

# War Can't Be Just. Listen to the Veterans

Colleagues,

We're six days away from this year's Veteran's Day observance. It bears remembering that the day first appeared on calendars as Armistice Day, recalling that eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, when the armies stopped shooting on the Western Front. This past summer I listened to an audio recording of Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, about the critical and dreadful first month of World War I. The Germans almost won the war in those brief few weeks, but not quite; and a consequence of how they almost won was a moral outrage, especially in Britain, that ensured the conflict's grinding, butchering continuation until, four years later, the parties finally wore each other out, and one said "uncle" first. In the aftermath, the insanity of what Europe had done was obvious to all. When people, looking back, talked of "the great war," they were speaking merely of its scope, not its character.

27 years later, the Second World War was ending, and now the view was different. So evil had Hitler been, that the shapers of American memory began telling of "the good war" that took him down. John Bodnar of Indiana University argues that it took a while for this idea to emerge as a national consensus. In the two-part offering that comes your way today and next week, you'll find reason for being chary about applying that adjective to any war at all, even the one that stopped the Holocaust. "Good" and "necessary" don't always go hand in hand. Nor, as you'll see, do "necessary" and "just."

Ed Schroeder is our author. Some weeks ago he was finishing the book review you'll find below, when, from the blue, he got an invitation to attend a screening of a new documentary that touched squarely on the book's topic. So he went, he watched,

and after that he wrote a letter to the woman who made the film. That's for next week.

Meanwhile Wednesday will be here. Time was when people paused at 11 o'clock on November 11 for a moment of solemn silence in honor of the dead and in quiet thanksgiving for combatants who survived. I can't recall when that happened last. Might we who share these posts revive the practice, at least among ourselves? And in that quiet moment, let's dare, with Christ in view, to ask Almighty God to pardon what can't be pardoned, to have mercy on the human race, and to wrap his damaged sons and daughters in the arms of his love.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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#### Book Review:

Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War

by Robert Emmet Meagher

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014

Robert Emmet Meagher is Professor of Humanities at Hampshire College. Here, in his own words, is the gist of this book:

"Just war doctrine was never more than a theory and at its worst it was a lie, a deadly lie. It promised at least the possibility of war without sin, war without criminality, war without guilt or shame, war in which men and women would risk their lives but not their souls or their humanity. This theory has been tested for sixteen centuries, and has failed. It is time to declare its death, write its autopsy, reveal its deadly legacy, and point to a future beyond just war."

I came away from this book with a new understanding of the biblical axiom: "They that take the sword shall perish with the sword." I must have memorized that Bible passage already in early years in parochial school as a proof-text supporting the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." But I never learned that the

second sword in the sentence was often the same sword that came first in the sentence. And in the same hand! That grisly fact is the drumbeat of Meagher's book. In war the killer's sword often turns back on the killer himself, the one who was not killed—"killing him from the inside out"—with suicide the end of the line.

The book's bizarre title came from the mother of a U.S. veteran, a son who came back from war, seemingly unharmed. But that was only on the outside. For what he had done as warrior—"honorable," he was told by his officers and U.S. society—was working its recompense within him, "from the inside out." He was perishing with the same sword he'd wielded in killing the enemy. It came to closure when he took his own life. As have thousands and thousands of U.S. veterans from recent U.S. wars. Example: there are 50 thousand names on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, warriors who fell in battle. Far more than fifty thousand Vietnam vets have committed suicide since then. The killing they did on the other side of the world came home with them and triggered that second killing.

But Vietnam was long ago.

More recently:

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta labeled it a "top Pentagon priority," namely, "the runaway suicide rate in the military, averaging 33 suicides per month in 2012, roughly one every 17 hours."

Or this: "Even this number—representing confirmed suicides among active-duty troops—falls far short of the dark truth. Off the Department of Defense's map and spreadsheets are the veterans, who, weeks or months or years after their war service, take their lives often without much national or even local notice. Here the numbers are even more shocking—22 a day in February 2013, nearly one every hour."

Meagher uses the term "moral injury" for what war-killing does to the killers.

"This is what we have come to call 'moral injury,' the violation, by oneself or another, of a personally embedded moral code or value resulting in deep injury to the psyche or soul. It is what used to be called sin. [Aha!] The haunting question here is: 'How can there be moral injury in a just war?'"

