
George Weigel

TRANQUILLITAS ORDINIS:

*The Present Failure and Future Promise of
American Catholic Thought on War and Peace*

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Reviewed by **Gordon C. Zahn**

In the long departed days of radio, I was greatly impressed by a dramatization of a work attributed to Rebecca West which has remained fresh in my memory over the intervening years. Entitled "There is Conversation," its central character was the unhappy confidant of the two parties to a brief but ardent love affair, each of whom described the same events and episodes but with diametrically opposite interpretations. This, I fear, is where George Weigel and I are with respect to our differing evaluations of what has happened and is still happening to "American Catholic Thought on War and Peace."

Some might question the propriety of my doing this review. After all, in what I am inclined to consider something approaching pre-emptive canonization, the author includes me in an exclusive category along with Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, James Douglass, and the Berrigan brothers. Of course, the honor is balanced by his insistence that the six of us bear much, perhaps most, of the responsibility for what the book's subtitle describes as "the present failure" of American Catholic thought on war and peace and represent stubborn obstacles to its "future promise" as well.

His "portrait" of me, I must admit, reveals a fairly thorough familiarity with my writings over the years and, allowing for some missed nuances here and there, a passably good grasp of what I have been trying to say. He misses the crucial point, though, that my "traditionalist Catholic pacifism" does not accept — and has never accepted — the validity of the "just war teachings" based on the Augustinian concessions. Instead, since the "conditions" required under those traditional formulations cannot be met by

the actuality of war (and almost certainly never were), and since they lead to the same practical conclusions as “evangelical” pacifism, I have been willing to argue in its terms, recognizing that this was the language my fellow Catholics find easiest to understand. However, I have never abandoned the pacifist commitment that made me a conscientious objector to World War II. There has never been a “conversion” to the proposition that any actual war at any time can be justified.

It is also fair to note that the credit he gives me for not finding parallels between Hitler’s wars and our war in Vietnam is undeserved. On several occasions, in articles and talks, I did point to what I felt were troubling parallels *in essence if not in excess*. Indeed, before that tragic adventure ended, we came uncomfortably close to matching the excesses as well.

Limitation of space precludes discussion in detail of the “portraits” of my distinguished co-conspirators in what Weigel decries as the “abandonment” of “the Catholic heritage.” Readers of this *Annual*, however, will be interested in the portrait of Merton. He, too, is treated with the generous appreciation mixed with unmistakable overtones of condescension. His major flaw, it becomes clear, was too apocalyptic an approach complicated by excessive dabbling in Eastern religious exotica. He is given due credit for successfully avoiding the pitfall of pacifism and remaining true, at least at the level of theory, to traditional “just war” teachings; but this saving feature is negated by a “mirror image” approach to U. S. / Soviet relations and the failure to recognize the “good guys / bad guys” distinction so crucial to the Weigel analysis. A further complication was Merton’s insistence upon the “eschatological” character of nuclear weapons.

In style, too, he was “not a systematic theorist of the ethics of war and peace” which meant his essays “could combine rhetorical overkill with measured analysis and prescription.” Most basic (a weakness displayed by all six culprits) was his failure to enter into “serious dialogue with the sophisticated form of the tradition of *tranquillitas ordinis* as it had been developed by [John Courtney] Murray.”

More than just the book’s title, this Latin term (defined by Weigel as “the concept of peace as rightly ordered political community”) is used with such frequency that it seems to take on the character of a mantra or mystical incantation — as if by repetition alone it will establish the validity of the author’s thesis. It is here that the absence of conversation becomes most pronounced. It seems never to cross the author’s mind that those he

chooses to identify as the activist and intellectual “elites” responsible for the “abandonment of the heritage” simply do not accept his implied assumption that Catholic thought on war and peace began with the conversion of Constantine and ended at Murray’s death in 1967. They are more likely to hold that the *true* “heritage” was abandoned centuries before when Augustine validated patterns of conformity that had taken hold of a Christian community enjoying its new-found status of prestige and power in an Empire no longer dedicated to its extermination.

The results of *that* abandonment, if measured in the full sweep of subsequent human history, have brought neither tranquillity nor order to the followers of Christ. Instead, the acceptance of the previously unknown doctrine of justifiable war opened the way to their participation on every side of almost every war that has come along. A heritage that could find German bishops calling upon Catholics to support service to Hitler’s wars as “a Christian duty” or find an American cardinal publicly endorsing the principle of “my country right or wrong” in Vietnam days is a heritage that cries for abandonment. If Weigel berates his “elites” for their failure to denounce extremist opponents of that war for using the code-word *Amer-ika* (strangely enough, the only use of that term in the book is his own), he seems not at all disturbed by the scandalous excesses of rhetoric and the sheer inhumanity of proposals advanced by some of the war’s more hawkish supporters.

