

The Obscenity

AND THE IMPERATIVE OF THE EVIL EXPEDIENT

of War

J. Harold Ellens

“Just war is a medieval European concept that a ruler, by proper declaration and with proper motives might employ armed force outside his normal jurisdiction to defend rights, rectify wrongs, and punish crimes. He could, that is, take up arms for a just cause (which in practice, of course, was interpreted according to one’s own lights). The concept developed as early as St. Augustine in the 4th century and was still accepted by the Dutch jurist and writer on international law Hugo Grotius in the 17th. Its popularity thereafter declined though in the 20th century it enjoyed a revival in somewhat new form, with the idea that a nation might resort to armed force in self-defense or in the execution of collective obligations toward international peace-keeping operations.”¹



So begins the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s account of what Jews and Christians have styled historically as holy war and Muslims call a form of jihad.

I am a soldier. I have been for fifty years. I served in three wars and was wounded in two of them. I hate war. But I am *for* the present war in Iraq. This article does not give an account of why I am a soldier, why I hate war, or why I am for the present war. Rather, it sets forth a perplexing ambiguity that every human being, in my judgment, should consider with the utmost seriousness as a central problem for human integrity.

I should like to begin by reviewing briefly the history of just-war theory and its purposes to demonstrate that just-war theory is a tacit and obscene affirmation of massive violence, as well as a legitimization of its methods.

JUST WAR, JIHAD, AND HOLY WAR

The origins of just-war theory can be found in Clement of Alexandria's development of a theme taken from Philo's concept of the Logos. Philo understood the Logos to be a pervasive expression of the divine spirit throughout the universe, constituting the organizing principle in both the physical and moral universes. The Logos was both the template for the divine creation of both of those universes and also the expression of the structure, order, law, and word of God for humankind. Clement emphasized the role of the Logos as the divine law and the medium of God's authoritative word or self-expression on matters pertaining to human life in the world. He believed that Christians were called to obey both the word of God and the rule of governmental authorities or laws. If a conflict arose between these two sources of authority, Christians were to appeal to the higher law, namely the Logos. This moved Clement to articulate the notion that just cause might exist for open rebellion against an oppressive government.

The ancient Greeks had anticipated Clement in this view, and Augustine followed his line of thought two centuries after him in developing the early Christian version of just-war theory. Roman law changed the Greek concept of peace, as a period of time in history, into a legal state of affairs in which specified regulations applied to the behavior of combatants. These notions were extrapolated for the formulation of regulations protecting noncombatants and personal property. "In ancient Greece and Rome . . . a just war (*bellum justum*) meant not one that was just in nature but one that complied with the formalities demanded by law and religion for engaging in war."²

Augustine was clearly aware of the historic Roman legal theory and also of Clement's rather primitive hints at order, justice, and decency in war. Under Constantine, Christian ideals came to dominate the Empire, and so it became necessary to elaborate the rationale of various practical arguments

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Christians had been offering for a couple of centuries to justify their service in the Roman army.

In the fourth century C.E., Augustine, in *De Civitate Dei*, developed an intricate argument for the distinction between the secular state, The City of This World, and the state infused with Christian ideals, The City of God. The distinction was the foundation for a further argument regarding the reconciliation and integration of the ideas of these two cities, that is, of our mundane and transcendental worlds, politically and ethically. In that context, he laid down the basic rubrics of just-war theory that have been in the back of the Western mind ever since, though today they are grounded in secular legal principles. Both Hugo Grotius, a Dutch legal philosopher of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and Francisco de Vitoria, a Spanish theologian of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, fleshed out Augustine's construct.

