

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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What Should Christian Do?  
Revisiting John Howard Yoder's *What Would You Do?* \*

Jeffrey Peterson

The human communities that Augustine described as the “earthly city” all depend for their existence on the use of lethal force and the threat of its use. Killing, that is to say, is integral to the life of every enduring earthly polity, including all those in which the church of Jesus Christ, the visible manifestation of Augustine’s “city of God,” subsists during its earthly sojourn. Christians have long, and rightly, been troubled by this fact and have reflected on our proper disposition toward such force in a world thus configured as we await the consummation of the kingdom of God. This reflection is deposited

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\* I am pleased to offer this essay in honor of Michael Robbins Weed, recently named the Billie Gunn Hocott Professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology. Michael has long taught a version of the case examined here in classes on ethics. While I’ve benefited greatly from discussing it with him over some years, as also many other theological questions (and a few questions of lesser import), he is absolved of responsibility for the views presented here. I wish also to honor Michael’s beloved partner in Christian education and in life, Mary Elisabeth (Libby) Weed, whose work as the Elementary Principal and Vice President for Education at Brentwood Christian School has blessed the lives of my children. Earlier versions of this essay were presented as papers at a conference on “Theology and the Christian University” (Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas, 23–25 March 2006) and at the Christian Scholars Conference (Rochester College, Rochester Hills, Michigan, 21–23 June 2007).

principally in the pacifist and Just War traditions of Christian social ethics. The present essay is a modest attempt to commend the latter.<sup>1</sup>

**The Teaching of Jesus and a Christian Social Ethic:  
A Prefatory Note**

In recent decades, John Howard Yoder and his followers have championed a thoroughgoing pacifism as the only position consistent with the Christian profession of faith.<sup>2</sup> Such a position exerts a particular appeal among Christians who look to Scripture as the sole or principal authority in theology. On its face, a pacifist social ethic seems able to marshal impressive biblical support, especially from the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount; such precepts as “do not resist one who is evil” and “turn the other cheek” appear able to withstand even the stringent demands of a hermeneutic based on direct command and approved example.

There are nonetheless serious exegetical questions to be answered by advocates of a pacifist interpretation of New Testament teaching. Perhaps the place to begin is with a point of definition regarding the term *pacifist*, which is not merely a synonym for *pacific*. Without question, Christ pronounces his blessing on “peacemakers” (Matt 5:9), and Christ’s apostle urges Christians, “If it is possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18 NRSV). A genuinely *pacifist* interpretation of the gospel goes far beyond this, taking literally the Sermon on the Mount’s instruction to “turn the

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<sup>1</sup> Among recent introductions to the Just War tradition, I have found especially helpful Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church Rather than the State* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009); Oliver O’Donovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Darrell Cole, “Good Wars,” *First Things* 116 (October 2001): 27–31. On the mediating position of “Just War pacifism,” see James P. Sterba, “Reconciling Pacifists and Just War Theorists,” *Social Theory and Practice* 18 (1992): 21–38, and Michael Neu, “Why There is No Such Thing as Just War Pacifism and Why Just War Theorists and Pacifists Can Talk Nonetheless,” *Social Theory and Practice* 37 (2011): 413–33.

<sup>2</sup> See especially John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich./Carlisle, U.K.: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1994 [1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1972]); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

other cheek” (Matt 5:39) and obliging a Christian to forswear all use of force, or certainly all lethal force—even force used to pacify one person disturbing the peace of another.

Formally, the ethical teaching of Christian Scripture stands at the other end of a continuum from the mathematically precise axioms of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Scripture does not convey its ethical teaching through abstract philosophical propositions applicable to every imaginable contingency. It rather offers concrete, specific precepts relevant to the particular audience addressed or situation considered. The Sermon on the Mount addresses disciples living under the governance of others (cf. Matt 2; 5:41; 8:5–13; 22:15–22; chap. 27) and offers them guidance for negotiating the common situations of daily life as disciples of Jesus.

