Definitions and Assumptions

This book offers an overarching view of the church’s positions on war and peace through the centuries. To focus the discussion, we will rely on classifications and typologies, knowing that they sometimes undervalue the importance of particular situations and individual differences. But in a brief study such as this, typologies are indispensable. We will be structuring our treatment of the subject around five types of approaches to war: Pacifism, Crusade or Holy War, Just or Justifiable War, state self-interest (often referred to as *raison d’état*, by reason of state), and terrorism. The book ends with a theological consideration of “policing” as an alternative to war.

Before looking at approaches to war, however, some definitions are in order. My definitions of terms and concepts are not cut in stone but are working definitions that pertain to one
type of violence (war) and only tangentially touch on other forms of violence, such as genocide, domestic and institutional abuse, capital punishment, abortion, homicide, suicide, and ecological violence.

Definitions

*War*, or armed conflict between nations or clashing factions within a country, is the most virulent and destructive form of violence. It is frequently justified as a necessary evil to defend freedom and justice, as a means of last resort to end even greater violence and restore peace, with lip service paid to rules of engagement and declarations of war. Yet wars are dependent on training camps, with instruction manuals, where young people are indoctrinated to think of other human beings as enemies and are trained to kill them.

*Violence* entails the “violation” of other human beings and of creation—inanimate or animate. It is the use of force (as in coercion, below) in a way that causes harm, injury, violation, or death. Force may be used deliberately to violate or to persuade people to do or not do something, or it may cause harm incidentally. Violation may be of a physical, psychological, spiritual, structural-systemic, or ecological variety.
Coercion is the use of force (or threat of force) to compel someone to do something or to restrain someone from doing something against his or her will. If it causes harm, it would be synonymous with violence; but coercion may be benign, devoid of harm, and even beneficial, as in disciplining children or restraining someone from committing suicide.

Power is frequently confused with violence or coercion, but it ought to be clearly distinguished from these. Power is the capacity to act, exert influence, and exercise authority, and it can function benevolently or malevolently. The exercise of power is necessary for the preservation of human existence and institutional life. It ranges from personal and humane authority in which individuals are dealt with as persons with dignity (as ideally in child discipline or community policing) to an impersonal and inhumane authority in which the dignity and value of the individual is no longer a factor (as in modern warfare and policing gone awry).

Policing, as I use it in this book, is to be distinguished from war and the military both in theory and in practice. It is used here as a kind of metaphor for efforts to preserve order and restrain violence against “innocent” populations within family, local, regional, national, and international arenas. Its primary goal
is peacekeeping and peacemaking, and it is not premised on a training-culture of “killing” the other in any way comparable to military training. Although policing on rare occasions necessitates the use of lethal force, and sometimes deteriorates into abuse, its primary goal is to reduce violence and promote peace.

Pacifism is commonly taken to mean opposition to and refusal to participate in warfare or armed hostility of any kind. It may be personal or corporate (the ideology of a group or denomination). There are in fact many different types of pacifism, as we will discover below. Some pacifists are selective and limit their pacifism to certain groups, places, times, and conditions. Pacifism is often incorrectly identified with “passivism.” This is unfortunate because most pacifists are committed to assertively resolving conflict by nonviolent peacemaking, negotiation, or mediation, and view reconciliation as a way of life.

Nonresistance is a radical form of pacifism that does not take a stand against or resist an aggressor. It is critical of any use of force to defend oneself or another, preferring to suffer and be persecuted (“turning the other cheek,” as Jesus says) rather than to engage in any form of coercive activity. It is frequently held as a general attitude to
all of life (a form of Christian discipleship) rather than merely the refusal to engage in warfare. The movie *Witness* portrays the Amish Mennonites as people who refuse to defend themselves when attacked. Whether nonresistance as a consistent approach to life is possible remains a debatable question.

*Nonviolent resistance* permits the use of benign, nonviolent force against an aggressor, or in defense of a third party, provided it does not cause harm, violation, or death to anyone. It may include protests, lobbying, boycotts, obstruction, Gandhian-type sit-downs, and sometimes damage to property. Any harm that occurs to people is not intentional.

To have clarity on these concepts is essential if one wants to do justice to the various historical and theological approaches to war and peace. Another important factor to keep in mind is that the Christian church's teachings and practices concerning war cannot be isolated from a much broader issue: that of the church's attitude to the wider world. This can be stated in terms of Christ and culture, church and state, or Christianity and society. How the church has understood its role in the broader society has determined its approaches to the issues of war, violence, and peace.
Church and Society

H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic book *Christ and Culture*, identifies five types or ways of understanding the relationship of Christ to culture that he, sometimes mistakenly, identifies with specific denominations: Christ *against* culture, in which the church considers itself within society but not of it (as in “sects” like the Anabaptists); Christ *above* culture, in which the church tries to raise general culture to a higher Christ-like level (as in medieval Roman Catholicism, which viewed grace as transcending nature); Christ *and* culture in paradoxical juxtaposition, where both church and society require allegiance but exist on different planes (as in traditional Lutheranism); Christ *of* culture, where the church uncritically identifies with culture (as in nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, particularly German “Culture-Protestantism”); and Christ *transforming* culture, where the church is engaged in society in an effort to bring about greater justice (as in the Reformed-Calvinist tradition).

