibility and the use of force. He knew that both theologically and philosophically, Niebuhr had radically departed from that tradition, as much as had the “older” tradition of liberal Social Gospel Protestantism.

### *The Classical Just War Critique of Pacifism*

While it would be impossible to survey the entire range of the just war/classical realist position, it will be helpful to summarize a few representative views. As Darrell Cole notes, “Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, Ambrose, and Augustine,” to name just four very early Christian theologians, defended the just use of force unequivocally. Their various “defenses”—especially Augustine’s—were the genesis of the Christian just war doctrine, a doctrine that insists that war can be the sort of thing Christians ought to support. Most important, according to Cole, “none of these early Christian approaches to war treated it as a necessary evil. Each held that the person who used just force was acting in a way consonant with God’s wishes and was, though in a way less praiseworthy than bishops and clerics, following Christ. The just soldier’s acts in war were thus thought to be positively good acts—acts that would shape him into the kind of person fit for beatitude with God.”<sup>11</sup>

For Saint Augustine, the decision to go to war is never a decision between two evils. Hence, in *Contra Faustum* 22.74, Saint Augustine famously asks, “What is the evil in war?” He responds by rejecting the notion that war’s evil is “the death of some who will soon die in any case,” adding that “this is mere cowardly dislike, not any religious feeling.” The real evil of war lies in any evil intent of the warriors or of the political authorities who wage war: “love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable hatred of the enemy, wild resistance, the lust of power, and such like.” But Augustine immediately adds that “it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some lawful authority, *good men* undertake wars, when they find themselves in such a position as regards the conduct of human affairs that *right conduct* requires them to act, or to make others act in this way.”

When Thomas Aquinas discusses just war in the *Summa Theologiae* (II-II.40), he does not do so in the section on justice, but rather in the section on charity—specifically, the love of God. He makes it clear that war is not necessarily a vice that is opposed to the love of God. On the contrary, warmaking, when just, can be a form of love. The short answer to his question, “Whether it is always sinful to wage war?” is “no.” In agreement with just war theorists before and after him, Aquinas moves from the responsibility of political authorities to guard the peace domestically to their responsibility to protect the commonwealth from external threats. Concerning the former, Aquinas stressed the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. In discussing the New Law and its relationship to the Old Law, he says, “[T]he intention of the [Old] Law was that retaliation should be sought out of the love of justice . . . and this remains still in the New Law.” Moreover, in his discussion of Paul’s advice to the Romans concerning the governing authorities (Romans 13:1–7), Aquinas insists that it is not merely allowable but positively “meritorious for princes to exercise vindication of justice with zeal against evil people.” Finally, Aquinas argued that it is both “praiseworthy and advantageous” for someone in proper authority to kill a person dangerous to the community. Therefore, it is not at all surprising to find that Aquinas argued that protecting the commonwealth from foreign threats is not intrinsically sinful, and then set forth the criteria required to justly wage war: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention.

John Calvin was even more explicit with regard to the obligations (not mere permission) of the civil authority (what he called, in the language of the day, the “civil magistrate”). While “the law of the Lord forbids killing,” Calvin observed, in order “that murderers may not go unpunished, the Lawgiver himself puts into the hands of his ministers a sword to be drawn against all murderers. . . .” Citing several biblical examples, Calvin argued that since the “true righteousness” of the civil magistrate is “to pursue the guilty and the impious with drawn sword,” then if magistrates should rather “sheathe their sword and keep their hands clean of blood, while [in a passage most relevant to contemporary terrorism] abandoned men wickedly range about with slaughter and massacre, they will become guilty of the greatest impiety. . . .” Calvin is most pointed here because he is directly confronting the challenge of the early Anabaptists. But this view is not narrowly Calvinist or “Reformed,” for Calvin is simply summarizing the Christian consensus that a virtuous statesman is obligated to use force not as a necessary or lesser evil, but as a positive obligation. To *refrain* from using proportionate and discriminate force in defense of justice, order and peace is to act impiously (or viciously). For Calvin (and here he is simply rearticulating the tradition), soldiering is a holy



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vocation, and to reprove this vocation is to blaspheme God. The chasm between Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, on the one hand, and the consequentialism or proportionalism of Niebuhr and his modern disciples is therefore quite profound, although it may appear seemingly superficial because of their mutual rejection of pacifism.

