

PERSONAL VOICES:

In the Service of Peace, In Defense of War

Reflections on War of a Liberal Catholic in Mormon Utah

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ANXIETY AND FRUSTRATION HAVE accompanied my resistance to the second Bush war on Iraq. I feel such discontent partly because the Roman Catholic Church in Utah tends to be ultraconservative in theology and politics. While Catholic leadership worldwide, including Pope John Paul II, vehemently opposed the war, many of my coreligionists, especially locally, have supported the U.S. president with great fervor. Meanwhile, and just as paradoxically, the Catholic Left, who rarely support the present pope in anything, have hailed his position with respect to the war as prophetic and morally exemplary. This essay reflects on how and why Catholics in the United States responded to the war; it also examines my own complex reactions, paralleling those of my liberal Mormon friends and DIALOGUE writer Jeffrey Johansen, to the U.S. assault on Iraq. Yet marked as my views may be by proverbial shades of gray, let me be clear: I oppose this second Gulf War and cannot endorse the sentiments or the policy that led us to send troops for a second time against Saddam Hussein. I'll begin with some practical information about Catholicism, outline the historical

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Roman Catholic position on war, compare current Catholic responses to the war to those described by Johansen, and finally consider my own stand.

Like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Roman Catholic Church is hierarchical and patriarchal: it has a single leader (the pope); a group of councilors to the pope called cardinals, who have the exclusive right to elect the pope; bishops, who represent the highest order of ministry; priests, who are the local ministers of the church; and laity, or ordinary Catholics understood to be members of a "priestly people." Despite such nominal priesthood, no lay person can celebrate the rite of Eucharist (the ordinary worship service of the Church) nor hear confessions. No woman can be an ordained priest. Unlike LDS men, not all Catholic men are assumed to be called to priesthood, which is just as well since one qualification for most Catholic priests is celibacy.

Catholic doctrine comes in several forms, most notably dogma, a designation "widely used in a strict sense for all and only those truths that have been revealed by God and proposed as such by the [Catholic] Church for belief by the Faithful, that is, those things . . . [that] have to be believed on divine and Catholic Faith. . . . [T]he truth . . . has to be part of the public revelation. . . . [I]t has to be declared by the Church's authority to be believed as revealed."¹ In other words, Catholic belief is determined by Church leaders who interpret scripture and preserve tradition. Such leaders are always male and clerical, with formal training in theology.

Surprisingly, however, this rigid structure for teaching matters of faith does not exclude Catholic laity. Every Catholic is responsible for forming his or her own conscience; and despite a long list of what must be believed and done to be a good member, individual conscience is the last forum of judgment. It must be said, however, that such responsibility is not stressed by those who teach religion. Yet while matters of faith almost never change in the Church, its teaching on morals reflects eventually (i.e., within a century or two) what the faithful perceive to be right or wrong. The teaching with which I am concerned here is that on war.

Just war theory began with Saint Augustine of Hippo in the late fourth century. It was developed and popularized during the Middle Ages, not coincidentally the time of the Crusades. Its first criterion is that war must be waged only when there is "real and certain danger." Second, it

1. "Dogma," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2d ed. (Boston: Gale Press, 2003): 4:811.

must be declared by a competent authority; third, rights preserved must be proportionate to the lives that will be lost; fourth, all other peaceful alternatives must have been tried and found wanting; fifth, it must be fought for a just reason; and sixth, it must have reasonable chance of success.² As might be expected, conservative Catholic theologians and lay persons believe that the second Iraqi war satisfied these criteria. Like many of my Mormon neighbors, they support the war and President Bush's calling for it.

Conservative Catholics today would fit the image William B. Prendergast suggests in his book, *The Catholic Voter in American Politics*: they are anti-abortion with few or no shades of gray to their position; they adhere to the teaching that homosexual acts are intrinsically morally disordered; they support the U.S. president and military; and they vote Republican. Older white males usually support the Church ban on artificial contraception (especially its use by young women), although the decreasing birthrate among American Catholics suggests that women and men, conservative or not, have begun to exercise freedom of conscience with respect to this issue. Such practice is a response to the failure rate of the approved "rhythm method" (also known as "Vatican roulette") in preventing conception.

