

It's Just War: Working for Peace, Struggling with Conscience, Anticipating Dissent

Bill J. Leonard
Dunn Professor of Church History and Baptist Studies
Wake Forest University

“It’s just war.” “It’s just war.” That phrase, I think, describes our society’s implicit (perhaps even explicit) response to the war in Afghanistan, begun in 2001, now the longest combat- conflict in American military history. And the “other war” in Iraq, begun in 2003, continues, with troops withdrawn by year’s end we learned yesterday. There have been 4479 American casualties so far in Iraq and 1812 casualties so far in Afghanistan. And those are only the American soldiers. (<http://icasualties.org/>. Total military casualties in Iraq: 4797; in Afghanistan: 2768.)

Much “war news” languishes on the back pages of newspapers, or television news “summaries” dwarfed by presidential campaigns, Wall Street occupation, Tea Party convocations, and jobs, jobs, jobs. Unless you’re military or military-related family/friends, “it’s just war.” We are there, we wish we weren’t, there’s nothing we can really do about it; we’ve got our own troubles; it’s just war.

Perhaps we are just immune to war—we’ve had so many that they seem a given in American life. Here’s one online list since 1675:

- King Philip’s War
- King William’s War
- Queen Anne’s War
- King George’s War
- French and Indian War
- Cherokee War
- American Revolution
- Franco-American Naval War
- Barbary Wars
- War of 1812
- Creek War
- War of Texas Independence

Mexican-American War
Civil War
Spanish American War
World War I
World War II
Korean war
Cold War
Vietnam War
Bay of Pigs Invasion
Grenada
Panama
Persian Gulf War
Intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina
Afghanistan
Iraq
Libya
(<http://americanhistory.about.com/library/timelines/bltimelineuswars.htm>.)

Based on those calculations, Americans have fought 112 wars in the last 336 years, for an average of a war every 3 years. No wonder we might think “it’s just war” in response to yet another conflict. And that does not include the “soft wars” we fight with each other all the time, gun violence in synagogues, mosques, churches, schools, parking lots, homes, stores, restaurants, across the country. Indeed, wherever religious individuals may stand on questions of “gun control,” “gun rights,” or related legislation, the fact remains that the United States is a firearm-oriented culture where, according to the Center for Disease Control, some 30,000 persons die annually as a direct result of firearm-related incidents. And for every person killed, two are wounded. Thus religious communities can no longer act as if firearm attacks are a cultural anomaly, rather, they must pursue new strategies that respond to the presence of gun-related violence throughout American society. That’s the war we rage against ourselves another topic for another conference.

When we reflect on recent conflicts, we don’t really mean “a just war,” linking the present conflicts with an ancient theory. Who really understands or pays attention to “just war

theory” a fascinating historical attempt to explain why some wars are necessary if not inevitable?

The current and previous president did, sort of, but not without difficulty. Remember the

arguments for “just war” as set forth in www.catholic.com/documents:

The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time:

- the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
- all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
- there must be serious prospects of success;

The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.

(www.catholic.com/documents/just-war-doctrine)

Great intellectual guidelines with decidedly Augustinian and Thomistic overtones (if we need to speak theologically here), but with little or no meaning, many suggest, in the “War on Terror.”

So torture, lengthy imprisonment without trial, invasions of countries before they invade us, among other things, are said to be realistic responses to new kinds of conflict.

In one of numerous essays published in the *British Medical Journal* near the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, Jennifer Leaning, Professor of International Health at Harvard School of Public Health, wrote:

When the United States characterises these al- Qaeda forces collectively as “terrorists,” “foreign” Taliban, or “unlawful combatants,” who are “hiding in caves” (a devious sounding stance) it casts doubt on the extent to which it will feel bound to use only legal means to defeat, capture, and hold them. What agents or methods are being used to “smoke them out?” What kinds of force will be tolerated in extracting information from them? What licence will be given to intermediaries so that the United States can claim clean hands? These ambiguities are heightened by the presidential order establishing a special class of military tribunals for the leaders of these forces—which may subject them to denial of standard rights established for prisoners of war.

Leaning then concluded:

This brief application of modern just war theory to the Afghan conflict suggests that its value as an analytic moral or legal framework is limited. The difficulty in obtaining reliable information makes some assessments impossible. Political biases introduce further complexities. There is, however, one component of the just war theory—the means of war—where international standards and measures do exist and a provisional assessment can be made. This suggests that the United States has missed several opportunities to establish a reassuring normative tone and presiding presence in this conflict. Instead of rooting its engagement in international humanitarian law it has emphasised the dastardly outlaw nature of its enemy to justify a need to keep its tactical options open. With the whole world watching, persistence in this mode may prove to be shortsighted. (Jennifer Learning, “Was the Afghan Conflict a Just War?” in BJM, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1122274.)

