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Book Review **by Anthony Gregory**

Christianity and War; And Other Essays against the Warfare State

by Laurence M. Vance (Pensacola, Fla.: Vance Publications, 2005); 118 pages.

When asked to name his favorite political philosopher in late 1999 during a debate with other Republicans in the campaign for the presidential nomination, George W. Bush named Jesus Christ. Bush's support from Christian groups and voters is widely known, and the turnout of millions of evangelical Christians has been largely credited for his reelection.

From the point of view of even more millions of Americans, Bush and the Republican Party affirm and uphold their Christian morals and patriotic pride better than do Democratic candidates such as John Kerry. Most of America's large Christian population lean conservative; and Bush's public pronouncements of faith in Jesus Christ, along with his rhetorical appeals to classic American values, have undoubtedly garnered support from many Christians who feel proud to have a vocally Christian president representing them, rather than a supposedly paganistic chief executive such as Bill Clinton.

One very important factor in all this is the perception that Bush will not waver in "defending America" — in that he is supposedly more certain than other politicians, especially Democratic ones, to wage war aggressively in the Middle East. Not a few Christians see the "war on terrorism" as a "crusade" — as Bush once called it — and not only in metaphorical terms, indeed as a genuine clash of civilizations that has pitted the Christian West against Islam. Combining this religious fervor with a nationalist pride, millions of American hawks see the civilizing forces of freedom-loving Christian America engaged in a battle for survival with Muslim foreigners who hate our freedom.

Does the Christian case for war withstand serious scrutiny? Should people agree with the Rev. Jerry Falwell that "God is pro-war"? We know that Bush has hardly honored his campaign promise in 2000 for a "more humble foreign policy," but has he acted consistently with his claim that he draws his political philosophy from Jesus? If the answer is no on all counts, are any

of the lessons taught by anti-war Christian scholars on the evils of war universally applicable and useful to those who might not strictly identify with Christianity but nevertheless respect the positive and unspeakably large impact of Christian values in fostering principles of liberty and peace in the development of Western civilization?

In some senses, America is not technically a Christian nation at all, and yet, in others, the importance of Christian principles in the birth of America becomes clear in the writings of even the most deistic and agnostic of the Founding Fathers. The universal significance of Christianity in our culture is stark. What Christians throughout America regard as legitimately Christian or diabolically un-Christian viewpoints, especially as they relate to government policies as important as war, affects us all. That cannot be denied.

How wonderful it is, given all of this, that Laurence Vance has made available a selection of his writings in a book entitled *Christianity and War; And Other Essays against the Warfare State*, which contains 13 essays, four of which focus on explicitly Christian themes and nine of which more generally address war and empire and why all Americans should oppose the immoral, un-American — and, yes, sinful — institution of aggressive mass killing known as the U.S. military, at least in its current context. The essays are all readable and informative and explain why any American who takes seriously moral and political principles, drawn from Scripture and religious teachings as well as from America's Founders and sheer reason, must eschew the U.S. warfare state in its present form, and, indeed, in the form it has taken for more than 100 years.

Religion and war

Attempting to reach people on the merits of peace and the perils of war is not always easy, particularly when they hold tightly to what they believe are teachings of their religious faith that validate or even endorse war. With millions of Christian Americans drawing their attitudes toward war from the bloodthirsty lessons of pro-war clergymen, it is not too surprising, but nevertheless disappointing, to see so many replace faith in God with faith in the state, and respect for the teachings of the Prince of Peace with the calls for blood coming from the god of war. Even many pro-war American Catholics deferred to Bush, but not to the Pope, in the run-up to the Iraq War.

In addressing, point by point, Falwell's interpretation of Scripture, Vance rebuts the notion that, in Falwell's words, "God is pro-war" :

We know from the Bible that God is pro-holiness and pro-righteousness, but to say that God is “pro-war” doesn’t sound like any description I have ever read in a systematic theology book. Was God pro-Crimean War? Was God pro-War of the Austrian Succession? Was God pro-War of the Roses? Whose side was [he] on in these conflicts? What Falwell really means is that God is pro-American wars. Falwell’s shameless pseudo-patriotism is a violation of the third commandment in the Bible he professes to believe: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain.”

It is here that we see Vance’s central and crucially insightful thesis: American Christians have, by and large, transformed faith in God into faith in the American nation-state, especially as it regards war. But war, as Vance convincingly argues, stands in conflict with the vast bulk of time-honored Christian tradition and literature. Compellingly citing the Bible, Vance demonstrates that blind obedience to and trust in the state directly contradict obedience to and trust in God.