However, the conservative American Catholic found himself or herself in an awkward situation with respect to the second Gulf War. The pope and the Vatican came out firmly opposed to a preemptive strike, and the pope had some damning things to say about the arrogance and greed of the American president and our country. Nonetheless, very conservative Catholics simply dismissed the pope's words. At least one family I spoke to claimed that the pope was being naive about the evils in Iraq. In this, they echoed the sentiments expressed by the conservative Catholic press. For example, Father Richard Neuhaus, author and editor-in-chief of *First Things: The Journal of Religion and Public Life*, asserted:

As St. Thomas Aquinas and other teachers of the just war tradition make clear, war may sometimes be a moral duty in order to overturn injustice and protect the innocent. The just cause in this case is the disarmament of Iraq, a cause consistently affirmed by the Holy Father and reinforced by 17 resolutions of the Security Council. Whether that cause can be vindicated

2. Joan Chittister, O.S.B., "Random Thoughts on Just War Theory," *Catholic Peace Voice* 28, no. 2 (2003): 3.

without resort to military force, and whether it would be wiser to wait and see what Iraq might do over a period of months or years, are *matters of prudential judgment beyond the competence of religious authority* (emphasis mine).³

Such a statement seems ironic issuing from a man who agrees so fully with the pope on so many other matters. The implication of the last sentence is that the pope doesn't understand how evil Saddam Hussein is nor what actions he may precipitate on a worldwide scale. Neuhaus suggests that the pope is politically naive—a remarkable view to take of a man who survived the anticlerical regime in communist Poland and whom some credit for the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Conservative Catholics are similar to those Mormons described by Jeffrey R. Johansen in his essay, "Wars of Preemption, Wars of Revenge." Johansen states, "Many Mormons, being politically conservative, may well support this . . . preemptive war. The members of both houses of Congress who are Mormon are squarely behind this dramatic turn in policy. It surprises me that I have heard so little said among Latter-day Saints about two very clear and very relevant stories in the Book of Mormon."⁴ Johansen cites the war of revenge perpetrated by the Nephites against the Lamanites contrary to the advice of the Nephite general, Mormon, and he reminds us of its disastrous consequences. He also calls attention to the refusal of another Nephite commander, Gidgiddoni, to launch a preemptive strike against the Gadianton robbers. His conclusion is that those Latter-day Saints who profess belief in the Book of Mormon would do well to withhold support for the Iraq war. My Mormon friend Jeanne, at least before the war started, thought of George W. Bush as a holy man and the war as a holy cause. Mormons, too, seem intent on ignoring their scriptures and the pronouncements of their leaders.

My analysis of the U.S. population's overall approval of the war—despite the flimsiness of the president's evidence for weapons of mass destruction or collusion between Saddam and Osama Bin Laden, despite the calls of religious leaders worldwide for moderation, despite U.N. disapproval—parallels Johansen's. People felt terribly insecure after 9/11 and

3. Reverend Richard Neuhaus, "Father Richard Neuhaus on the Iraqi Crisis: Disarmament as a Just Cause," *Rome Zenit*, online edition, March 10, 2003, <http://www.catholicjustwar.org/neuhaus.asp>.

4. Jeffrey R. Johansen, "Wars of Preemption, Wars of Revenge," *DIALOGUE* 35 (Fall 2002): 236–38.

needed revenge on someone. When bombing Afghanistan did not bring the necessary relief (we never even found Bin Laden), people seized on Iraq as a place that past success said we could easily destroy. We would show the rest of the world that we were still the most powerful nation on earth. The war would also demonstrate that neither political nor religious arguments would stay our hand.

Liberal Catholics, unmoved by such feelings, believed that the war was uncalled for. Yet these members of the Church do not usually side with its hierarchy. Ordinarily they feel no need to justify disagreement with its official teaching. They believe that many moral issues are matters of private conscience. They are likely to use birth control, support civil protection of homosexuals and of women's rights, and belong to groups seeking peace and social justice. Groups such as Pax Christi (an international Catholic organization for nonviolence), Call To Action (an international Catholic organization for empowering the laity), and Network (an American Catholic social justice lobby) have published articles by other Catholics—theologians and political scientists, clergy and laity—that contested support for Gulf War II. In doing so, they can claim the pope himself as an unaccustomed ally.

In his annual speech at the start of the new year, Pope John Paul II told the Vatican's diplomatic corps:

War is never just another means that one can choose to employ for settling differences between nations. . . . As the Charter of the United Nations organization and international law itself remind us, war cannot be decided upon, even when it is a matter of ensuring the common good, except as the very last option and in accordance with very strict conditions, without ignoring the consequences for the civilian population both during and after the military operations.⁵

More powerfully, according to the *Albany Times Union*, the pope declared: "When war, as in these days in Iraq, threatens the fate of humanity, it is ever more urgent to proclaim, with a strong and decisive voice, that only peace is the road to follow to construct a more just and united society.

5. "Breaking News," *Irish Examiner*, online edition, January 13, 2003, <http://breaking.tcm.ie/2003/01/13/story84104.html>.

. . . Violence and arms can never resolve the problems of men.”⁶ The Vatican, the city-state of which the pope is head, also made clear its opposition to what U.S. officials called a “preventive war” against Iraq, saying it would not qualify as a just war.