Arguments for making Afghanistan and Iraq incursions into “just wars” are seriously flawed. But that is not our major concern here. The thesis of this essay is that for many Americans “it’s just another war.” Our tax dollars go to support the war, unbudgeted though it may be. We don’t have ration cards, or limitations on food, gasoline or other commodities that remind us daily that we too need to sacrifice for the “men and women in the armed forces.” When asked, some sixty-two percent of Americans want troops withdrawn from Afghanistan within two years (as opposed to the Pentagon’s proposed thirteen year plan). And, earlier this month, “Truthout” the online news service, reported that “hundreds of peace advocates marched from Freedom Plaza in Washington, DC, past the White House, to the office of drone manufacturer General Atomics, demanding an end to the wars and drone strikes.” (“We, the 99

Percent, Demand the End of the Wars Now,” “Truthout,” 8 October 2011, www.truthout.org/we-99-percent-demand-end-wars-now/1318014376.)

Yet those actions seem a minority when compared to the demonstrations raised by Tea Party and the Wall Street dissenters about a variety of other issues.

Perhaps that recognition was one of the reasons the organizers of this conference decided to take action to bring some people together to say something like this today: We are at war. People are dying. People are being maimed. The conflict has gone on a long time. The reasons for the conflicts are blurred at best and getting blurrier month to month. Most of all, we need to work for peace. And if we are serious about being peacemakers, then we need to reexamine, indeed renew our consciences, and prepare to exercise dissent.

Since you asked a historian to say those things out loud, then you should expect some history. Let me say that another way: If we are going to work for peace—reassert that powerful minority voice known as pacifism, then we can feel good about the fact that, historically, we are not alone. People a lot braver and more harassed than we are, paved the way for us and strengthen us on the journey.

So with considerable little fear and trembling, I propose the following:

- We are at war.
- For large segments of our country/culture, “it’s just war.” We don’t really pay much attention to it; and unless our family or friends are directly involved, the war is as distant for us psychologically and spiritually as it is geographically. And if we are a long way off from war, we’re equally a long way off from peace, let alone from peacemaking.

- If we are going to try and renew the imperative for peacemaking, dare we say pacifism, then we need to make a case for:
 - Renewing the conscience
 - Reaffirming the possibility of dissent
 - Recognizing the responsibility (and voice) of the minority

In a recent study on religious liberty, John Noonan writes that conscience was the “central moral notion of the pagan world converged with the Christian tradition.” Roman philosophers as early as Cicero called conscience the “inner judge.” Noonan contends that conscience entered “the moral consciousness of Christians” as a combination of “witness, judge, reason, [and the] voice of God.” Conscience is evident but not identified in the acts of many religious individuals to endure persecution from states and established religions. For much of human history—today included in some situations—individual conscience has not been protected from coercion. Whatever else we may say about the Protestant Reformation, it was a renewal of conscience, the inner imperative present in every human being, religious or not. John Noonan writes that the Reformation simply “created more heretics to be persecuted.” Yet “heretics became so numerous that they had to be tolerated for the sake of peace,” a fascinating almost modern paradox. (John T. Noonan, *The Lustre of Our Country: The American Experience of Religious Freedom*, 44, 48-49)

Moravian patriarch John Huss, on his way to condemnation and subsequent burning by the Council of Constance (1416), anticipated such renewal with the words: “I refuse nothing, most noble Emperor, whatsoever the council shall decree or determine upon me, only this one thing I except, that I do not offend God and my conscience.” Martin Luther’s dramatic confession before the Diet of Worms in 1521 actually sets the word firmly inside the

Reformation: “My conscience is captive to the word of God, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. . . .” Yet voices from what became known as the Radical Reformation and the beginnings of the historic peace churches spoke beyond Luther who with John Calvin was still shackled to the magisterial reformation, the link between citizenship and church membership, a direct coercion of conscience. For them, Gospel, Conscience and Non-violence/Peace were inseparable. Conrad Grebel, a martyred founder of the Swiss Brethren movement, the first Anabaptist group, noted in 1524: “True Christians use neither worldly sword nor engage in war, since among them taking human life has ceased entirely. . . .The gospel and those who accept it are not to be protected with the sword, neither have they thus protected themselves.” Hutterite leader Peter Riedemann, declared in 1545: “Christ, the prince of Peace, has established His Kingdom, that is, His Church, and has purchased it by His blood. In this kingdom all worldly warfare has ended. Therefore a Christian has no part in war nor does he wield the sword to execute vengeance.”