### “Dirty Hands” Niebuhrian Realism and Noncombatant Immunity

In large measure, the revival of the just war theory following the Second World War was a reaction to the failure of Niebuhrian realism to address what in just war terms is referred to as *jus in bello* criteria of noncombatant immunity or the principle of discrimination. Both the *jus in bello* and international law, which had implicitly relied upon the just war tradition, expressly prohibited the direct and intentional targeting of noncombatants. This convention was explicitly challenged by the Allied strategy of terror bombing or obliteration bombing of German cities, which commenced early and continued throughout the war. But the most notable protest during the war came from a Jesuit priest, a natural law exponent of just war theory, John C. Ford, in an essay titled “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing.”<sup>12</sup> However, as Michael Walzer recently commented, “Inside the government [both American and British], there seemed to be a ban on moral talk: there’s no one here but us realists!” The debate over whether the goal of the Allies should be to kill as many German civilians as possible, so as to demoralize the enemy and shut down the economy, or whether their planes should aim only at military targets, was conducted entirely in the language of strategy. “The idea that civilians were innocent men and women, immune from direct attack, was never mentioned. Instead, the questions posed were radically ‘realistic.’”<sup>13</sup>

Recovering the earlier just war emphasis on *jus in bello* would be central to Paul Ramsey’s project, but Niebuhrian realism would also be challenged on this score by Catholic philosopher and theologian Elizabeth Anscombe. The distinction between Niebuhr’s realism and traditional just war doctrine is most evident in her classic article “Mr. Truman’s Degree.”<sup>14</sup>

Anscombe begins with a standard natural law description of the prohibition against killing the innocent (e.g., murder): “For me to choose to kill the innocent as a means to my ends is always murder, and murder is one of the worst of human actions. So the prohibition on deliberately killing prisoners of war or the civilian population is not like the Queensberry Rules: its force does not depend on its promulgation as part of positive law, written down, agreed upon, and adhered to by the parties concerned.”<sup>15</sup>

She then proceeds to denounce the contemporary tendency to obliterate the distinction between “killing” in war and “murder,” stating famously, “It is characteristic nowadays to talk with horror of killing rather than of murder, and hence, since in war you have committed yourself to killing—for example, ‘accepted an evil’—not to mind whom you kill. This seems largely to be the work of the devil.”<sup>16</sup>

But, of course, Anscombe is not dodging responsibility with the caveat “the devil made me do it.” Rather, Anscombe immediately sets her sights on *pacifist* arguments. This might seem odd at first glance, since her aim is to repudiate the “realist” defense of the direct and intentional attacks on civilians. However, pacifists, she argues, share much of the blame. “I also suspect that it is in part an effect of the existence of pacifism, as a doctrine which many people respect though they would not adopt it. This effect would not exist if people had a distinct notion of what makes pacifism a false doctrine,” she wrote.<sup>17</sup>

For Anscombe, the just warrior’s denunciation of the obliteration bombing campaign in Germany and her protest against the nuclear attacks on civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki against realist defenders (Christian or otherwise) goes hand in glove with a philosophical (e.g., natural law) and biblical-exegetical critique of pacifism. Anscombe warns us that those who reject pacifism for the wrong reason, whether out of a desire to dabble in international relations, foreign policy, and *realpolitik*, or perhaps out of an empirical realization that something had to be done to stop Hitler (the 1930s version of being “mugged by reality”), do not necessarily resort to the distinctions required by just war and natural law, but inevitably resort to some form of consequentialism or realism. Both the pacifist and the realist tend to reduce killing in war to the moral equivalent of murder. The pacifist considers all killing in war to be murder and against the requirements of the ethic of Jesus. The difference is that the pacifist wants to draw from it the conclusion that you should never kill, while the realist wants to draw from it the conclusion that sometimes you should regard yourself as being forced to murder. You have to get your hands dirty. But if your hands are dirty already, having been forced to kill, then why be concerned about traditional distinctions between combatants and noncombatants, especially if killing civilians might end the horror of war much more quickly and perhaps “save civilization” to boot?