The numerous statements by (or in the name of) the pope are undeviating in their insistence that a U.S. preemptive strike against Iraq did not meet just war criteria. Unfortunately, however, the unity against the war claimed by Cardinal Pio Laghi, special envoy of John Paul II to President Bush, is exaggerated, as any reference to a dozen or so American Catholic writers and speakers like Father Richard Neuhaus would show.⁷ Ultimately, like Mormons, Catholics of good faith have divided themselves into opposing camps on the question of the war’s moral defensibility.

My own stand results from several decades of envisioning Jesus as a person of peace, a stance shaped by my psychology and personal history. I wept for joy when the Berlin Wall fell and in frustration and pain when the first Bush Iraqi war was declared. My sorrow later turned to anger when I intuited that George W. Bush lied to get us into the second Iraqi war and that U.S. citizens supported it less out of naiveté and more out of a desire for revenge because of 9/11. The first Bush war disappointed me and severely challenged my sense that the United States had evolved beyond physical violence against other countries. The second war threatened my feelings of loyalty and even provoked doubt about the existence of God whose name the Bush administration invoked repeatedly in its calls for war.

Deep empathy with those who suffer political oppression permeates my perception of the world; but my life history, too, contributes to the views I hold today. I entered the convent at seventeen as a devout Catholic girl and left it at forty-three as a woman still driven by a gospel vision. In the early 1980s, then-priest Father Matthew Fox wrote a book called *Whee!*

6. “Pope Says Iraq War Threatens Humankind,” *Albany Times Union*, online edition, March 23, 2003, A5, <http://www.timesunion.com/library/summary> list.

7. “Statement of Cardinal Pio Laghi, Special Envoy of John Paul II, to President George Bush,” *L'Osservatore Romano: Official Newspaper of the Pope*, March 5, 2003, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/peace/documents/peace_20030306_card-laghi-usa-meeting_en.html.

We, Wee All the Way Home: A Guide to a Sensual, Prophetic Spirituality (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Co., 1976) that found its way into the library of the convent where I lived. Fox wrote of men's violence against women, the earth, and other men, especially the vulnerable. Inspired by Fox's work, I began to read the Gospels in a new way. I noted that while Jesus evinced anger on several occasions and acted violently at least once, he consistently defended the powerless, especially the poor and those judged as "sinners" and outsiders by his society. He ultimately refused to meet force with force, even though eschewing violent reprisal would lead to his own crucifixion and death. Because these Gospel texts are so central to my stand against war, I want to devote some space to them.

Jesus's anger precipitates a violent outburst from him in three specific passages. First, Jesus gets angry and curses a fig tree (Matt. 21:18–19). I don't find this a serious example of anger—even if I shudder as an environmentalist that Jesus, driven by peevishness, causes a tree to shrivel up and die. (I'm reminded of the commercials for Snickers that show horrible results of hunger, and I have to wonder how hungry Jesus was.) Second, and more seriously, Jesus drives the money changers out of the temple (Matt. 21:12–16). While he wasn't kind, he doesn't seem to have done damage to wares or vendors since he isn't accused of criminal offense. More importantly, his motivation for the act was the misuse of holy ground: Jesus objected not only to using a house of prayer as a place to make profit, but also as a place to cheat one's fellow Jews. No evidence presents itself that his actions were motivated by anything other than piety and charity.

The third moment occurs at the Last Supper. Jesus allows the disciples to bring a sword to the Garden of Olives (Luke 22:36–38), but in the garden he chastises Peter for using it, saying that they who live "by the sword" shall die by it (Matt. 26:52). Some scholars believe that Jesus commanded the sword to be brought so he could make this very point. Such a reading accords better with the majority of his teachings than the possibility that he would use the sword to protect himself by injuring others. So while Jesus prophesies that he comes to bring not peace but the sword (Matt. 10:34), this declaration describes the result of adhering to his teaching rather than what he wishes to happen.

While instances of Jesus's anger are few, New Testament moments when Jesus spurns or teaches us to spurn aggression are numerous. A few such examples include the following: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:10); "If a man strikes you on one cheek, offer to him the other"

(Matt. 5:39); "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). When he describes the right uses of power, Jesus says that whoever wishes to govern must serve the rest (Matt. 23:11–12). At the Last Judgment, those invited into the kingdom have given to the poor, the outcast, and the prisoner (Matt. 25:34–45).

Perhaps the most powerful moment of witness to nonviolence occurs in the accounts of the passion. Jesus offers no resistance to those who arrest and falsely accuse him, assuring Peter that he need only petition his Father and "twelve legions of angels" would respond, presumably to deal death and destruction to his enemies (Matt. 26:53). My own sense of the passion is that it culminates a life of learning (insofar as Catholicism understands Jesus growing experientially in wisdom); it validates the power of nonresistance. Refusing to meet aggression with aggression, anger with anger, and hatred with hatred, Jesus gives personal witness to the power of peacemaking. Killed at the behest of his own people by an occupying government, Jesus rises from the dead. His first word to his apostles after the resurrection is "peace" (John 20:19).

