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Presumptions against War

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing a Christian is to negotiate a theologically honest faith-based participation in social affairs. Questions of power, politics and violence are foremost. Arguably the most basic of all Christian presumptions is one against war and war-fighting. But tensions between the church as it is and the church as it ought to be, between its theory and practice, have been part of Christianity since its earliest days. On one side stands a ‘counter-cultural’ position represented by ‘idealists’ who hold (however imprecisely) that threatening or waging war represents an unchristian militarism that must be rejected. Here an unbridled confidence in human creative action brings forward the desire to hold fast a Christ-like, pure politics. On the other side stands a ‘culture-making’ position best represented by ‘realists’ who maintain a qualified support for a state’s right to sometimes threaten or wage war. This opposing vision of a flawed and imperfect politics is based on the notion that in an unredeemed world moral failure is ascribed to natural human limitations. In short, the belief that deterrence as an instrument of policy must be renounced clashes with the reality that church teachings are in fact flexible. Such theoretical and practical oppositions bear witness to the church’s origins in the heart of the Greco-Roman world and together bring into focus the difficulties of precise sacred and secular markings regarding attitudes to war. Yet it is a readily accepted presupposition that the early church, following the crucifixion of Christ (AD 30), was essentially idealist in its detachment from classical thinking and only later made realist following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in AD 312. Should we take such original purity of mission to be an objective reading of church history or rather an ideological imposition on it? It is not the purposes of this chapter to adjudicate the authenticity of various approaches but rather engage
with them in a way that provides a moral framework against which to assess modern theologies of deterrence. Virtually all readers of primitive Christianity would probably agree that it contains a theological narrative that could or should have a bearing on the political stances taken by modern Christians. The task is to demonstrate the origin and nature of the theological concerns alive in the church debates of the 1940s and 1950s Cold War.

Over two millennia of Christian history, material has been found that can justify almost any position on political violence from pacifism to unadulterated crusading. This basic acknowledgement is the key to unlocking Christian thinking. A straightforward reading of church teachings is that they are contested, multilayered, and/or contradiction-riddled. Political interpretation has affected the theology, and theology the political interpretation. And while there may be naive and politically unaware theology there can never be apolitical theology (Moltmann 1974). An analysis normally begins with the Bible but, as is well known, selected texts can be plucked at random (and out of context) to prove or justify one position over another. Most commentators would probably still agree that Christ’s teaching condemned coercive power and political violence. After all this presupposition was the strange, new law at odds with prevailing Judaic and Hellenistic culture. Take as example Christ’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matt. 5:38–41)²

Christian idealists point to this weighty conceptualisation to support the authenticity of a politics of counter-cultural resistance; ranked against them Christian realists argue that the relationship between Christ’s injunction and its relevance to political or military practice is far from simple. For critics like Reinhold Niebuhr (1953, p. 14) it is more important ‘to take all factors in a social and political situation which offer resistance to established norms into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power’.³ Christian idealism is hence subject to ‘illusions about social realities’ characterised by unquestioning loyalty to moral ideals and over-optimistic expectations that encourage ‘ideologically pure’ strategic commitments. Christian realists subsequently reject the idea of Christ’s ethics as ‘historical possibility’ because to them