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A Death to Celebrate?

THE JUST-WAR TRADITION & THE KILLING OF OSAMA BIN LADEN

During the Middle Ages—the historical context for the rise of what would come to be known as the "just war" tradition—violence under any circumstance was deemed a great evil by the church. In official Catholic teaching, combat was accepted as legitimate only when it prevented still greater evils and led to an otherwise unobtainable peace. The common ecclesiastical opinion, though, was that virtually all wars by the feudal nobility were waged from *libido dominandi*, lacked just cause, and resulted in far greater harm than good.

The rules of "just war" were not developed in courts by religious advisers keen to *justify* war. Rather, the tradition took shape largely in the setting of the confessional. It was codified in canon law by priests who wanted to limit the brutality of war and who were responding to a very practical question: Should knights returning from the battlefield be allowed to partake of the Eucharist? "Just war" precepts were applied to determine what sorts of *penance* soldiers should be made to perform before being fully readmitted to the Body of Christ.

There was no place, then, for triumphal displays in the aftermath of wars or violence, even when a conflict was seen as a tragic necessity or manifestation of God's providential punishment of the wicked by the sword of the magistrate. The authorities who served as the agents of God's wrath might themselves reap the violence they sowed. The moral legitimacy of taking any human life made in the *imago Dei* was always at best a regrettable concession to the violent realities of the "city of man" still in defiance of the City of God. In all cases, the attitude of believers toward wars and killing was to be one of somber soul-searching and even mourning for their enemies.

These ideas originated largely with St. Augustine, whose "just war" teachings fused Roman legal and Old Testament sources and proved decisive for Catholic political thought over the next millennium. Tragically, Augustine provided the doctrinal framework not only for limited wars of just cause but also for the brutal persecution of "heretics" in the name of corrective love. His ideas would later help inspire the largely unrestrained *holy war* tradition of the crusades.

Nevertheless, Augustine and later medieval thinkers provide at least some resources for Christians seeking to understand and resist the violence of *imperium* in any age. Their insistence that wars be waged with purity of heart or right intention, if taken seriously, is in fact deeply subversive of violence of any kind. As the Augustine scholar Michael Hanby observes, "The very qualities that make Christians just warriors also make them unfit to fight." Christian hope, Hanby continues, refuses "to situate human horror within the teleology of empire...and it refuses the consoling rhetoric that trivializes suffering and forestalls any reflection beyond that designed to congratulate ourselves."

These widely forgotten requirements of the just-war tradition—the duties of loving intention even in the midst of combat, and somber reflection and mourning in the moment of victory—came to mind as I listened to President Barack Obama's May 1 speech announcing that U.S. special forces had killed Osama bin Laden.

One cannot but empathize with the family members of the victims of September 11 who have expressed relief and satisfaction at the knowledge that the man who helped to mastermind the attack is now himself dead. Anyone possessing any moral sensitivity at all will agree that bin Laden reaped the fruit of violence he had sown. By all accounts the operation was conducted with great courage and skill. No American lives were lost. Bin Laden's body was quickly disposed of in keeping with Muslim custom. The burial at sea included the reading of religious rites in Arabic. All these facts of the operation as reported by U.S. officials are in keeping with the demands of the just-war tradition.

Yet there was much in Obama's speech—and in the scenes of spontaneous chanting, patriotic singing, and jubilant flag-waving across the country that followed—that ought to give Christians, and not only pacifists such as myself, great pause. The archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has pointed out that serious questions must be asked any time an unarmed man who is not returning fire is killed—before the eyes of his wife and twelve-year-old daughter, we now learn—rather than apprehended and forced to stand trial. Even accepting the highly implausible official account that bin Laden would have been captured rather than killed had he not in some way resisted, troubling questions remain.

