

“Just War” Theory and the Christian

Two Reviews of Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York, Basic Books, 2003).

A Flawed, Misleading Analysis

By Douglas Morgan

In *Just War Against Terror*, Jean Bethke Elshtain bases her appeal for American Christians to support their government’s war against terrorism on the venerable and honorable tradition of “just war” reasoning. In a lively and succinct style, the book showcases the process of appropriating that just war heritage, developed during the medieval centuries to regulate the running of a Christian empire, as an instrument for Christian moral perspective on running the American republic. Serious reservations emerge about the adequacy of that process when considered in the light of the earliest sources of the Christian faith.

Elshtain’s polemic expands on (and includes as an appendix) the statement “What We’re Fighting For” (WWFF), signed in February 2002 by sixty scholars and public policy experts and directed against critics of the Bush administration’s militant approach to the struggle against terrorism. WWFF affirms five foundational principles about human rights and religious freedom, the last of which states: “Killing in the name of God is contrary to faith in God and is the greatest betrayal of the universality of religious faith.”

Elshtain and her cosignatories do not view the military action they endorse as “killing in the name of God,” presumably because Western democracies have secularized the state, freeing it from ecclesiastical control. As a Christian interested in what it means to live in congruence with the good news about the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God proclaimed in the New Testament, trying to sort out what citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20) means for living on earth, I don’t find the distinction between killing for God and killing for American values finally persuasive.

It is unconvincing, first, because Christians who support the project of American world hegemony retain a

profound moral and spiritual bond with the nation, notwithstanding formal separation of church and state. WWFF expresses this point quite explicitly, observing that though we have a secular state, “we are by far the Western world’s most religious society—a society whose citizens pledge allegiance to ‘one nation under God.’” Separation of church and state frees religion from state control, which in turn causes “government itself to draw legitimacy from, and operate under, a larger moral canopy that is not of its own making” (187–88).

In view of the monstrous and insidious threat posed by international terrorism, human freedom and dignity need a powerful guarantor, says Elshtain, and only the United States has “the power and (we hope) the will to play this role” (167). To protect the values that matter most from the evil that threatens most, American Christians must rely upon and support American military power, thus providing the legitimizing “moral canopy” (143–44; 166–73).

Elshtain’s approach moves beyond the model of direct Christian empire symbolized by Constantine, and also beyond the Reformation pattern of territorial rulers establishing their choice among the various

versions of the faith in the now-divided Christendom (neo-Constantinianism). However, it manifests what John Howard Yoder called “neo-neo Constantinianism.” The rhetoric of the current administration bears out more powerfully than ever Yoder’s observation that “American patriotism remains highly religious.... Moral identification of church with nation remains despite institutional separation. In fact, forms of institutional interlocking develop which partly deny the theory of separation (chaplaincies, tax exemptions)” (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 142). To declare a war “just” through a process of Christian moral discernment confers upon it sacred legitimacy even if fought in the name of democratic values rather than Christianity as such.

Moreover, although she seeks to affirm moderate, democracy-compatible Muslims, Elshstain’s call to arms is on behalf of Western democratic institutions—built on the Christian distinction between church and state—struggling against the fusion of religion and sword she sees at the core of the Islamic tradition. In other words, the war on terror is a clash of civilizations. She quotes Andrew Sullivan’s delineation of the stakes in the struggle. As with Nazism and communism, writes Sullivan, we are faced with “yet another battle against a religion that is succumbing to the temptation Jesus refused in the desert—to rule by force.” How to take cognizance of this reality “without descending into a religious war mentality” is a question Elshstain raises but never clearly answers (139–40).

“Mohammed was his own Constantine,” she observes disapprovingly (159). My question is, When Christians bless the military crusade for liberal democracy/American hegemony, have they not allied with a new Constantine? Have they not succumbed to the temptation in the desert, thereby surrendering one of the most crucial distinctions between their faith and that of Islam?

Second, Elshstain’s use of the laudable distinction between church and state that developed in Western Christendom opens the way to fragmentation and constriction of Christian identity and loyalty. She asserts that, in contrast to the Islamic Shari’a, Christianity “never presented a comprehensive, all-encompassing law good for all societies and covering every aspect of human existence” (29).

Although partially true in some respects, the statement is also seriously misleading. It implies that the gospel is irrelevant to some aspects of human existence, in which the guidance of Christians is ceded to an autonomous realm of “civil law.” The apostolic communities glimpsed in the New Testament, along with

Christian movements throughout history inspired by the apostolic ideal, embodied a wholistic faithfulness to the way of Christ determinative of economic practices, juridical functions, and societal relationships (see, for example, Acts 4:32–37; Acts 6:1–6, 1 Cor. 6:1–11; 11:17–22; Eph. 2:11–22; 2 Thess. 3:10–12).

