The Realism Objection to Setting Aside Just War Theory: A Response

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In April 2016, participants in the "Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference" called on the Catholic Church to place greater emphasis on nonviolent peacemaking and to no longer recognize the possibility of a just war.[1] In the exchanges that have followed, one line of objection has been to endorse the first goal but reject the second as dangerously unrealistic.

While supporting more work to promote nonviolent conflict resolution, Mark Allman and Tobias Winright point to cases of military aggression, ethnic cleansing, and genocide where "real-life challenges" mean nonviolent methods might not be effective enough, leaving armed force as the only way to save innocent lives. For them, "Even if the case for just war is rare, such cases still occur."[2]

Similarly, Peter Steinfels surveys the world's war-torn regions and concludes that while "such brutal realities" call out for as much "nonviolent peacemaking" as possible, "did the conference really imagine that nonviolence alone would stop all this bleeding?"[3]

And in his contribution to the special issue of *Expositions* dedicated to the future of just war thinking following the April 2016 conference, Robert Latiff is sympathetic to its call for greater peacemaking efforts, but he argues that "officially abandoning just war teaching would be a terrible outcome for the Catholic Church." On his account, such a move, while "well-intentioned," ignores how military force is sometimes "necessary to protect people who need protection" and is therefore "extraordinarily naïve and potentially dangerous." It is "wishful thinking" to reject the need for "options to use force" if nonviolent alternatives prove ineffective.[4]

This is an important objection. Many people sympathetic to the increasing emphasis on nonviolent peacemaking in Catholic teaching on war and peace are nonetheless reluctant to completely close the door to the possibility of a just war. They believe that since nonviolent alternatives may not always work, sometimes armed force is still necessary to uphold justice and protect innocent people from aggression, tyranny, or mass violence such as genocide or ethnic cleansing. In such situations, countries or threatened groups are still morally permitted to take up

arms to defend themselves. And, if they are too weak to do so, members of the international community are still morally permitted to do so on their behalf under the traditional principle of humanitarian intervention or, more recently, the international legal norm of a "Responsibility to Protect."[5]

I believe that ethical and theological reflection on the incompatibility of war with Catholic moral principles and their Gospel foundations should ultimately carry the most weight in the case for the Catholic Church to, as the conference participants urge, "no longer use or teach 'just war theory.'"[6] I also recognize, however, that for many an important obstacle to supporting such a step is the sense that it is unrealistic to completely rule out justified war when sometimes it may be the only effective tool available. This concern deserves a response.

Effective at What?

> Peace results from that order structured into human society by its divine Founder, and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice.
>
> *–Gaudium et spes*[7]

> True peace therefore is the fruit of justice, that moral virtue and legal guarantee which ensures full respect for rights and responsibilities, and the just distribution of benefits and burdens.
>
> *–Pope John Paul II*[8]

This is largely a disagreement about means rather than ends. The authors of the "Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference" statement identify themselves as "Christians committed to a more just and peaceful world." Believing that "peace requires justice," they challenge "militarism," "economic injustice," "dehumanization," and "persecution, oppression, exploitation, and discrimination," offering instead a gospel-inspired vision of a nonviolent social order marked by "human dignity and thriving relationships."[9]

Such an order is also the basis for arguments to keep some room for justified warfare in the Catholic tradition. Kenneth Himes, for example, grounds his case for the moral permissibility of some humanitarian interventions in a vision of a "political order" that provides "just laws," protects "public safety," cares "for the poor and infirm," and upholds "each person's basic rights." On his account, sometimes protecting the kind of just order that upholds human dignity in these ways requires the "armed force" necessary to "depose tyrants, stop genocide, or deter aggression."[10]

This, then, is the key question: What is the most effective way to build and maintain this common goal of a just and peaceful order—one that upholds human dignity and basic rights, promotes human flourishing, and protects persons from aggression, tyranny, and mass violence?

War Is Actually Not Very Effective

Recourse to violence, in fact, aggravates existing tensions and creates new ones. *Nothing is resolved by war; on the contrary, everything is placed in jeopardy by war*. The results of this scourge are the suffering and death of innumerable individuals, the disintegration of human relations and the irreparable loss of an immense artistic and environmental patrimony. War worsens the sufferings of the poor; indeed, it creates new poor by destroying means of subsistence, homes, and property, and by eating away at the very fabric of the social environment. […]

Recent history clearly shows the failure of recourse to violence as a means for resolving political and social problems. War destroys, it does not build up; it weakens the moral foundations of society and creates further divisions and long-lasting tensions. And yet the news continues to speak of wars and armed conflicts, and of their countless victims. How often have my Predecessors and I myself called for an end to these horrors! I shall continue to do so until it is understood that war is the failure of all true humanism.