As John Kloppenborg notes, “Mediterranean society was in general agnostic and expected conflict (in particular between males).”<sup>3</sup> In Matt 5:39, Jesus instructs a disciple upon receiving a blow to “the right cheek” (*tēn dexian siagona*)—that is, most likely, a backhand slap, a public challenge to one’s honor—to offer the other as well; in v. 40, he tells a disciple sued for his inner garment (*chitōn*) to surrender his outer garment (*himation*) as well. From such vivid precepts disciples can (and should) distill principles that govern broader circumstances and more complex relationships; e.g., a disciple of Jesus doesn’t make preservation of personal honor or defense of material possessions the priority in relating to others. But we shouldn’t read Jesus’ concrete precepts as comprehensively stated rules invariably applicable outside the situations they address.

As Richard Bauckham observes, “Jesus’ ethical teaching becomes specific ... most often with reference to personal life.” Bauckham cautions that “love must take different forms in public and private life” and elaborates:

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<sup>3</sup> John S. Kloppenborg, “Associations in the Ancient World,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, Jr., and John Dominic Crossan; Princeton Readings in Religions; Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 328.

The individual is obliged to forgive personal injuries against himself, but this principle will not be enough to guide him in situations where the interests of several people are involved, where other people have been injured or need protection, or where (as a parent, for example) he has a responsibility for the moral education of the person who has done wrong.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament nowhere offers specific guidance to disciples of Jesus entrusted with the responsibility for civil government (as Christians were only in the fourth century AD). Neither does Scripture advise Christians on how to respond when governments solicit our advice regarding the policies to be adopted for the protection of ourselves, our families, and our neighbors (as Christians are now routinely asked to do in participatory democracies). Pacifism may be an appropriate answer to this question, but we should be clear that a pacifist social ethic is as much a deduction from the scriptural data as any other.

Further, we may note that if the Sermon on the Mount as a whole were interpreted as pacifist exegetes interpret the command not to resist evil, then we would have to conclude that in Matt 6:5–6 Jesus prohibits all public prayer by his disciples and confines worship to the individual disciple’s prayer closet. In 6:25–34, Jesus’ prohibition against worry over our material needs (let alone wants) would mean that (e.g.) modern Christians would be barred from exerting ourselves to find and retain employment; in the event that (through no effort on our part) we found ourselves offered a job, we could not legitimately consider the financial benefits of a position in deciding whether to accept it. It is better to recognize with Dale Allison that “the hyperbolic is characteristic of Jesus” and to recognize the presence of hyperbole in the Sermon’s precepts.<sup>5</sup> It is an interpretive mistake to take one of these precepts and absolutize it.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 77.

There are other exegetical difficulties involved in a pacifist reading of Jesus' teaching. Yoder himself recognizes "serious scholarly opinion to the effect that 'resistance in kind' [in Matt 5:39] is meant specifically in reference to legal recourse against an evil which one has suffered."<sup>6</sup> Yoder offers no rebuttal to this interpretation, nor does he seem to recognize the extent to which it undercuts a pacifist interpretation of Jesus' teaching: nowhere else does Jesus categorically forbid his disciples to employ force.

Interestingly, Yoder regarded scriptural example—specifically, divine example—as more important than scriptural commands:

We do not, ultimately, love our neighbor because Jesus told us to. We love our neighbor because God is like that. It is not because Jesus told us to that we love even beyond the limits of reason and justice, even to the point of refusing to kill and being willing to suffer—but because God is like that too.<sup>7</sup>

It seems hermeneutically problematic to carve out too great a divide between the exemplary character of God and the teaching of Jesus, which is presumably integral to the biblical revelation of "what God is like." Of more immediate relevance to our inquiry, in abandoning the command of Jesus as central to the Christian ethic, Yoder has abandoned the clearest scriptural basis for a definition of love in terms of pacifism. As we shall see, Yoder's definition of "love of neighbor" seems to require preferential regard for a person threatening or employing violence rather than for a person being threatened.

