

Ellul on Violence and Just War¹

The question of what faithful disciples of Jesus are to say and to do in response to the violence of war has divided Christians for most of the history of the church. As Ellul states in the opening sentence of his book on the subject of violence, ‘The churches and theologians...have never been in unanimous agreement in their views on violence in human society’.² That does not, however, mean that there has not been a consensus down the centuries. There has clearly been a predominant approach to the question of war, namely that of the ‘just war tradition’ which has argued that political authority can, subject to various constraints, legitimately use lethal military force outside its sphere of jurisdiction in the pursuit of justice.³ With pre-Christian origins, it took a distinctively Christian form in the writings of Augustine which in turn shaped both medieval theologians such as Aquinas and the Reformers.⁴

Ellul is a trenchant critic of this way of thinking and yet, as often in his writing, his comments are lacking in detailed engagement with the specific arguments of his opponents. Instead, he provides a broad-brush account and critique. This, while making some strong and valid objections, is bound to leave anyone sympathetic to the complexities of the just war tradition feeling rather dis-satisfied, perhaps even that they have been subjected to the ‘violence’ of caricature.⁵

Given the importance of this subject and the strong differences of opinion found among Christians resulting in divided witness to the world, it is necessary to

¹ This chapter is a revised version of an article that first appeared in *The Ellul Forum*, Issue 32, Fall 2003.

² Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (London : SCM Press, 1970), p. 1. All page references in the text refer to this volume. There are discussions of war in other works by Ellul and in various articles, including a number now collected in Jacques Ellul, *Israel: Chance de civilisation* (Premiere Partie, 2008) where see especially “Guerre juste...Ce que j’en pense”, pp. 254-6 from July 1992.

³ One of the best recent articulations of this tradition is by the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University - Nigel Biggar, *In Defence of War* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

⁴ An excellent reader with major texts is Gregory M. Reichberg, Henrik Syse, Endre Begby (eds), *The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). Reichberg and Syse have recently also edited *Religion, War and Ethics: A Sourcebook of Textual Traditions* (CUP, 2014) drawing on writings in a range of religious traditions including Christianity.

⁵ The main critiques and account of the historical origins of the tradition are found in his categorisation of this approach as one of ‘compromise’ (*Violence*, pp. 1-9) and his appendix on conscientious objection (*Anarchy and Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 91-5). A less polemical account of the origins of the Christian just war tradition is found in his study of the history of institutions (*Histoire des Institutions Vol 2*, (Paris: PUF, 1989, pp. 506-7, 525-7). Particularly given our current context, it is also important to note that he sees this tradition in part shaped by Islam’s subversion of Christian faith (*Subversion of Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 100-4. This chapter from *Subversion* is reprinted and the theme of Islam and war also explored in other chapters in Ellul’s *Islam and Judaeo-Christianity: A Critique of their Commonality* (Cascade Books, Wipf & Stock, 2015).

step back and identify the fundamental differences between the just war tradition and Ellul's thinking and to ascertain whether any constructive dialogue can take place between them. This chapter highlights two areas in which the wider rationale and method of Ellul and the just war tradition stand in tension with each other and acknowledges both strengths and weaknesses that can be seen when the two approaches are placed in dialogue.

The heart of the divergence between Ellul's account of violence and that of the mainstream Christian tradition is perhaps most easily understood by reference to the two terms which identify that tradition – 'just war'. In relation to these Ellul questions both the proper focus and subject matter (writing on violence rather than war) and the moral purpose and task (which he argues should be confession of sin not justification).

The Subject Matter – War or Violence ?

It is of the utmost importance that Ellul's account is focussed on *violence*, and interestingly, in the original French is entitled *Contre les violents*.⁶ The specific question of *war* is therefore set in the wider context of the phenomenon of *violence*. Instead of concentrating on 'hostile contention by means of armed forces, carried on between nations, states, or rulers, or between parties in the same nation or state; the employment of armed forces against a foreign power, or against an opposing party in the state'⁷ he insists that thinking about this specific subject can only be properly done once set in a wider context. To think rightly about war there is the need, in the words of the title of his book's third chapter, for 'Christian realism in the face of violence'.