–Pope John Paul II (italics in original)[11]

One hallmark of war's history is the tendency to overestimate its effectiveness, which is why leaders, especially of large military powers, routinely get mired in disastrous wars that fail to achieve their original aims. This historical trend is also true of domestic armed resistance and external interventions over the last century, both of which have proven far more likely to fail than succeed, usually just extending violent conflicts and making the emergence of an oppressive regime at its conclusion more rather than less likely.[12]

This shouldn't be surprising, since, given its nature, war is a poor candidate to sustain a just and peaceful order. War's original meaning is discord, and Erasmus characterized it as a state of disorder where "the laws are compelled to silence, charity is laughed at, justice has no dwelling place."[13] As Hugo Slim catalogues in excruciating detail, war zones create spikes in poverty, famine, disease, looting, extortion, assault, corruption, and the suppression of human rights. They tear families apart and produce streams of refugees vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. For people in war zones, fear, humiliation, and hopelessness are constant companions.[14] Rape is so common that St. Augustine called it a "customary evil" of war.[15] As Eileen Egan points out, a good definition of war is the corporal works of mercy in reverse.[16]

Wars, even ones conducted by professional militaries with clear rules of engagement, kill shocking numbers of civilians, primarily because of the lethality of the weapons involved, the low threshold for using them, and uncertainty about the status of targets, what Dave Grossman, in his study of lethal violence in war, calls "gray-area killings."[17] War's levels of killing, whether of combatants or noncombatants, relies on systematic dehumanization of its targets to justifying their slaughter, as well as the dehumanization involved in training soldiers to suppress mercy and their resistance to killing in order to do their job.[18] And, of course, for soldiers and civilians who do survive war, the legacy is often a lifetime of physical and emotional wounds.

War, then, is the opposite of an order marked by human dignity, security, and flourishing. It is itself a disorder of mass violence, suffering, dehumanization, and injustice. This is why while it is rare for a war to successfully stop instances of genocide or ethnic cleansing; genocides and ethnic cleansings themselves almost always occur only when wars are already underway, creating an environment of mass violence that allows them to emerge.[19] It is also why even when war appears effective in the short-term, its long-term impact is to usually unleash continuing cycles of more armed conflict. Warfare, in the words of John Paul II, "leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war."[20] For example, the culture of violence and resentment caused by World War I led directly to World War II, which, in turn, largely produced the Cold War and its many proxy wars around the world. To follow just one of these proxy wars, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was met by American-backed Mujahideen fighters, fueling a civil war that saw the rise of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, leading in turn to the attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequent U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere across the Middle East, which themselves have spun-off new civil wars. Other regions and historical periods reveal similar patterns of armed conflict, where even the seemingly successful resolution of one war only sows the seeds for ones to follow. Indeed, the vast majority of contemporary wars are actually continuations of previous ones, civil wars in which their participants are caught in cycles of chronic stop-and-start armed conflict.[21] Interventions by outside forces are more likely to exacerbate these conflicts rather than end them, as illustrated by the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya, the first authorized by the U.N. under the Responsibility to Protect principle, which seemed a short-term success when it toppled the dictator Muammar Gaddafi, but only fueled ongoing cycles of

armed conflict that have continued to devastate the country since. Again and again, war proves itself an especially unfit tool to fashion an enduring just and peaceful order.[22]

Nonviolent Alternatives Are Surprisingly Effective

> In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.
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> –Pope Francis[23]

> In this way, the solidarity which we propose is the path to peace and at the same time to development. For world peace is inconceivable unless the world's leaders come to recognize that interdependence in itself demands the abandonment of the politics of blocs, the sacrifice of all forms of economic, military or political imperialism, and the transformation of mutual distrust into collaboration. This is precisely the act proper to solidarity among individuals and nations.
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> –Pope John Paul II[24]

Fortunately, there are better options. A range of nonviolent tools have a much better track record at creating, protecting, and sustaining a just and peaceful order. They can do so in two ways. First, they can defend vulnerable persons against aggression, tyranny, and mass violence better than armed force. Second, they can reduce the instance of war itself, since, after all, it is in warzones, especially those areas of the world with endemic warfare, that human dignity, rights, and flourishing are so threatened and that aggression, tyranny, and mass violence are so common. If fighting wars is not an especially effective way to uphold a just and peaceful order, fighting war actually is.