Perhaps the *reductio ad absurdum* of this sort of “dirty hands realism” is the infamous statement of Curtis LeMay in defense of the terror bombing of Tokyo: “Killing Japanese didn’t bother me very much at that time. . . . I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal. . . . Every soldier thinks something of the moral aspects of what he is doing. But all war is immoral, and if you let that bother you, you’re not a good soldier.”

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Niebuhrians will no doubt object to being identified with these sentiments. Nevertheless, it is telling that, contrary to the rather profound reflections of Catholic natural law thinkers Ford and Anscombe, Niebuhr could only muster the following reflection on the obliteration bombing campaign: "It is not possible to defeat a foe without causing innocent people to suffer with the guilty," he wrote. "It is not possible to engage in any act of collective opposition to collective evil without involving the innocent with the guilty. It is not possible to move in history without becoming tainted with guilt."<sup>18</sup>

This is precisely the "ambiguist" style of argumentation that Murray and Anscombe found so objectionable. As Darrell Cole observes, the problem from the classical just war perspective is not with the first two sentences. The just warrior knows that innocent people will suffer in even the most justly fought war, both because of unintended harm and because some soldiers, even in a just cause, will act viciously and harm noncombatants. That is why no war should be entered into lightly and why the resort to force needs to be justified (*jus ad bellum*). The just warrior's problem is with the third sentence. Cole calls attention to the regressive logic of what he calls "dirty hands thinking" and is worth quoting at length:

Those responsible for the decision to fight in a just war and those who fight virtuously in war do not become necessarily tainted with guilt (i.e., there is nothing inherently evil about deciding to fight in a war or about fighting in war). Such virtuous people know that innocent people will suffer, but they do not intend this suffering and the success of their war-fighting plans are not in any way dependent upon the suffering of innocent people. The vicious persons responsible for the war are the ones necessarily tainted with guilt, as are those who, though fighting on the just side, fight unjustly. The Allies of World War II, for example, were not guilty of any suffering caused to the innocent people of Europe as long as they did not behave viciously in battle, that is to say, so long as they approximated the *jus in bello* as best they could. The Nazis were responsible for the suffering of the innocent people caught in a battlefield created by the Nazis, except of course the suffering caused by the Allies when they engaged in vicious practices like saturation bombing. The trouble is that, as soon as we start wringing our hands with self-imposed guilt, our own evil actions may follow . . . once we begin to believe we are acting viciously by the very nature of the case, then the temptation becomes to be a little more vicious and guarantee victory. Dirty hands thinking tells us that we have already crossed a moral threshold in fighting a war to begin with, and once having crossed that threshold, we may be tempted to make sure that it was worth it and guaranteed victory.<sup>19</sup>

One of Murray's criticisms of Niebuhr's realism was that it collapsed into a form of "situationalism." The problem is that Niebuhr habitually analyzed

moral-political problems by recourse to the most general of considerations, such as the law of sacrificial love and the realities of sinfulness. Cole asks us to recall that a central tenet of Niebuhr's realism, contrary to Social Gospel liberalism, is that the life and work of Jesus do not offer us a social ethic; it was not, per Rauschenbusch and other liberal Protestants, a "simple possibility." Niebuhr argues that the ethic of Jesus was a personal ethic or individual ethic since Jesus meant to change the quality of the individual's life. Jesus offers us a pure ethic of love, an ethic too pure to be realized in this life, but an ideal toward which we must strive if we hope to act well.<sup>20</sup> This personal ethic of love is in need of a social ethic, because human beings don't love each other but themselves.

