



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on March 6, 2009

A “Just” War or Just a War?

[*Christianity and War and Other Essays Against the Warfare State*](#), by Laurence M. Vance, Pensacola, Florida: Vance Publications, 2008 edition, 418 pages, paperback, \$19.95.

Modern history, particularly with the advent of the 20th century and down to the present, has been marked by one overriding distinguishing feature: war. Without question, the 20th century was the bloodiest in history.

Certainly, the ancients can boast of their share of mayhem. At Cannae, eight Roman legions plus cavalry and allied troops were outmaneuvered and slaughtered by the Carthaginians under Hannibal. As many as 40-50,000 Roman soldiers may have perished. Several centuries later the scene would be replayed outside the walls of Adrianople, where the great legions again fell to the sword, and Emperor Valens with them, at the hand of a desperate Gothic army.

Yet these ancient horrors pale when compared to modernity. Conservative estimates suggest that 20 million perished in World War I and 40 million in World War II alone. And these were just the two largest wars of modernity. Another 2.5 million may have perished in addition for both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. One can picture in the mind the bloody outcomes of the ancient battles — bodies strewn on the battleground, the carrion birds circling overhead — but the sheer scale of modern bloodlust is beyond the mind’s ability to comprehend.

There was reason to hope that as the 21st century got underway, the evils of the past could be left behind. One reason for that hope was the election of George W. Bush. During his campaign for his first term, the media seized upon Bush’s religious faith, and the candidate who was to become president gave plenty of reasons for Christians around the country to think he was sincere. For his part, Bush was very open about what he claimed to believe. At a debate in Iowa when he was asked who his favorite philosopher was, a question that the media no doubt thought would make candidate Bush stumble, he answered with a curveball no one expected. His favorite philosopher, he said, was Jesus.

This was the philosopher who in the Sermon on the Mount said: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” Taking this to heart, would the Bush administration usher in a new age of peace? Even before September 11, 2001, Bush answered “no” by bombing Iraq. And after September 11, the most openly self-professed Christian president in recent decades led the nation into a “war on terror” that included attacking a nation that did not attack us (Iraq), and demanding that





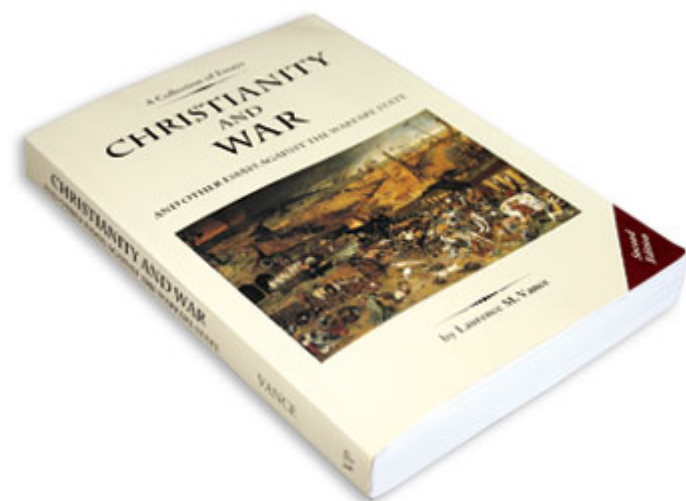
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other nations be either with us or against us.

The answer to what went wrong is long and complex, but a good starting point is an examination of what Christian theology and belief has to say about war, and a good starting point for that, particularly for evangelicals who most fervently supported the Bush administration, can be found in *Christianity and War*, Laurence Vance's important collection of essays on the subject.

Vance's book is wide ranging. Through 79 essays, the author examines all aspects of war and its relationship to Christian thought and behavior with particular emphasis on events of the last decade. For one who considers himself or herself to be a Christian, particularly if he or she has supported one or more aspects of the War on Terror, the book is a disconcerting read. That should be a sign of its value.

