

## “IS THERE JUST WAR?”

### Introduction

In late May of this past year, a week or so before a planned departure for the United Kingdom, I received my Quest assignment from Mr. Robert Nance. It was a well timed communiqué, for during the month of June I was scheduled to serve as Chaplain with the Gladstone Library at St. Deiniol's, in Hawarden, Wales (Sir y Fflint).

The Gladstone Library is located in a small village in the northeast corner of Wales, not far from the historic English city of Chester. The village was home for Gladstone, who for over half a century was a giant in British imperial politics, including four different terms as Prime Minister (1868-1874, 1880-1885, 1886, 1892-1894). The library serves as a memorial for Gladstone. It is a unique research institution, providing dining and residential accommodations for students, church clergy and lay leaders, university professionals, and others in their various pursuits. It was there, amidst an abundance of books, Gladstone memorabilia, Victorian charm and ambiance, that I pondered my assignment, Is There Just War?

A number of events occurred during my stay that intersected with my Quest. I will mention just two. Early in the month “cyber war” was in the news. It was reported that British intelligence hacked into a well known al-Qaeda website, and replaced a downloadable 67 page color manual entitled, “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom” (by “The AQ Chef”) with “The Best Cupcakes in American”, a recipe published and credited to Ellen DeGeneres. The al-Qaeda website was troubled by this unexpected

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volley in defense of security - all for two weeks, when cupcake subterfuge was diagnosed, deleted, and our unstable world was back on track.

It was noted, though, cyber-war jousting is no laughing matter. Within the U.S. a “Cyber Command” has been established with consideration being given to classifying cyber attacks as “acts of war.” If the source of an attack can be traced, conventional retaliation will be considered. As assessed by one Brit, a Ministry of Defense cyber team adviser: “A well aimed cyber attack against the City of London could have more devastating consequences than an al-Qaeda dirty nuclear bomb.”<sup>i</sup>

A second event was the spring release of a book by Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan, entitled Cables from Kabul. The book was lauded in review as “unquestionably the most important record yet published of the diplomatic wrangling” that has accompanied Afghan military operations over the last decade. Cowper-Coles was credited for “exposing the mixture of arrogance, overconfidence, and rudderless dithering” that has defined the conflict. He was complemented for composing a work that “will be remembered as one of the best and most well informed accounts of how Britain lost its fourth Afghan war.”<sup>ii</sup>

These two vignettes, from among many, brought pause to my consideration, “Is There Just War?”

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### War in Review

History is replete with war. No era, ancient or modern, escapes war’s wrath. Look wherever you will and you will find somewhere, someone engaged in mortal combat with someone else. Our human history notes no absence of war. Encrypted in our DNA, so it would appear, is a propensity for violence to resolve our differences.

In the Bible the stage is set early. Cain kills Able. The first born of Adam and Eve slays younger sibling. Birth of the first, death of the second, is recorded in all of eight verses on the east side of paradise (Genesis 4:1-8). And you may recall, Cain the Killer is marked, protected by God from the violent who are known to inherit the land (Genesis 4:15)

The Holy Land, Eretz Israel, is said to have been “one of the main military thoroughfares as far back as written annals record.” The first coherent account of an ancient military campaign is chiseled on a tomb dating from the reign of Pharaoh Pepi I, the 24<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a thousand years or more before any mention is made of Israel settling in a promised land.<sup>iii</sup>

War is embedded in the seasons of life. So we read, “in the spring of the year when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out...” (II Samuel 11:1). If there is a “time for every matter under heaven” (Eccles. 3:1), war gets more than an equal portion. Though it may be “vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccles. 4:4), it is time honored vanity, a fixture deeply seeded in our human condition.

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### The Human Response to War

The spectrum of human response to war includes three broad clusters:  
resisters, revelers, and realists.

Resisters abhor war. They recoil and refuse to enter its fray. Traditionally labeled “pacifists,” they resist the use of violence to resolve conflict. In *Lysistrata*, the Greek poet Aristophanes portrayed women striking a pacifist blow against war, suspending bed time privileges until war halt and peace prevail.

