OFFERING HOSPITALITY
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Questioning Christian Approaches to War

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Grateful acknowledgments to Suzanne Gardinier for permission to quote excerpts from her poem “To Peace.”
To my students,

whose questions pushed me to write this book

and who have taught me so much
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Set during the Mexican Civil War, Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* (1940) follows the life of a whisky priest as he tries to save his life and protect the faithful. There is no doubt that the priest is a fallen man—he is an alcoholic; he has had affairs with women in his parish; he is filled with self-loathing. While intent on doing penance, there is one thing he refuses to regret: that he’s fathered a child. Shot and injured by a socialist lieutenant who hates everything the Catholic Church stands for, the priest runs for a gloomy three days before returning to danger to perform his priestly duties. For his effort, he is killed. The whisky priest is a Christ figure. This is hinted at even before his death. While evading the lieutenant and trying to minister to his congregants, the priest seeks out his graceless daughter. She is the encapsulation of dirty humanity. Nonetheless, the priest tries to impart to her an important lesson in the midst of a horrid war.

He went down on his knees and pulled her to him, while she giggled and struggled to be free: “I love you. I am your father and I love you. Try to understand that.” He held her tightly by the wrist and suddenly she stayed still, looking up at him. He said, “I would give my life, that’s nothing, my soul . . . my dear, my dear, try to
understand that you are—so important.” That was the difference, he had always known, between his faith and theirs, the political leaders of the people who cared only for things like the state, the republic: this child was more important than the whole continent. He said, “You must take care of yourself because you are so—necessary. The president up in the capital goes guarded by men with guns—but my child, you have all the angels of heaven” (Greene, 2005: 79).

There are some people who do not like to acknowledge the allusions to Christ in this undisciplined priest. Yet to deny this in part denies the dual nature of Christ: that the Word became flesh (John 1:14) to settle our sin because humanity is so important. In the Trinity, there is the Father that cares for his Son and for his children—his creatures inhabiting his creation—all interceded for by the Spirit. Scholars of international relations, with the discipline’s focus on the state—on republics and tyrannies alike—and on all the continents, tend to lose sight of the children, of humanity, and forget that they are so very necessary. Humans require care. Care is not something easily and readily done in international relations—nonetheless, it is an essential practice in a world increasingly divided between the privileged who inhabit stable powerful states and those who are in weak, conflicted states and, thus, at considerable risk. Finding ways to care, to practice hospitality by seeing to the needs of those on the margins, is the purpose of this study.

There are multiple occasions in the Bible that Christians are taught to care. One such an example occurs in Luke 9:10–17, the feeding of the five thousand. The story is multilayered, but Jesus commands the Disciples to perform hospitality; when they want to send the crowd away, Jesus says, “‘You give them something to eat.’” (Which is more of a command than a request.) Still they protest, but after more instruction, they do as Jesus tells them. After feeding the crowd, there are twelve baskets filled with enough food for the Disciples. This is a clear story of hospitality and God’s provision, but it is more than that. The Disciples, who struggle to grasp what Jesus is trying to tell them, in the
end act without self-interest (even their suggestion to send the crowd away was selfless, “Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging”). Acting without self-interest reaps them rewards: they are fed, along with everyone else.

Comprehending that the daughter of a drunken Catholic priest is important, indeed more important than the protected president or the state, upends notions of what is of primary concern in international relations (IR). Yet protecting without interest the good and the bad of humanity and humans is to practice hospitality in international affairs. Acting without self-interest is contrary to status quo understandings of how security operates. Nonetheless, this book explores how hospitality can be better inserted into understandings of war, specifically failed state conflicts, and ultimately of peace. Is peace a naïve objective? A blessed reality? An unreachable transcendent ideal? Practicing hospitality should result in peace; a new approach to *jus ad bellum*’s last resort is one method for practicing hospitality and establishing a better peace. The achievement of peace is intimately connected to the way we—the audiences of this book—look at war.