Their own sword turns back on them, piercing the self, the soul, the inner person, the "who I am." Finding the right term here is not easy. "Moral injury" too may be too tame. "I violated my own moral code" is frightful. Yet if "it is what used to be called sin," then the paradigm changes. It's no longer the "moral" me wrestling with me "the killer," it's me the killer wrestling with the God who authored that maxim about taking the sword and perishing with the sword.

Meagher, a classics scholar, surprised me by showing that Homer and Sophocles knew about war-inflicted "moral injury" too. They portrayed it vividly, grimly, explicitly, in Homer's Iliad and Sophocles' two Oedipus dramas. Those chapters were eye-openers for me.

And in these chapters Meagher introduces a sub-theme that meanders—discreetly—through the book, namely, the link between war and sex. The Trojan War was fought over a woman, namely, who could sleep with Helen! Oedipus, in complete ignorance, kills his own father in a skirmish and beds his own mother. The choreography of hand-to-hand killing and love-making has many eerie parallels. Killing the men and raping the women go hand in hand in warfare.

There is more, but that's enough already.

Warrior self-destruction, aka moral injury, is one of two themes in the subtitle of Killing from the Inside Out. The second is the "just war" doctrine. And there too Meagher taught me something I never knew. It was invented by Saints Ambrose and Augustine after Emperor Constantine became a Christian. He got to the top by warfare, he would stay there by the same means, and so would his baptized successors. Required now was a

“Christian” doctrine of war. The two top theologians of the day went to work to create the “just war doctrine.”

Herewith several paragraphs in Meagher’s own words:

Timothy Kudo, a Marine captain who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, published a piece in the Washington Post in January 2013, entitled “I killed people in Afghanistan. Was I right or wrong?” To many the question was indeed blasphemous and his answer to it proved still worse: “Killing is always wrong, but in war it is necessary.”

This simple statement, killing is always wrong, calls radically into question – none too soon in my view – a theory and doctrine firmly in place within Western ethical and theological orthodoxy for the past 1500 years: I have in mind here what we know as the just war doctrine. The deceptive and destructive core of the Christian just war doctrine can be stated very simply. It is the claim that wars, or at least some wars, and all the killing and destruction they entail, are—in addition to being necessary—good and right, even virtuous and meritorious, pleasing in the sight of God.

This calls for a new species or category of homicide: “killing” that is radically distinct from “murder,” a distinction that hadn’t previously existed in Christian ethics. “Murder” violates the will of God and darkens the soul of the murderer, but the other, “new” kind of killing doesn’t. The difference lies not in the level of violence, death, suffering, and destruction involved but in the “intention” of the killer. If the intention is to do the will of God, which the tradition identifies as the will of the Church and its ordained spokesmen or else the will of a legitimate secular sovereign authority, and if all is done with “love,” or at least not in hate, then there can be no moral injury because there has been no moral infraction, no sin. If the intention is pure, all is well in heaven and so on earth.

The origin of this foundational claim lay not in the New Testament, nor in early Christian theology and practice, but

rather in a practical necessity and political convenience of Emperor Constantine. Once the Christian Church found itself in a position of power, which is to say that once the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, i.e., when Constantine, super-warrior, became a Christian, the exercise of lethal force and the waging of war, that is, killing, became its ecclesiastical responsibility.

In fact, service in the army, the imperial legions, was now confined to baptized Christians. How, then, could the Christian Church say that military service was sinful? How could it maintain and deploy an army of Christians whose very service put their souls at peril? A pacifist Church was one thing, but a pacifist Christian empire was something very different, and untenable.

Augustine, and his mentor Ambrose, both of whom had once aspired to a secular career in the imperial service, came up with the solution, a new theory of war and killing that would not only permit but endorse killing for "God and Country," as it were. It was from the beginning a doctrine of convenience—conceived, promulgated, and perpetuated by men who themselves, as clerics, men of God, would personally eschew service in the military and the conduct of war. They and their successors in the tradition would readily raise a hand to bless the troops but never themselves lift a hand to wield a sword or carry a rifle. There would be no blood on their hands. War and killing, now blessed, soon became not the lesser of two evils but a positive good.