Grotius wrote *De Jure Belli ac Pacis (On the Law of War and Peace)*, which was published in 1625. The principles laid down were cogent and clear. First, war was unjustified except in defense or to set right some major international wrong. Second, war must have an adequate cause. Third, it must have a potentially constructive outcome—be able to do more good than harm. Fourth, it must be preceded by viable attempts at alternative solutions and by a legal declaration of war. Fifth, there must be no excessive force or destruction but be proportional to the cause and objective. Sixth, noncombatants and prisoners of war must be protected from harm or abuse. Seventh, there must be no wanton destruction of property. Eighth, war must not be waged for the acquisition of territory. Ninth, provision must be made for conscientious objection. Tenth, war must be conducted with adequate force to achieve the objective. Eleventh, there must be a constructive disengagement or exit strategy. Twelfth, the completion of the war must lead to reconciliation. Grotius and Vitoria both opposed the building of empires, such as those

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in South America and Africa, censuring the European nations for subjugation and abuse of native or primitive people; they both opposed racism as justification for slavery.

These philosophical and legal efforts to introduce ethical structure into the practice of military violence certainly constituted an admirable effort to corral the moral turpitude that war always evinces and to resolve its inherent ambiguity and inevitable monstrosity. However, it gives one pause to realize that these efforts to structure war morally have a shadow side—the implied justification of the resort to violence for the sake of achieving final solutions. Once that justification is established, the moral question of war in and of itself is removed from the

ethical and political equation. This action creates a psychological atmosphere in which a host of evils are hatched, not the least of which is the provision of a rationale for almost any kind of field expedient that might seem necessary in a developing combat situation. This puts humane constraints in jeopardy, makes ultimate violence for final solutions the order of the day, and places war as an objective phenomenon into a category outside of the domain of our normal censures of violence. It legitimizes war as a form of violence.

As far as I know, no one has ever addressed this shadow side of just-war theory with any significant depth or breadth. I contend that the very ethical system of just-war theory begs the original and ultimate question, "Is the bestializing obscenity of military violence ever permissible?" Moreover, the solutions offered by just-war theory are merely semantic solutions. We solve the problem of the moral evil of violence by arbitrary definitions of terms.

THE OBSCENITY OF WAR

To certify the legitimacy and justify the moral validity of the violence and bestiality of war in this way is in itself an obscene act, just as war is under every circumstance obscene. War bestializes everything and everyone it touches. It bestializes soldiers by placing sensitive human beings in settings that they must endure in combat; among the broken remnants of their comrades; amid the wrecked cities that once were burgeoning places of living, loving, and laughing children; amid the smoking disaster of a battlefield strewn with shattered technology and artillery-shredded machinery; amid the corpses and mass graves of innocent children and parents who are inadvertent collateral damage. It often seems to be the case that, for two decades after a major military conflict, both winning and losing nations experience an enormous increase in violent crime in the streets of their cities.

It is obscene to traumatize the inner spirits, the psyches, of fine young men and women by subjecting them to the hardship, deprivation, loneliness, fear, and jeopardy to their hope and self-confidence that war, and particularly active combat, brings. The conditions are so far removed from normal, healthy, psycho-social life that they are, and are experienced as, monstrous and inhuman. To subject enemy populations, combatant or noncombatant, to that same degradation and trauma is equally inhumane and obscene.

That is the reason that nobody hates war like a soldier. It is an obscene fiction among the general, naive population of those who have never served that it is the members of the military who make war. It is failed statesmen who have behaved as mere politicians who make war. Soldiers hate war but serve for the sake of those they love. For a soldier, as it should be for a policeman, putting on the uniform is a daily confession that he or she has agreed that, if there is any wounding or killing to be done, he or she will stand in the stead of the civilian. Real soldiers know that, when they put on the uniform, they have already given their lives. It remains only a question of how much fear, loneliness, and pain they will need to endure before the last moment comes.

That is why I make the claim in this article that it is no lon-

ger coherent or tenable to employ such terminology as *just* or *holy* for the monstrous behavior that military operations inevitably are. Military operations are sometimes necessary, but even then, they are obscene, degrading, and monstrous. That there is something heroic about war is mainly the fiction of propagandizers and theater directors. There are heroic moments in war, but they are never moments of consciously motivated heroism. They are, rather, moments of consummate expedience in which a very scared person puts his or her life at risk to meet some significant need.