In the first century of the Common Era (CE), there existed a Jewish sect, the Essenes, who renounced the world and withdrew from its clashing factions. They embraced a hope that the Deity of their devotion would justly settle all accounts without need of their assistance.

The Christian movement, for well over two centuries, was clearly pacifist in nature. Resistance to war and its legions, with rejection of its efficacy and necessity, can be traced through most generations to this day. John Howard Yoder (*The Politics of Jesus*, 1972), and Stanley Hauerwas (*War the American Difference*, 2011), are two significant names with Indiana connections that have heralded the pacifist tradition of resistance to war.

The formidable opposition to resisters are revelers, who embrace war with a certain gusto. “Happy warriors” is the descriptive term employed by war scholar Michael Walzer. Happy warriors have no peace with peace; they revel in war and are most at home in its inferno.

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Alexander the Great was a Happy Warrior said to have wept when considering no more worlds to conquer.

Teddy Roosevelt, our rough riding 26<sup>th</sup> president (1901-1909), was a happy warrior who championed the manly arts of combat, and passed the fighting spirit on to his children. Roosevelt’s son, Archie, was said to be “an absolutely selfless gladiator who insisted on being the first to smell the enemy’s bad breath, regardless of the risk.”<sup>iv</sup>

George C. Scott, in his famous portrayal of General George Patton (Patton, 1970), is the iconic happy warrior. When beholding a field of battle he enthused: “I love it. God help me, I do love it so. I love it more than life.”

In the mean between resisters and revelers reside the realists. Realists accept war as a reality that can’t be avoided. Call them reluctant warriors, resigned to war as a viable, sometimes necessary course to settle dispute or calm a threat. Realists also recognize a moral dimension to war, and the need for strict measures to curb the human proclivity to escalate violence when war is being waged.

“Pure pacifism,” according to Reinhold Niebuhr, was an ideal not to be realized in the time of human history; as a philosophical construct, as a theological “eschatological sign” it was fine, but in the nuts and bolts of our every day, it was politically irresponsible.<sup>v</sup>

For Niebuhr, the best one can do in this beautiful, brutal world is fight for justice, use as little violence and coercion as possible, and conscientiously humble oneself “all along the way.”<sup>vi</sup> Expressed yet another way, the realist may participate in war, but always with a heavy heart, shunning its glory, rejecting its romance.

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### War – A Working Definition

We need define war. Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), the noted military theorist, spoke of war as “a contest of wills conducted with physical means,” whose object is a better peace, “from one’s own point of view.”<sup>vii</sup> Clausewitz provides another angle when stating, “War is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds.”<sup>viii</sup>

Roger Shinn provides a simple definition: “Violence, when sufficiently massive, is war.”<sup>ix</sup>

War, William James curiously observed, is something people want. It feeds a deep need for thrill and excitement. “War is human nature at its uttermost...It is a sacrament.”<sup>x</sup> More recently, Chris Hedges has written that war is “a force that gives us meaning.” It is a meaning, though, with peculiar “standards of morality.”<sup>xi</sup> For Hedges, war is a “drug,” a “heady narcotic,” an “addiction that slowly lowers us to the moral depravity of all addicts.”<sup>xii</sup>

Michael Walzer, whose work on this subject was most helpful to my quest, has stated, “War is so awful that it makes us cynical about the possibility of restraint, and then it is so much worse that it makes us indignant at the absence of restraint.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Cynicism testifies to our grasp of what is beastly in our behaviors; indignation is indicative that we possess reservoirs to resist the beast. Indignation is a sign of hope that lurking within our nature is the capacity to experience repugnance over the grotesque depths into which we always capable of sinking.

