

KILLING FROM THE INSIDE OUT: MORAL INJURY AND JUST WAR

FOREWORD BY STANLEY HAUERWAS

PREFACE

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Moral Injury Then and Now

Moral injury has been inseparable from war since antiquity. Two stories—one ancient, one recent—reveal the tragedy of self and soul, the guilt, the shame, the confusion and despair faced by all too many combat veterans. At the center of these two stories are Noah Pierce and Neoptolemus, who despite the millennia that fell between them were brothers-in-arms. Theirs is a story of youthful patriotism and trust met with betrayal and violation. Each served his country, followed orders, and lost his way in a darkness for which no one forewarned or prepared him. The inevitable question raised here is whether and how it is ever possible to recover from deep moral and metaphysical wounds like theirs. This is the question posed and pursued in this book. Understanding, much less answering, it will call for a dialogue with past and present, a dialogue opened here and ongoing throughout what follows.

CHAPTER TWO

Ancient Greece: Warriors and Lovers

The Greeks gave us in the West our earliest literary taste of war and with it the words and concepts for understanding war's contradictions. First among these is the strange entanglement of love and war in the ancient imagination. War, it is often said, is necrophilia, and the Greeks knew all about it. Love-making, in its climactic moments is a convulsive act, but so too is killing, if it is up close and intimate. Both are orgasmic. Homer saw the "killing zone" as a trysting place, where warriors meet for a love-struggle. This was exactly how he choreographed it, as a dance to the death, a dark mating of opposite forces, intimate and deadly, the "sweet rendezvous of war." The rituals of love and war are much the same: rendezvous, words of provocation, foreplay, struggle, consummation, and unconsciousness. Each ritual proceeds towards and culminates in a moment of erotic or deadly copulation, for which ancient Greek had one same word, *meignumi*, "joining," "mingling" or "mixing it up," denoting both intercourse in battle and intercourse in bed. This same fusion of love-making and war-making will endure into the Christian era and prove critical in the Church's earliest deliberations and decrees regarding the moral precariousness of marriage and military service.

CHAPTER THREE

Killing: Moral Agency and Pollution

This chapter provides a critical bridge from the wisdom of Greek antiquity to the revolutionary thinking of the early Christian era. Both, in ways confusing and unresolved, shape our minds today. The focal concern here is the surprisingly complex question of just how responsible we are—or are not—for what would at least appear to be our own actions, notably our acts of copulating and killing. Looking ahead to the defining role that "intention" will play for Christians in determining

personal responsibility and guilt, we examine narratives, ancient and contemporary, in which intention appears all but irrelevant. Once again, we find a poignant precedent and paradigm in Greek tragedy, this time in the figure of Oedipus, who without knowing or intending it killed his father and bedded his mother. Oedipus was at first convinced of his guilt yet later shed it, claiming to have suffered rather than performed his hideous crimes. Perpetrator or victim—which is he? Not an easy question for the ancients, nor for us. From Oedipus we turn to the present and reveal how our views and experience of action and moral responsibility are similarly confused, conflicted and unresolved. Our consciences and courts of law are torn between two very different and clearly conflicting understandings of human action. In the first case, action is defined by its consequences, and in the second case action is defined by its intent. Both understandings have a certain common sense on their side. Neither alone is convincing. This fact will haunt us as we move ahead into the Christian era. Lastly, we turn to the ancient phenomenon of pollution and find that it offers fresh insight into the self-inflicted torment of veterans.

CHAPTER FOUR

Imperial Rome: Warriors and Believers

This is the first of four historical chapters tracing the origins and transformation of Christian teaching and practice. This chapter explores the many voices of the early Christian Church in the pre-Constantinian era and the near consensus that emerged regarding two particular areas of instruction and command, the one having to do with sex and the other having to do with war. In matters of the bed, intercourse and procreation, once simple and not unwelcome facts of life, were now seen as profoundly problematic and suspect. While at the extreme edges of the faith and of the empire life-long celibacy was openly embraced and touted, sex retained a solid majority of more or less silent supporters, even among the clergy. These, however, were seen—and saw themselves—as compromised and second-class Christians. The future of the Church belonged to the celibate elite. The early Christians' evolving policies and practices regarding military service rather precisely paralleled its policies and practices regarding marriage. Military service, though incompatible with the Christian life, was acknowledged, at the same time, to be like marriage a worldly necessity. Someone has to do it, which doesn't make it right, only unavoidable. Killing, the consummate act of the military (like sex, the consummate rite of marriage), was judged to be always polluting and more or less sinful: more sinful when passionate and driven by rage or revenge, less sinful when controlled by the intention to protect the empire and punish its enemies. Summing up the mind of the Church in the first three centuries, the case for Christian pacifism was more easily made and widely embraced than the case for celibacy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Christian Rome: Warriors and Saints

From its infancy the Christian Church had more or less consistently regarded the Roman emperor as an unwitting providential agent of its God, providing the soil and the infrastructure, as it were, for the spread of the faith and the development of its own institutions. But until the fourth century a Christian empire was an oxymoron. All that changed in an instant with the conversion of Constantine, who became the knowing ally, even the faithful friend, of the Christian God. Christians now saw the empire as their very own, as the willing and able consort of the Holy Church. However unthinkable it once was to imagine a Christian army, that's what the imperial legions soon became. Change—at this pace and extreme—is indeed mind-bending. And so it was

for the Church whose most eminent scholars and spokesmen of the fourth century bent their minds anew around the question of war and killing and came up with moral and theological justifications for both. At the same time, military service—so far from being suspect, if not flat-out forbidden, for Christians—was becoming a Christian duty. It was Ambrose of Milan and his protégé Augustine of Hippo who constructed the bridge from the pacifism of the New Testament to the militarism of post-Constantinian Christianity. The bridge they built proved to be a characteristically durable Roman bridge, surviving to this day to justify virtually every war our nation has fought. For centuries the early Christian Church had prayed for and come to expect religious tolerance within a pagan empire, and for the most part they had been granted it. Now, when the empire was theirs, they forgot all that. The Lamb of God was rapidly redesigned into the Lord of Hosts. The seed of holy war was sown and was already taking root in welcoming soil. The imperial legions were now the agents of God, the enforcers of his will, the devouring flame of his wrath.