One of the most significant political developments of the last century is the emergence of nonviolent civil resistance movements as a way to challenge and defeat domestic dictators and foreign occupiers. All regimes, even brutal ones, depend on widespread cooperation to function. Police and army personnel, government bureaucrats, financial institutions, workers, and everyday citizens on the streets all must to do what they are told and contribute to the regime's ongoing operation. This is the vulnerability nonviolent civil resistance exploits. It withdraws the active cooperation any regime, whether domestic or occupying, needs to exercise power. When such noncooperation becomes organized and widespread enough, the regime's power collapses as its leaders issue orders nobody carries out. From Africa (Tunisia) to Asia (Philippines) to Europe

(Serbia) to the Americas (Chile), nonviolent civil resistance has proven itself a powerfully effective force.[25]

The effectiveness of nonviolent alternatives to armed force by people under threat is supported by empirical research. Oliver Kaplan details the techniques vulnerable civilians in war zones use to successfully protect themselves from armed groups.[26] Adrian Katatnycky and Peter Ackerman's study of how dictatorships end concludes that compared to armed rebellion, nonviolent methods are far more successful in removing tyrants and establishing lasting democracy.[27] And, in their landmark study, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan analyze over 300 cases going back to 1900 of either armed struggle or nonviolent civil resistance to domestic dictatorships or foreign occupation. They find that nonviolent campaigns are nearly twice as effective as violent ones, that this success does not depend on how brutal a regime's response is, and that even among the increasingly small percentage of armed struggles that do succeed, they are far more likely to slip back into dictatorship and civil war in their aftermath.[28] Summarizing other findings since their study came out in 2011, they report that regimes are less likely to deploy mass violence against civilians when facing nonviolent versus violent movements challenging their rule; that even when regimes do react with mass violence, the likelihood of a nonviolent resistant movement's success does not go down; that when a largely nonviolent campaign adds a violent "edge" or "flank" in a mixed approach, its effectiveness drops; and that while the success rate for nonviolent movements has dipped somewhat in the last few years as more and more groups, including some underprepared ones, undertake them and regime leaders adjust their responses, the success rate for violent ones has dropped even more, meaning that now nonviolent civil resistance is three times as likely to succeed as armed struggle.[29]

Just as there are effective nonviolent tools for oppressed peoples to deploy themselves, the international community has a range of alternatives to warfare when acting to deter aggression, prevent mass violence against vulnerable groups, and reduce the frequency of war itself. These tools exist as part of an infrastructure of global governance that Catholic teaching has long supported.[30] Contrary to conventional wisdom, international relations are not a struggle of all against all with armed force the only thing countries ultimately respect. While countries do often pursue their own interests, political scientists have demonstrated that international institutions and norms strongly shape the behavior of individual countries, including how they understand their interests and the options available for pursuing them.[31] This is what allows countries to cooperate

in regulating a range of issues that cross borders, such as mail delivery, criminal extraditions, free trade, or endangered species, and to reform or abolish practices once considered only internal matters, such as capital punishment.[32] It can also help shift behavior when it comes to armed force. For every country that has acquired nuclear weapons in the last half century, another has given them up.[33] Countries no longer consider war an option for collecting international debts, even though it was once a routine justification for going to war.[34] And, as the European Union shows, closer institutional integration certainly does not eliminate conflicts among countries, but it can remove warfare as a plausible way to address such conflicts, even among countries that were once chronically at war with each other.[35] Indeed, just belonging to intergovernmental organizations, even seemingly minor ones such as those regulating fisheries, reduces a country's risk of engaging in war.[36]

In this international system, countries have a range of methods to shape each other's behavior and prevent armed conflicts. For shaping behavior, a mix of incentives (integration into regional bodies, beneficial trade agreements, debt relief, economic aid, and technology transfers) and sanctions, especially those targeting regime leaders and their financial backers (blocking financial transactions, asset freezes, travel bans, import/export embargoes, and expulsion from regional bodies) can be effective in reducing external aggression and increasing internal democracy and respect for human rights, especially if these efforts are multilateral, have clear goals, and are used as part of negotiations rather than campaigns for regime change.[37] When it comes to preventing countries from launching attacks on each other, diplomatic exchanges can successfully construct cycles of reciprocal restraint that help adversaries establish lasting peace, and a rising trend toward mediation and arbitration efforts, whether by intergovernmental bodies, such as the U.N.'s International Court of Justice, or nongovernmental actors, such as the Sant'Egidio community, are increasingly effective.[38]

