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Interpretations of Conflict: Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just War Tradition (Book Review)

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MILLER, RICHARD B. *Interpretations of Conflict: Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just War Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 294 pp. \$48.00 (cloth); \$17.00 (paper).

Richard Miller opts for the “low road of ethical inquiry” (p. 6), engaging diverse voices in their practical wrestling with conflict and violence, hoping thereby to isolate those areas where pacifist and just war traditions converge. This road leads through fascinating country, from John Bennett, Roland Bainton, and the brothers Niebuhr to Pius XII, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King. His superb account of William O’Brien and “American Exceptionalism,” the recurrent notion that our place in history exempts us from ordinary moral constraints, forcefully displays how contemporary rhetoric about democracy, leadership, and a new world order is the legacy of puritanism, colonialism, and nineteenth-century imperialism.

Miller’s hope throughout is to demonstrate how the fundamental duty of “non-maleficence as nonpreferential compassion and respect for others” (p. 241), works with *phronesis* to overcome the limits of competing positions. It is not clear, however, that the principals in the debate between pacifism and the just war tradi-

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tion would be able to recognize themselves in Miller's reconstruction. "Nonmaleficence" is not the issue, for example, between John Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, on the one hand, and Paul Ramsey, on the other. Theirs is a concrete theological dispute about the meaning of agape and the challenge it poses to this-worldly justice. Miller's quest for "a nonconfessional idiom to resist the ideology of memory" (p. 234) may appear moderate and unexceptionable on the surface, but it registers a judgment against those like Yoder, Hauerwas, and Ramsey who, in their different ways, think theology and religious belief not only can, but *must*, be decisive in understanding the meaning of political force and armed conflict.

Nor would Thomists like Francisco de Vitoria, or their secular Aristotelian counterparts, be eager to see themselves represented in Miller's terms. For that tradition it is justice, ultimately, that makes duties intelligible and explains why failing to perform results in injustice. It is a fact of our political experience that individuals and communities differ over the substance of justice, but this is part of being human, situated in history and struggling to secure individual flourishing and the common good. For the Aristotelian, secular or religious, the language of duties divorced from justice masks the key issues of intention, malice, and what each is due in virtue of his or her membership and role in the life of the community. This, at least, would be Saint Thomas's response to Miller's discussion of "the trade-off between the moral values of justice and order" (p. 58). Order in the abstract is not a moral value. It is necessary for the social commerce that secures our common good but is ultimately incommensurate with our unwavering commitment to justice as a fundamental constituent of the common good. For this tradition, *phronesis*, practical reasoning about what is and what ought to be done, cannot get started without a substantive understanding of justice, and the absence of such vitiates Miller's account in chapter 9. To put it another way, the *phronimos*, the person of practical wisdom, rejects "exceptionalism" and "political realism" not as ideologies but because they are forms of injustice. To lose sight of this is to disengage from what matters most to those committed to virtue and community, just as losing sight of the example of Jesus is a failure of faithfulness for Christians committed to God's active presence in history. Just war thinkers and pacifists of these sorts will likely resist Miller's efforts at convergence.

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