To the question, "Why does the Christian seek justice?" Niebuhr replies that love is the reason we seek earthly justice. While the Christian must admit that ethic of love taught by Jesus is an impossible ideal, the ideal is still essential if we want to achieve the worthwhile mundane goals of earthly justice. Moreover, human beings are not completely corrupted by self-interest, for they retain the law of love (or the law of our being), which is boundless self-giving. Between these two forces we formulate "ad hoc restraints," and this we can call natural law. The goal of law is justice, yet justice is related to love in that the law is both "an approximation of the law of love" and "an instrument of love."<sup>21</sup>

So, observes Cole, "Niebuhr's logic seems to lead us to claim that vicious acts in war [e.g., the direct and intentional targeting of innocent civilians] are sometimes needed to get the job done, but when we do such things, we do them out of love. In other words, Jesus' ethic of love impels us to do vicious things. There is something wrong about this." And Cole calls our attention to Timothy Luke Jackson's characterization of this logic as one in which love "claiming to transcend justice, actually falls below it in embracing too violent means for political ends."<sup>22</sup> Here, finally, the contrast between Niebuhr's realism and the just war tradition is most stark. For the just warrior, some vicious acts, such as deliberately and willfully killing innocent people, even in war, cannot be ascribed to anything like Jesus' ethic of love or as a "loving" act.

### Niebuhrian Realism and *Jus Ad Bellum*

In large measure, it was the failure of Niebuhrian realism to address adequately the moral issues related to the *jus in bello* principle of noncombatant immunity that led to a revival of serious and sustained reflection on just war in the latter half of the twentieth century. Just as Niebuhrian realism tended to loosen restrictions on the *jus in bello* principle of noncombatant immunity,

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it has also been in large measure responsible for the conceptual problems and historical distortions associated with understanding just war theory as a form of cryptopacifism or as reflecting a so-called “presumption against force.” I want to suggest that the Niebuhrian realist, to the extent that the resort to force is understood as a “controlled exception to pacifism,” has contributed to the tendency in recent years to proliferate the “criteria” for the legitimate resort to force. The problem with regard to the *jus ad bellum* tends to be the precise opposite of the problem with the *jus in bello*. While the Niebuhrian realist tends to lower the moral bar where the just war tradition has set it high, the realist tends to render moralistic and restrictive what the *jus ad bellum* considers matters of political prudence.

The contemporary debate among Christian moral theologians and philosophers over whether the just war tradition incorporates a “presumption against violence,” on the one hand, or whether it reflects a presumption for justice, on the other, can be understood as a debate between modern Niebuhrian Christian realists who, with no little irony, align themselves with neo-Anabaptist pacifists such as John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauer was against more traditional moral theologians who embrace the classical tradition. Modern Christian realists, at least to the extent that they follow Niebuhr’s lead, seem compelled to understand the resort to force as a controlled exception to general pacifism. And the neo-Anabaptist pacifists have found, despite their deep theological disagreements, common cause with Niebuhrian realists on the general prohibition against the use of force by Christians. The convergence of the neo-Anabaptists and the Christian realists on this point, despite their profound disagreements and sharp polemics, is perfectly understandable upon deeper reflection. Both share the belief that the life and teaching of Jesus require all Christians—the entire church—to be pacifists. The difference is that modern neo-Anabaptists are less willing than the Christian realists to compromise and do evil so that good may come. The difficulty becomes prominent when the neo-Anabaptists and the Christian realists together try to construct a “just war theory” generated out of a “presumption against violence.”

The notion that just war theory grew out of a presumption against violence has had a profound influence on much of modern ecclesiastical and academic writing on issues of war and peace, from the Catholic bishops who embraced the idea in large measure as a compromise between Roman Catholic pacifists and just war traditionalists in their pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*, to the frequent and entirely predictable functional pacifist statements of mainline Protestantism, to a narrow but influential swath of American evangelical Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

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Classical Christian just warriors, on the other hand, continue to insist that historically, just war theory did not arise out of nonviolent assumptions but out of assumptions of justice; more pointedly, out of the normative requirement that political authorities are responsible for justice. Contrary to the assertions on many contemporary pacifists, Darrell Cole insists rightly that assumptions of nonviolence have nothing to do with the genesis of Christian just war theory:

Christian pacifists, of course, think that just war theory developed precisely because early Christians had to figure out a way to harmonize their nonviolent assumptions with the desire to aid their neighbors with acts of force. This is factually wrong. Pacifists cannot point to a single Church Father who helped develop the Christian just war doctrine out of “nonviolent assumptions.” On the contrary, just war theory arose out of assumptions of justice and the virtue of charity. Assumptions of nonviolence had nothing to do with the genesis of Christian just war theory.<sup>24</sup>

