After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice


It is uncommon to find a work that has the potential to change the level of thought for an entire discipline. In After the Smoke Clears, Allman and Winright have accomplished precisely this feat. There is little doubt that just war theory is one of the most controversial elements of Christian ethics, and one that has been debated for the better part of two millennia. The authors not only recognize this fact, but also set out to write a book intended for those scattered all over the just war theory continuum – adherents to the theory and pacifists alike.

The entire work consists of an Introduction, followed by two parts which succinctly present the authors’ major thesis: that there is inadequate attention devoted to the period following the cessation of violent force in warfare and that this needs to change in order for just war theory to be complete. An addition to the existing Christian tradition of just war is needed for it to continue to foster peace. In the Introduction, the authors make clear what separates this work from the other resources on just war theory: “We wish to emphasize that it is a living, developing tradition, and our focus is on a particularly Christian version of just war theory. Both of these Christian approaches to the morality of war – pacifism and just war – are supposed to be directed toward a just peace even though they disagree with regard to the permissibility of the use of lethal force” (6). Even though the authors admit they are not pacifists, they maintain that this is a work of Christian theology (which makes good use of philosophy) and also is an asset to the pacifist community, which should use the text’s arguments to challenge the rigor of just war theorists. I maintain that Allman and Winright have succeeded admirably in this goal to appeal to both sides of the just war debate.

Part I of the book, “The Just War Theory and Jus Post Bellum,” attempts to accomplish a twofold goal that is evident in its title: to provide a brief history of just war theory from the time of Plato to the present, and to explain the newest category of this theory, that concerned with postwar justice. The authors expertly accomplish both parts of this goal. Chapter 1 provides the reader with one of the best descriptions of just war theory available in such a short space. They trace its history and the major figures (Augustine and Thomas Aquinas) that have shaped it in the Christian tradition. Furthermore, they introduce less familiar figures, such as Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suarez, who played significant roles in shaping the tradition, especially in establishing different chronological categories in the process of justifying warfare. These categories, Allman and Winright argue, were not always so clearly separated. They maintain “new criteria have been developed and added, while some others have been set aside. The current framework of just war theory delineated by the U.S. Catholic bishops in The Challenge of Peace, with its two categories of jus ad
...bellum and *jus in bello* criteria, is a recent expression of this living and dynamic tradition. Perhaps this clarifies why we see a need for similar considerations and criteria for the *jus post bellum* period” (49). It is just such analytical thinking that makes their argument so appealing.

It is clear that a deep and lasting appreciation for the tradition acts as a driving force for the authors in presenting a Christian evaluation of postwar justice. This does not mean that they ignore more secular attempts at arriving at this same new category. In fact, they note: “Catholic moral theology engages signs of the times as it seeks to formulate an ethical perspective on issues we face in the world” (67). Such a stance led Allman and Winright to examine the work of those in other disciplines when compiling their own priorities for postwar justice. This wide frame of reference allows their own work in the later section of the book to exist not as theology ignorant of other disciplines, but rather as theology that utilizes those disciplines with creative fidelity to the tradition.

Part II of *After the Smoke Clears* is where the authors have truly made their mark on war and peace studies. In four successive chapters – which comprise the remainder of the work – the authors consider four criteria for justice after war (*jus post bellum*): the principle of “just cause,” which they had previously introduced as one of the elements of *jus ad bellum* (criteria for justice before war may be waged) (38-40), and three phases that a nation must experience after a war has ceased in order to experience true justice. Perhaps the most important question the authors pose in the entire book is: “Can you get good fruit from a bad tree?” It is upon this one question that their entire argument hinges. Unlike Brian Orend, whom they criticize, the authors answer this question in the affirmative. In other words, even if a war has not met the required *ad bellum* and *in bello* standards, it can salvage some sense of justice by meeting *post bellum* criteria. The authors introduce a chart that determines how “perfectly just” a war is (98). This chart will be of lasting importance in the future studies of the just war theory.

The second criterion is “The Reconciliation Phase” (Chapter 4). A key fault of reconciliation that many critics display is that it seems equivalent to forgetting the past. On the contrary, the authors maintain that reconciliation may be obtained alongside “prevention” and “justice” (103). Allman and Winright outline the six areas that need to be carefully considered before reconciliation is a possibility: “immediate post conflict period, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, apologies, punishments, forgiveness, and amnesty” (107-116). Incidentally, while the authors do not mention this explicitly, I would contend that this phase would overlap significantly with the work of the peace movement. Many of their major tenets are also highlighted by the authors, especially the importance of religious traditions that encourage reconciliation instead of violence.

The penultimate chapter considers “The Punishment Phase.” By all accounts, this is an integral part of any postwar justice, because without it in place, perpetrators would be allowed to go free. The authors do not intend to fall into this trap. They pay particularly close attention to the phenomenon of war crimes trials. Sometimes, they argue justice ought to be delayed in the interest of “the greater good: peace” (133). I am not entirely convinced, however, that what the authors speak of here isn’t a cheap
peace. What the authors do argue convincingly is that these war crime trials should indict public apathy on the issue of war as a “sin of omission” (142). They couldn’t be more right.

The final chapter is also the most important. In it, the authors finally consider “The Restoration Phase” of postwar justice. Allman and Winright contend that being victorious in a war does not justify an absolute reign of terror. On the contrary, victory comes with an obligation to the vanquished nation (144). The most intriguing part of their argument is one that has often been overlooked by the rest of society — the responsibility to returning soldiers (165). Many studies have outlined the effects of war on soldiers, yet there has been little academic concern afforded this group. This is not to blindly absolve their possible crimes during war, but it is to consider these in addition to the deleterious aftermath of being in the midst of such combat. Hopefully the authors have opened the door for more work in this important area.

While this is one of the most important books currently available on the just war tradition, it is not perfect. While the authors contend the book is written for adherents to the just war tradition as well as for pacifists, it would have been a nice addition to consider pacifism in greater detail. Perhaps a further chapter on precisely how those two groups — so often at odds with each other — might work together to bring about postwar justice would have been helpful. This one critique notwithstanding, this book’s appeal is wide-ranging. I would heartily recommend the book in its entirety for graduate courses in Catholic social ethics and moral theology, as well as philosophy courses on war and peace. Furthermore, individual chapters would be suitable for undergraduate and even high school religion courses. Finally, the scope of this book extends beyond the classroom. It would be a worthwhile read for parish reading groups and especially the United States bishops, who might use it as motivation to write a pastoral letter for the 30th anniversary of The Challenge of Peace in 2013. This would be a fine resource for them.

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