### **Getting Down to Cases**

As Yoder recognized, more than exegesis is needed to commend a pacifist Christian social ethic. The bulk of his work on the topic involves engagement with historical theology, dogmatics, and ethics. His 1983 book *What Would You Do?* considered the aspect of the subject most likely to en-

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<sup>6</sup> Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1971), 53 n. 6. Yoder cites Stuart D. Currie, "Matthew 5:39A—Resistance or Protest?" *Harvard Theological Review* 57 (1964): 140–5, but offers no analysis or rebuttal.

<sup>7</sup> Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 52.

gage a nonspecialist audience, the practical implications of his “pacifism of the messianic community.”<sup>8</sup> This consideration took the form of his own treatment of a standard case: “What would you do if a criminal ... pulled a gun and threatened to kill your wife ... or daughter or sister or mother [?]”(13).<sup>9</sup> I offer this examination of Yoder’s treatment of the case in the hope that it will not only aid in assessing how effectively he commends his pacifist convictions, but also raise broader questions about the choice to be made between the pacifist and Just War traditions by Christians who seek to stand under the authority of Scripture.

Yoder’s discussion moves back and forth with some freedom between the question whether an individual Christian may use lethal force to protect a threatened innocent and the same question addressed to a society, i.e., the question of war. I suggest that we can proceed with greater clarity if we focus the discussion at the individual level. This will mean giving only brief attention to the question at a societal level, but it should be possible to indicate the direction in which the argument tends.

We have, then, good reason to consider carefully the case that Yoder offers in order to explore how to be faithful in situations not explicitly treated in the scriptural witness, including those situations in which Christians are called on to exercise political judgment so as to extend love to a distant

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<sup>8</sup> John H. Yoder with Joan Baez, Tom Skinner, Leo Tolstoy, and others, *What Would You Do? A Serious Answer to a Standard Question* (Scottsdale, Penn., and Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1983). Parenthetical citations in the text refer to this book, which as far as I know is his most concentrated discussion of what the pacifism of the messianic community looks like on the ground, as it were. For other engagements with the question strewn throughout the vast Yoder corpus, one may consult [yoderindex.com](http://yoderindex.com), which is anticipated to offer complete online searching of Yoder’s works by January 2013. My thanks to John Nugent for this information, and to Lee Camp for forwarding my inquiry to John.

<sup>9</sup> Yoder’s exploration of the case occupies pp. 13–42; he then collects considerations of the question by other pacifists (45–111), notably Leo Tolstoy (45–49) and Joan Baez (62–68). The aim of Yoder’s volume was evidently to advocate a pacifist response to the question rather than to foster a balanced consideration, as there are no selections from G. K. Chesterton, Paul Ramsey, or other non-pacifists who treat some version of the case.

neighbor. Yoder apologizes early in his essay for the “plodding analysis” that represents “the only way to move the question from the visceral to the rational level” (13); on the contrary, I will suggest that at some points Yoder’s analysis is not plodding enough. Indeed, the question being addressed needs to be stated with greater precision at the outset. The question is not, as the title of Yoder’s book has it, what any one of us *would* do, for any of us might fail to do what is right on a given occasion. The question properly treated by an ethicist, rather than a psychologist, is “What *Should* You Do?”—what is one justified or unjustified in doing, what actions is one obligated to take or prohibited from taking, in the event a violent person threatens harm to a loved one?

Here a second qualification of Yoder’s case is needed. He notes that posing the question only in regard to a loved one “distorts the real nature of the argument” (19). He says it invites “an altruistic form of egoism” as “I defend *my* wife or *my* child because they are precisely *my own*” (20, italics original). Yoder criticizes this way of posing the question because it “does not suggest that I would have the same responsibility to defend the wives and children of Vietnamese ... who are being attacked by my countrymen” (20). His point is well taken, as the biblical tradition commends to us the protection and care not only of those to whom we are bound by ties of kinship and acquaintance, but also of the those with whom we have no ties beyond our common membership in the worshipping, or indeed the human, community, those who themselves have ties to no one: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (Jas 1:27, NRSV).