The great theologians of the Christian church such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin did not begin with a “presumption against war” but rather with a *presumption against injustice*, focused on the need for *political authority* to employ the responsible use of force to confront wrongdoing. Indeed, the criteria classified under *jus ad bellum* does nothing else than specify the terms under which those in political power are authorized to resort to force.<sup>25</sup>

But the problem with the presumption-against-war position or an understanding of the just war tradition as a controlled exception to pacifism is not merely historical. More important, it introduces a certain perverse logic into moral reflection on the use of military force, a perversity that helps account for the irrelevance of most recent academic and ecclesiastical teaching on the ethics of war. How does this happen? The resort to military force in the just war tradition has historically come to be defined through the following moral concepts: just cause, competent authority, right intention, reasonable hope of success, last resort, the goal of peace, and overall proportionality of good over harm. However, both historically and in terms of the inner logic of the just war idea, the criteria are not all of equal importance. Just cause, competent authority, and right intention, the “criteria” mentioned by Saint Thomas and drawn from Saint Augustine, have priority because they are immediately oriented to the fundamental political goods of justice, order, and peace. The remaining concerns (and the criteria often tend to proliferate)—last resort, proportionality, reasonable chance for success, and the prospects for peace—must be taken seriously; but being prudential tests, they are, as James Turner Johnson says, “of a qualitatively different character from the deontological

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criteria”<sup>26</sup> of the first three criteria. Contemporary writers advancing the presumption-against-war position, however, tend to invert these priorities so that prudential criteria such as last resort (probably the least helpful of the criteria) are presented as being at the center of the tradition.

To draw attention to this inversion of priorities is no mere splitting of academic hairs. By inverting the logical priority of the criteria, the presumption-against-war interpretation of the tradition ends up presenting just war as a jumbled collection of abstract moral ideals, or a “checklist” of pacifist-inspired requirements utterly disconnected from political and military judgment. Both historically and conceptually, however, the just war approach to the use of force is already in dialogue with the spheres of statecraft and military expertise. Indeed, just war reasoning belongs to, and properly resides with, military commanders and statesmen considering the use of force, not academics, activists, and certainly not ecclesiastical bureaucrats. In short, if the mere use of military force is conceived in the first instance as the “problem” (or the evil) to which avoidance is the preferred solution, then just war reasoning is reduced to little more than a moralistic checklist, or a set of hurdles that the “ethicists” put before the statesman, imported from the outside, as it were, from a realm external to the task of statecraft.

However, in almost every instance, the responsibility to make prudential judgments as to whether a military operation will be successful (the criterion of reasonable chance for success) or will result in greater good than harm (the principle of proportionality) rests with those who have the political authority and competence to render such judgments. This normally does not include bishops, theologians, and professors, who are no more competent on these questions than the average citizen, and usually less so. It is the disorienting inversion of logical priorities in the presumption-against-war teaching that explains why, in recent years, we confront the maddening spectacle of theologians who know virtually nothing about military strategy, force structure, and weapons capability holding forth confidently on the likely or unlikely success of a potential military operation. It accounts for the frequently heard assertion that pacifists and just warriors share a common commitment to military force as a “last resort,” the only purported difference being that pacifists believe a last resort is never reached—as if that were a minor difference. It also explains how it can be that so many intellectuals can support the use of force in theory, but also always oppose it in practice.

Now, it is the case that modern Niebuhrians realists will, while modern Christian pacifists will not, justify exceptions to pacifist-generated strictures against the use of force. But because the moral baseline is pacifist, the exception to which is conceded to be sinful or evil, the bar for the permissible use

of force tends to get raised to an almost impossible level. Hence, in the section of Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* devoted to the deficiencies of Catholic just war theory and natural law, one looks in vain for a careful consideration of just resort to force. However, we do get this comment: "The very same war which fails to yield an absolutely clear sense of 'justice' *may yet concern itself with the very life and death of civilizations and cultures*. Men do have to make important decisions in history upon the basis of certain norms, even though they must recognize that all historic norms are touched with both finiteness and sin; and that their sinfulness consists precisely in the bogus claim of finality which is made for them."<sup>27</sup>

Niebuhr, the former pacifist, came to justify the resort to war because the very life and death of civilization was at stake. We should be thankful for this, but it raises innumerable questions related to the just use of force across what the military calls the entire "spectrum of conflict," including issues related to the first use of force, military intervention for humanitarian reasons, counterinsurgency operations against nonstate actors, and every other potential use of military force short of the survival of "civilizations and cultures." Niebuhrian realism is too ambiguous to prove much help on this score.