Murray’s great and lasting contributions to the cause of religious freedom deserve the praise and gratitude they have earned. In matters related to foreign and military policies, however, he became something of a “court theologian.” It was a fellow Jesuit, John C. Ford, not Murray, who protested the immorality of obliteration bombing in 1944. Later, though he surely must have known that even limited nuclear war would exceed that immorality in destructiveness and loss of life, not only was Murray willing to contemplate it as a necessary military option but, given that presumption of necessity, *one that must be made “possible.”*

His disdainful dismissal of Scripture as a useful guide in foreign policy may well have been justified (“What makes you think that morality is identical with the Sermon on the Mount?” — p. 122), but that response to the question posed missed its point. It ignored the real problem: what the Christian who presumably is committed by faith to the Sermon’s message should do about the morality (or, perhaps better, immorality) of policies keyed, not to Christ’s teaching and example, but to the pragmatism of

subjectively defined “national security” and “military necessity.” At what point, would Murray — or Weigel for that matter — recognize a choice to be made between being a Catholic who happens to be an American or an American who just happens to be a Catholic?

One need not go back to World War II or Vietnam to test the relevance of “the heritage” to the contemporary scene. The much-lauded invasion of Grenada clearly violated several of the conditions of the “just war” and, by so doing, made a cruel farce of *tranquillitas ordinis* as “a dynamic political community rightly ordered in truth, charity, freedom, and justice.” It was clearly not the “last resort,” an action taken with reluctance after all peaceful means had been exhausted. An arbitrary military attack unleashed without warning to “rescue” a few hundred medical students who were imagined to be in danger fails all reasonable tests of proportionality or, for that matter, just cause, or legitimate authority. Yet not only does Weigel, the champion of the heritage which rests upon those conditions fail to apply them to this action. He voices impatience with the “elitist” journals which dared to do so.

That failure, of course, is consistent with the sad record of the 1500 years of the heritage whose passing Weigel laments. Today that “cool and dry,” moralism-free “moderate realism” he extols has brought us to the point where its advocates are ready to contemplate (or at least threaten) the final destruction of the world and all who dwell in it. To raise objections, as our bishops did to their credit in their 1983 pastoral, is to risk being dismissed as a craven “survivalist” primarily if not exclusively concerned with saving one’s own skin. That these objections are rooted in the unwillingness to assume even indirect responsibility for *killing* untold millions of one’s fellow human beings in what Merton described as a moral evil “second only to the Crucifixion” is dismissed as an unwarranted intrusion of “moralism” into the serious business of statecraft.

Weigel’s image of a world poised between “the fire of war and the pit of totalitarianism” is an effective presentation of today’s setting in which the Christian, like everyone else, is forced to make personal moral choices. If, as my reading suggests, his preference is to risk too great a measure of the “fire” to avoid the “pit,” it gives too little credit to the proven human capacity for heroic endurance under adversity in the hope of ultimate victory over time — a hope supported by confidence in a power perfected in powerlessness and the promise that the Gates of Hell will not prevail. Instead, the “moderate realism” celebrated here accepts the infamous

distinction between “totalitarian” and “authoritarian” along with its implied tolerance of — even *support* for! — the immoderation of the oppression and torture employed by some of our nation’s “authoritarian” friends and allies.

It is perhaps predictable that the fervor of his “pit”-avoiding anti-communism (coupled with resentment of the anti-anti-communism of those activist/intellectual “elites”) would leave Weigel uneasy with moral commitments to social and economic justice or what in his view are exaggerated notions of liberation that threaten to present U. S. actions or policies at a disadvantage in Latin America and elsewhere in the Third World. Seen in this light, *tranquillitas ordinis* takes on the character of his private vision of a *Pax Americana* in the making. It is not that he is insensitive to inequalities that exist and the hardships they bring to those disadvantaged. He is just reluctant to relate them to the basic injustice of longstanding patterns of economic domination and exploitation that have made so many susceptible to the lure of “the pit.”

The book can be recommended as a strong, at times bitter, protest against trends the author feels diminished the Church and its traditional role in the world. As one who spent most of his adult life protesting the distance the Church had moved from the example and teachings of its Founder, I have sympathy for Weigel and others who are unhappy to see her find the way out of the blind alley at long last and return to those origins.

Even the occasional and sometimes mean-spirited cheap shots can be overlooked or forgiven. To cite an example, as one of the presumed members (perhaps even leader?) of Weigel’s activist/liberal/intellectual/anti-anti-communist “elite,” I could not help but note — with amusement giving way to annoyance — how few of us (compared, that is, with those in his “camp”) are officers and beneficiaries of heavily funded and prestigious foundations or “think tanks,” able to count on four-figure fees for lectures and the like. It has been my experience that individuals and organizations committed to the vision of peace and justice he so bitterly rejects as “abandonment of the heritage” are more likely to be operating on a basis of penury and prayer.

If, as the author fears and this reviewer hopes, the struggle has been won and the heritage of *tranquillitas ordinis* as defined by generations of ever-escalating warfare and uncounted victims of fratricidal slaughter perpetrated by Christians, often enough against Christians has passed,

there is renewed hope for the Church and the world. And if, as the author suggests, this reviewer can claim to have played a part, no matter how small, in opening the way for the return to the heritage of Christianity's earliest history — yes, even to the Sermon on the Mount — that would be a source of great and legitimate pride.