Niebuhr’s typology, which has had a profound influence on American denominational understanding of the church’s relation to the surrounding world, is an instance where “ideal types” are both helpful and distorting of particular traditions. It has been helpful
in provoking Christians to examine seriously where they stand on a variety of issues related to the “Christ and culture” duality, including war and violence. It has also in some instances led to distorted views of others. For example, it classifies Anabaptist-Mennonites as an instance of “Christ against culture,” when in fact historically Anabaptist-Mennonites see themselves as providing a radical alternative culture of peace to the dominant violent culture. There are strong transformative elements in this counter-culture tradition.

Niebuhr himself sides with the Reformed “Christ the transformer of culture” type and in so doing is prone to caricaturing the other types, implicitly assuming that they are all static approaches when in fact each of them has dynamic elements. Furthermore, his list of types is incomplete. In a recent conversation, a theologian of Reformed background suggested to me a sixth type to add to Niebuhr’s list: “Christ the subverter of culture.” He said that Reformed theologians always talk about “Christ the transformer of culture,” but there are times when culture is so corrupted that to be faithful to Christ means to subvert that culture so that it can be more radically transformed, or even replaced.

I have in my own work argued for a seventh type: one in which the boundaries between
Christ and culture, church and world, Christian and state are more fluid, possibly requiring any one of the above six types on different occasions. The Christian’s primary home is the believing community (the church), and the secondary home is the world beyond that community. Fidelity to Christ requires a moving into the world and withdrawing from the world in dynamic ways that may require on different occasions blessing culture, raising culture to a higher level, standing in a paradoxical relation to culture, positioning oneself over against culture, and even subverting or transforming culture. In short, the church-world categories ought not to be considered static types but dynamic positions.

**Approaches to War**

What does the church’s attitude to society have to do with war and peace? How one views the church’s role in culture and in the world will have ramifications for how one understands the church’s stance toward war and policing. How one approaches the issue of violence socially and ethically has to do with how one views one’s relation to, and responsibility for, the world. Each of the above church-society models might evoke different responses to whether one is willing
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to participate in military engagement or not. In this study, we will be looking primarily at the three approaches to war that have most relevance for the Christian Church: holy war or crusade, just war or justifiable war, and pacifism.

*Holy war or crusade* is a war fought either in obedience to divine command or with special divine assistance, as in having “God on our side.” Some view the crusade as an example of God’s command and holy war as claiming “God on our side.” In this volume, I will as a rule not make this distinction and will use the terms interchangeably. Tracing the career of the holy war through history, one could say it was dominant in certain periods of Jewish history (as narrated in the Hebrew scriptures) and in the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament (as in the imagery of the book of Revelation). It was evoked in the high to late Middle Ages (eleventh to thirteenth century), in some Reformation groups (some of the rhetoric of the Reformed tradition and some factions within the Radical Reformers), and in the religious wars of the post-Reformation (seventeenth century), sometimes referred to as the “Age of Intolerance” and “dogmatism.”

In the twentieth century, much of the war rhetoric of World War I, on both sides, had a “crusade” quality, as did some liberation movements. In all
of the above cases, clear lines are drawn between light and darkness, good and evil, those who have God on their side and those who do not, the righteous and the unrighteous, the oppressed and the oppressor. Effectiveness is not the primary consideration in these movements, only obedience to divine command and will, with frequent appropriation of martyrdom language. Terrorist movements in our century frequently employ the language of holy war or crusade (see chapter 12).

Just war or justifiable war, as it was first considered in the period of Augustine of Hippo (early fifth century), was a war fought out of necessity, subject to certain conditions. To call a war justifiable was to recognize war as a sin for which one had to repent but which nevertheless was unavoidable due to the fallenness of the world and of human activity. It was, one might say, a “lesser evil,” no perfect choice being available. In this kind of thinking, war is wrong; and the burden of proof lies with the one deciding to wage war. Just war language, on the other hand, has the ring of a more positive attitude to war, as a duty of Christians and the church under certain conditions.

It has been suggested by Mennonite theologian and ethicist John Howard Yoder that war prior to the sixteenth-century Reformation fell under the category of justifiable war,
while after the Reformation war took on the more positive meaning which found its way into mainline church confessions. This has been disputed, but it is helpful to recognize the distinction between justifiable and just war. We will for the most part treat them interchangeably.