Finally, Darrell Cole has called our attention to a feature of the classical just war tradition that distinguishes it from Niebuhrian realist and pacifist views alike: that a failure to engage in a just war is a failure of virtue, a failure to act well.

An odd corollary of this conclusion is that it is a greater evil for Christians to fail to wage a just war than it is for unbelievers. When an unbeliever fails to go to war, the cause may be a lack of courage, prudence, or justice. He may be a coward or simply indifferent to evil. These are failures of natural moral virtue. When Christians (at least in the tradition of Aquinas and Calvin) fail to engage in just war, it may involve all of these natural failures as well, but it will also, and more significantly, involve a failure of charity. The Christian who fails to use force to aid his neighbor when prudence dictates that force is the best way to render that aid is an uncharitable Christian. Hence, Christians who willingly and knowingly refuse to engage in a just war do a vicious thing: they fail to show love toward their neighbor as well as toward God.<sup>28</sup>

Failure to engage in a just war is to act viciously. To fight a just war justly is an act of charity. Failure to fight it justly, by directly and intentionally attacking innocents, is to act viciously. Niebuhrian Christian realism is deficient to the extent that it is unable to make these moral distinctions or mitigate them under a cloud of ambiguity.



## Conclusion

Classical just war theory is Christian and realistic. This venerable tradition has provided policy guidance to political and religious leaders for nearly two millennia and is founded on a moral view of human affairs that is also deeply conscious of the necessary prudential judgments that come with political and military responsibility. Hence, classical Christian realism asserts that there are times to employ violence in this world, but that such activities should be limited within the strictures laid out in the just war tradition. In contrast, Niebuhrian realism is rooted in the shallow soil of theological liberalism and therefore lacks an adequate worldview to provide a robust alternative to pacifism, guide the decision to engage military force (*jus ad bellum*), or limit the use of violence during conflict (*jus in bello*). What is needed today in facing the security threats associated with apocalyptic terrorism, powerful nonstate actors, and outlaw regimes is a robust theologically grounded Christian realism that is not quasi-pacifistic, but which utilizes rather the resources of the classical tradition in thoughtful policies working toward greater security and peace.

## Notes

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: Scribner, 1943), 289. Niebuhr's hostility to "biblical literalism" extended beyond a mere critique of Christian fundamentalism. Numerous critics have observed that Niebuhr's major work in systematic theology, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* was really an exercise in applied anthropology and that all the great doctrines of the Christian tradition get transformed into saying something about human nature or human hope. This was a consistent criticism of Niebuhr from more conservative Protestants but also from his closer colleagues. For example, Niebuhr's biographer, Richard Fox, tells us that Niebuhr was none too pleased when several academic and religious reviewers of his book *Beyond Tragedy* (1937), including his Union Seminary friends and colleagues, questioned his reduction of orthodox classic Christian doctrines to the status of "myth." His Union Seminary colleague Joseph Haroutunian responded to an angry letter from Niebuhr by defending his charge that he was a Platonist:

I called you a Platonist because your God is primarily the ethical ideal which passes judgment upon us by its sheer unattainable excellence. The "tension" between the ideal and the real seems to me to be the essence of your religion. Your God does not perform miracles; never has and never will; hence to you the Incarnation and Resurrection of the dead are myths, not fantasies indeed (I never said so, nor made an "effort" to say so), and yet "trans-historical"—shall we say, unhistorical? Reiny, for truth's sake, tell me, just what do you do with Paul,

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Augustine, Luther, for whom sin and death, *together* were what Christ saved us from? . . . Yours is a truncated Christianity, one that pushes aside the cry of the human heart for life with God in eternity.

