

In Defence of War

Nigel Biggar

Oxford University Press, 384pp

If a book makes a significant contribution, a reviewer should have the decency to include a helpful soundbite whether or not in agreement with its thesis. So here goes. This book presents a provocative counterpoint to Christian pacifism and I shall be recommending it, as an antidote to people like myself, when presenting the case for nonviolence at military staff colleges.

Now, let battle commence! Nigel Biggar, a regius professor of theology at Oxford, opens with the frank confession that while speaking 'a fortiori as a Christian ... I do not have it in me to write a book about peace ... it is war that captures my imagination.' His case rests on Augustinian 'just war' theory.

Augustine's criteria were that war should have just cause, be waged under a legitimate authority, with right intention, as a last resort, be conducted proportionately with respect to objectives, with discrimination as to who's in the firing line, and with an acceptable prospect of success.

Rarely does Biggar quote Augustine directly. This is a pity. It sidesteps choice passages, such as when this north African bishop wrote in the late fourth century to Count Boniface (later, Roman tribune for Africa) offering the reassuring thought of a Roman peace, namely:

'We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace.'

Pacifism, rues Biggar, has come to dominate Christian ethics but only as the 'wishful thinking' of those who 'tend to object to killing as such.' It's a pity then, isn't it, that some of us seek to follow the Christianity of, say, John 18:36, rather than the Paulianity of Romans 13:4, or Augustinianity.

My repeated contention with Biggar is his framing of the debate. Chapter 1, 'Against Christian Pacifism', opens by taking on Stanley Hauerwas as 'the leading living exponent of Christian pacifism' then moving on to Niebuhr, Yoder and Richard Hays. His critique is eminently reasonable, except that Christian pacifism is no more amenable to human reason than the Cross on which it hangs. Biggar sees the logic but misses God's mystery.

I find it incomprehensible that Biggar confronts spiritual pacifism without a single reference to *satyagraha* — truth force, soul force, God force, indeed, reality force. It's like attempting quantum physics without special relativity. Activist theologians such as Walter Wink, Rosemary Radford Ruether or Desmond Tutu are conspicuous by their absence, leaving the book with a straw man feel to it.

In contrast, Biggar's second chapter is a convincing and fascinating study of soldiers' experience of mutual love in war. Many have told me that while they may not have

agreed with Afghanistan and especially Iraq, they fought because their comrades were there. Here is war as an epiphany of the gods, albeit tribal gods as distinct from that of 'the healing of the nations.'

Chapter 3 is a key exploration of the 'theory of double effect'. Pacing Augustine, this justifies war as a 'harsh kindness', distinguishing effects from their intentions. Thus, 'one may deliberately perform an act... provided that one does not intend that evil' — and I can just imagine the dealer telling the court: 'But M'lord, it was only ecstasy.'

Chapter 4 interrogates 'proportionality' in the First World War. Again, framing, framing, framing! War nearly always looks rational on the short temporal wavelength of the kneejerk reaction. Less so, when stepped back onto the long wave and in this case, the wider context of Europe-wide imperialism.

Chapter 5 takes on David Rodin's challenges to just war theory that distinguish between individual and state morality. Here I surrender. Biggar's intellect transcended my limited cranial capacity.

Chapter 6 attempts to justify not 'giving the Devil benefit of law' in a case study of Kosovo. Biggar casts NATO's motives as humanitarian. But what about the wider undercurrents to which a theologian should attend? What about the role of the Murdoch press having urged Blair to 'Bomb, Bomb, Bomb' Kosovo (in a full front page banner in the *The Sun*) shortly after having backed his election? What about war as a fetish that idolatrously makes up for meaning in a wilfully evacuated world? Or the morality of those 78 days of high level bombing in 1999? Did Biggar notice? I know conscientious generals who certainly did.

The same applies to his exoneration of Tony Blair in the closing chapter's case study of Iraq. Biggar concedes at least 200,000 deaths from the intervention and 'suffering on a massive scale' but concludes: 'I judge that the invasion of Iraq was justified.' Saddam, he emphasises, was 'an atrocious tyrant.' Unexamined is the extent to which he was one of the west's own making or what strengthening Iraqi civic society might have achieved, as with the Arab Spring elsewhere.

Biggar sidelines powerful voices such as Michael Northcott's *An Angel Directs the Storm* as Biblical apocalypticism dipped in Marxism. Well, the Bible is meant to be apocalyptic, is it not? Even David Whetham's edited volume, *Ethics, Law and Military Operations* receives not so much as a bibliographic mention, yet this is the UK Defence Academy's standard teaching text.

In Defence of War is a powerful book, meriting study even as grit to this particular Quaker's oyster. It reminded me of why early Friends called the Devil 'the Great Reasoner.' It reinforced why, in the third millennium, our urgent task is to survey the Cross as the supreme symbol of nonviolence that absorbs the violence or 'sin' of the world. This, as Eliot's rose of love 'in-folded into the crowned knot of fire.' This, the primal *satyagraha*, the mystery of God, 'that moves the sun and other stars.' Alastair McIntosh

