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## The betrayal that is unjust war

by George J. Bryjak



### Viewpoint

Former chaplain Fr. William Mahedy served in Vietnam with the U.S. Army. In his 1997 book, *Out of the Night: The Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Veterans*, Mahedy relates an incident wherein a young soldier approached him one day after Mass.

‘Hey, Chaplain,’ he said quietly, ‘how come it’s a sin to hop in bed with a *mama-san*, but it’s okay to blow away gooks in the bush?’

Mahedy asks: ‘Consider the question that he and I were forced to confront that day in a jungle clearing. How is it that a Christian can, with a clear conscience, spend a year in a war zone killing people and yet place his soul in jeopardy by spending a few minutes with a prostitute? If the New Testament prohibitions of sexual misconduct are to be stringently interpreted, why, then, are Jesus’ injunctions against violence not binding in the same way?’

One possible response to the soldier's query, Mahedy notes, is that it's not a sin to kill Vietcong because we're fighting to stop them from attacking the United States. "If I had told him that," Mahedy states, "he wouldn't have believed it anymore than I did. But it is the answer that both he and I had previously assimilated. The problem was that he could no longer accept it. The first crack in his religious faith was beginning to develop. Either the Gospel itself made no sense, or the people who were interpreting it to him really didn't believe it themselves. ... He was being 'scandalized' in the biblical sense by immoral acts he had been told were now morally permissible. Still, somewhere deep within his soul he knew, even in the midst of combat, that this was evil."

The unsatisfactory answer Mahedy offered soldiers was that you can kill people who are trying to kill you, that it's morally justifiable to take the life of another in self-defense. "The answer is legitimate on one level but not on others. It is perhaps inescapable, given a combat situation, but it leaves much unresolved." Mahedy does not discuss the "just war" doctrine. From this perspective, inasmuch as the United States was not facing an imminent attack -- an impossibility as the North Vietnamese had virtually no air power or seaworthy warships -- the Vietnam War was unjust.

As the war escalated, more than a few soldiers had a gut feeling this conflict was immoral even if they were unfamiliar with the just war position.

Veteran war correspondent and Harvard Divinity School graduate Chris Hedges argues, "War is always betrayal. The institutions, including religious institutions, that mold us into compliant citizens can never again be trusted by those who return. This betrayal is so deep that many never find their way back to religious faith. They nurse a self-destructive anger and resentment, understandable, but also crippling."

Hedges believes the "Where was God in Vietnam?" question, applicable in Iraq and Afghanistan today, is something all soldiers ponder as war is ultimately a godless endeavor. "When love, compassion and human kindness are replaced by the vast, grotesque phenomenon of violence and destruction, God is banished. Human beings, who have the freedom to choose between good and evil, cannot find within them the power of the divine when they embrace a world of sin. ... And war is a state of almost unadulterated sin."

One especially devastating consequence of war is the tremendous guilt many veterans harbor, remorse that some will carry for the rest of their lives. Mahedy states that as American soldiers "discovered the truth about war, many experienced a profound and altogether appropriate sense of guilt. Widespread destruction of villages and peasant dwellings, and the slaughter of Vietnamese civilians affected everyone who was there."

While some soldiers railed against God, others plunged headfirst into religion, searching for divine absolution to alleviate their guilt. A combat veteran related the details of a particularly bloody battle, a day of fighting when 175 U.S. soldiers held off an onslaught of roughly 1,000 North Vietnamese troops.

After the fighting, which culminated in hand-to-hand combat, the ground was littered with the dead and dying of both armies. The soldier told Mahedy: "I began to weep uncontrollably and put the barrel of my weapon in the dead and dying enemy soldiers' mouths, ripping off three to five rounds. ... I stalked the perimeter reciting the act of contrition and Hail Marys, stopping to kiss and bless dead Americans and Vietnamese while begging God's forgiveness for our involvement in the raw carnage that morning. ... After returning from the hospital I informed my colonel that I had 'lost my punch' and spent my last three months ... in a virtual stupor. Thou shall not kill is ringing in my ears."

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In November 2002, the U.S. bishops released a statement noting that a war in Iraq would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force. Just prior to the invasion of Iraq by U.S. forces in March 2003, Pope John Paul II stated that a war with that country could not be legally or morally justified. After the invasion, the Holy Father stated: "When war, as in these days in Iraq, threatens the fate of humanity, it is ever more urgent to proclaim, with a strong and decisive voice, that only peace is the road to follow to construct a more just and united society. Violence and arms can never resolve the problems of man."

I've never understood why, in the light of these forceful statements, priests have not been speaking out against the Iraq war with the same passion they exhibit when condemning abortion. It's certainly not because they hesitate to involve the church in matters of state, as abortion is one of the most contentious issues in American politics, and Catholic clergy have no qualms addressing that practice.

With the exception of Christian evangelical associations, the leadership of virtually every major Christian denomination in the United States condemned the Iraq war. And like their Catholic brethren, they failed (with too few exceptions) to carry this unambiguous message to their congregations, to tell the faithful: "This is an immoral war. Do not support it. Do not send your son and daughters, husbands and wives to fight in it. Do everything you can to oppose it?"

The ambivalent attitudes toward the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars by religious leaders exacerbates the deep sense of betrayal and loss of religious faith that Hedges discovered in so many combat veterans. In an 1816 letter, Thomas Jefferson noted, "It is in our lives, and not our words, that our religion must be read." On this score Christian leaders have been sorely lacking. While condemning the war in proclamations, they failed to instill in their congregations the imperative to oppose unjust wars and obey the commandments.

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