CHAPTER SIX

Medieval Christianity: Warriors and Monks

The ascendant Roman Catholic Church now defined rather than defied the saeculum, the earthly order, extending its primacy beyond “things divine” and claiming what today is called “full spectrum dominance.” This new imperial Church of the early and high Middle Ages was no pacifist Church. It continued to condone and not infrequently to call for the exercise of violence by the secular powers. While the primary intent of the theory and rules of just war set out by Augustine and developed by Aquinas may have been to limit rather than to legitimize lethal force, that was hardly their primary effect. Sometimes to open a pinhole is to unleash a flood. These rules left it to the sovereign to declare just wars, and to soldiers to fight clean ones. The signature “holy wars” of Christianity were undeniably the crusades of the late 12th through the 13th centuries—preached and promoted by popes. To fight its “holy wars” the Church required holy warriors, angels of the sword-wielding persuasion, but the Templars and other warrior-monks like them were as close as the Church came to enlisting angels to her ranks. The truth, however, is that men can never be angels; and with a dearth of angels at hand, the task was left to men, who go dark in war—dark in death or dark in soul, or both. And they can’t help it. Just or unjust, war leaves scars, on souls as well as bodies. The imposition of penances for killing in war—a practice that dated from the early centuries of Christianity and continued into the 11th century—was difficult to reconcile with the waging of holy war and rather than drop war the Church eventually dropped its penances. The spiritual distress and desolation of returning warriors was from now on their secret, their private problem, as it were, incomprehensible to others, a phantom pain felt in a missing or invisible extremity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Early Modern Europe: Warriors and Lawyers

Opening the gates of war was relatively easy. Closing them again, even part way, was to prove more difficult. In the history of Christian Europe, the first was the work of moralists and theologians and the second was a task eventually left to lawyers. Both Augustine and Aquinas shared a moral presumption against war and killing and saw these as a last and unfortunate resort. Regrettably, such a presumption was not their legacy. Their prescription for just war was in the end a formula for enablement, not deterrence. When the Crusades provided a precedent for the conquest and colonization of the New World and medieval combat mutated into modern warfare, just war

doctrine proved no threat and offered little or no resistance. After a thousand years, Christian Just War Theory was a moral vessel with countless cracks in its hull, listing and in need of a tow. In the ensuing centuries, the definition and adjudication of just war would be increasingly left not to theologians but to lawyers. It was a matter to be settled between sovereigns and states, a matter of international not ecclesiastical law. With the publication of Grotius' *On the Law of War and Peace*, we witness the transition from just war to legal war, as lawyers replace moralists and theologians and international law, the law of nations, takes center stage in discussions of war and peace. By the time Georg Friedrich von Martens' published his *Precis du Droit des Gens de l'Europe*, a century and a half after the death of Grotius, European common law had wholly eclipsed the last remnants of the just war tradition. Remarkably and with presumably good intentions, centuries after its obituary had been filed, there was a concerted effort to resuscitate Just War Theory following World War I, and the result is that it has haunted political and moral discourse and debate for the past century. During that time, the concept of just war has been invoked to drape with legitimacy every major war that the United States has waged since then, despite the fact that none of these conflicts would have met the criteria for just war before those criteria became so opportunistically diluted and disfigured that they could be used to stamp as legitimate whatever a warring nation deemed necessary to prevail.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion: Beyond Just War

Just war theory is a dead letter. It 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 would risk their lives but not their souls or their humanity. At its headiest, it promised war in which men would win eternal life, and now, in the fullness of wartime, these same promises have been extended to women and children. Whether or not these promises were first or ever made in good faith is something we can never know, and it doesn't matter. What we can know is that they have not been kept. We know this from experience, the experience of war, the killing lab in which the theory of just war has been tested for sixteen centuries. We know it from the utter failure of every institution and tool employed by armies and governments to assure just wars, free of atrocity and moral wreckage. The League of Nations, United Nations, and the Geneva Conventions, no less than our own military's rules of engagement and military codes all come to nothing in the face of war's only rule—to win at any cost. If there is a better way to leash the dogs of war, the time has surely come to find it. We must think beyond war, and neither our government nor our mainline churches are prepared or inclined to lead us there. Listening to our vets may well prove to be a conversion experience for our nation and its churches, no less momentous than the conversion of Augustine, the father of the just war tradition. It is today's combat veterans who are bringing the greatest clarity to the moral cost of any war. Many of them have begun to ask themselves and their country whether there is any such thing as a just war. To set aside the rhetoric of just wars is no more than an exercise in honesty. It is simply to tell the truth about war, starting with our wars. But telling the truth is better than lying, and that is a step forward, a first step beyond war. We are a fearful nation in a fearful world. We fear others and they fear us even more. We even fear ourselves. Until we can confront our fear rather than succumb to it, we will never be able even to conceive of a world without war, much less embrace it. The Just War Theory, put simply, had its origin in fear, the fear of chaos, and the corresponding longing for security and order. It was the road taken and it led only deeper into fear and chaos. The road not taken, the road beyond just war, stretches before us.