Quite intriguing is Vance’s exposition in the title essay of Hugo Grotius’s Just War Theory, as it pertains to both just cause and just practices in war. War must have

just cause (correct intention [self-defense] with an objective), proportionality (grave enough situation to warrant war), reasonable chance for success (attainable objectives), public declaration (fair warning, opportunity for avoidance), declaration only by legitimate authority, and last resort (all other options eliminated).

Furthermore, even a justly started defensive war must be conducted only against legitimate targets and must respect the doctrines of proportionality and the fair treatment of prisoners.

Many U.S. wars have failed miserably by these standards, and a great many of them have failed on every count. Unfortunately, many Christians defend most of these wars, and some of them were even waged, at least implicitly, in the name of Christianity. (One absurd example that comes to mind is the claim given at the time of the Spanish-American War that the U.S. government was working to “Christianize” the already mostly Christian population in the Philippines — an intervention that, as Vance reminds us, took the lives of more than 200,000 people, mostly civilians.) That Christianity would be abused in the name of aggressive war is nothing new, however. Vance quotes “Veritatis Amans” in an essay from 1847:

Many of the wars whose desolating surges have divulged the earth, have been carried out in the name and under the sanction of those who profess the name of Christ.

Two of Vance's most hard-hitting essays — "Should a Christian Join the Military?" and "Christian Killers?" — do not pull any punches in outlining the urgent conflict personally lived by those Christians who are currently carrying out orders for the U.S. military in its aggressive actions. In one profound section in the first of these articles, Vance lays out the case that the U.S. military violates every single Commandment in the Ten Commandments. In the second article, he explores the curious fact that many Christians see less contradiction in the term "Christian killers" than they might in similarly oxymoronic phrases, such as "Christian pimps" or "Christian adulterers."

Morality and war

As noted earlier, Vance's book holds significance not only for Christians but for all who are interested in the moral case against war and reasoned critiques against blind allegiance to the warfare state. Even in the essays focusing on Christianity, he has lots of ecumenically useful information, such as a brief summary of the lies told by America's principal warmongering presidents from James Polk to both George Bushes. He appeals to universal morality, explaining why Christians and non-Christians alike should oppose aggressive war, with such parallel questions as "Should a Christian join the military? Should anyone join the military?"

However, the distinctly Christian arguments against war may prove among the most interesting content in the book, even to the non-Christian anti-war American, as they weave together a tidy summary of religious principles of peace heard all too seldom these days. Just as one does not need to be an atheist to find value in anti-war reasoning based on the inherently secular values of Objectivism, especially in these days when all too many Objectivists favor war, so too does one not need to be a Christian to recognize the strength in anti-war reasoning based on Christianity, especially in these days when all too many Christians likewise favor war. More than simply appealing to the authority of Christianity — which, with his scriptural citations, the author does quite well — Vance is making a *reasoned* argument that Christians are holding contradictory positions if they claim to follow both Christ and the secular god of war.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, articles 5 through 13 focus not on Christianity and war, but on war itself. Vance has sections on the evils of war, specific wars, and the nature of the U.S. empire, all of which have undeniable universal appeal but which also tie in nicely with his earlier essays, forming a cohesive collection of arguments in his attempt to reach fellow Christians who have been misled into supporting war.

One of the most impressive of these essays is "Jefferson on the Evils of War." If Christian Americans have strayed from their faith to cheer on the warfare state, all pro-war Americans have neglected the principles of one of our greatest Founding Fathers in doing so. Instead of dropping only a couple of gems, as many do in citing Jefferson's inclinations toward peace, Vance supplies more than 11 pages of valuable quotations chronicling his consistent opposition to war. "I have

seen enough of one war never to wish to see another,” said Jefferson, who “abhor[ed] war and view[ed] it as the greatest scourge of mankind.” Vance shows how Jefferson’s opinions on aggressive war were not ambiguous, as he documents the Founding Father’s general opposition to it as well as his specific observations concerning the American experience, the formalities of declaring war legitimately, and standing armies.

Standing armies

On this last all-too neglected issue alone, Vance presents wonderful arguments against what the Founding Fathers considered a principal grievance in their own time: standing armies during peacetime. Thomas Jefferson named standing armies as a tyrannical component of the British Crown in the Declaration of Independence and described them as

instruments so dangerous to the rights of the nation and which place them so totally at the mercy of their governors that those governors, whether legislative or executive, should be restrained from keeping such instruments on foot but in well-defined cases.