In his speech, the president declared, "After nearly ten years of service, struggle, and sacrifice, we"—referring exclusively to Americans—"know well the costs of war." But the people who have borne the greatest costs of the "war on terror" are the people of Iraq, including the millions of refugees and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed as a result of America's unjust policy of "preemptive" war. Not once in his speech did Obama refer to the people of Iraq, only to "our sacrifices." America's tragic losses during the past decade are real and must be remembered. They cannot be understood and so cannot be properly remembered, however, apart from the staggering losses of Iraqis as a consequence of U.S. actions. The just-war tradition requires that we think and speak not only about the sacrifices of our own nation or tribe but about the global common good and the sufferings of the Other whom we bear responsibility for.

"We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies," the president continued. "We will be true to the values that make us who we are.... Justice has been done." It has been suggested, however, that the intelligence that led to bin Laden's whereabouts may have been gathered, at least in part, through "enhanced interrogation techniques" authorized by the Bush administration. Whether or not this proves true, the final lesson Americans might well take from Obama's words—"Justice has been done"—is that the ends justify the means, that all of the crimes of state committed during the past ten years were somehow worth it because this one man is finally dead.

But the just-war requirement of mourning even for our enemies means that we must see bin Laden's death with a clear sense of proportionality. It is hard in this light to maintain that his killing signifies that *justice has been done*. A narrowly legitimate or justifiable use of force might still be part of a fundamentally unjust pattern of violence. And the language of justice can itself be a great injustice when it is used in ways that induce or perpetuate historical amnesia.

Reinhold Niebuhr, reflecting the long Christian tradition of deep ambivalence about "just war" (even as he vigorously defended it), declared that "our own sin is always partly the cause of the sins against which we must contend." There was, unfortunately, no acknowledgment in Obama's speech of America's role as a contributing agent in the evils against which we must now contend. This should come as no surprise, for in the final analysis U.S. foreign policy is not based on the Christian vision of the causes of violence and injustice. Christianity has powerfully shaped American political life and the grammars of just war and human rights in liberal societies. But the relationship of the American story to the Christian *euangelion* is in many ways one of violent parody.

This was also evident in Obama's speech. The president appealed to the nation to unite around the killing of bin Laden as "a testament to the greatness of our country and the determination of the American people." We "are once again reminded," he said, "that America can do whatever we set our mind to." We "can do these things not just because of wealth or power"—as political realists tell us—"but because of who we are: one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." From the perspective of the Hebrew prophetic tradition and the witness of the New Testament writers that Christ has overcome the "principalities and powers" through his nonviolent suffering and death at the hands of the empire, what are we to make of these stark assertions of America's might and American exceptionalism?

In plain terms, on May 1 Obama declared that the death of one man—Osama bin Laden—is a new "testament" not to the goodness but to the *greatness* of America. Through the shedding of this guilty man's blood, mingled with the innocent blood of America's sons and daughters, we may now once more experience a "sense of unity," since the unity of the *demos* after the deaths of September 11 has grown perilously "frayed." None of this is ultimately a matter of reason or realism ("wealth or power"), the president said. It can only be grasped in terms of sacral and ontological categories, that is, in terms of *who we are*: the *one* nation under God whose violent "sacrifices" bring peace to the world ("make the world a safer place").

Was the killing of bin Laden a legitimate action? Most Americans have already concluded that it was. For those Christians who subscribe to just-war precepts, however, perhaps the most difficult requirement of the tradition is the demand that we mourn rather than celebrate the deaths of our foes, and that the occasion of killing be one of moral introspection rather than of unbridled enthusiasm or unexamined joy among those who claim justice for their side. Martin Luther King Jr. was speaking in the spirit of both authentic just-war thinking and Christian militant nonviolence when he reminded Americans of the "courageous maladjustment" of Jesus in commanding his followers to *love their enemies*.

I feel no love for Osama bin Laden. But Christian mourning for bin Laden requires not a *feeling* of grief at his passing, nor simply refraining from cheering in the streets. What it demands now is that we refuse to script his death into any myth of redemptive violence, into any nationalistic narrative of the regenerative power of blood sacrifice, whether of fallen soldiers or of those who would do us harm. ■

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