

# Imaging a common peace: Pathways to positive change in global politics

**Philip McDonagh** looks at the roots of ‘just war’ theory, and considers Pope Francis’ recent statements on war, in light of the current situation in Ukraine and other global challenges. Justice must come with peace.

## Towards a ‘secular synodality’

The Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations was launched by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland in 2021. Our goal is to explore the organisational principles that can encourage a mutually beneficial engagement by political leaders with religious actors; and at the same time to contribute in practice to frameworks of engagement inclusive of the churches and faith communities.

The vision of our Centre is that we need to develop new meeting places or frameworks of engagement to think long-term; interrogate our overarching vision of society; help us identify our most important cultural resources; interpret, clarify, and nurture our high-level values; and create shared social meaning in a context of cultural and religious pluralism. To create new future-oriented frameworks of engagement with which to ‘image’ a common peace in the mid twenty-first century does not call into question our ability to defend immediate interests and to raise immediate concerns in day-to-day negotiations elsewhere.

In western Europe, over three centuries, there has been a draining of cultural energy away from religion. Arguably, there is now an imbalance. Religious learning, interreligious dialogue, rational reflection on politics from a religious starting point, and the dialogue of public authorities with religion, have been undervalued over a long

period. Public authorities should recognise, in developing a ‘secular synodality’ that faith communities can make a significant contribution to building trust at all levels of society. An additional benefit is that when churches and faith communities set out to engage in a substantive dialogue with public authorities and other stakeholders, they are likely to start new discussions and develop new forms of leadership. Writing as a cardinal, the future Pope Benedict stated very bluntly: ‘One might go so far as to say the Church will survive only if she is in a position to help mankind overcome this hour of trial.’<sup>1</sup>

## Hope and discernment

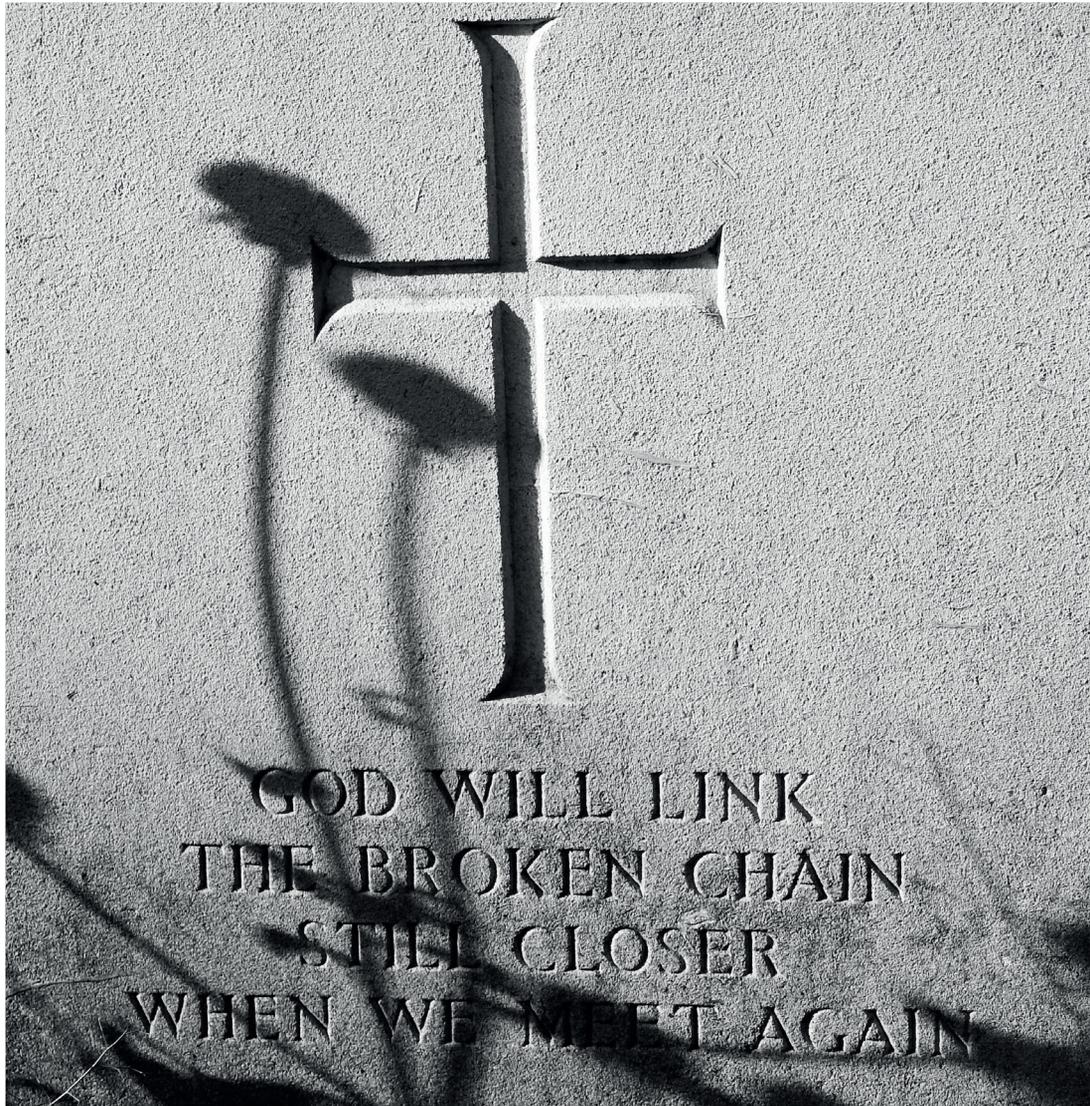
Calling on the Greek of the New Testament, we might argue that for Christians the practice of *pistis*, faith–hope, and *krisis*, practical discernment, are central to our contribution to ‘overcoming this hour of trial’. The practice of hope and discernment also implies humility, or whatever word we choose to describe the opposite of *hubris*:

And when you stand in prayer, forgive whatever you have against anybody, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your failings too. (Mk 11.25)

In *Spe salvi*, Pope Benedict states the following about human agency: ‘we can uncover the sources of creation and keep them unsullied.’ ‘The sources of creation’ are the same for everyone. Therefore, a common criterion of evaluation – let us call it the

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‘standard of hope’ – links one situation to another. Living in hope is not a matter of holding ourselves and others to account according to clearly established rules: premature certainty is ‘the wisdom of the present age’, in St Paul’s language.

Jesus states in St Matthew that ‘the weightier part of the law is discernment, mercy, and faith’ (Mt 23.23). Entering a process of discernment in particular situations (*krisis*), taking account of the *particular reality*, is how we express our hope in practice. Together, *pistis*, faith–hope, and *krisis*, practical discernment, enable us to practice the love of ‘macro-relationships, social, economic, and

political’ described by Pope Benedict in *Deus caritas est*.

Knowledge of the reality of situations depends on specialised expertise in all sorts of areas. It also depends on insights into the nature of politics, a ‘philosophical operating system’ in which we take a view on questions such as the following:

- How does life in society work, and why is it important?
- If every action aims at some good, is there a higher good, such as happiness, which is

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valued for its own sake and becomes the 'unifying focus of all our scattered enterprises'?<sup>22</sup>

- How does a political dispensation based on coercion become a dispensation based on freely given consent?
- Are we prepared to suffer for the sake of others? Is there a common life or collective well-being that is more than the sum of our private interests?
- Who has a share in the common life? Do we need communities distinct from the political community? What is the relationship between sharing in the community of faith and our vision of justice in society?
- How should different political communities relate to one another?
- How does a path for evil open up in human affairs and how does evil spread and metastasise?
- Where does reconciliation begin?

Addressing the Council of Europe in 2014, Pope Francis said: 'If [conflict] paralyses us, we lose perspective, our horizons shrink, and we grasp only a part of reality. When we fail to move forward in a situation of conflict, we lose our sense of the profound unity of reality, we halt history.' The impact of conflict on our perception of reality and on our capacity to act constructively is the central concern of Thucydides at the very beginning of the western tradition of history-writing.