Jesus's espousal of peacemaking became a subject of my meditations through much of my religious life. Over the years, I became convinced that the message of the resurrection was that the only triumph over evil is nonviolence. This idea had become a major inspiration in my political understanding by the time President George Bush declared the first Iraq war. I had believed that the American people, having lived through the horrors of two world wars and the quagmire of Vietnam, would renounce war forever. When President George Bush ordered the U.S. bombing and invasion of Iraq, I was stunned. While this attack was not preemptive and world opinion supported Bush's reaction, I knew our stated purpose of "liberating" the Kuwaitis was at best euphemistic. Kuwait is, after all, a constitutional monarchy where, according to our own CIA, only 10 percent of the people (all of them male) may vote. "Liberation" for Kuwait will require social changes far more complex than simply causing an occupying force to withdraw.

When terrorists struck at the United States on September 11, 2001, I wondered to what extent the attack was motivated by U.S. aggression in the Middle East. My anger and anguish over George W. Bush's threat of a strike against Afghanistan, and then his preemptive invasion of Iraq, grew until the president finally announced that we had "won" the war and were

pulling out. I have felt betrayed by my own compatriots whose support of the war seems to compromise the very principles of peace and justice we have long prided ourselves on. I have been puzzled by a nation that has seemed increasingly under the sway of the religious right but which has ignored the counsel against the war of religious leaders from almost every major U.S. denomination, especially if not supported by the United Nations. David Skidmore, writing for Episcopal News Services in December 2002, reported:

In a letter to President Bush drafted Thanksgiving week and signed by over 30 of the 47 denominational and faith group leaders making up the [Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago], Chicago's religious leaders urged the President to continue working with other nations for greater security in the Middle East and Persian Gulf "while avoiding, if at all possible, a costly, dangerous and destructive war."⁸

The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago includes "most mainstream Protestant and Catholic denominations, along with the Chicago Board of Rabbis, the Council of Islamic Organizations, several Baptist conventions, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, the Salvation Army, and the Unitarian Church."⁹ Reconciling American religious self-righteousness about making war on Iraq with such religious leaders' resistance to it seems impossible.

Our bombing and shooting of Iraqis has led me to an examination of my own life and to a reflection on my own violent tendencies. I have played (for longer hours than I want to admit) video games which entail eradicating whatever "monsters" appear on my computer screen. I enjoy James Bond movies as well as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. I have followed television shows like *The Highlander*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Hercules*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* with glee. Seeing bad guys beaten to a pulp and murderers die in agony gives me satisfaction on some visceral level. If I use the excuse that these instances are fictitious and are, therefore, safe ways to express my aggressive tendencies, then I must face the ways in which my anger surfaces in real life. For example, I have slammed doors hard enough to make paint fall off; I have cuffed my pet rat on the snout when he per-

8. David Skidmore, "Chicago Religious Leaders Ask President Bush to Give Peace a Chance," *Episcopal News Service*, online edition, December 2002, <http://gc2003.episcopalchurch.org/ens/2002-272.html>.

9. *Ibid.*

sisted in doing something I didn't want him to do; I have slammed a door in a neighbor's face when she came to argue with me about a job I was doing; I have ranted at my sister when she said, quietly but with conviction, that she supported the war. When my previously mentioned friend and neighbor Jeanne spoke positively about Bush, I cut her short with a vituperative speech about him. Even my tendency to argue about almost everything, a tendency reinforced by my role as a teacher of argumentation to university freshmen, marks me as more violent than I like to admit.

I submit my confession not because I think I am a really bad person or because I am looking to be judged by readers, but because I believe that being "for peace" is difficult in ways overlooked even by outspoken war critics. Morally, for example, and despite my own espoused ideal of charity toward all, I find myself increasingly intolerant of religious and political conservatism. My gut-level reaction is to brand those who disagree with me as intellectually and morally inferior. My ability to discuss issues on which I differ from others is hampered by being angered into speechlessness.

So where does this leave me? While I do not believe that being either a doormat or passively aggressive identifies a person of peace, I submit that we who wish to follow that path must examine ourselves for ways in which we fail to measure up to our own ideals. Yet admitting our own limitations does not mean we must be paralyzed by them. Given that the U.S. has become increasingly imperialistic in the past twenty years, given that it alone possesses the power it manifested in Iraq to reduce any other nation on earth to rubble, given that the majority of U.S. citizens seems willing to support war whenever a leader finds such a move expedient—those of us who oppose war, the U.S. and international peace communities, must be willing to oppose it with our money, our time, even, if necessary, our lives. But whatever the cost, we must continue to strive for peace, both here and abroad, both politically and in the battlefields of our own hearts. Of those who profess to become persons of peace, no less can be asked. No less must be required.