It is odd then that Yoder does not revise the case to take into account an anonymous victim rather than (or in addition to) a relative, even though he includes as an appendix to his own essay a brief comment by Leo Tolstoy that poses the case in just this form. Tolstoy asks, “How (to use the stock example) is a man to act when he sees a criminal killing or outraging *a child* [an anonymous child] and he can save the child only by killing the criminal?”

(45, italics mine). The anonymity of a potential victim in need of help is an important element to consider, so I suggest we modify the case accordingly.

Yoder's other objections to the case largely apply to the use of cases as such in ethical reflection and in general do not appear decisive or even especially weighty (14–19). In particular, it seems incongruous to find Yoder suggesting (19, italics mine) that the scenario under consideration

excludes the possibility that the other [violent] party might have *reasons* for behaving in the way that I perceive to be wrong. There is no room for the possibility that the offender might be a Jean Valjean, only looking for bread for his hungry children in the home of someone who has more than needed. Nor is there room for the possibility that the offender might be an oppressed person (as in the theories of Frantz Fanon), whose *human dignity is dependent upon his rising up and destroying* a symbol of oppressive order (*an innocent symbol*, true, but that makes no difference for the psychic *need* of the former slave).

Valjean only stole, he did not kill or threaten killing, and so his example is not strictly relevant. Nor is it readily apparent how Frantz Fanon's revolutionary philosophy, developing the premise that "the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence," might inform the ethic of messianic pacifism that Yoder sought to commend.<sup>10</sup>

At any rate, these considerations are enough to allow us to reformulate the case in a form sufficient to guide our reflections. With apologies to Bunyan, then, we join a latter-day Christian on the streets of the City of Destruction. Rounding a corner, Christian comes upon a police officer lying on the ground, fatally shot, sidearm still holstered. Some yards ahead, Christian sees a man pointing a smoking gun menacingly toward a young woman at point-blank range. Christian cannot tell whether the man has designs on the woman's property, her virtue, or her life, but he makes the obvious deduction that

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<sup>10</sup> Quotation from Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1961]), 44. A cynical reader might well take Yoder's comment as *ad hoc* pandering to the tastes of an academic readership; I confess I have difficulty finding an alternative interpretation.

the gunman has just killed and is on the verge of killing again. Further, with an uncanny prescience for which he is not otherwise noted, Christian intuits that the woman is an orphan, recently widowed, and thus falls under the scriptural obligation to assist those in need who lack the resources to provide for themselves. We are thus led to ask: (1) What are Christian's obligations to the gunman, and to the person whom the gunman is threatening? (2) In discharging these obligations, what specific actions is Christian either justified in taking, or prohibited from taking?<sup>11</sup>

Yoder's answer is that Christian may not intentionally use lethal force against the attacker, but short of this, he must do everything he can to secure her deliverance and, beyond that, simply trust God to provide a way for her escape. In the Just War tradition, however, the use of force, even lethal force, is on occasion involved in "the love of neighbor"—it is the way one must express love to a neighbor threatened by unjust force when one judges that no other course of action will secure the neighbor's protection.<sup>12</sup> Applying such a perspective to the individual situation of our case would suggest that Christian's primary responsibility is to defend the person unjustly threatened against harm, employing the minimum force needed to accomplish that objective. In evaluating these two approaches to the issues raised by the scenario, we might usefully consider a series of actions on an ascending scale of forcefulness that Christian might entertain in the seconds which he has to decide what he will do.

