

# In Defence of War. By Nigel Biggar

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*In Defence of War*. By Nigel Biggar. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, Pp x +361. Price £25.)

Just war theory has always been a matter of controversy in the Christian tradition. How could war possibly be just according to a belief based on the teaching of “the Prince of Peace”? In the history of Christianity one finds on the one side radical Christians arguing for pacifism, and on the other Church Fathers, bishops and theologians who elaborate a Doctrine of just war.

Oxford theologian Nigel Biggar’s book *In Defence of War* is as the title indicates a vigorous argumentation in support of the doctrine of just war. A main target is “wishful thinking”. Biggar is very critical of idealists who believe that tyranny could be reasoned away. Integrated in the Christian version of the doctrine is the idea of human beings are sinful creatures and as a consequence force and war are sometimes necessary means to combat evil: war in the service of love. Biggar refers to the ideas of Augustine, Aquinas, Grotius and Vitoria, and he applies their doctrines to some recent and controversial wars; the NATO attack on Serbia in 1999 to protect Kosovo, and the United States’ and Britain’s invasion of Iraq in 2003. Chapters are also devoted to critique of Christian pacifism, and critique of liberal individualism.

In the right circumstances, Biggar offers a forthright defence of war. For many who are not pacifists in the sense that they think that the use of violence is never under any circumstances justified, war is nevertheless seen as something evil that stimulates the worst instincts in human beings. But this negative view is not shared by Biggar. On the contrary, in the chapters “Love in War” and “The Principle of Double Effect”, Biggar argues that war could be an act of love. In support of this view he cites soldiers who witness that combat is

not fought in irrational frenzy but “...in a white heat of total rationality”, and refers to stories saying that war generates a sense of courage and strength “to be a man”, that killing in war could be acts of love for one’s comrades, and that enemies are killed without hate. In these ways, soldiers fighting just wars are not involved in some necessary evils but can be seen as virtuous or even heroes.

For me these stories tell another message. They express alienation and a very problematic distancing. The soldiers are wounding and killing enemies (human beings just as much as themselves, with loved ones back home) and they do it without any sense of empathy. The stories might seem to be about psychopaths rather than heroes.

Biggar’s world view is one-sided; the British and Americans are always the good guys, the Germans and Arabs the bad guys. The one-sidedness of the heroic stories could of course be explained by a limitation of material. But it seems to go deeper than that. In his defence of the British involvement in the First World War, Biggar argues against the view that the war was a senseless and unnecessary clash of rival empires – recently even advocated by Niall Ferguson.

Although there were some dark spots on the British Empire, its lasting value was according to Biggar the opposition against fascism in Europe and its abolition of the slave trade. But he does not mention that the British Empire for hundreds of years was the great benefactor of the slave trade, as demands for reparation for the slave trade from the leaders of the Caribbean nations have recently reminded us.

Biggar also defends the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He examines thoroughly the arguments for and against the invasion, and he demonstrates admirable insights. However, he seems to neglect some important aspects. On the classic theory, good cause and good intention are

necessary requirements for a just war. Were these requirements fulfilled? Yes, according to Biggar and in support he cites President Bush, Paul Wolfowitz, Bill Cheney, Prime Minister Blair and other politicians involved. They wished to liberate Iraq from tyranny and to strip Saddam Hussein of weapons of mass destruction. But why invade Iraq in 2003 when Saddam had used chemical weapons against the Kurds as long before as 1988? And why not let the UN inspectors investigating Saddam's possession of WMD complete their task? Biggar's discussion reveals, not always deliberately, how little US and British politicians knew about Iraq's culture and politics and how little interest they had in the fate of Iraq. Couldn't we perhaps, in the light of this, suspect that the expressed good intentions were merely rhetoric? Could there be other intentions: revenge for 9/11, safeguarding oil resources for the west etc.? Some motives behind war are not openly revealed and therefore run the risk of being omitted in the kind of analysis Biggar elaborates.

Biggar argues for just war against pacifism. But he does not consider a third alternative; active non-violent resistance, developed not least by Christian activists. The book would have gained if Biggar had taken this alternative to war seriously; the resistance of Gandhi, Bishop Dom Helder Camara, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu indicates that there at least sometimes might be better options than military force.

There is much more to say about Biggar's book. Its detailed elaboration of just war theory and the application to recent international conflicts, makes it very useful reading for anyone interested in the ethics of war. It is also provocative, which in applied ethics is a virtue rather than a vice.

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