When Pope Francis in 2023 describes conflict as a 'virus' that spreads beyond our control, he is of course referencing Covid-19. But he is also echoing Thucydides, who develops a comparison between the spread of the plague at Athens and processes of social disintegration under the pressure of conflict.

In the face of social pathologies, Thucydides considers that a 'far-seeing moral patience' is a key political virtue. Moral patience requires dialogue and deliberation in each situation: 'how is it possible to deal with the uncertain future through

any medium other than speech?'<sup>23</sup> But moral patience has another dimension as well. It requires the juxtaposing of one case with another in order to learn lessons. Thucydides anticipates in important respects the four principles of benign political change set out by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*:

- Time is more important than space.
- The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
- Unity can be achieved in the presence of difference.
- We must close the gap between ideas and reality.

When Pope Francis engages with a Thucydidean vision of disintegration and regeneration in politics, he is looking, in effect, for an exercise of reason that will take us far beyond current orthodoxies, as when St Paul invites us 'to become foolish in order to be wise' (1 Cor. 3.18).

Psalm 22 quoted by Jesus on the cross begins, as we all know, with a cry from the depths, 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' I believe that in his final moments, struggling to recite this psalm, Jesus had in mind the whole text, above all the singer's confidence that under the future reign of God, 'the poor will receive as much as they want to eat'. Today, a high and growing percentage of the world's population is exposed to hunger. In a world in which hope and practical discernment are the key political values, our primary responsibility is to work towards a more rational and coherent understanding of political models under which unimaginable sums of money are spent on weapons while at the same time hundreds of millions of people are undernourished or malnourished, including many citizens of relatively prosperous countries.

### Towards a ceasefire in Ukraine

This is the global perspective in which I turn now to the prospects for an end to the war in Ukraine. Many would hesitate to enter this debate, arguing that our first obligation is to distinguish between perpetrator and victim, to align ourselves with the victim, and to hold out for a so-called 'victory' involving a complete reversal of the situation on

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the ground, regime change in Russia, prosecutions, and reparations. The pursuit of these objectives is often combined with a certain disregard for the price that is paid for the continuation of the war and for the associated grave risks. My response to the demand for victory is shaped by the quotation from St John chosen by the Cardinal Secretary of State when he entered St Peter's Square to announce the death of Pope John Paul II: 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world' (Jn 3.17).

The position of the Holy See, as I understand it, is that Russia, Ukraine, and all other parties have their particular responsibilities in the present situation – including responsibilities towards the rest of the world. At his General Audience on 22 February 2023 (Ash Wednesday), the Pope said this:

I appeal to those who have authority over nations to make a concrete commitment to end the conflict, to achieve a cease-fire and to start peace negotiations. What is built on rubble will never be a true victory!

At the Angelus on 12 February 2023, Pope Francis had called for 'the patient pursuit of dialogue'. It is among the leading actors who remain in the wings that we are most likely to find both the capacity and the moral freedom to make a difference.

### If you wish for peace, seek justice first

A re-assessment of the role of aggression in human society is required. In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis states: 'It is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a "just war"' (258). Pope Francis is hoping for deep change as described in his book *Let Us Dream* – an 'overflow' that breaks the traditional confines of our thinking. In the hope of contributing to such an overflow, I suggest here some new avenues of approach.

### *The phenomenon of aggression*

The phenomenon of aggression cannot be accounted for satisfactorily by analogies with aggression in animals and by appeals to a so-called 'state of nature'. There is a risk that we are unconsciously cultivating public mythologies and other forms of truth distortion which make the

arms industry seem inevitable and according to which elaborate plans for the destruction of neighbouring societies are an acceptable part of our domestic social contract.

### *The roots of just war thinking*

Just war thinking has dark roots. In the western tradition, the foundational text is Aristotle's definition directly linking the concept of a 'just war' to the doctrine of the 'natural slave'.<sup>4</sup> Slave-making is analogous to the hunting of animals (*thēreutikē*):

The art of war will by nature be an art of acquisition that is properly employed both against wild animals and against humans designed by nature for subjection who refuse to submit to it; this warfare is by nature just.