When we speak of war as "just," we are using legal terminology, which insists that war is legitimate on the basis of actions that the enemy has taken. We are thereby claiming that it is logically justified and, therefore, legally just. First, this is an enormously illogical leap. Second, this line of thought implies a *quid pro quo* rationale. Even though in all the wars in which I served, we employed this logic, it was never true. Sweeping categories of equivalence were constantly put before us as justification for the fight. But there is no justice or equivalence in the slaughter in an open field of five conscripts, or ten thou-

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sand, who have done nothing more than answer their nation's telegram to report for duty.

During all of my years of service the enemy was the USSR. We feared it and hated its threat against us, nationally and personally. One day in the 1980s, I was at a conference in East Berlin. In mid-afternoon, I took a walk through the forest near Potsdam. To my great surprise, in the middle of the forest, I came upon a very impressive structure with elaborate walls and massive, decorative gates. I thought it was a palace, though it was obvious that it had been built in the mid-twentieth century. I was able to read the inscription over the gates in the Cyrillic alphabet and realized that it was a Soviet military cemetery. There, in well-kept silence, lay the honored Soviet dead—row on row of thousands of tombs. I found myself weeping profoundly. To say that they were the enemy was monstrous. They were no different than I, except that they were dead—and a long way from home. Called up by their country, serving for those they loved, dead from doing their duty. To say their uniform made them different from me is obscene. Words like *justice* do not apply. We will need other words, if we are to continue this business.

When we spoke of war as "holy," which of course, we seldom do in the West anymore, we meant that it was sanctioned by God. That is the greatest obscenity of all. We got that model, of course, from the Bible itself. Yahweh the warrior for Israel, who stands in tension with Yahweh the enticer to green pastures in much of the Bible, has fed his violent metaphors continuously into the unconscious archetypes of Western psychology and

culture for four thousand years. “God’s wars” were “good wars,” and vice versa. That is monstrous and hence obscene. No wonder Judaism and Christianity eventually gave that up. But the Islamic jihad is no different than the Jewish extermination of the Canaanites 3,500 years ago and the Christian Crusades 1,000 years ago, all of which were promoted as holy wars.

Jihad originally meant and still mainly means the inner struggle each human faces against evil, that is, against everything within the person or within his or her cultural and social context that may distract one from an intense God-centeredness. That kind of jihad is no different from the injunction of St. Paul and that of the Hebrew ethical prophets that we should have done with evil and triumph over it for the cause of God’s Kingdom in, around, and through us. However, Muhammad betrayed his own cause in this regard when, early in his leadership of the Islamic movement, he resorted to military action to secure his domain in Mecca and Medina, calling this military action a “jihad.” Ever since that time, there has lain at the core of Islam this fatal flaw, waiting to be exploited periodically by any militant who wishes to hijack Islam to justify his own violent purposes. All the monstrosities inherent to calling war “holy” or “just” are also inherent in this employment of the term *jihad*.

THE IMPERATIVE OF THE LESSER EVIL

In light of this line of thought, it is imperative to address the argument of war as the lesser evil. There are times when war is thrust upon us, and we have no constructive alternative but to fight and to do it effectively. That fact of history and of life heightens the problem of the inherent moral ambiguity of war. It is, therefore, an almost inevitable imperative of simple logic to claim that such a war is better than a failure to conduct military operations. When we say it is better, we really do mean that it is pragmatically necessary for the protection or advancement of a desirable quality of life, freedom, decency, and civilization in our world, given whatever the threat is. Therefore, we also mean to say that it is morally better than a failure to defend and enhance these ideals. From that position, it is a short leap of logic, or illogic, to the claim that such military operations are good. Another leap of illogic leads us to the belief that such operations are good in and of themselves, not just pragmatically expedient. At this juncture in the equation, we have arrived at the point of claiming that this lesser of two evils is a “good” evil, indeed, preferable to some other evils. Are we, then, morons to have been seduced into believing such an oxymoron, establishing costly national policy upon this stroke of illogic? We have made legally just and, hence, morally imperative or even sacred a triple leap of illogic and erroneous ethics!