Since the majority of wars today are chronic civil wars that go through cycles of stopping and restarting, the best way to reduce warfare, and the military aggression and mass violence that it unleashes, is to help break this bloody cycle. Fortunately, there are effective tools the international community can use to help negotiate a war's end and prevent it from resuming, tools that, compared to military interventions, have a much better success rate at helping a more just and peaceful order emerge and endure.[39]

Using a mix of incentives and sanctions, it is possible to push parties in a conflict toward a ceasefire and eventually a negotiated settlement with the help of a trusted moderator. This is important, since wars that end with a formal negotiated settlement have a better chance of producing a lasting peace.[40] With the end of active combat, the quick presence of third-party monitors of the peace agreement's implementation can quickly help local leaders and civil society groups implement steps that studies show significantly reduce the risk of war breaking out again, such as resettling refugees or transitional justice mechanisms.[41] Crucially, the greater the involvement of women in each of these steps, the greater their likelihood of success.[42]

In addition to these shorter-term interventions, the data show the potential of a longer-term commitment by the international community to work for the kind of economic and political development Catholic teaching has long supported.[43] Poor countries are at a much higher risk of war, so development assistance that helps address poverty, education, health outcomes, and infrastructure can not only improve human flourishing in general, but significantly reduce the odds of armed conflict as well.[44] Similarly, political institutions that are inclusive, accountable, and responsive; that protect the rule of law; that guarantee and civil and political rights, especially for women; and that make space for a vibrant and pluralist civil society are not only more consistent with human dignity, but also significantly lower the risk of war.[45] Importantly, trying to impose such political institutions by armed force is much less effective than the slower process of promoting democratic reform through diplomatic pressure, incentives and sanctions, and support for local activists and civil society groups.[46]

The evidence, then, is clear. If the goal is a just and peaceful order, one that upholds human dignity and basic rights, promotes human flourishing, and protects persons from aggression, tyranny, and mass violence, including the mass violence of war itself, then nonviolent alternatives are more effective than warfare.[47]

The Realism of Repudiation and Abolition

> Never again war, never again war!
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> –Pope Paul VI[48]

> War should belong to the tragic past, to history, it should find no place on humanity's agenda for the future.
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> –Pope John Paul II[49]

Unfortunately, war's nonviolent alternatives are not guaranteed to succeed. Sometimes they do fail, at least in the short term, to stop aggression, tyranny, or mass violence. And sometimes armed force has stopped these things, at least in the short term. For some people, the fact that we can point to apparent cases of nonviolent failure (e.g., Tiananmen Square) or military success (e.g., Kosovo) means that we should not put our faith in nonviolent alternatives to war. But, of course, it is a rigged comparison to demand perfect success from nonviolence while overlooking war's own poor success rate. When assessing each, it is important to hold them to the same standards of overall effectiveness, and when we do so, we have just seen how nonviolence comes out ahead.

A related mistake is to argue that because nonviolent alternatives do not always work, people might suffer and die unless they resort to war or others do so on their behalf. It is true that nonviolent alternatives to war cannot guarantee nobody will suffer or die. This will often be the case even when they succeed. But, obviously, war cannot make that guarantee either. Even effective wars see plenty of suffering and death, and since most wars fail, this suffering and death is usually in vain. The sad truth is that suffering and death are common when resisting violent attack or injustice no matter the means of resistance. The happy truth is that nonviolent means do usually lower the overall levels of suffering and death, while also giving resisters better odds of success.

Those who criticize calls for Catholics to "no longer use or teach just war theory" might acknowledge all of this. They might stipulate that a fair comparison shows that war is more likely to produce greater suffering and death and end in failure compared to its nonviolent alternatives, which is why nonviolence should be the default position and Church teaching should emphasize it more. If a physician treating an ill patient knows of drugs that are more effective and have fewer side effects, of course she should start with them rather than going right to a drug that is more dangerous and less effective. But sometimes patients don't respond to the usual treatments, and in such cases physicians may try a treatment that is normally more dangerous and less likely to succeed because it may seem the only thing left with any chance of working at all. In the same way, while war is usually a more destructive and less effective option, maybe we should nonetheless hold it in reserve for those extraordinary cases where it may be the only option. Nonviolent alternatives may be more effective than war, but why not have both in humanity's toolkit just in case?

