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## **Taking the Prince of Peace Seriously** **by Thomas E. Woods Jr.**

*Christianity and War, and Other Essays Against the Warfare State* by Laurence M. Vance (Vance Publications, 2008); 432 pages.

Several years ago, Congressman Sam Johnson (R-Texas) told parishioners at Sun creek United Methodist Church in Allen, Texas, something he had said to President George W. Bush: “Syria is the problem. Syria is where those weapons of mass destruction are, in my view. You know, I can fly an F-15, put two nukes on ’em and I’ll make one pass. We won’t have to worry about Syria anymore.”

Johnson later claimed he’d been joking. But the congregation wasn’t laughing — it was roaring with cheers and applause.

These were all Christians, you understand — you know, people who are supposed to be concerned about the wrongful taking of innocent human life.

It’s not just Protestants; a substantial number of Catholics are guilty of the same cavalier attitude toward war, which is ipso facto just if waged by the U.S. government. They will spend their time tracking down whatever slivers of evidence they can find in support of their leaders’ war propaganda, a practice they would have laughed at if they’d observed it in the Soviet Union. As a Catholic myself I have been mortified to think that a neoconservative death cult is what is being projected to the non-Christian world as Christianity.

This is why the second edition of Laurence Vance’s *Christianity and War, and Other Essays Against the Warfare State* (which is nearly four times as long as the first edition) is at once both good news and bad news. The good news is the book itself, which eviscerates the self-justifying nonsense that passes for moral reflection among so many Christian supporters of war. The bad news is how rare such a book is these days: a theologically conservative Christian’s powerful, unrelenting case against war, militarism, and an eagerness to believe whatever propaganda will promote war and cast those politicians who support it in a favorable light. And it

is to conservative Christians that Vance directs the bulk of his appeal, since it is they, he finds, who most readily adopt the war propaganda that emanates from Washington.

It's one thing to describe someone as a voice crying in the wilderness, but that doesn't quite capture Laurence Vance and his work. Vance is a voice crying in a soundproof sarcophagus on the moon.

Vance is no pacifist and would not oppose Christian participation in the armed forces if the U.S. military were actually used for defensive purposes. But that has not been the case for quite some time, which is why two of the essays in this collection are provocatively entitled "Should a Christian Join the Military?" and "Should Anyone Join the Military?"

To those who urge participation in the state's wars on the grounds that Christians must obey the powers that be — an objection Vance evidently encounters quite a bit — Vance counters with the admonition to obey God rather than men. No one is exempt from moral censure on the grounds that he was just obeying orders. The issue is whether the orders are morally acceptable or not, and that question is not answered by anti-intellectual demands of obedience. Vance demands to know whether, on the grounds that one must obey the powers that be, such critics would kill their own mothers if ordered to do so by the state. I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

Vance raises another good point: what about the soldiers of the enemy country? Are evangelicals prepared to say that those men are to be honored and respected as well, since they too are obeying the powers that be, namely their own rulers?

Evangelicals cite that verse, incidentally, not because they need to persuade themselves of the need to support the war, but in order to bully other Christians into doing so. Most evangelicals need little biblical encouragement to follow a position on war they have already adopted on other grounds. Apparently determined to live down to the *Washington Post's* famous description of evangelicals years ago as "poor, uneducated, and easily led," they can't sign on fast enough to whatever immoral, harebrained military intervention their leaders urge them to support. Anyone who reacts otherwise must be a "liberal" who "hates America."

As for those who appeal to the Old Testament to prove divine sanction for war (for instance, the late Jerry Falwell in a bizarre article called "God Is Pro-War"), Vance joins other anti-war Christians in the obvious reply: "God commanded the nation of Israel in the Old Testament to fight against heathen nations (Judges 6:16), but George Bush is not God, and America is not the nation of Israel."

### **Blind faith in Caesar**

Not just among Christians but among conservatives more generally, all critical thinking and curiosity cease when the subject turns to war. Moral relativism and utilitarianism, which Christians supposedly oppose, take the place of serious moral argument. Vance describes the position simply: "Killing someone you don't know, and have never seen, in his own territory,

who was no threat to anyone until the United States invaded his country, is not murder if the U.S. government says he should be killed.” Behavior that Christians would never support in any other context suddenly becomes perfectly acceptable, even praiseworthy, simply because the state has declared that a war is under way. (That’s what Voltaire meant when he said, “It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.”) Many even seem to suspect the Christian orthodoxy of those who raise the subject of war as a moral question.

It was not always so. Vance includes an essay on the evolution of the Southern Baptists, who in the past have issued compelling statements about the moral and material catastrophes of war. These beautiful statements in behalf of peace weren’t merely the perfunctory preambles that good taste demands before bringing out the war drums, as is so often the case today. Consider this single paragraph from a 1940 statement:

Because war is contrary to the mind and spirit of Christ, we believe that no war should be identified with the will of Christ. Our churches should not be made agents of war propaganda or recruiting stations. War thrives on and is perpetuated by hysteria, falsehood, and hate and the church has a solemn responsibility to make sure there is no blackout of love in time of war. When men and nations are going mad with hate it is the duty of Christ’s ministers and His churches to declare by spirit, word, and conduct the love of God in all men. In time of war it is our Christian responsibility to prepare for peace. We would, therefore, urge our churches to think and work toward a Christian social order in which a just and lasting peace can be realized.

### **A commitment to principle**

Now to be sure, Vance’s is not the most elegant English prose you will ever read; there is little subtlety in his sledgehammer style. But there is nothing subtle about the subject matter, either, and if anyone can be excused some understandable exasperation, it is Vance, who has so often been shunned and condemned in Christian circles for his rational thinking and aversion to propaganda. (The typographical errors, which I’m sure will be corrected in the next printing, are less excusable; the United States is described as a “rouge” nation twice on the same page, for instance.)

The foreword to the second edition of *Christianity and War* is written by Mike Reith, a retired major in the U.S. Air Force. Reith was resistant upon reading Vance’s work for the first time, but he finally had to admit to himself that Vance had the better of the argument.

Most describe it as a “loss of innocence” — that moment of enlightenment when we discover a painful truth of life. My loss of innocence is still ongoing. Vance has caused me to open my eyes. The result

has been a discovery of the wonderful truths and economics of libertarianism, and a correction and deepening of my faith in and understanding of Christianity, and most importantly, the orthodox, historical, and biblical views of war.

“This book,” Reith concludes, “is a clarion call that challenges the modern American church, the military member, and all citizens as to their beliefs concerning the historical and moral aspects of warfare. For me, it was literally life changing.”

Few authors ever receive an endorsement like that. Fewer still actually deserve it. Vance’s book is refreshingly — at times even shockingly — radical, but I am unable to identify any flaws in his unrelenting exposition. He says what all Christians, *especially* those who boast of their fidelity to the Bible, should be saying. I am not just delighted with *Christianity and War*. I am grateful for it.

*Thomas E. Woods Jr. is the **New York Times** bestselling author of eight books, most recently **Who Killed the Constitution? The Fate of American Liberty from World War I to George W. Bush** (with Kevin R.C. Gutzman). Visit his website: [www.ThomasEWoods.com](http://www.ThomasEWoods.com).*

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