Invented in a theological lab, just war and virtuous killing, as soon as they were tested in the field, proved useful for some and devastating to others. The "others" were the combatants, the killers and their victims. The shocking truth was that the "side effects" of just war on these lay, un-ordained "others" were of little concern. Not even civilian casualties, however massive, were finally allowed to question its efficacy. Church and State were not about to condemn war, any more than they are today, not

at least their wars; so war had to be good. Or rather, "our" wars have to be good, and those who serve in them do no wrong, ever, so long as they serve the cause and follow orders. As the great scholar-monk Erasmus pointed out centuries ago, every war is just, from the perspective of those waging it, and every killer is a hero, to the side they are on.

That is the wall our veterans still run up against today. They are expected to deny their own pain, ignore what war has taught them, and take up their civil status as heroes.

If they fear that they have lost their souls or their humanity or both, it is not because they have committed war crimes but because they have become convinced of the essential criminality of war. Surely there cannot be guilt and shame in having done their duty, served their country, at such a great risk and cost to themselves.

From the beginning of the just war tradition, the powers-that-be needed their wars and so they enlisted their heroes to wage them. Nothing about that has changed, including the confusion and resentment of the returning warrior at the reception he or she comes home to. It "baffle(s) him," writes Kevin Powers, an Iraq war veteran and author of the acclaimed novel *The Yellow Birds*, "because he immediately remembers what he has actually done, the acts of violence for which he's being thanked, and it just doesn't make sense. And he doesn't get to hide from the fact that he must account for what he's done."

The truth is that just war theory has never made sense to those with blood on their hands, nor to those whose blood it was. But to our great shame that fact has not been given much weight or mattered much, and has been largely ignored. After all, veterans represent less than one percent of the population.

The fact is that just war doctrine lies at the root of our inability to comprehend moral injury and to make sense of our military "heroes" marching off to take their own lives. Why can't our veterans see themselves as we see them – luminous in

their service and lucky to have the rest of their lives ahead of them? Why can't they leave the war behind?

The truth, of course, is that warriors bring their war home with them, not like a tan acquired on holiday but like a secret they wish they hadn't been told. It is a secret the rest of us need to learn, even if we'd rather not, and a part of that secret is that, in the words of Captain Kudo, "Killing is always wrong." I, for one, am grateful to him for summoning the courage to remind us all of this most inconvenient truth.

Thus far the Meagher citations.

If the depth diagnosis is sin, worse even than moral injury, then it's a God-problem. Better said, a God-relation problem. In Christian theology there are two options for bringing sin's tyranny to closure. One is the law: the wages of sin is death—even self-inflicted death. That does close the case. The other is Gospel, literally, a "good news" option: Christ's death, his work and word of forgiveness. Forgiveness from God. Herewith an example of that: healing the "moral injury" of a Navy admiral, from the American Bible Society magazine that just showed up at our place.

A U.S. Navy Chaplain reports being called into the office of the admiral who orchestrated Navy operations across half the world. He looked weary. He took a deep breath and began to unload the burden from his 34 years of service in the military. "Ordering others to kill had taken a toll in him," explains the chaplain, "it weighed on him very heavily." The chaplain did what chaplains are called to do, hear confessions and offer absolution, God's own forgiveness. "Tell God whatever you want to tell him." At the end of the three-way conversation, we hear these words from the commander: "I feel like I lost 10 pounds. I'm forgiven. It's incredible."

One more that Marie and I heard came "live" from one of my former students, Air Force Chaplain Tom Unrath, when we visited him on duty at Cape Canaveral. A psychologist challenged him one

day by saying, "You chaplains don't do these airmen any good. You just make them feel guilty." To which he replied, "No, you've got that wrong. They know they're guilty, that's why they come to me. But I can offer them forgiveness, which you can't do."

To eliminate war in our fallen world is something even Jesus didn't achieve. So it's unlikely that we will either. And yet, this axiom persists: Killers are sinners. The hundreds of veterans Meagher listened to said so. The Christians involved in the plot seventy years ago to assassinate Hitler agonized over that axiom. Just war theory gave them no help. They decided to attempt it, conscious that they were acting as sinners. Forgiveness was not their escape hatch to make it "okay." One might say they agreed with Timothy Kudo. "Killing is always wrong, but killing Hitler is necessary." So they were already sinners as they were plotting. They needed forgiveness, whether the attempt succeeded or not. Their attempt failed, and most of them were executed. The Christians among them died, so we have learned from Bonhoeffer, as confessed and forgiveness-trusting sinners.

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St. Louis, Missouri  
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