“We” is meant to include anyone reading this book, but it specifically references Christians in the United States who hope to engage a civil conversation about how we think about war and participate in governments that fight wars. “We” may also include non-Christians interested in reading a book that is critical of the conventional wisdom that seems to exist regarding U.S. Christians’ thoughts on war. At its most basic point, hospitality is the relationship between different actors—actors who may respect one another on the highest level or actors who may resent and resist everything about the other. Yet in hospitality we extend courtesy and an audience to the other—we treat one another with respect, recognizing each other’s humanity and intrinsic value. This book, with its focus on hospitality, is also asking people from different perspectives—theologians, feminists, postmodern scholars, and international relations experts—to engage in conversation with one another. The conversation may not be easy and may not be natural, but it is very important in light of the challenges facing the world today.
Christians, specifically those within the United States, are caught in the trappings of party politics and issues, mistakenly thinking that views on women’s healthcare and taxes are predetermined by faith, instead of deeply personal and nuanced topics. Since 9/11, but more than likely beginning with the Moral Majority and the Reagan Administration, Christian thinking on war in the United States has become highly militaristic (see Bacevich, 2005). It is often assumed that American Christians think monolithically about what a faithful response to war is. But again, there are different perspectives due to different denominations and personal thinking on war. War is a complex issue. Christianity is also complex—there are multiple Christianities (denominations, churches, communities) in the United States, and within those, beliefs vary from person to person, with agreement largely centered on the faith that Jesus Christ is the resurrected Son of God. Citizenship and patriotism are additional complications. When Christians make generalizations about how “we” are to think about war and then how non-Christians ascribe generalizations to the Christian community about how “they” think about war, it is easy to see how conversations become difficult. Recognizing that there is a multitude of traditions within the Christian faith, this book cannot speak to or for them all. Yet the aim is to re-engage the traditional American Christian response to power, conflict, and war. This book re-evaluates the predominant strands of American political theology—Christian realism, pacifism, and the Just War tradition—to ask if these are the capstones to each strand’s conversation or if they are now a point of departure for a new way of Christian thinking about war.

To do so, the strongest traditional American Christian voices within each strand—Reinhold Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas, and Jean Bethke Elshtain—are deconstructed in order to uncover a way for Christians to think critically about war in order to end complicity with it. Ending complicity may be too strong of a sentiment, because as people living in what is still the most powerful state in the world, a state that has only just ended one of two large and expensive so-called traditional wars, as well as having its finger in the pie of other recent and ongoing conflicts (e.g., Colombia, Libya, Pakistan, Israel/Palestine), U.S. citizens cannot completely end complicity—at most they
can be aware of it, critical of it (criticism does not preclude support),
and move against it when necessary. Being critical of our complicity
with hegemonic power can happen only when we are given the tools to
be aware of it.

The idea for this book emerged from the discussions during “A
Christian Response to the New American Century,” a Lilly Summer
Fellows Institute event I participated in at Rosemont College, Rose­
mont, Pennsylvania, in 2005. The institute was directed toward ex­
amining how neoconservatives in the United States had manipulated
Christian identity, but it also addressed a general Christian response
to power. Since 2005, conversations, readings, questions in lectures,
student projects, movies, and books have kept me thinking about the
question, What is a Christian’s response to power? Or at least this
Christian’s?

During the institute another fellow, Reverend Nicole Duran,
brought up an interesting interpretation of the Strongman story in
Mark 3. She posited that this parable speaks to power but more impor­
tantly speaks to those complicit with power. In this chapter in Mark,

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inevitable, they do not want it), then once the balance of power fails and war does happen, the question becomes, How can we best fight war? The answer might be: justly. Some pacifists admit that war happens but hate it, and some pacifists sometimes see war as the very last option. But then the question remains, When it does happen (and it does) how can we best fight it? The answer might be: justly.

Yet, there are Christians who are also using Just War to argue in a way that strikes precariously close to American imperialism (Elshtain, 2004). The Just War tradition is not without its own critics; Nick Rengger has been quoted multiple times as saying, “Just War is after all just war.” No matter how much Just War advocates try to make war more palatable by setting restrictions on the entering and fighting of it, it is still death and destruction. Yet, Just War may offer figurative space for a solution, where the expansion and weakening of traditional definitions of last resort create hospitality instead of war. In thinking through a response to power, this passage from Romans became foundational:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:9–18).

This passage requires a commitment from Christians to bless all people, enemy or not, and to offer them hospitality. This has profound implications for Christians and international relations.
Both Christianity and feminism problematize power because it is ruthless, manipulative, and certainly not humble. Chapter 1, “Harming Others,” explores feminist and gender studies criticisms of international relations. Specifically, it defines hegemonic Christianity, based upon the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic Christians are convinced of their own theological faultlessness to the detriment of hearing and valuing other Christian perspectives. This constructs a hierarchy between the different theological strands—creating a hegemon and subalterns. The subalterns include differing Christian voices and any non-Christian voices that present challenges to the hegemon. It is a distinctly inhospitable structure. Political theologies on war compose a particular hegemonic structure—between themselves and voices on the margins. This results in the inability of these political theologies to account for the security of vulnerable populations. By being so invested in state-centric human constructions of power, political theologians Reinhold Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas, and Jean Bethke Elshtain often fail to account for how marginalized populations are affected, specifically the populations living in or affected by failed state conflicts. Arguing from a human security perspective, failed states present one of the largest current challenges to international relations, as most wars today occur in failed states. Additionally, if Christians are concerned with all peoples’ well-being, then those most on the margins matter. Therefore, it is necessary to rectify this omission.

