

## Just War Theory Revisited

by Olga Bonfiglio

Army captain and Iraq War veteran Robert P. McGovern's new book *All American: Why I Believe in Football, God, and the War in Iraq* makes the case that "as a lawyer, a soldier, and a graduate of four Catholic schools, I believe that nations are legally and morally obliged to prevent injustices like genocide, military aggression and threats to civilians."

In other words, he believes that the Church's Just War Theory fits the Iraq situation and provides adequate justification for the war.

I gasped when I saw this. First of all, Captain McGovern's contention that the Just War Theory justifies this war in Iraq is such revisionist hooey. The fact is that before the war ensued, Pope John Paul II pleaded with Bush NOT to go into Iraq-and to get out-several times. ALL of the U.S. mainline churches openly opposed the prospect of war. Moreover, onlookers claim that Bush never consulted a minister, including one from his own Methodist faith about his decision to invade Iraq.

Secondly, four and a half years of war have gotten us over 3,700 dead Americans and between 70,182 and 655,000 dead Iraqis; mass migration (both in-country and out-of-country) of nearly five million Iraqis, unrest in the region; \$454.1 billion of taxpayers' money; torture against our enemies; domestic spying; soldiers doing three, four, five tours in Iraq; and the cultivation of more terrorism because of our occupation. Things are so bad that 70 percent of the American people are against this war, almost a complete reversal of support from when we started it. Perhaps a look at Just War Theory with the assistance of Professor Rudi Siebert, religion and society scholar at Western Michigan University, can help us see through this fog of war that seems to be getting thicker and thicker.

In 387 A.D. Constantine made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. The Christians, who had been enemies of Rome, suddenly became allies of the state. Although they no longer had to dodge being eaten by lions, they had a new problem: how to deal with questions of war like: "When is it permissible to wage war?" (*jus in bello*) and "What are the limitations in the ways we wage war?" (*jus ad bellum*). St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) tackled this problem by formulating his famous "Just War Theory" which claimed that leaders could commit their people to war provided it were morally justifiable under three conditions. First, the nation must have legitimate authority to declare war. Secondly, it must take care not to hurt non-combatants or civilians. Third, the nation must consider a proportional means to achieve its goal.

Even though these rules of war had been laid out, Christians have not shown much restraint in waging war through the centuries and making as many excuses for war as there have been wars. In truth, Augustine's Just War Theory runs counter to Jesus'

Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), which is core to Christian belief and preaches that we love our enemies and take care of the poor.

Another unintended consequence of St. Augustine's Just War Theory is the alliance between church and state, which has resulted in the Church's "horrible history of war that we try to forget by re-interpreting the text," says Professor Siebert. Hitler, for example, reinterpreted the text with the 1933 Concordat, a treaty he made with the Vatican which guaranteed the Church's right to regulate its own affairs in Germany while the dictator proclaimed that Christianity was "the basis of our collective morals," the family, and "the kernel of our people."

Applying Just War principles to the twentieth century has become "very murky" says Professor Siebert because today's wars may involve weapons of mass destruction and they often include genocidal violence against civilians. For example, during World War I, 10 percent of those killed were civilians. In World War II the number rose to 40 percent. Today, estimates are at 90 percent.

It distresses Professor Siebert that religion has been the source of so much violence and war. However, he is concerned that "when religion fails, what does that leave us?" Law and secular morality can avert war through the state as well as through international controls like the Geneva Convention, the United Nations, and NATO. However, these institutions are losing their effectiveness, which became evident when President Bush blew them off in his urgency to get the war in Iraq started.

For all Professor Siebert's study and experience of war (he was a teenage fighter pilot in the German air force, an infantryman and a POW during World War II), he admits that the ultimate paradox about war is that "All wars are bad even if sometimes some wars may be necessary." So, why have we had so many wars? Economically, we fight over scarce resources. Culturally, we have movies and other media that glorify war and killing. Psychologically, we have a death instinct "as if there were something biologically wrong with us."

"Even wolves have an instinct to stop fighting when it is clear that one wolf is vulnerable and defeated," says Professor Siebert. "He opens his neck to the other wolf and the aggressor doesn't bite. We human beings don't have a mechanism within us to be against war-except the Sermon on the Mount." Unfortunately, some Christians will quote Matthew 10:34 to justify war: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Finding our way to peace is looking more and more difficult and yet, as Gandhi said to the British: eventually you will all leave; you will just walk out. And walk out they did- ever so graciously and India gained its independence from Britain in 1947.

Seems to me that we have a solution for ending the war in Iraq: we simply walk out of there. Better that it happen sooner than later!

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