There can be no question that in some important cases war is necessary. To make this discussion more complicated, let me claim at least tentatively that I believe that the current war in Iraq is such a necessary war. What I am concerned about here, however, is that we recognize that the sequence of logical steps I have just unfolded above is a sequence of semantic procedures in which each step is true individually only by definition; that is, these steps are not, taken individually, answerable to reality

in any specific given situation. This means that they may or may not be true and applicable in real-life cases, and when combined they lead us to an impossible oxymoron. Nonetheless, we claim they are principal and we build our destiny from them. Moreover, it is an established psychological principle that how we feel about things is related to how they are named. Therefore, we must be intensely careful with the words we use to express our claims and proclamations regarding the rationale for war, lest we trick ourselves into holding views that are untrue, and, therefore, destructive—at least psychologically, probably logically, and perhaps socioculturally and politically.

The logical or illogical sequence of actions regarding which I am urging great caution is a casuistic notion that lands us in the moral no man’s land of semantic subterfuge. Can we really afford to hang the destiny of humanity and civilization on such a Jesuitical thread? Can we use language such as “lesser evil,” “holy,” or “just” to describe what is mere expedience in situations that have usually developed because of neglect and irresponsible failures to take more honorable, sensible, and timely actions?

We must agree, I think, that there is something that, for want of better wording, we have called “the lesser evil.” We must speak of the imperative of something of that sort, but should we not stop calling it “the lesser evil” because that implies that it is a better evil, indeed, a good evil, given the situation? Why not call it the “Imperative of the Evil Expedient”? That would be honest, psychologically correct, healthy, and logical. It would constitute the basis for an agreement that when we undertake war we are wading into the maelstrom of the moral and socio-cultural underworld, so to speak. We could consciously know that we are deciding out of an unavoidable necessity to engage in barbarous evil. Let us call it what it is and then do it if we must! Let us admit the depravity and injustice of this business of war. Let us no longer invoke the honored principles of law and right with terms like *just* and *ethical* war. Let us no longer invoke God and the sacred with words like *holy* or *jihad*.

In this way, we could, in one fell semantic swoop, remove all of the self-imposed subterfuge by which we make ourselves comfortable with the violence, bestialization, and the moral turpitude of war. We must confront the inherent ambiguity of war, especially when it is expedient, lest we play psychological and semantic tricks upon ourselves and de-civilize ourselves: naming what is obscene as though it is a form of goodness or even godliness. The ancient prophets warned, “Woe to those who call evil good” (Isaiah 5:20).

Nonetheless, we must find ways to handle the perceived imperative of war in circumstances in which we seem deprived of all alternatives and a resort to obscene violence is imposed upon us. What is the likelihood that our unconscious awareness that ultimate violence is always available to solve political, social, and religious impasses, and that it can be given false but consoling names, seduces societies to avoid less violent solutions earlier in the international equation, so as to prevent war?

THE DIVINE DRIVERS

Addressing these ambiguities of war with utter seriousness is

especially necessary because humans are inherently violent when under threat. Our unconscious and conscious values as individuals and as a society are shaped and energized at the archetypal level by the central metaphors of Western civilization. Archetypal structures, as Carl Jung made clear³ are derived mainly from our primal urges toward survival and power, namely, control over our anxiety-inducing environment, from birth on. These archetypes are informed and empowered by the cultural metaphors of our Western tradition, most of which are religious. They derive from ancient Israelite traditions, conveyed to us in the Bible. Unfortunately, these foundational religious texts declare repeatedly that God's method for solving his problems is an early resort to violence: the depopulation of Eden, drowning humankind in a flood, wiping out cities with fire and brimstone, the genocide of the Egyptians and Canaanites, the threatened genocide of the Israelites, the extermination of the ten tribes, the exile of Judah, and the crucifixion of "his only begotten son."