Cicero's *De Officiis* influenced Christian writers. But Cicero's 'just war' is a hypothesis, a template to be employed by rivals for imperial power to 'soften the misery of history' (*rei tristitiam mitigare*). The indiscriminate destruction of 'wars of survival' is never far away.

### *The agency of the individual combatant*

'Just war theory' depends on a stylised narrative involving two actors or centres of power. One side is presumed to be acting justly, the other unjustly. This is already a somewhat fragile tool of analysis. Most conflicts are many-sided, many actors join wartime coalitions for a mixture of motives, and the longer a war continues the less the situation resembles the original crisis. An even more fundamental point is the status within just war theory of the individual citizen and his or her agency. The Greek polis attributed a sacred character to participation in war, as we see in the common meals of the Spartans and the shared hope (*koinē elpis*) ascribed to Athenians who die 'almost without noticing' in the heat of battle.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to accommodate the drilled responses of individuals caught up in a political-military machine to a Christian understanding of conscience, responsibility, and human dignity: 'What passing bells for these who die as cattle?'

### *Technological change*

It is not a mark of sophistication that today we

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have transplanted large parts of an ancient military ethos to social and material circumstances which are completely different. The jury of humanity does not accept the use or possession of weapons of mass destruction. Some writers argue that precision weapons make it possible to choose targets more accurately and therefore to fight wars such as those of the early decades of this century. In practice, we witness long drawn out, even permanent, conflicts in which entire populations are traumatised. In the non-transparent sphere of cyber warfare, involving a range of state and non-state actors, the predictability that was pursued with great difficulty during the Cold War is not even theoretically possible. We think of as normal a new form of total or so-called 'existential' conflict in which economic sanctions and attacks on critical infrastructure destroy the livelihoods of millions of people and prejudice the global future. The use of drones and lethal autonomous weapons is often favoured because it avoids casualties on one's own side. To me, this long-distance killing of lists of people drawn up for the approval of politicians has an 'enormity' – a quality of inhuman strangeness – of which we ought to be extremely wary.

### *The uncertain effect of military action*

Force is unpredictable in its consequences. Military actions are intended to 'send a message' to others. But how the message will be received is uncertain, all the more so in a long timescale and across a wide geography. There are feed-back loops and ricochet effects. Insights into the social impact of violence are especially important in today's global context which resembles more than ever a complex system in which there is very little slack.

### *The arms industry as an Aristotelian 'mixed action'*

The arms industry could never be 'chosen for its own sake'. The legitimacy of persisting with a seriously defective arrangement – Aristotle would call this a 'mixed action' – depends on responding in good faith at two levels: first, we need to mitigate the effects of what we are doing now; and second, we need to take all reasonable steps to change the conditions that have brought us to where we are. One way of changing current conditions is to complement conceptions of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello* with a further set of criteria developed under the heading of what we might

term *ius ad bellum parandum*, the jurisprudence of preparing for war. Criteria such as right intention, legitimacy, proportionality, the rights of ordinary people, and likelihood of success are relevant to coercive policies in the round as well as to individual military actions. We cannot continue to acquiesce, through inertia, in what Pope Francis calls a 'third world war fought piecemeal'. A future *ius ad bellum parandum* would need to address questions such as the following:

- the scale of defence expenditure in comparison with other expenditures;
- the use of military spending to promote economic interests, including private economic interests;
- the relationship between the threat of economic sanctions and the threat of war;
- the role of espionage, including espionage for commercial purposes;
- the place of weapons development and surveillance technology within the wider question of how technological change impacts on human experience;
- the arms trade.

The development of a new *ius ad bellum parandum* can help us to ensure that military preparations and the associated 'narrative' no longer contribute as they do now to our collective failure to resolve global challenges. Let us affirm, rephrasing the Roman saying: *si vis pacem, para iustitiam*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ratzinger, J., *On Conscience/Two Essays*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> A phrase borrowed from the late Fr Joe Veale, SJ.

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides 3.42.2.

<sup>4</sup> *Politics* 1256 b 24.

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides 2.42.