This approach marks a significant shift in understanding of the question. The great Christian theologians of the just war tradition generally approach their discussion from two angles. In some contexts, it is a question about how a confessing Christian with a particular political or military responsibility in society is to act or indeed whether they can faithfully remain in certain positions given the duties that will be incumbent upon them.⁸ In others, it is seeking to elucidate the obligations of

⁶ Jacques Ellul, *Contre les violents* (Le Centurion, 1972). Ellul's main concern appears to be, as often in his work (for example *False Presence of the Kingdom* and *Jesus and Marx*), those Christians who are similar to him in their advocacy of a radical, revolutionary Christian faith but who have from his perspective taken a serious false step by supporting and justifying violence in their cause.

⁷ Oxford English Dictionary's primary definition of 'war'.

⁸ So, in the tradition, among the key classic texts are Augustine's letter to Count Boniface (Letter 189, from 418AD) with the counsel, 'Do not think that it is impossible for any one to please God while

love and the prohibitions entailed by the specific commandment against murder.⁹ In thinking about ‘war’, in other words, we are being asked to reflect on a form of practical, political action that raises a fundamental moral question because it requires participants to be involved in the taking of human life.

Ellul, from the opening pages of his book, critiques this tradition by relocating it within his own predominant category of violence. So, categorising this strand of Christian thinking as ‘compromise’, he places the early Christian concerns about the state in relation to ‘violence’ – ‘they saw that the state...used violence against its enemies, internal or external. For war certainly seemed violence pure and simple, and the police operated by violence’ (2). The challenge that remained even when Christians held political office and the state ceased persecution of the church is expressed in the following terms - ‘the political power...continued to use violence’ (3). Ellul then explains how theologians and canonists responded to this challenge which he insists on describing as ‘internal violence’ and ‘external violence’ by the state.

In relation to ‘internal violence’ Ellul discerns two key redefinitions taking place. A distinction is drawn between the state and human beings and it is held that the state ‘never acts by violence when it constrains, condemns and kills’ (3). Instead, its actions are distinguished from ‘violence’ by being conceived of as ‘force’ so that the state ‘is the institution which demonstrates the difference between violence and force...There is all the difference between violence and force’ (4). The issue then becomes whether or not the state’s use of force is ‘just’ or ‘unjust’ and in deciding this it is conformity to the laws which is the determinative factor. However, even when the state does not conform to the laws it still uses force – albeit now unjust force – rather than violence. This reasoning, Ellul claims, was an attempt ‘to clear the state of the charge of violence by explaining that it was not violence’ (5).¹⁰

engaged in active military service’ and Luther’s ‘Whether Soldiers, too, Can be Saved’ (1526) written to respond to the concerns of Assa von Kram of Wittenberg about reconciling his Christian faith and military profession.

⁹ Thus Aquinas’ main discussions in the *Summa* are (a) *ST II-II*, q40 which is entitled ‘of war’ and, importantly, placed under the discussion of charity and (b) *ST II-II*, q64 ‘Of Murder’.

¹⁰ In our current context such an analysis raises interesting questions for those who accept this distinction: Al-Qaeda was clearly a non-state body which did not present itself as taking on the responsibilities of political authority more broadly and so would be classed as using violence. We now face the new challenge of Islamic State, a group which in many ways appears more violent in its actions of beheadings etc but on this analysis could be described as using force as it has proclaimed a Caliphate, governs a significant amount of territory, and seeks to order social life in that sphere, not simply to attack those it perceives as enemies.

In relation to the external violence of war, Ellul believes that the church reasoned that because ‘to deny the state the right to go to war was to condemn it to extinction’ yet the state was ordained by God, therefore the state ‘must have the right to wage war’ (5). This he claims (though without citing any supporting evidence¹¹) was the origin and fundamental rationale for ‘the casuistry of the just war’ whose evolving tradition he sums up in terms of seven conditions to make a war just. Although Ellul acknowledges these conditions ‘have theoretical solidity’ (6) he questions their practicality and relevance, especially in the contemporary world.