Quite apart from the fact that these metaphoric narratives have no truth in them regarding God's disposition on the use of violence, the unconscious-level function of these traditions shapes us. The theology of grace is even stronger than these stories in the Old Testament and New Testaments, but that perspective of grace has never been able to rise up in a radical transcendence over and away from the conditioning barbarism of the violent metaphors. This is probably because the god of violence appeals more directly to our most primal instincts. Grace, as unconditional positive regard for the enemy, is inherently beyond human imagination.

A second source of destructive religious metaphors is the concept in ancient Israelite religion, mediated to us through the Bible, that we are up against a cosmic conflict; God is up against it too. This is a dualism, resident in our unconscious worldview, imported into ancient Judaism from Zoroastrianism during the Babylonian exile, and which gives us a rule-of-thumb solution to the problem of suffering and evil. It is a lie, of course. There is no evil god out there operating in tension with the god of grace and creativity. The evil in this world is only that which we do to ourselves. There is no empirical, historical, or literary evidence for cosmic evil forces, to say nothing about the absolutely crazy concept of ontic or primordial evil. That, in itself, should give us pause to reconsider this monstrous thing called war, expedient or inexpedient, and our unconscious inclination to justify it as a moral or sacred imperative.

CONCLUSION⁴

Despite the illogic of just or holy war, nations continue to arm for the expediency and call it by idealizing names. Nobody hates war like a soldier, yet the very existence of the well-prepared soldier or armed force may facilitate a neglectful and irresponsible political process that fails to produce statesmen and so causes us to allow conditions to deteriorate to the point at which we can and must employ armed forces, justifying the action as being in line with the nature and method of God. How truly obscene it is to "let slip the dogs of war"! Furthermore, regardless of the urgency of the Imperative of the Expedient Evil in any given situation, can there ever be a logical, legal, or

moral justification for what has lately become honored with the estimable name of preemptive defense? To justify the bestiality of war on the ground of preemptive defense moves the enterprise of war out of moral or ethical bounds by making it a matter of the private judgment of the warring nation or local commander. It was precisely that dangerous kind of out-of-bounds ethical end-run that the entire history of just-war theory development was most interested in preventing. Surely, such a rationale for military action undercuts efforts to establish humane constraints on warring nations and on war itself. This new military philosophy, hatched by the Israelis in their current conflict with the Palestinian Liberation Organization and adopted more recently by supporters of the current war in Iraq, is blatant violation of all human sense of justice.⁵ ■■

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Notes

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropedia*, vol. 5 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1974), p. 646.
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropedia*, vol. 19
3. Heinrich Karl Fierz, *Jungian Psychiatry* (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1991), pp. 17–86, 329–64; Carl Gustav Jung, ed. Robert Coles, *Selected Writings* (New York: BOMC, 1997), pp. 3–37, 141–284, 407–96; Carl Gustav Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 18–310.
4. Regarding a thought for further study, I suspect that we must work on the psychological question as to why humans reject ambiguity and move to violent ultimate solutions rather than rejecting violence and embracing ambiguity.
5. Moreover, such rationale is unnecessary, and essentially inapplicable, particularly to the Iraq war. Those who have not yet noted the overwhelming evidence for Saddam Hussein's long standing active "war" on his own people, his support of the suicide bombings by the PLO, his repeated activity or complicity in the various attacks upon the United States during recent years, and his support of Al Qaeda simply do not wish to know truth and deal with reality. It is my perception that war in Iraq, in that sense, particularly after the World Trade Center attack, was forced upon us as the Imperative Evil Expedient.