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Just war theory emerges here, among the indignant, whose revulsion would restrain the warring appetite of revelers. And here we encounter what is peculiar to war – Not the violence, but the lack of restraint, the inability to contain our human furies. Roger Shinn makes the observation: “The peculiarity of war is not its violence...The peculiar problem of war is that it represents magnified violence between states or factions unrestrained by government.”<sup>xiv</sup>

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#### Just War: a Trajectory of Roots, Rules, Resistance

The origins of just war theory are found in the writings of Plato (Republic) and Aristotle (Politics; Ethics). The Roman had a proverb, “Inter erna silent leges,” which translates, “in time of war, the law is silent.” Just war theory breaks the silence, giving rise to permissions and prohibitions. For Plato, war was legitimate if it was an effort to restore peace, if it was waged to break a cycle of violence. Wars of conquest, plunder, vengeance need not apply for admission in the Platonic code.

Augustine (354-430 CE), the north African bishop, was an early Christian voice that legitimized the vocation of soldier. It was not good for peace to have barbarians running around sowing discord, pillaging and plundering your basic law abiding citizen. Augustine was instrumental in advancing the theoretical basis for permitting Christians to wage war. “Love,” Augustine wrote, “does not exclude wars of mercy waged by the good.”<sup>xv</sup> And again, “War is a way of punishing sin and sinners...to prevent the sinner from sinning further.”<sup>xvi</sup>

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In the middle ages, the great Jewish thinker, Maimonides (1135-1204), along with Aquinas, the Christian (1225-1274), and Averroes, the Muslim (1126-1198), each addressed the subject of war in the framework of their traditions, each noting categories of permission and prohibition.

General principles have emerged from the work of such as these. To gauge whether a just war be waged, the following criteria must be met:

- (1) War must be declared by a legitimate authority, to ensure the common good of society is served;
- (2) War must be waged with good intention (right reason);
- (3) War must lead to a greater good; to secure peace;
- (4) War must be a measure of last resort, with all other means for conflict resolution having been exhausted;
- (5) War must be waged for defensive, not offensive reasons.

Two further principles serve to limit engagement:

- (1) Proportionality is a rule to be observed; the methods of waging war should not exceed the evil that is opposed;
- (2) Combatants must be distinguished from civilians; civilian population is neither a just nor legitimate target in war.

In the Christian tradition (Augustine & Aquinas) all the above mentioned criteria must be met for a war to be considered just.<sup>xvii</sup> In the words of the Roman Catholic Catechism, these principles and the like are “strict conditions” for “legitimate defense” which require “rigorous consideration.”<sup>xviii</sup>



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Just war principles ‘represent a public theology’ that allow all citizens, all institutions, to reflect deeply “on the ethics of war.”<sup>xix</sup> They offer us “the closest equivalent to a shared global framework for moral evaluation of conflict.” The categories recur again and again in worldwide commentary which is a reflection of the importance and influence of the principles.<sup>xx</sup>

There exists resistance, if not rejection of just war thought. It was John Lyly (1554?-1606) who first commented that “fair play” does not apply in love and war. In Shakespeare’s play, *Henry V*, soldiers get stage time, and they speak: “We know enough if we are the King’s men. Our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us.” Absolution is available to the obedient who strictly follow their orders.

Clausewitz was mindful of those who would curb war conduct. He stated: “To introduce into a philosophy of war a principle of moderation would be an absurdity.”

General Sherman in our Civil War put it thus: “War is cruelty and you cannot refine it.”

General Omar Bradley, the WWII general some may see as the antithesis of Patten, declared, “war has neither the time nor heart to concern itself with the individual and the dignity of humanity.” Bradley was no reveler; he was realist when assessing war had “little room for the niceties of justice.” War was “a wretched debasement of all the thin pretensions of civilization.”<sup>xxi</sup>

War, we are reminded by Michael Walzer, “is always an extreme case of the anarchy of moral meanings.”<sup>xxii</sup>

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So, in this quest we seemingly are caught, teetering between the cynicism that makes us doubt our capacity to restrain ourselves, and revulsion at our ingenuity to exceed behavior we abhor.