First, Christian might engage the attacker verbally (cf. 27–29, 32–36). On the simplest scenario, if Christian yells, "Stop! Leave her alone!" and the gunman retreats, that would discharge his obligation to visit the woman in her affliction. Yoder also suggests seeking "some way to disarm the attacker

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<sup>11</sup> The case is of course contrived but not wholly unrealistic; comparable situations with the ethical dilemmas they entail are met by Christians with some frequency on the streets of St. Louis and Tbilisi, Detroit and Karachi, Memphis and Kinshasa.

<sup>12</sup> For this understanding of love of neighbor in the Just War tradition, see Bell, *Just War as Christian Discipleship*, 30–31, 73–74; Cole, "Good Wars," 29. On the proper meaning of the criterion of "last resort" for the use of force, see Bell, 183–95.

emotionally” (27–28) or employing “a ruse” (28). Employing deception incidentally treats the provision of the Sermon on the Mount requiring entire truthfulness on the part of Jesus’ disciples (Matt 5:37) as a less than absolute command, and so raises again the question why the Sermon’s prohibition of force (if indeed there is such) is not treated with similar freedom.

Second, Christian might offer passive resistance; as Yoder puts it, he “might interpose [him]self and let the intended victim escape” (28). In many situations involving a firearm, this will be impractical. In our scenario, for example, an attacker intent on harming the woman will most likely fell Christian as he attempts to close the distance between them, and our damsel will remain in distress. Christian’s passive resistance will also prove inadequate to protect her should she be unable to escape by her own power.

Third, Christian might unholster the fallen police officer’s sidearm and *threaten* to use it, as Menno Simons permitted his followers to carry a sword with them on a trip, though not to use it, in effect lying.<sup>13</sup> But again, this will prove ineffective if the attacker is brazen and calls Christian’s bluff, firing on Christian first.

Fourth, as Yoder himself suggests, Christian might employ “nonlethal force” against the attacker (28). Yoder does not specify the form or level of force that might legitimately be used, but he does say

I am more likely to find [an alternative to lethal force] ... if I have disciplined my impulsiveness and fostered my creativity by the study and practice of a nonviolent lifestyle, or of Aiki-Do, the nonviolent variant of the martial arts” (28).

Aikido, it may be noted, involves the manipulation or redirection of force with the aim of turning its effects back on the one who initiates it. As a technique of self-defense (rather than a philosophy encouraging nonviolence),

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<sup>13</sup> George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 488.

aikido is not a *nonviolent* form of the martial arts, but rather a *defensive* one.<sup>14</sup>

If Yoder's reference to aikido is to be taken seriously, it involves Christian in the manipulation of force, and potentially lethal force. It is unclear what principle would allow redirecting force onto the attacker at the level at which he introduces it but disallow opposing the attacker with one's own force equal to that which he introduces, or with the level of force needed to protect the threatened person. In our scenario, it may also be noted that aikido will likely prove to be of limited usefulness in opposing an attacker armed with a gun.

If non-lethality is the criterion of legitimacy, then it would seem Christian is free to take the policeman's sidearm and shoot with the intent of disarming the attacker, or injuring and incapacitating him, rendering him unable to do harm in this situation. There are, however, practical difficulties involved in shooting only to injure, as the force required to stop an assailant from doing harm is often deadly, as illustrated by the common police policy of "shoot to stop," concentrating fire on the torso.<sup>15</sup> Police forces adopt this policy not out of bloodthirstiness—in that case, targeting recommendations would presumably include the head—but because focusing on a target's "center mass" proves the most effective way to prevent an assailant from doing harm.

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<sup>14</sup> In the words of practitioner Erik Sotnak, "Aikido ... is not primarily a system of combat, but rather a means of self-cultivation and improvement ... At the same time, the potential of aikido as a means of self-defense should not be ignored. One reason for the prohibition of competition in aikido is that many aikido techniques would have to be excluded because of their potential to cause serious injury. By training cooperatively, *even potentially lethal techniques* can be practiced without substantial risk" ("Aikido Primer," <http://www.allegheyaikido.com/Primer.html>, accessed 24 July 2012; italics mine). See also Adele Westbrook, *Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere: An Illustrated Introduction* (Rutland, Vt.: C. E. Tuttle, 1970), 361–2.