Duke University scholar Richard Hays writes that the New Testament presents the church as “a counter-cultural community of discipleship ... called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God’s redemptive purposes in the world,” and as such is a “concrete social manifestation” (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 196). Opting out of the system of empire building through violence and coexisting with the dominant order rather than trying to smash it did not make the church any less a concrete political alternative or mean that it had no “law” to guide members concerning participation in the empire’s military agenda.

Wherever it ends up, it seems to me that Christian moral reasoning has to start with and prioritize the question of what it means to be the people of God constituted in accordance with the New Testament witness and not with short-term calculations about protection of American interests or even the lives of the “innocent” (which usually involves protection of only some innocents, selected along national, tribal, or religious lines).

That conviction lies behind the third major reason why I think *Just War Against Terror* fails to offer satisfactory guidance to American Christians. It makes inadequate use of the resources of the New Testament and the pre-Constantinian Christian movement, instead drawing theological light primarily from the wisdom of great thinkers from later periods such as Saint Augustine, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

For Elshstain, Jesus’ teachings aren’t of much use to Christians facing the complex challenges of today’s world. He “preached an ethic for the end of time” that directed his disciples “away from temporal pursuits.” Not only that, “Christ’s ethic seems unattainable in principle, save by the few saints among us” (99–100). She also tells us that “Jesus preached no doctrine of universal benevolence” (100). Some distinction must exist to explain why “love your neighbor as yourself” and “love your enemies” do not add up to a doctrine of universal benevolence, but we are not given it.

One gospel passage does receive considerable weight in Elshstain’s reasoning: “Render unto Caesar that which it Caesar’s, and unto God that which is

God's" (Luke 20:24–25). However, she foregoes serious analysis of this cryptic saying in historical and literary context, instead simply invoking it repeatedly as proof that Jesus affirmed a wide gulf between church and state (for instance, 28–30, 159). Other resources—such as Augustine, Luther, and liberal democratic theory—determine what is to be placed on either side of the gulf.

Elshtain also has little use for pre-Constantinian Christian voices in the second and third centuries, and badly misleads the reader concerning the evidence from this era. She contends that the claim that Christianity was a pacifist movement during its first three centuries and subsequently fell away from its nonviolent origins "does not bear up under close scrutiny." In support of this contention, she offers only a dismissal of Tertullian and Origen as "outside the Christian mainstream," after which she immediately points the reader to the more "powerful" and "more mainstream" teachings of Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose, and Saint Thomas Aquinas (51).

Of course, all of these teachers come after the first three centuries of Christianity and the Constantinian revolution—a fact that a reader uninformed or rusty

on church history would be forgiven for overlooking. Without definite knowledge of when these men lived, the natural assumption would be that the whole paragraph deals with the first three centuries.

Although there is evidence of some scattered Christian participation in the military beginning in the late second century, prior to Constantine "all of the outstanding writers of the East and West repudiated participation in warfare for Christians" (Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*, 68–73). In other words, Elshtain's "mainstream" did not exist before the Constantinian revolution.

To be strong and credible, a Christian case for adapting the just war heritage to American democracy must address, much more effectively than Elshtain has, the issues of sacred legitimization of democracy, the wholistic, communal character of Christian ethics, and the pre-Constantinian witness. I must leave to other respondents analysis of Elshtain's application of just war principles to the contemporary situation.

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A Lucid, Closely Reasoned Book

By David A. Pendleton

Jean Bethke Elshtain explains how one prominent Christian tradition understands the use of force by first providing the context for understanding just war doctrine. There is a spectrum of perspectives with respect to war that can be grouped into four schools of thought (56).

Realism holds that politics is about power. War, being merely politics by another means, is also about power. Hence pragmatic concerns always override moral analysis or at least assume the morality of exercising power.

Holy war is the belief that religious faith authorizes and compels killing of certain others. This is associated with some extreme forms of Islam.

The pacifist holds peace as above all other values. This is the categorical position that use of force is never justified and is therefore always morally wrong.

Fourth, and finally, there is the just war position. *Justice* is seen as the reigning word. This is the long-standing tradition going back to Augustine. Peace is a goal of the civil society. Yet just war recognizes that peace at any cost may be a peace purchased at the price of injustice—or at least inaction in the light of injustice perpetrated by others against third parties.

Elshtain, in classic just war fashion, argues that as long as there are those who would engage in violence against innocents, the strong must be prepared to protect the innocent.