Ellul’s own contrasting approach to the question is shaped by what he calls ‘Christian realism’ – ‘the Christian who wants to find out what he ought to do, must be realistic; this is the first step’ (83). The problem is that we need first to be clear what the Christian must be realistic about and herein lies the fundamental weakness of Ellul’s work. ‘Violence’ is the lens through which he re-interprets and critiques the just war tradition and the phenomenon about which he insists we must be realistic. But ‘violence’ is itself never defined by Ellul.¹² Clearly it is broader than the just war tradition’s focus on the taking of human life but just how broad it is remains unclear. The signs are, however, that for Ellul the terms is exceedingly wide-ranging in its scope – ‘economic relations, class relations, are relations of violence, nothing else’ (86), ‘psychological violence...is simply violence, whether it takes the form of propaganda, biased reports, meetings of secret societies that inflate the egos of their members, brainwashing or intellectual terrorism’ (97). It would appear that Konyndyk is broadly correct that violent behaviour for Ellul is ‘coercing someone in a way that violates his personhood’,¹³ a very broad definition which in turn requires more clarity as to what violates personhood. Given that ‘violence’ is to be the over-arching interpretative category for Christian reflection on war and is being used to explain

¹¹ Oliver O’Donovan is clear, and presents a better historical and theological account, when he writes that the Christian just war tradition is “irreconcilable” with those who “make *survival* the final criterion of what may and may not be done”. He is clear, in defending just war, that “to take survival as the bottom line is to revert to the antagonistic model of mortal combat, and so inevitably to retreat from the Gospel proclamation of the universal rule of Christ and from the praxis of loving judgment. When self-defence, of state, community or individual, has the last word, paganism is restored” (Oliver O’Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 9).

¹² This is a common criticism of Ellul’s writing on this subject. For example, ‘The first question, then would seem to be: What is violence? But, strangely, Ellul does not address it’ (Kenneth J. Konyndyk, ‘Violence’ in Clifford G. Christians & Jay M. Van Hook (eds), *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (University of Illinois Press, 1981), p.256. Rognon makes a similar critique (extended by Ellul’s positive talk of ‘spiritual violence’) in *Jacques Ellul: Une pensee en dialogue* (Geneva, Labor et Fides, 2007), p. 145 n15.

¹³ Konyndyk, *op.cit.*, p. 256.

Christian moral assessments in history which did not themselves primarily use this category, it would help if such a definition – or preferably a more precise one - had been given and defended by Ellul himself.

Despite this weakness, there are two great strengths in Ellul's approach. Firstly, it refuses to mask the fact that punitive measures taken by political authority have the same basic structure as the wrong actions to which they respond. So fines (like stealing) take away people's property without their consent, imprisonment (like kidnapping) deprives a person of their liberty. Although this should be more obvious in war, the language of 'force' means that it can be effectively forgotten. As Glover comments, 'It is widely held that killing in war is quite different. It is not, and we need to think about the implications of this'.¹⁴ But this similarity need not mean moral identity or that ethical differentiation is impossible or illegitimate: materially the act of sexual intercourse has a common structure whether it is joyful marital sex, adultery, fornication or rape; the insertion of a knife into human flesh could be an act of surgery or grievous bodily harm. Ellul formulates a stark law of the identity or sameness of all violence. This, when it is given a moral focus in order to insist that we cannot distinguish between just and unjust violence or violence that liberates and violence that enslaves, simply asserts what really needs to be argued for.¹⁵

Secondly, Ellul also helpfully highlights the continuity between the internal coercive actions of political authority ('police functions' as we might call them) and the external actions (military functions in war). Here there is continuity between Ellul and the traditional just war understanding. That tradition similarly refuses to treat these as two independent spheres with different moralities or criteria for action. Ellul thus will be sympathetic to a common critique made by just war theorists. They point out that there is a tension (if not incoherence) in being a principled advocate of non-violent pacifism who rejects all war but not being a non-violent anarchist (Ellul is here coherent given his defence of non-violent anarchism). Similarly there are ethical challenges which are not always recognised in being committed to just war thinking but absolutely opposed in all circumstances to capital punishment (which is increasingly becoming the dominant Christian position).

¹⁴ Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 251. For a vivid, first-hand reflection on the realities of war see Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like To Go To War* (Corvus, 2011).