<sup>15</sup> Chris McNab and Hunter Keener report that "most police forces operate a simple formula for 'shoot to stop,'" targeting "the center mass of the assailant (especially the solar plexus)" and delivering "multiple quick shots into the target until the assailant is completely incapacitated" (*Tools of Violence: Guns, Tanks and Dirty Bombs* [Oxford and New York: Osprey Publishing, 2008], 52).

Further, it cannot be assumed, as Yoder appears to, that a clear line distinguishes force that will prove lethal from force that will not, or that this line will be perceptible to Christian in the moments he has to make a judgment and take action. Here, it seems, Yoder commits the same error he attributes to non-pacifists in the opening of his book, that of assuming that the defender has “total control of the situation” and presupposing that “if not omniscience, at least full and reliable information” is available to the defender (15). In this case, Yoder supposes Christian to possess certain knowledge of the precise point at which the use of force becomes lethal.<sup>16</sup> If such precise knowledge were available, cases of police brutality would presumably never issue in the death of the victim; the perpetrators would simply stop short of administering the lethal blow, thus sparing themselves the risk of a murder or manslaughter charge.

Fifth, Yoder does not treat the question whether, if time permits, Christian would be justified in calling the police, that is, in asking others to threaten and use force on behalf of the woman, and in his stead. If this option is open to Christian, if he can call out the *gendarmarie*, then he has not avoided the responsibility of using force. Rather, he has transferred the direct responsibility for its use (as well any guilt incurred by its wrong application) from himself onto the constabulary. Christian would not evade responsibility for the death of the gunman in the event that the police found this necessary.

So we come, finally, to the watershed: Is Christian himself justified in taking the police officer’s weapon and firing at the attacker, employing force that he anticipates may be lethal? Yoder will allow Christian the use of non-lethal force to protect the innocent but insists he stop short of administering a lethal blow. The difficulty for the pacifist perspective, as Yoder articulates it, is to explain how stopping short of employing force likely to be lethal in cases where that is the minimum needed to protect a threatened person expresses love for her.

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<sup>16</sup> See Rory Miller, *Force Decisions: A Citizen’s Guide* (Wolfeboro, NH: YMAA Publication Group, 2012), 42: “There is no level of force that is completely safe.”

The logic of the pacifist position treats as a matter of indifference the question whether the gun is pointed at the attacker or at his victim; Christian's only concern is to be sure that he does not wield the gun. Pacifism thus easily becomes a form of legalism, as pacifist engagement of the scenario does not focus on Christian's responsibilities *to these two persons*. The pacifist perspective rather commends the question, "What are the rules, and what action must I take (or refrain from taking) in order to ensure that I do not transgress them?" We do better to ask in such a morally challenging situation, "How do I seek the good of the persons for whom I have responsibility? How do I limit the evil visited on them in this situation?"<sup>17</sup>

On Yoder's analysis, it seems that once the potential of lethal force is present in a situation of conflict, Christian's obligations to the aggressor always trump his obligations to the potential victim. George Orwell famously criticized pacifism in World War II as "objectively pro-Fascist."<sup>18</sup> In our scenario a pacifist response appears to be "objectively pro-aggressor." Yoder is concerned that authorizing the use of lethal force will foreclose the opportunity for faithful witness to nonviolence by the victim in our scenario.

If this person shares my values, ... [i]t would be certainly improper for me as a third party in the conflict to deal with her enemy in a way she would not desire. At least some Christian women would not want to be protected by lethal violence (18).

Yoder is doubtless right in the last sentence quoted, but here his conclusions are skewed by his failure to adopt Tolstoy's version of the case with the anonymous victim. If the victim is anonymous, I cannot know whether she shares my values and whether her death therefore would have the force of a martyrdom. Martyrdom is a vocation that must be voluntarily embraced; no one can choose it for another.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Bell's critique of legalism in the "public policy checklist" strand of the Just War tradition, in comparison to virtue as focus of the "Christian discipleship" strand (*Just War as Christian Discipleship*, 78–86).