Harold S. Bender, the great Mennonite scholar wrote that, “In this principle of nonresistance, or Biblical pacifism. . . the Anabaptists were again creative leaders, far ahead of their times.” He also reminds us that “they held this principle in a day when both Catholic and Protestant churches not only endorsed war as an instrument of state policy, but employed it in religious conflicts.” A radical response to the Christian gospel led them to those views; a radical response to conscience led them to speak and write their beliefs, knowing that they would pay dearly for doing so. And their witness, often punctuated by imprisonment, condemnation and death, led others to demand liberty of conscience for heretic and atheist alike. So a century later, Dr. John Clarke, Baptist founder of the Rhode Island colony, the only one of the original thirteen to provide for such radical freedom, wrote: “No such believer, or Servant of Christ Jesus hath

any liberty, much less Authority, from his Lord, to smite his fellow servant, nor yet with outward force, or arme of flesh, to constrain, or restrain his Conscience, no nor yet his outward man for Conscience sake.”

In a society where the old resources of church and community seem increasingly unable to pass along basic religious identity, let us commit ourselves to a renewal of conscience among a new generation of young people who are unclear about its meaning, and an older generation whose memories are clouded with cynicism, complicity, or exhaustion.

With a renewal of conscience comes the possibility, indeed the probability, of dissent. Internalized convictions can have public consequences. Again our forebears got there ahead of us. The link between conscience and dissent leaps of the pages of John Woolman’s *Journal*, 1757/58, and his decision not to pay taxes that went to support wars against the Native Americans. He wrote: “To refuse the active payment of a tax which our Society generally paid was exceedingly disagreeable; but to do a thing contrary to my conscience appeared yet more dreadful.” Thus he concluded that while other “upright-hearted” persons “paid such taxes,” their example was “insufficient reason for me to do so.” Thus he concluded: “I believe that the spirit of truth required of me, as an individual, to suffer patiently the distress of goods, rather than pay actively.” Woolman acknowledged that non-violence was a difficult, probably minority position, that required cultivation of specific spiritual resources. He wrote: “It requires great self-denial and resignation of ourselves to God, to attain that state wherein we can freely cease from fighting when wrongfully invaded, if, by our fighting, there were a probability of overcoming the invaders. Whoever rightly attains to it does in some degree feel that spirit in which our Redeemer gave his life for us....” (*The Journal of John Woolman*, 75, 77)

For Woolman, dissent represented “principled objection” to culture—challenges to the conscience, an outward and visible sign that persons did not “pretend scruple of conscience.” (<http://www.answers.com/topic/john-woolman#ixzz1avy1RmKf>) Dissent past and present can take many forms: participation in public demonstrations, letters to public officials, essays, articles and books. Sometimes dissent is very public with economic and political implications. At other times they are quiet but determined responses. My favorite illustration of such dissent is the response of the slave woman who after manumission recalled of her days as a cook in “the big house,” “How many times I spit in the biscuits and peed in the coffee. . . .” (Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm o Long: the Aftermath of Slavery*, 159.)

In the midst of the Cold War, monastic Thomas Merton produced an amazing literature of dissent from within the cloistered walls of the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky, penning these direct, poignant words in the book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, published in 1961:

At the root of all war is fear; not so much the fear men have of one another as fear they have of *everything*. It is not merely that they do not trust one another; they do not even trust themselves. If they are not sure when someone else may turn around and kill them, they are still less sure when they may turn around and kill themselves. They cannot trust anything, because they have ceased to believe in God. (*Thomas Merton Reader*, 276)

Merton noted: “When I pray for peace, I pray not only that the enemies of my country may cease to want war, but above all that my own country will cease to do the things that make war inevitable.” He acknowledged: “I am fully aware that this sounds utterly sentimental, archaic, and out of tune with an age of science. But I would like to submit that pseudoscientific thinking

in politics and sociology have so far had much less than this to offer.” (*Merton Reader*, 281.)

Thomas Merton wrote half a century ago. They remain a profound voice of dissent.