Where Ellul differs fundamentally with the just war tradition is that it is marked by seeing the task of political authority as one which can legitimately be fulfilled – at home and abroad, through police and through military – through the subordination of all uses of ‘violence’ to the pursuit of justice and the task of good judgment. Ellul himself held such views earlier in his life as is evident from his first published book on the theological foundation of law which appeared in French shortly after the war in 1946. There, in discussing biblical texts such as Rom 13 on the ‘use of the sword’, he writes,

The use of the sword in itself is not condemned... The use is subject to eventual condemnation... which will become a reality only if the sword... serves either the obstruction of justice or the spirit of power. Within this eschatological perspective, man’s judgment in the realm of law assumes its rightful value. His judgment is the reason why the use of the sword will not be condemned. Any use of it apart from man’s judgment runs counter to God’s will... It is law which, before God, permits the use of force.¹⁶

Although it is difficult to be clear as to why Ellul departed from this viewpoint, one factor is perhaps found in his comment that the just war tradition is ‘based on the conviction that man can retain control of violence, that violence can be kept in the service of order and justice and even of peace’ (5-6). Ellul’s later realism about violence appears to have led him to reject this fundamental presupposition which is essential to just war thinking. That realism is an important challenge to those who believe that the forms of violence found in warfare can be a valid means of enacting judgment and serving peace. Nevertheless, it is hard to dismiss the view that, at least in some case, a limited amount of authorised force can indeed serve order, justice and peace. If ‘peace-keepers’ had used such controlled and limited ‘violence’ at the start of the Rwandan genocide or in Srebrenica during the Bosnian conflict, then great evils may well have been prevented. Here, and elsewhere, order, justice and peace may well have been served by what Ellul rejects as ‘violence’ in a way that they were not by the refusal of UN peace-keepers to resist and suppress those bent on mass killing.¹⁷

¹⁵ For a more sustained philosophical argument for the moral identity of killing in war with other forms of killing, which thereby critiques just war thinking while also disagreeing with Ellul in that it seeks to justify some forms of killing, see Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law* (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 113.

¹⁷ See the powerful accounts in Elizabeth Neuffer, *The Key To My Neighbour’s House: Seeking Justice in Bosnia and Rwanda* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002) where chpt 5 describes the failure of UN forces in Rwanda and chpt 6 in Srebrenica.

In contrast to the just war tradition and his own early views, not only does Ellul place all reflection about war under the broader rubric and laws of violence, he also sees violence (and so war as a subset within that) as a force which rules human beings. Occasionally in his writing he relates this to his theological understanding of the principalities and powers by naming violence as ‘one of the “rudiments” (*stoicheia*) of this world’.¹⁸ This is a feature of Ellul’s work on violence which frustratingly he does not develop. Its reminder of the need to consider the powers in any thinking about war stands, however, as a further challenge to the just war tradition. In making judgments about war, and assessing moral questions in relation to any particular war, we must keep sight of the bigger picture and avoid thinking ethics can simply focus on the choices and actions of individual agents abstracted and isolated from the reality of power in wider society.¹⁹ Ellul, by approaching the question through the category of ‘violence’ as a power in human culture, helpfully draws attention to the flaws and dangers in making moral judgments about particular actions before and during war – the classic questions relating to *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* – without our moral thinking and evaluation also considering the spiritual reality of the powers in the wider shaping of our society.

The Purpose – Justification or Confession ?

Ellul’s differences with the just war tradition are not limited to his insistence on approaching the subject of war through the much larger category of violence which is then understood in a much more global and quasi-deterministic fashion. He also has a fundamental objection to its attempt to provide justification for certain violent actions. This objection would appear to take two forms.

First, in his realistic analysis of violence, one of the features Ellul identifies – his fifth and final law of violence - is that ‘the man who uses violence always tries to justify both it and himself’ (103). The horror and agony caused by violence means, he claims, that everyone who uses it seeks to demonstrate that they have acted morally when they have turned to violence. More controversial still Ellul explains that this

¹⁸ Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury, 1970), p. 174. The best account on Ellul and the powers remains the work of Marva Dawn whose findings in her doctoral thesis are most easily found in her “The Biblical Concept of ‘the Principalities and Powers’: John Yoder Points To Jacques Ellul” in Stanley Hauerwas et. al. (eds), *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honour of John Howard Yoder* (Wipf & Stock, 1999), pp. 168-186.

universality of justification derives from the fact that ‘violence is an expression of hatred, has its source in hatred and signifies hatred...It is absolutely essential for us to realize that there is an unbreakable link between violence and hatred’ (104). Again this is not defended but simply repudiates the Augustinian strand of the just war tradition which appeals to ‘love of neighbour’ – the neighbour suffering unjust oppression or violence - as its rationale for the use of coercive force. The just war tradition is, therefore, in Ellul’s eyes simply one of the multiple forms of self-justification inevitably developed by fallen human beings in the face of their own violence.