Just war thinking was present already within the Greek city-states. In the Christian tradition, it has roots in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. In western Christianity, it arises more formally in the fourth and fifth centuries with Ambrose and Augustine, as part of the so-called Constantinian shift, when Christianity became the dominant religion. In the Middle Ages, it was the dominant Catholic position and was revived among the city-states in Renaissance Italy.

The just war has strong defenders in the mainline groups of the Reformation, regaining strength in the twentieth century, particularly during and after World War II. It continues to have strong proponents among theological ethicists such as Paul Ramsey and Oliver O'Donovan. The just war tradition has in its historical career developed a typical set of conditions both for declaring war (\textit{jus ad bellum}) and for fighting war (\textit{jus in bello}). These conditions or criteria leading up to war and determining what is acceptable within war
will be considered in greater detail below (see chapter 5).

*Pacifism* is a third type of approach to the question of war. Important to note is the fact that there are many forms of pacifism, all assuming that war and violence are wrong but differing in the underlying motivation and justification for espousing a pacifist stance. Mennonite scholar John Howard Yoder, one of the most influential defenders of pacifism in the twentieth century, tenaciously challenged the reduction of pacifism to “passivism” or to a single approach.

In his booklet *Nevertheless: The Varieties of Religious Pacifism*, Yoder identifies more than twenty-five different types of pacifism, including the Roman Catholic “Pacifism of Christian Cosmopolitanism” (espoused by Pope John XXIII in his *Pacem in Terris*), which assumes a common, global humanity and the priority of pastoral concern; and the just war “Pacifism of the Honest Study of Cases,” where each case must be considered separately to see whether it is justifiable. Other types include “The Pacifism of Absolute Principle” (the imperative not to kill, grounded in the authority of scripture); “The Pacifism of Nonviolent Social Change” (the use of pacifist pressure to bring about justice, represented by Mohandas K. Gandhi
and Martin Luther King Jr.); and “The Pacifism of the Virtuous Minority” (represented by Menno Simons, who espoused a nonresistant, nonconforming community). Yoder’s own “Pacifism of the Messianic Community” is grounded in the Incarnation: It presupposes a corporate confession of Jesus Christ as Lord in which the person and work of Christ translate into a dynamic enemy-loving way of life in the context of a community of discipleship.

In the 1992 expanded edition of Nevertheless, Yoder identifies the Jewish nonviolence tradition after Jeremiah as foreshadowing later Christian pacifism, calling it “The Pacifism of Rabbinic Monotheism.” He argues provocatively, although a bit too one-sidedly, that “For two and a half millennia, from Josiah to Ben Gurion, Jewry represents the longest and strongest experience of religious-cultural-moral continuity in known history, defended without the sword.”

While Yoder’s many forms of pacifism provide helpful distinctions, the sheer number of types tends to relativize the very notion of pacifism as a category. For our purposes, one might divide Yoder’s types into two major ones: (1) political or liberal pacifism, which seeks pragmatically to use pacifism as a means of transforming society, based on an optimistic view of human nature and of history; and (2) biblical pacifism, which is grounded in the
person and teachings of Christ, committed to transforming society toward peace, justice, and reconciliation through nonviolent means without illusion about human perfectibility and historical progress.

The idealization of peace has been strong in many historical periods and traditions. In Judaism, *shalom* is thought of as a state of peace and total well-being. The Greek word for peace (*eirene*) refers to a state of order and harmony. In the Roman period, *Pax Romana* was understood as the absence of war and military conflict. The early Christian church was in principle opposed to the shedding of blood and participation in the military. During the sixteenth-century Reformation, pacifist groups emerged within certain wings of the Radical Reformation. In the modern period, eighteenth-century Enlightenment saw the rise of pacifism in the great humanist tradition. The period between World War I and World War II saw renewed calls for the church to reject all war, and in the second half of the twentieth century, there were strong pacifist movements in most major Christian denominations.

*State self-interest (raison d’état)*, a fourth type of approach to war, does not emerge from religious roots like the other three—it is not based on moral or Christian ethical reasoning but is a pragmatic-realist approach
to violence and war. It assumes that the state has its own superior reason by which it can use violence based on self-interest and self-preservation, regardless of moral reasoning. Although throughout history states have used holy war and just war rhetoric ideologically to underpin their militarism, a candid analysis would show that most wars have been fought “by reason of state”—for purely national, economic, political, or other “non-moral” reasons. As we shall see below, the first three types—holy war/crusade, just/justifiable war, pacifism—may be said to have biblical warrants. But this fourth type cannot be so defended. Although religion has often been used ideologically to support a war that is waged primarily on grounds of state self-interest, this type will not figure strongly in the following pages.

Whether “terror” and the “war on terror” can be considered an additional type of approach to war is an issue we will consider in chapter 12. Chapter 13 will look at policing as an alternative to war.