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### War and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Adjacent to the grounds of the Gladstone Library there is a rather large cemetery, part of the St. Deiniol’s Church (Church of Wales). It contains a lot of Welsh slate duly noting a number of the lost and fallen in war. The last known survivor of the Light Brigade whose futile charge was made famous by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is there laid to rest.<sup>xxiii</sup> The grave yard contains a memorial commemorating those who fought in the Boer War (1899-1902), the conflict which introduced concentration camps as a strategy to employ in the conduct of war. There, too, lie the remains of those who fought in the Great War (1914-1917), and WWII. It is a rather haunting walk as one ponders if war is just.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has been a bloody mess of numbing proportions, without equal in human history. Indeed, the killing necessitated the rise of a new word in the lexicon of our language, genocide.

The excess of war and its scourge gave rise to its renunciation. Among Christians one can trace the rise of the ecumenical movement, “born amid the debris of World War I.”<sup>xxiv</sup> In the interim period between the WWI and WWII there was a strong witness to peace making, with many churches assessing war as being incompatible with Christian faith. In the aftermath of WWII, particularly with the prospect of nuclear annihilation,

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resistance arose, and with it a questioning of traditional “just war” theory. What good is a “just war” if in its aftermath the world is not fit for human habitation?

In April of 1963, on a Maundy Thursday, Pope John XXIII, issued the papal encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. It was addressed, not only to Bishops and Roman Catholic faithful, but to “all...of good will.” The New York Times editorialized on the teaching, calling it “one of the most profound and all-embracing formulations on the road to peace that has ever been written.” In the encyclical, war was assessed as “*alienum a ratione*,” i.e. war is “madness.” The paper called for “unsparing effort...constant endeavor...and cooperation” to rid the world the threat of war. Noting there is a “frequent divorce” between profession and practice of faith, the pontiff called for ethical instruction, sorely lacking, equal to, if not exceeding, that which is devoted to scientific study and technological progress.<sup>xxv</sup>

Another new term emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe the challenges presented by war and its advance. Robert V. Moss, second president of the United Church of Christ (the denomination with which I am affiliated), summed it up well:

“Although the doctrine of the ‘just war’ is a venerable one in the church, it is becoming increasingly clear that the classical criteria which the theologians have used to classify wars as ‘just’ or ‘unjust’ will no longer serve. In our kind of world, war has become dysfunctional. We now need to put as much effort into defining a just peace as we have done in the past in defining a just war.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

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“Just peace” is a term that strikes new ground between those who would resist war with pacifism, and those happy warriors who revel in the uttermost and its pursuits. Just peace is committed, not to restraining war, but to preventing what makes for war in the first place. Peace is a practice to be waged, as war is waged. “It is to be waged courageously, persistently, creatively, with imagination, heart, and wisdom.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

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### Terror and War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought renewed consideration of “just war”, with the question of whether it has any functional value. Terror, as a tactic, reared its ugly head. Horror and alarm reached new depths. “Terror” was employed on September 11, 2001, as this nation was targeted, with lives lost in Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and New York City. We were not alone in being targeted. In Bali on October 12, 2002; in Madrid, on March 11, 2004; in London, July 7, 2005, terrorists struck with chilling effect.

We have largely groped and floundered and become mired in our response, beginning with the war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom commenced on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001), and the recently concluded War in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003). New language was again coined to justify use of violence: pre-emptive war, pre-ventive war, and pre-clusive war are terms used in philosophical debate. In what served as prelude to the Iraq War, neo-conservative elements exerted considerable pressure upon the Vatican, advocating on behalf of a war prone administration, an amendment of Augustine and Aquinas.<sup>xxviii</sup> The Roman Catholic

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Church was valiant in withstanding the pressure, though feeble, distracted really by its own internal issues, in maintaining any meaningful protest to the war and its conduct. The Roman Church was not alone in its dissent. Almost all Protestant Christian churches historically linked to the ecumenical movement, who one could expect to be well versed in just war theory, considered the Iraq War a “march of folly” from its beginning to its unceremonious ending.<sup>xxix</sup>

The evangelical segment of our culture, which has historically positioned itself outside of the ecumenical movement, was largely supportive of the war, sensing it was a national right and honor to wage war, to right the wrong, to avenge the offense. Yet even among evangelicals there are exceptions. Sojourners Magazine, a noted evangelical publication (Jim Wallis, executive editor), was consistent in its dissent. The current issue (January, 2012) has a lead editorial: “Iraq: It’s Finally Over – and it was Wrong.”