Second, although Ellul can apparently accept that Christians will use violence, he refuses to accept their justifications for this. Instead, he emphasises that ‘as Christians we must firmly refuse to accept whatever justifications are advanced’ (140). He is insistent that ‘in their radical refusal to justify violence, Christians must not leave the smallest breach’ (141). Although particularly clear in his discussion of violence, this reflects a wider feature of Ellul’s approach to the task of Christian ethics. He is constantly on the alert to prevent a Christian ethic becoming a means of human self-justification that escapes God’s gracious gift of justification by faith in Christ.²⁰

Violence, Ellul argues, is a sign of the fact that humanity has sinned and ruptured our communion with God. We must not, therefore, formulate means to justify it in certain circumstances. Instead, we must confess our sin and seek God’s forgiveness. For Ellul, the important truth is that the Christian cannot have a good conscience – ‘the Christian, even when he permits himself to use violence in what he considers the best of causes, cannot either feel or say that he is justified; he can only confess that he is a sinner, submit to God’s judgment, and hope for God’s grace and forgiveness’ (138). It is important to realise that Ellul as emphatically rejects pacifist-inspired forms of self-justification which are developed for a policy of non-violence. He is quite honest that, ‘in the face of the tragic problem of violence, the first truth to be discerned is that, whatever side he takes, the Christian can never have an easy

¹⁹ For a recent analysis of modern warfare which helps us set ethical questions about war in this wider context, particularly of the arms industry, see Alan Storkey, *War or Peace?: The Long Failure of Western Arms* (Christian Studies Press, 2014).

²⁰ The fullest account of this is his *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969) where (p. 108), Ellul asserts, ‘Every honest reflection must absolutely begin by acknowledging that...there cannot be a Christian ethic’. I have discussed this point more fully in my *Living the Word, Resisting the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 108-12.

conscience and never feel that he is pursuing the way of truth' (138). Yoder is therefore right to describe Ellul as holding the view that 'the Christian will have to use violence but will know that it is sinful'²¹ but Ronald Ray is also correct in drawing attention to the fact that 'even the Christian position of non-violence involves guilt'.²²

This approach to the question of a Christian attitude to war provides important challenges to some of the uses Christians make of the just war tradition. That tradition, in defending the use of force to combat injustice, can at times appear to lose sight of the fact that all war is always a sign of humanity's rebellion against and alienation from the God of peace. The best Christian defenders of just war acknowledge this and so O'Donovan opens his study with the need to hesitate over the achievement of just war theory because "the will of God for humankind is peace" and peace is the ontological truth of creation, the goal of history and a practical demand laid upon us.²³ In contrast, the just war approach can too easily become a means by which "our side" in a military conflict seeks to claim moral superiority over the enemy and believe itself not guilty. Too many politicians and Christian leaders uncritically apply the 'criteria' for a just war in a simplistic manner as a checklist of tests in order to show that the decision to go to war is justified and that right is on the side of their government. Ellul, in contrast, highlights the painful and tragic reality of living in a fallen world and being, in Luther's famous phrase, *simul justus et peccator*.²⁴

There is, however, a major weakness in Ellul's approach. This is found in the fact that in its aversion to any form of self-justification his ethic is left being of little or no practical help to people faced with the harsh realities of living and acting in the real world. Two pieces of evidence show the dangers in Ellul's approach. Firstly, he appears incoherent and inconsistent when, despite his universal and sweeping categorisations and condemnations in relation to violence, he attempts to make moral distinctions between different violent acts. He will state that as a Christian he 'cannot

²¹ John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1992), p. 177, n16.

²² Ronald Ray, *A Critical Examination of Jacques Ellul's Christian Ethic* (Unpublished Ph.D, University of St Andrews, 1973), p. 196, n3.

²³ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 1ff.