Right off the bat, Vance confronts the reader with Charles Spurgeon. The great 19th-century Baptist preacher lived and worked at a time that is in some ways "a distant mirror," to borrow a phrase from historian Barbara Tuchman, to our own age. Instead of the American "empire" stretched across the world, in Spurgeon's time the sun never set on the British Empire and, like American troops today, British soldiers then were active around the world in low-level conflicts and nation building.



In the context of the British Empire, Spurgeon was not shy about trying to convince his fellow citizens that Christians had no business being involved in any war. On December 26, 1858, at Royal Surrey Gardens, Spurgeon confronted his fellow Christians, saying, "The Church of Christ is continually represented under the figure of an army; yet its Captain is the Prince of Peace; its object is the establishment of peace, and its soldiers are men of a peaceful disposition. The spirit of war is at the extremely opposite point to the spirit of the gospel."

Again, a few months later on May 1, 1859, Spurgeon warned: "The Lord's battles, what are they? Not the garment rolled in blood, not the noise, and smoke, and din of human slaughter. These may be the devil's battles, if you please, but not the Lord's."

Vance argues, in concert with Spurgeon, that the real Christian is properly at war on a spiritual level, but not on the physical plane. "The Christian soldier," he approvingly quotes Spurgeon, "hath no gun and no sword, for he fighteth not with men."

But what happens when men fight with you? What is the proper response to an unjust attack on innocents, such as that visited upon the unwitting civilian victims of 9/11? The traditional Christian approach would be based on the just-war theory originally espoused by Cicero and later further



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developed by the Christian theologians Augustine and Aquinas.

For a war to be considered "just," several conditions must be met. First, a nation fighting a just war cannot be the initiator of hostilities. Instead, it must first be attacked, but even that is not enough to justify a war. The attacker, in addition to the act of attacking, must inflict lasting and grave damage. The victim, before responding militarily, must have explored every other option that could rectify the situation without resort to war. All other means of preventing further conflict must be shown to be impractical or ineffectual. Finally, the war should go forward only if there are serious prospects for success. These are key components of establishing *jus ad bellum*, the right to go to war.

Despite its ancient pedigree and its development by the greatest theologians of the ancient Church, Vance argues, based on the work of philosopher Robert Brimlow of St. John Fisher College in New York, that just-war theory is inadequate. Brimlow, Vance notes, points out that "one of the primary difficulties with the just war requirements should be apparent: it is not very clear when the conditions of just cause and last resort have been satisfied."

To Brimlow's observations, Vance adds one additional point that is perhaps most relevant to the wars of modernity. "I might also add," he writes, "that it is the state that decides to go to war, not the people, most of whom want nothing to do with war."

To this, however, just-war theory does have something relevant to add. In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas notes that for a war to be just, it must be initiated by the authority of the sovereign. "For it is not the business of a private individual to declare war," Aquinas argues.

The question, then, is where does sovereignty lie? In the United States, the Constitution makes the answer clear. The Preamble unambiguously points out that it is the people who are sovereign in the United States, noting, "We the People of the United States ... do ordain and establish this Constitution." And in forming this Constitution that governs the legitimate sphere of government business, the people determined, in Article One, Section 8, that Congress alone shall have the power:

To declare War, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and make Rules concerning Captures on Land and Water;

To raise and support Armies...;

To provide and maintain a Navy;

To make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces;

To provide for the calling forth of the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions.

Thus it is the Congress alone, exercising the sovereignty of the people on their behalf, that can determine whether the nation shall go to war. Following Aquinas, no war can be just for America, then, unless it be declared by Congress.

Laurence Vance makes a strong case in [Christianity and War](#) that America's wars largely have been unjust from a Christian perspective. Even those who may adhere to just-war theory where Vance seems to find it inadequate must agree, if indeed they follow Aquinas, that our wars this decade, and indeed all those since 1945, are unjust, since Congress has been derelict in its duty.



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