Then and now the dissent for peace is a minority position. It is a “witness” born of conscience and audacious hope. And perhaps it has taken root, at least according to Stephen Pinker’s new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why violence Has Declined*. His thesis, I’m quoting from Peter Singer’s *New York Times* review, “is that our era is less violent, less cruel and more peaceful than any previous period of human existence,” with declines in family, neighborhood, tribal and national violence. I’ve just ordered the book, since the review says that “for anyone interested in understanding human nature, the material is engrossing.” (Pete Singer, “Kinder and Gentler,” *New York Times Book Review*, October 9, 2011.) It appears that the reasons have more to do with civilization, government boundaries, and reason than with religion, but I’ll get back to you on that.

Nonetheless, a minority voice remains essential. That was brought home to me not long ago in a prophetic document written a few years ago by Reverend Maria Bonafede, moderator of the Tavola Valdense, a community of Waldensian Churches in Italy. Entitled “The Responsibility of a Minority,” (2008) it expressed vigorous opposition to the efforts of the Italian government to finger-print 80,000 Rom-Gypsy children in Italy, a mistaken attempt to respond crime, anti-immigrant and anti-gypsy sentiments in contemporary Italian society. Reverend Bonafede offers this powerful explanation for her opposition to this practice, words that capture brilliantly the reason why we need to renew conscience and dissent in an ever expanding Globalism. She writes:

There are moments during which responsibility for vigorously affirming fundamental principles of civil society falls on the shoulders of small minorities. It is the duty of these minorities to intervene because they know first hand the pain of prejudice and persecution inflicted by the majority, a majority all too often ill informed, distracted, confused or manipulated and therefore unable to stop episodes of hatred, discrimination and violence against whomever's turn it is to be different. Today it is the turn of the Gypsy children....As Waldensians and Methodists, we acknowledge ourselves a minority that on the topic of civil rights has an important word to say. We speak, therefore, with all the strength and conviction at our disposal. We cannot keep silent during this moment when our spiritual, ethical and civil responsibility demand we speak out.

Sometimes life and grace overtakes us in ways that move us from our individual names to a broader global or communal identity, when we move beyond ourselves to larger tasks and callings. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus unnames everybody, renaming those who decide to participate in what seems an audacious, imprudent, life-embracing attempt to extend God's transforming grace in the world. They are designations full of vulnerability and courage all at once. Will there ever be a day when one of these descriptions is printed on your name-tag at some occasion large or small?

Poor in Spirit

Gentle

Merciful

Pure in Heart

Persecuted for justice's sake

Peacemaker

Peacemaker? These days that seems among the most impossible names of all. Yet sometimes we stumble into such a name, get a small taste of the unimagined possibilities they represent. In 2006 I joined two faculty colleagues and thirteen Wake Forest University students for a service-learning project in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, helping to build a two room school in a commune deep in countryside. Each day we left our hotel, crossed the wide Mekong by ferry and reached a village so far back in the sticks that the teachers had to pick us up on motor bikes to take carry the last few miles. For days we worked with faculty, students and townspeople painting, planting, and otherwise preparing the building for a new generation of Vietnamese students. Our hosts, a married couple who were civil officials in the commune, made lunch for us daily, and stretched hammocks for afternoon naps around their spacious dirt floored, thatch-roofed house. On one wall there were old photos of the couple in their youth, holding rifles, and dressed in the pajama-like uniforms of the Viet Cong. They were both combatants in what the Vietnamese call the “American War.”

When the work ended and the school was dedicated, our Wake Forest group departed the village amid the hugs and tears of a brief but astonishingly profound experience. A year later, one of the faculty colleagues returned to the commune and discovered that while the school was still intact, much of the village had been washed away in a devastating typhoon that struck the area. The house where we took meals and naps was gone, and only the wooden beams and doorposts remained, waiting on planned rebuilding.

She also found that after we returned home, our hosts, the former Viet Cong, had carved each of our names on the beam at the entrance to what had been and would be again their

home. And for one brief shining moment, perhaps, a group of all-too- privileged Americans understood something of the unexpected grace of the name Peacemaker carved quite literally on a doorpost in a Mekong Delta commune. Will such halting albeit singularly overpowering moments eradicate decades of geo-political, ideological conflict in Viet Nam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, or Washington, DC? No, of course not. Two-room school houses and names on Viet Cong doorposts won't transform complex global struggles any time soon. No, names like gentle, merciful, pure in heart and peacemaker still have not prevailed in the world. Not yet, anyway. There is always hope.

Bill J. Leonard, Dunn Professor of Church History and Baptist Studies, Wake Forest University, presented this keynote address at the "Reclaiming the Prince of Peace Conference" at Guilford United Methodist Church, Greensboro, North Carolina, on October 22, 2011.