²⁴ This element is present but often forgotten in the Christian tradition of reflection about war. It is seen, for example, in the medieval requirement for returning soldiers to do penance (see the brief discussion in Daniel M. Bell's excellent *Just War As Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 44-45). A fuller discussion can now be found in Robert J. Delahunty, "The Returning Warrior and the Limits of Just War Theory", *Rutgers Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol 15 (2014); pp. 219-296.

call violence good, legitimate and just' (133) and yet there are situations when he says he approves of certain violent acts (69). Indeed, in the original French, he even writes of conditions in which the use of violence is acceptable and not condemnable.²⁵ Yet, later he can write that violence is always condemnable.²⁶

Secondly, when it comes to the full and extreme horrors of war, we see the further difficulty that arises when treating all violence as the same and refusing to offer any means of moral discrimination. Here, Ellul appears to accept that 'anything goes' once war has begun. This is in stark contrast to the just war tradition's desire to limit the use of force. Instead, Ellul appears to refuse any moral constraint least those who accept the proposed limits then believe they are justified in the limited violence that they do use. So, in conversation with Patrick Troude-Chastenet he reflected on the French experience in Algerian in these terms:

According to me, once you have decided to go to war you have to go all out and use every means at your disposal. This is the case that applied in Algeria. Everyone was shouting their heads off against the torture that was going on. But the real problem was not the torture but the war itself. There is no morality in war. If you want to win you must pull out all the stops.²⁷

Ellul is thus in a paradoxical situation compared to the just war tradition. That tradition seeks to limit war by acknowledging certain carefully delineated situations in which the use of coercion is justified and permitted and beyond which it is unjustified and absolutely prohibited. In so doing, it also lays down clear boundaries within military conduct and even a duty in certain contexts to sue for peace rather than to use immoral means. Ellul, in contrast, stands resolutely opposed to violence. However, his refusal to distinguish between different forms and levels of violence, his rejection of anything that could be construed as justification for violence, and his emphasis instead on the need to confess our necessary sinfulness in the fallen world, means that Christians guided by his approach are left unable to make important moral distinctions. So, in relation to the recent and current 'war on terror' this insistence that all violence is violence and can never be justified leaves Ellul unable to distinguish and condemn some forms of interrogation of prisoners as torture. In rejecting any morality in war and seemingly accepting the need to use all necessary

²⁵ 'acceptable, non condamnable' (*Contre les violents*), p. 170.

²⁶ 'La violence est *toujours* condamnable' (*Les combats de la liberté* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984), p. 166, italics original).

means to win, he is in serious danger of allowing the moral vacuum created by his abstention from discriminating moral judgment being filled by a purely consequentialist ethic where the end of victory justifies any means. As a result, Christians following his approach could end up participating in torture, extraordinary rendition, or even, presumably, genocide or dropping nuclear weapons as a necessary but unjustifiable response in a fallen world.

In short, Ellul has an aversion to any approach to moral thinking that he believes risks facilitating self-justification or denying the continuing presence of sin in all our actions. Pushed to an extreme, however, this makes his writing incapable of providing moral guidance or setting clear and realistic moral limits. As Oliver O'Donovan comments in his discussion of whether killing is a moral evil that we are bound at all costs to avoid and thus participation in war totally prohibited,

The curious hybrid notions of 'sin within the realm of necessity' (J.Ellul) and 'responsible assumption of guilt' (H. Thielicke) capture dramatically the subjective moral tension which belongs to a decision of such gravity, but they leave the deliberative question in paradox and so seem to have more rhetorical than conceptual persuasiveness.²⁸

Finally, a further major difficulty in Ellul's approach in relation to justification is evident in his startling claim that 'apart from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the use of violence is always and *a priori* contrary to the will of God'.²⁹ Here it seems, having refused all forms of violence, he suddenly allows for divinely inspired violence and hence something more akin to holy war (might one even say *jihad*?) than a Christian conception of just war. How one would discern the Spirit's inspiration to use violence is, sadly, left unelaborated. Certainly it cannot be described by reference to the divine calling of political authority to exercise judgment in pursuit of justice as in the just war tradition. Presumably any attempt to say anything more than he does would be to deny divine freedom and risk providing a means of self-justification !

Conclusion

Ellul and the just war tradition clearly approach the subject of moral judgment in relation to war from quite different perspectives. It is important to recognise that it

²⁷ Jacques Ellul *on Religion, Technology and Politics: Conversations with Patrick Troude-Chastenot* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), p. 39.