<sup>18</sup> George Orwell, "Pacifism and the War" (1942; see <http://www.orwell.ru/>, 24 July 2012).

In the case of an animal attacking a defenseless person, most Christians would not hesitate to intervene with the force needed to prevent the animal from doing the person harm, even if this resulted in the animal's death.<sup>19</sup> As a person is of greater moral worth than an animal, it is right that we should be more reticent about using lethal force against a person than against an animal; but when a choice is inescapable, it is unclear why we would extend protection to a human attacker and withdraw it from the person he threatens.

Recognizing the possibility that lethal force may on occasion be needed to protect another does not license Christian to employ force as a first resort in a situation of conflict or threat. The rule that the Just War tradition commends is the use of the minimum force needed to protect the defenseless person from attack, and this is a matter requiring the exercise of judgment. Christian is still obliged to protect the threatened innocent without resort to force if he judges that possible, and all of Yoder's suggestions for creative nonviolent intervention remain necessary for Christian to consider before resorting to force. These constitute preferential options for Christian, and indeed for any prudent and morally sensitive person, Christian or not.<sup>20</sup> They do not, however, relieve Christian of the regrettable necessity of intervening with force to protect those for whom he has responsibility when no other avenue of protection seems available. Such Just War authorities as Thomas Aquinas and Calvin recognize a special vocation of some Christians to renounce the use of force (e.g., ministers), but not a universal Christian obligation to forswear its use in all situations.<sup>21</sup>

### **From Individual to Social Ethics**

Can we move from a justification of lethal force used to protect an individual to such force used to defend a community, even a community on the

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<sup>19</sup> I owe this observation to Michael Weed. Albert Schweitzer is the only exception that comes readily to mind.

<sup>20</sup> In the social sphere, the invaluable guide to nonviolent means of redressing wrongs is Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (3 vols.; Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> Cole, "Good Wars," 30.

scale of a modern nation-state? Yoder says we cannot (cf. 21–25), but it is not clear that his objections withstand scrutiny. To return to our case, suppose that rounding the corner Christian encounters not one lone gunman but an armed gang organized to menace a neighborhood whose residents lack the resources to protect themselves. Would Christian be justified in organizing a defensive militia, arming and organizing them in a way sufficient to deter the aggressors, or to engage them if they persist in their predations? If the use of potentially lethal force has been granted as an option that Christian must consider in order to protect the helpless, then it would seem defensible if he assembles a standing force to oppose a persisting organized threat menacing the helpless in the aggregate. Further, if the peace of Christian’s community, or some segment of it, is menaced by a gang headquartered on the other side of a national border, it would seem he might quickly find himself organizing an army, and with good reason.

If this line of reflection commends our assent, we are starting down the path sketched by Michael Walzer:

If you were attacked on the street and you defend yourself, that is a just war in miniature. And if I come to your rescue, that is also, in miniature, a just war. If you hear cries of help from children in a ... neighboring house and you run into the house to ... protect them from a drunken father, that is the domestic analog of a humanitarian intervention....<sup>22</sup>

If we accept Walzer’s analogy, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Christian may find himself obliged to participate in the organization and maintenance of a standing army, a navy, an air force, or even a nuclear deterrent as a defense against organized communities (e.g., countries) with potentially hostile intent possessing, seeking, or likely to acquire such military ca-

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Walzer in “War: Program Transcript” (*The Infinite Mind*, vol. 321), 12 (accessed via books.google.com, 7 July 2012). See also Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (3d ed.; New York: Basic Books, 2000), esp. 51–55.

pabilities and only likely to be restrained by the prospect of such force being used against them.<sup>23</sup>

Yoder appears inconsistent in holding that a common legal framework distinguishes the case he explores from the situation of nations at war (cf. 22); a nation's domestic legal framework is itself constituted through the monopoly on the legitimate use of force ceded to the modern nation-state.<sup>24</sup> It is unclear why on Yoder's account a nation-state may legitimately employ force *within* its boundaries to secure its people against *internal* threats but not *beyond* those boundaries against *external* threats to the populace. In either circumstance, it is the option of force that in the extreme case compels acquiescence in the decisions of the political community.