The most important reason is that by keeping war on the table, the Church signals that it is a legitimate option, which has two harmful effects. The first is to feed the myth of war's righteousness and effectiveness, one that often leads humanity to put too much faith in war while systematically overlooking its more effective nonviolent alternatives. Sometimes leaving a dangerous and less effective drug on the market, especially if it is one that has long been in wide use and thought the only effective treatment for a range of illnesses, can lead physicians to overprescribe it and patients to overuse it, causing more harm than good and crowding out safer and more effective alternatives. The second is that keeping war open as a legitimate option requires building militaries to be ready when the need arises. This means diverting wealth from pressing social needs such as education or healthcare, directing scientific knowledge and industrial capacity toward armaments, and, most significantly, recruiting people, especially the young, for training in how to kill. All of this gives violence a place of privilege in our culture, obscuring the damage that it does and normalizing war. As the old saying goes, if you put so much effort into building a hammer, every problem starts to look like a nail.

If war is actually ineffective in building, protecting, and sustaining a just and peaceful order, and is in fact a primary threat to such an order, then it is a mistake for Catholic teaching to continue to legitimize it by carving out room for its moral use. The better, more effective, and, yes, more realistic path is to commit to fully delegitimizing war itself as part of the Church's stated goal of eliminating it from the earth.

If one important strand in Catholic teaching on war and peace over the last century is its growing emphasis on nonviolent peacemaking, another related one is its shift away from seeing war as an inevitable part of international behavior, where the main moral question is whether or not particular armed conflicts meet just war criteria, to developing a powerful moral critique of war itself, leading the Church to emerge as an important voice in calls for its abolition.[50] The reason delegitimizing war as a path toward its abolition is a more realistic way to work for a just and peaceful order is that we have seen the process before. The ways humanity abolished other forms of institutional violence such as chattel slavery, dueling, or trials by ordeal and combat were complex, but a key part of each was a collapse in the institution's legitimacy following a campaign of consistent and total repudiation by abolitionist voices. These voices focused on the wrongness of the institution itself, on its being unwarranted for any reason whatsoever, rather than its misuse in particular cases. It was the spread of these views that allowed a tipping point towards abolition to emerge

and the institution to become socially untenable. Moral repudiation drove the social delegitimization that led to abolition.[51]

Of course, abolishing war seems daunting, but so did abolishing chattel slavery, dueling, and trials by ordeal and combat in their day. And most people don't realize the progress humanity has already made. News accounts of wars around the world obscure the longer-term trends in the decline of armed conflict. While the measurements are complex and the data has short-term fluctuations, the overall trend in the last few centuries is toward fewer wars and fewer people per capita dying in them. Thanks primarily to the spread of anti-war norms and the effective use of the alternatives to war we saw above, progress in the last seventy-five years has been particularly dramatic, with interstate wars to capture new territory or colonies and redraw national boundaries becoming extraordinarily rare by historical comparison. Much of the world is already essentially war-free, areas where there is still plenty of injustice and where countries still may have plenty of disputes, but where turning to war to address these things is simply not a conceivable option. There is still much to do to extend the elimination of war to the remaining areas of the globe where it is still present, but the evidence shows that it is certainly a realistic possibility.[52]

A truly realist understanding of war recognizes that the most effective way to secure a just and peaceful order is to abolish war itself in favor of its nonviolent alternatives, and that such abolition requires consistent and straightforward repudiations of war that deny it any legitimacy. This is a role Catholic teaching can, should, and is well-suited to fill. There is even a recent and familiar template for doing so. For most of human history, capital punishment was accepted around the globe as a widespread, routine, and legitimate punishment for a wide array of ordinary crimes. Doing without it seemed unrealistic and naively dangerous. Yet, in just the last century, it has been abolished in almost every country on earth and restricted to a rare number of cases in the handful of countries that still use it.[53] This is a remarkable historical shift in worldwide criminal justice practice, and Catholicism has played an important role in making it happen. By turning against capital punishment—by gradually shrinking any permissible use to zero while shifting its focus to repudiating the institution itself as immoral and ineffective—the Church helped delegitimize its use and pave the way for its widespread, though still incomplete, abolition. The same formula is possible for war. Repudiation is the realistic path to abolition, and it is one Catholic teaching is ready to walk.

Notes

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