Iraq and Afghanistan serve as examples of war making us cynical about the possibility of restraining conduct; and being so much worse, so that one becomes indignant at the excess. This of course, presumes, that we tilt toward those who would resist, rather than revel, in war. So we have seen that terror brought to rise a vice president who could publicly state we need work “our dark sides.” It brought to light that we will engage in torture as a morally acceptable tactic. And it brought to the highest levels of our government a people who will exploit death, employ deception, to maintain the image of a cause considered noble, necessary and just (review the sorry scenarios that swirl round the death of Pat Tillman, 1976-2004).

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### Conclusion – Is There Just War?

In December of 2009, President Obama, in his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, spoke of “old architecture” buckling under the weight of new threats. Modern technology, the president cited, “allows a few small minded men with outsized rage to murder innocents on a horrific scale.” In this speech President Obama offered a defense of war as a means to attaining, not simply peace, but a “just peace.”

The President’ speech merits study and a sympathetic reading, even if you are obsessed with Republican caucus results from Iowa, or the New Hampshire primary. Still, I caution. We have not yet grasped the fine line that distinguishes “just war” from “holy crusade,” whether sanctioned by church, encouraged by fatwa, or promulgated by the neo-pagan underpinnings of the modern nation state.<sup>xxx</sup>

Caution comes from diverse sources. William J. Fulbright, in his dissent over the Vietnam conflict, wrote: “Power tends to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is particularly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God’s favor.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “collision of immoral power with powerless morality” the major crisis of our times.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Yet another caution is sounded by the National Council of Churches, which has recently published a study paper, a tool for its member churches, entitled “Christian Understandings of war in an Age of Terrorism.” The paper asserts, as part confession, part lament, that those who are heirs to the principles of just war, who depend upon just war principles for moral reflection, are woefully ignorant of the historic moral compass

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that would guide their quest for meaning in an age that demands rigorous moral

discernment. The study paper notes,

“Almost no Christian denomination in the US has formal structures or procedures for evaluating a proposed military action as to whether it meets the criteria for a just war, nor for evaluating ongoing military actions as to whether the criteria for just war are being met. Almost no Christian denomination in the US has procedures in place for giving teaching to their members in the military regarding the expectations the church has for them in case the nation pursues an unjust war or unjust military policies.”

The paper literally pleads on behalf of “integrity” that communities reexamine “just war” theory, to see if it remains tenable in our era of modern warfare.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

St. Augustine remains a perceptive counselor on our human condition, as insightful today as he was so long ago. In the “earthly city,” in which we are but pilgrims those who “desire to dominate are dominated by the very love of domination.” It is in the nature of empires, I surmise, to be animated by this aphrodisiac which clouds our thinking. Blinded by such love, our moral values are quickly compromised, soon surrendered.

Is there just war? I’m caught in the shifting tides of cynicism and indignation, with periodic lapses into indifference (for non-theologians, this is a bold face state of sin). We have not processed recent wars well. Crusading sympathies championed by revelers have trumped, again and again, defenders of just war restraint. I’m a baby boomer, now

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well beyond two score and ten years. I have yet to experience a bona fide constitutional declaration of war. Yet I can count but few years of peace. We have, and we will continue, to pay a steep price for our misadventures.

I am certain of this. We are in desperate need of voices who can sound a different march, who will lead us through the fog of wars without end, not as a crusade, not as national sacrament, but with a firm grasp of just war principles. Failing this, we stand to lose the liberty we cherish, the honor we esteem, the justice we seek, the precious values that elevate us above our brutish inclinations.