Such an approach by no means justifies an uncritical nationalism or a blanket endorsement of all one's country's actions. I would hold, for example, that while the Allied Powers in World War II justly opposed the Axis (i.e., possessed *ius ad bellum*), the Allied response to Axis attacks on Pearl Harbor and London by ultimately targeting civilian populations in Lübeck, Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki cannot be defended as right conduct in warfare (*ius in bello*). The Allies' cause was just, but some of the actions they took to prosecute the war were not.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This conclusion is strengthened by consideration of the nexus between the evolution of military strategy and the development of constitutional order that Philip Bobbitt explores in *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History* (New York: Knopf, 2002), esp. 69–209. I would not confidently maintain that circumstances in the mid-1940s justified the American development of atomic weapons, but I would think a credible just-war case can be advanced for the maintenance of a US nuclear deterrent after the first successful Soviet test of a nuclear weapon on 29 August 1949, or indeed after the loss of nuclear secrets that made this test possible.

<sup>24</sup> See Bobbitt, *Shield of Achilles*, 829, “Prologue,” n. 1, citing Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” in his *Essays in Sociology* (ed. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970 [1921]), 77–78.

<sup>25</sup> The most discussed of these actions, the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, must be evaluated as one element of the Allied policy of area or “terror bombing” of civilian populations. One might make a just-war case for using atomic weapons on military targets sufficiently massive or fortified that their destruction would require kilotons or megatons of force, but the targeted use of such

### Conclusion

It is the challenge of everyone who bears the name Christian to live “in the world” yet not be “of the world.” Even as strangers and sojourners, Christians bear obligations to our neighbors in the cities and nations in which we reside. I find that I must question whether in *What Would You Do?* Yoder has adequately sketched these, including our responsibility to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” (Jer 29:7).<sup>26</sup> Before Christian determines what he must and must not do, he will want to consider fully the reflections embodied in the Just War tradition.

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weapons against civilians fails to satisfy the Just War criterion of discrimination (as does the tactic of terror bombing in general); see O’Donovan, *Just War Revisited*, 44–46. The most morally problematic aspect of nuclear weaponry is that, as Sean Malloy notes, the atomic bomb was “a weapon optimized for the destruction of cities and the killing of civilians,” and the consensus among American war planners favored its use without prior warning on “a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers’ houses” (see Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* [Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 43). For the relevant history, see also Michael Burleigh, *Moral Combat: Good and Evil in World War II* (New York: Harper, 2011), esp. 484–505; Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (rev. ed.; New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 402–5, 424–7.

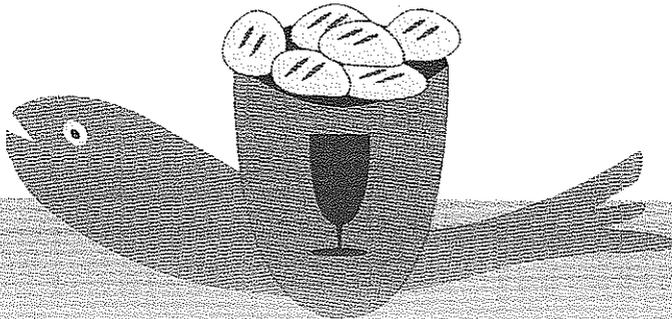
<sup>26</sup> For the importance of this text in early Christian social thought, see Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids, Mich./Carlisle, U.K.: Eedrmans/Paternoster, 1994).

Allan J. McNicol

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