

Just War, or Just War?

by Ron Dudum

When President Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize at the end of 2009, he spoke about the “irreconcilable truths” of both the necessity and the folly of war, observing that “the belief that peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it.” Liberal and conservative commentators alike praised his speech, but opponents of the war in Afghanistan organized vigils and marches throughout the nation, petitioning to end the conflict.

When presidents of the United States take their oath of office, they swear that they will “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Thus, when the nation was attacked on September 11, 2001, President Bush was constitutionally justified in making a military response—just not *where* he made it. Barack Obama, who later voted against the war in Iraq as a member of the U.S. Senate, argued that the real enemies of the United States, the members of Al Qaeda, were to be found in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and as president he has redirected our military efforts toward those nations.

George W. Bush’s and Dick Cheney’s flimsy justifications for their invasion of Iraq undermined their legitimate responsibility to protect the United States. But what can one expect from a president and vice president who never served in the military themselves? Their enthusiasm for the Iraq War reminds me of Lord

Farquaad's statement in the animated film *Shrek*, "Some of you will die, but it is a sacrifice I am willing to make!"

The armchair pacifists, however, come out no better than the armchair warriors. Their dilemma is best summed up by Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1954), in his poem "First They Came," in which he criticized the silence to Nazi oppression of communists, trade unionists, and Jews, only to find himself alone when "they came for me." The goal of peaceful coexistence, which motivates all pacifists, is only a work in progress and not an effective defensive strategy. Nevertheless, pacifists today are doing their utmost to constrain American military efforts around the world.

The ideas surrounding just wars are not new. In my book *Three Paradigms of Reality*, I describe how the nationalistic worldview of ancient Greece influences modern behavior. For example, many people believe that the United States, as a world leader, is *destined* to be involved in wars, that American soldiers and citizens have a *duty* to sacrifice self-interest for the common good, and that *reasoned* arguments justify support for conflict.

With Christianity came the theological attempt to reconcile civic duty with spiritual duty. Many early martyrs of the Church had originally been soldiers in the service of the Roman Empire. Their martyrdom came not from resisting their military duty for the empire, but in refusing the emperor's direct command to sacrifice offerings to him and the other deities in the Roman pantheon. None of

them were martyred for having pacifist views. To the contrary, they had no problem with killing in defense of the empire. However, these martyrs would not compromise their belief in the triune God.

The eastern Christian community of the Mediterranean, which was not included in Charlemagne's "Holy Roman Empire," eventually survived as a minority population within a Muslim empire. These Christians never formulated a "just war" strategy, emphasizing instead the values of forgiveness, repentance, and eternal salvation. In Western Europe, however, both civil and religious authority maintained an uneasy ruling alliance. The principles of a theory of "just wars" were fully developed there.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, not only is there no concept of "just wars," but, to the contrary, as early Christian theologian Maximus the Confessor (580–662 A.D.) wrote, self-love is the root of all conflict. Ambition, greed, self-preservation, and pride are just a few of the manifestations of self-love. In other words, all conflict is motivated by individual deficiency. Thus, the early Church taught that humility is the most reliable strategy for salvation. On the other hand, history repeatedly demonstrates that nationalism, destiny, and duty can be used to rationalize any war. Thus, the savagery of war will only be replaced by the tranquility of peace when human beings set aside self-love once and for all. Since that goal appears to be virtually unattainable in the real world, we can expect war to be among us for quite some time to come—both a necessity and a folly.