Vance not only consults Jefferson on the evils of standing armies, but devotes large portions of two other essays on the subject, each one drawing on an important voice in the history of America’s founding: “Brutus,” the pseudonym credited with 16 virtually forgotten essays written in opposition to the *Federalist Papers* and the ratification of the Constitution; and “Cato,” the pseudonym credited with the collection of 144 essays, known together as *Cato’s Letters*, which made the case for liberty in Britain in the early 1720s and were a source of inspiration for the American revolutionaries half a century later.

The Anti-Federalists for whom Brutus spoke had many reservations about the Constitution, not the least of which was standing armies. As Vance puts it,

In four of his sixteen essays ... he explains how the establishment and maintenance of standing armies breeds fear, is destructive to liberty, and should be viewed as a scourge to a country instead of a benefit.

In Brutus’s words,

The power of the federal legislative, to raise and support armies at pleasure, as well in peace as in war, and their controul over the militia, tend, not only to a consolidation of the government, but the destruction of liberty.

Vance includes other thought-provoking quotations from Brutus, including his engagement with Alexander Hamilton on the issue of standing armies.

In discussing *Cato's Letters*, Vance shows that their early classical liberalism, much like the Anti-Federalist principles of Brutus and the individualism of Thomas Jefferson, had little sympathy for war. The 1720s essays “preferred commerce to conquest” and, in their own words, strongly opposed the rulers who

[engaged] their country in ridiculous, expensive, fantastical wars, to keep the minds of men in continual hurry and agitation, and under constant feats and alarms.

Cato called standing armies “standing curses in every country under the sun, where they are more powerful than the people” ; opined that “it is certain, that all parts of Europe which are enslaved, have been enslaved by armies; and that it is impossible, that any nation which keeps them amongst themselves can long preserve their liberties” ; claimed never to have “met with one honest and reasonable man out of power who was not heartily against standing armies” ; and contended that “great empires cannot subsist without great armies, and liberty cannot subsist with them.”

Vance's presentation of Brutus's, Cato's, and Jefferson's opposition to standing armies is particularly well worth pondering. What many chief philosophical architects of the American Revolution viewed as a sure sign and implement of tyranny, most Americans today, including many libertarians, regard as an acceptable, necessary, and obvious part of national security and the American way of life.

Vance also presents and substantiates eight little-known facts about Iraq, including that “there was no country of Iraq until it was created by the British in 1920” and that “the United States already sponsored two previous regime changes in Iraq.” He discusses the Crimean War, which, he says, “should have been the ‘war to end all wars’ instead of being a precursor to the carnage of the war that made ‘the world safe for democracy.’” And he addresses the horrible realities of combat and the terrible prevalence of war in the modern world. The last section of the book is filled with powerful documentation on how extensive the U.S. empire has become, providing lists of places in which the United States has intervened and continues to have an unnecessary military presence. He writes,

The total number of troops deployed abroad as of [September 30, 2003] was 253,764, not including U.S. troops in Iraq from the United States. Total military personnel on September 30, 2003, was 1,434,277. This means that 17.6 percent of U.S. military forces were deployed on foreign soil, and certainly over 25 percent if U.S. troops in Iraq from the United States were included. But regardless of how many troops we have in each country, having troops in 135 countries is 135 countries too many.

Vance's book provides an important contribution to the cause of peace. Readable, eloquent, and well-reasoned, it serves well in teaching the reader about the Christian principles of peace so often neglected by many of today's Christian hawks; and it has the rare potential to appeal to and convince them of their error and inconsistencies. I recommend it as a delightfully engaging and quick read, both to win over Christian supporters of the war and to enlighten non-Christians as to the true Christian outlook on war and empire.

The need for returning America to peace and nonintervention has perhaps never been greater. It has perhaps never been more important to make the case for peace. For these reasons, it is crucial that the arguments for peace be made clearly, cogently, and often, within as many philosophical frameworks and ideological groups as possible. It is vitally necessary and useful to reach audiences who support the war in glaring contradiction to other beliefs to which they claim to swear total allegiance. For the potential Vance's book has in reaching many who might not otherwise be reached, and for providing his readers with some very important rational and moral arguments against the war, Vance deserves the thanks of those of us who love peace and liberty and are working to see them restored to America.

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