Just peace remains my hope, the means to the end I trust, we all seek. Only just war, ending in just peace, stands to tame the “fanatic furies” that lurk within, providing the restraint and discretion we need to attain the peace for which we pray.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The End



### Footnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Daily Telegraph, June 3, 2011, p. 18.
- <sup>ii</sup> The Observer-News Review, Sunday, June 19, 2011, pgs. 37-38.
- <sup>iii</sup> Chaim Herzog and Mordecai Gichon, Battles of the Bible, p. 27.
- <sup>iv</sup> The Lion’s Pride: Theodore Roosevelt and his Family in the Great War,” by Edward J. Renehan, [www.worldwar1.com/dbc/roosev.htm](http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/roosev.htm).
- <sup>v</sup> Richard Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr – a Biography, p. 155.
- <sup>vi</sup> *ibid*, p. 164
- <sup>vii</sup> Clausewitz is quoted in Just War on Terror? A Christian and Muslim Respond, p. 154.
- <sup>viii</sup> Robert G. Clouse, ed., War – Four Christian Views, p. 23.
- <sup>ix</sup> Roger L. Shinn, Wars & Rumors of Wars, p. 237.
- <sup>x</sup> William James made this assessment remarks given to the World Peace Congress, October 7, 1904, in Boston; they were later published in the Atlantic Monthly, December, 1904.
- <sup>xi</sup> The phrase, “peculiar morality,” can be found in William James’, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 283.
- <sup>xii</sup> Chris Hedges, War is a Force that Gives us Meaning, p. 25.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, p. 46.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Roger L. Shinn, Wars & Rumors of Wars, p. 24.
- <sup>xv</sup> Robert G. Clouse, ed., War - Four Christian Views, p. 15.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Richard Sorabi and David Rodin, eds., The Ethics of War, p. 34.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite, A Just Peace Church, p. 17. The criteria for “just war” is somewhat fluid; lists may differ in their wording, but broad consensus, having formed over the years, exists.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Avoiding War”, Section 2309, p. 555.
- <sup>xix</sup> David Fisher and Brian Wicker, Just War on Terror?, p. 5.
- <sup>xx</sup> *idid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Shinn, Wars & Rumors of Wars, p. 194

<sup>xxii</sup> Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, p. 11

<sup>xxiii</sup> The charge of the Light Brigade occurred in the Crimean War (1854-1856), in the Battle of Balaklava (Ukraine). A light cavalry unit of 637 men suffered the loss of 247 of its members in what Alfred, Lord Tennyson, called “the valley of Death.” The Crimean War was a Turkey-Russian contest which Great Britain entered to thwart Russian control of the Dardanelles, which was perceived as a threat to British sea routes.

<sup>xxiv</sup> see Christian Understanding of War in an Age of Terror(ism), a Vision and Study Paper from the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, p. 3.

<sup>xxv</sup> “Pacem in Terris” is available on the web at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Moss’ statement was printed in the United Church Herald, a publication of the denomination, in 1971.

<sup>xxvii</sup> see Just Peacemaking – Ten Practices for Abolishing War, edited by Glen Stassen, p. 9.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Michael Novak, George Weigel, Robert Royal, and Fr. Richard Neuhaus all advocated that preemption in Iraq was justified on the basis of an expanded understanding of “just war” theory. Then Cardinal Ratzinger was quoted as stating, “A preventive war is not in the Catechism.”

<sup>xxix</sup> see Barbara Tuchman’s work, The March of Folly.

<sup>xxx</sup> Paul Tillich referred to the “neo-pagan” constitution of the modern nation state in his work, Theology of Peace, p. 49.

<sup>xxxi</sup> William. J. Fulbright, The Arrogance of Power, p. 4.

<sup>xxxii</sup> see King’s speech, “Where Do We Go From Here?,” delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Leadership Conference, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 1967.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> see “Christian Understanding of War in an Age of Terror(ism), p. 7.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Roger Shinn employed this phrase in his work, Man: The New Humanism, p. 161.