²⁸ Oliver O'Donovan, 'War and Peace' in McGrath, Alister (ed), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1993), pp. 655-6.

²⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (London: Mowbrays, 1976), p. 406.

is these different approaches or paradigms which then largely shape their different conclusions.

In the light of the valid criticisms and cautions raised by Ellul but also the serious weaknesses in his own method, the challenge is whether or not a third way is possible. This could represent a chastened form of just war thinking in the light of Ellul's critique. In contrast to Ellul's work (where his attempt to reconfigure the Christian tradition by making 'violence' the controlling concept risks distorting the structure of the tradition's account of morality in war) this would recognise and build upon the strengths of the just war tradition. Rather than just subsuming war under a strong account of 'violence' and eschewing anything that could amount to self-justification this would provide a careful structured analysis of the key questions which must be addressed in thinking about going to war and conducting war: who is to wage war? why should they have recourse to war? when should they do so? how should they fight? It would draw on the wisdom of the just war tradition to discern where significant moral boundaries lie in each of these areas.

In particular, like Ellul in his earlier writing, it would be based on the conviction that the structure and limits which must be placed on any use of destructive or lethal force are defined by the fact that just judgment is not only necessary but good and the divinely ordained task of government in a fallen world. It is therefore certainly true that 'violence' is a sign of the fallenness of the world – Ellul's emphasis on this must not be ignored even if it needs to be tempered – but it does not follow that all recourse to violence is the same and so moral discrimination impossible.³⁰ There is, for example, a difference between war in order to right wrongs (just cause) and war for self-aggrandisement even if the latter is sometimes masked behind a claim that it is the former. There is a difference as well as a similarity between, on the one hand, attacking opposing armed forces and, on the other, engaging in torture of prisoners of war or blanket bombing of non-combatants.

This approach would, however, need to remedy the weaknesses in the just war tradition that become evident in the light of Ellul's approach. In particular it must redress the tendency to be unrealistic about the nature of human violence. There has to be a challenge to the idealism about human control in the face of the power of

³⁰ 'The distinction between a moral and a non-moral evil can be rendered in terms of what is evil *as action* and what is evil *as suffering*. Not every action that involves the suffering of evil is an evil action.

violence that so often undermines just war thinking. Alongside the “micro” ethical deliberation about how to respond in a particular context, there needs to be a realistic and critical “macro” ethical analysis of the various historical, political, cultural and economic forces. These shape the contexts and produce the situations in which war is having to be considered as an option and often take over and drive the prosecution of war once it is started.

Perhaps most important of all, Ellul’s critique has highlighted the tendency of the just war pattern of thinking to be hijacked for self-justification which masks the pervasiveness of human sin. The tradition could, however, be used as a more critical and prophetic tool. It would then raise before those holding political power and claiming to act justly the challenging questions of their own complicity in global injustice and their enthrallment to the powers of Technique and propaganda as they make decisions about war in the contemporary world.

As in so many spheres of his thought, Ellul’s work on violence runs the risk of an ‘all or nothing’ response. Those attracted to the just war tradition easily ignore him as of no practical relevance to the realities of international power politics. Those eager for a prophetic Christian voice can easily buy uncritically into his sweeping analysis of violence and his powerful rhetoric by dismissing the tradition as ‘casuistry’ and ‘compromise’. They then often find they are unable to offer guidance to those – including many Christians – who bear the terrible responsibilities of political authority. They can, as we have seen, even appear to see no difference between limited and excessive violence.

By recognising the deeper divergences in method and focus between Ellul and the just war tradition and outlining both his strengths and weaknesses, it is, however, possible to draw on but go beyond Ellul’s work. This could then enable the development of a realistic analysis of the nature of war today which builds on the majority Christian tradition Ellul himself once embraced in order to encourage a prophetic yet discriminating voice for those seeking to be faithful disciples of Christ.³¹

The non-pacifist tradition has represented the justified belligerent as suffering the evil of necessity, but not as doing evil’ (O’Donovan, *op.cit.*, p. 655).

³¹ I have explored some of these issues a little further in the booklet *When Is War Justified?* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), available from www.grovebooks.co.uk