In a most insightful comment on this exchange, Fox says that Niebuhr was particularly enraged at the critiques of his reviewers in part “because he was so committed emotionally to his self-image as a crusader *against* liberalism in theology.” Fox rightly noted that Niebuhr’s theological liberalism “ran deep, deeper than he ever understood” (Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* [Harper and Row, 1985], 183). Indeed, this is why Niebuhr could speak and defend the *idea* of the resurrection of Jesus, but could still write to Norman-Kemp Smith shortly after his Gifford Lectures that that he did not want to give comfort to the literalists, adding, “I have not the slightest interest in the empty tomb or physical resurrection (Fox, p. 215).

2. Niebuhr’s essay on “Why the Church Is Not Pacifist” was recently reprinted in *The End of Illusions: Religious Leaders Confront Hitler’s Gathering Storm*, ed. Joseph Loconte (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 135.
3. Niebuhr, “Why the Church Is Not Pacifist,” in Loconte, *End of Illusions*, 141.
4. *Ibid.*, 133.
5. The Schleithem Confession can be found at <http://www.anabaptists.org/history/schleith.html>.
6. Niebuhr, “Why the Church Is Not Pacifist,” 143–44.
7. Niebuhr’s attitude toward the classic pacifist position seems ironic, but it comes at the expense of reinterpreting what the early Mennonites thought they were doing. In contrast, classical just war theory has respect for the pacifist position, although just war should be willing to call it heretical. It is heretical because it proscribes Christians from holding offices that Scripture does not prohibit Christians from holding. And it diminishes the role of the Christian magistrate from an honorable office to one that is intrinsically sinful. But at least the classic Christian just position has the virtue of taking classic pacifists seriously on their own terms.
8. Niebuhr, “Why the Church Is Not Pacifist,” 135.
9. *Ibid.*
10. John Courtney Murray, S. J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (1960), 278.
11. Darrell Cole, “Good Wars,” *First Things*, October 2001, 243.
12. John C. Ford’s essay, “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing,” was originally published in *Theological Studies* 5 (1944), 261–309.
13. Michael Walzer, “Can There Be a Moral Foreign Policy?” in *Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy in an Unjust World*, by Brian J. Hehir et al. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2004).
14. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, vol. III, *Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 10.

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15. Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 64.
16. *Ibid.*, 67.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Bombing of Germany," in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (New York: Meridian Books, 1967), 222. This article was originally published in *Christianity and Society* (Summer 1943).
19. Darrell Cole, "Virtuous Warfare and the Just War: A Christian Approach" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2001), 111–12. See also Darrell Cole, *When God Says War Is Right* (New York: Waterbrook, 2002); and Darrell Cole and Alexander Webster, *The Virtue of War: Reclaiming the Classic Traditions East and West* (London: Regina Orthodox, 2004).
20. Cole, "Virtuous Warfare," 104.
21. *Ibid.*, 105. The citation is from Reinhold Niebuhr's *Christian Realism and the Political Problem* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 171–72.
22. Cole, "Virtuous Warfare," 112–13. The citation is from Timothy Jackson's "Christian Love and Political Violence," in *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 191.
23. For an excellent summary of the debate, see the exchange between Paul J. Griffiths and George Weigel, "Who Wants War? An Exchange," *First Things*, April 2005. Paul Ramsey addressed this issue as early as 1968 in "Can a Pacifist Tell a Just War?" in *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Scribner, 1968).
24. Darrell Cole, "Listening to Pacifists," in *First Things* (August/September, 2002). Also accessible at [http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id\\_article=2054](http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=2054).
25. It is also significant that Father Bryan Hehir, a central architect of the bishops' pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*, which argued that the tradition begins and ends with a presumption against force, has conceded the historical point in a review of James Turner Johnson's book *Morality and Contemporary Warfare* (Yale University Press, 1999). See Hehir's review in *Commonweal*, March 10, 2000.
26. James Turner Johnson, *Morality and Contemporary Warfare* (Yale University Press, 1999) p. 42.
27. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 284.
28. Cole, "Virtuous Warfare," 93.