Taking account of these populations means prioritizing a different vision of security than the ones these three theologians often articulate. Chapter 2, “Marginal Wars,” explores how human security recognizes the vulnerability of those living within failed states. Conceivably more important than terrorism, failing and failed state statuses indicate significant socio-economic, socio-political, and political-economic weaknesses in a state. These put the inhabitants at considerable risk of physical violence, and also of material, health, and environmental risk. Thus, theologies on war need to better grasp ways of approaching those human security concerns. This is investigated using a case study on Plan Colombia, a development plan articulated by the Colombian government asking the international community, mainly the United...
States, for aid. Although Plan Colombia would appear to be an excellent example of proactive last resort, the manner in which the United States manipulated the aid given was (and continues to be) problematic, begging the question, Did this serve the United States or Colombia?

Chapter 3, “Hospitality toward Others,” relies upon understandings (or rejections) of vulnerability in international relations. Drawing upon postmodern thinkers Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, as well as feminist thinker Judith Butler, this chapter understands that the mutual vulnerability of humanity demands a responsibility toward one another. Hospitality ultimately acknowledges the deep responsibility the self has for others. As a cornerstone of the Christian faith, *agape*’s intrinsic care for others (love of God and neighbor before self) is related to hospitality. Instead of being focused on responses to power solely, which makes one complicit in some way with power, Christians must be able to demonstrate a thoughtful approach to conflict that embodies the grounding of faith in *agape*. Thus, it is necessary to be attentive to how war and conflict have been traditionally conceived of by political theologians, scholars who have often unwittingly denied vulnerability and responsibility to marginalized populations in global affairs.

Chapter 4, “The Invulnerability Myth” focuses on Reinhold Niebuhr’s legacy, Christian realism. Niebuhr’s conception of how anxiety leads humans and states to seek security is one of the better articulations of human behavior. However, Niebuhr found it sinful that security-seeking behavior might happen at the expense of others. I believe that Niebuhr’s adherence to nuclear deterrence during the Cold War reflected his desire to promote peace. Yet while nuclear deterrence worked well for the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it was at the expense of the Third World, as it was referred to in this era. This is a troubling abstraction of the effects of power on the part of Niebuhr. In effect, the policy of nuclear deterrence valued the populations of the United States over the populations of the Third World. This chapter argues that this abstraction of power continues, perpetuating the denial of other people’s vulnerability. In order to re­dress the problems within Christian realism, this dynamic must be
overcome by accepting some form of vulnerability along with the provision of security.

Chapter 5, “The Presence of Suffering,” begins by arguing that pacifism does not equate with passivity toward war. Instead, it provides an alternative to war—one that is proactive in addressing the needs and hurts in the world. Inherent in Mahatma Gandhi’s approach to nonviolence is empathy; Gandhi argued that nonviolent resisters must know and understand—be empathetic to—the other’s desires. Such an idea accepts a certain level of vulnerability. Yet the most prominent contemporary American Christian pacifist, Stanley Hauerwas, at his best espouses an often ambiguous commitment to confronting the power structures. Because of this, Hauerwas, while providing a framework for a good alternative, articulates a dualism (church versus world) and the “paradox of privilege” that denies a need to do something about the vulnerability problem. As both Hauerwas and Marilyn McCord Adams claim Cross-centered theologies, this chapter applies Adams’ idea of the church as a worldwide, inclusive entity that saves Hauerwasian pacifism from irrelevance in international affairs.

Chapter 6, “The Offer of Hospitality,” interrogates traditional understandings of the term “last resort”—one of the key criteria of jus ad bellum in the Just War tradition. Many theological justifications for war, from Augustine to contemporary scholars, are rooted within agape because a just war provides a way of loving neighbors—either through interventionist protection or by bringing violators back into righteousness. For many contemporary traditionalists, the performance of agape and the decision to engage in war stems from a position of theological contemplation and discipline. One of the most widely read Just War books since 1950, Jean Bethke Elshtain’s Just War Against Terror builds on an agape framework but has significant overtones of imperialism and neo-orientalism. This chapter attempts to reframe contemporary agapic Just War around hospitality, especially by changing how last resort has operated.

Last resort is closely connected to legitimate authority. Yet the tension inherent in contemporary international relations between state sovereignty and ethical norms is echoed in the tension between
Christian realism and pacifism. This has allowed realpolitik maneuverings to prevent last resort from functioning. I posit that if realism is being challenged to grant more vulnerability to state affairs, then the Just War tradition and the last resort criterion must also be challenged by taking a more proactive approach to preventing war (via pacifism), especially in failing states. Can addressing the variables that are linked to conflict emerging in failed states stabilize the situation as a truer, more hospitable concept of last resort?