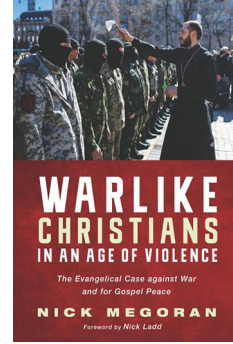


Book Review

Nick Megoran.
*Warlike Christians in an Age of Violence: The Evangelical Case
Against War and for the Gospel of Peace*
Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017. Ix-308.
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Nick Megoran is another voice in the large chorus of Christians who believe that participation in war is incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Quite simply, Megoran believes that war is sin (p.xii) and the notion that Christians can be involved in war, including so-called Just Wars, stems from the church's adoption of secular/pagan thinking. Unsurprisingly, Megoran bases his belief on the Sermon on the Mount, Apostolic teaching about the Gospel of Peace, and the behavior of the pre-Constantinian church. But the author's position cannot simply be dismissed as that of an idealistic pacifist. Megoran contends that pacifism errs by having too much faith in man. Conversely, the philosophy of non-violence has too much faith in the role of political strategies characteristic of social action. Instead, Megoran believes that Christ calls believers to a deeper mission, namely the Gospel; that transformative power which can change a person's values from hate to love, from bitterness to forgiveness, from estrangement to reconciliation.

Before discussing how Christians should wage peace, Megoran wants to clear away what he thinks are improper justifications for war. He contends that Christians cannot use the Old Testament to justify war because 1) the Church

has replaced Israel and 2) Old Testament war (when it was justifiable) was used to establish holiness not expand economic power or international justice. In chapter 3, Megoran addresses numerous New Testament passages used to support Christian participation in war. He appeals to historical background, literary context, and theological analysis to undermine the claims of the pro-war view.

The next two chapters delve into Christian tradition regarding war. Megoran strenuously argues that the early church was decidedly against participation in war. While providing references to early church fathers, Megoran's sparse use of primary literature led me to ask whether Megoran missed some contradictory data or alternative assessments of his view of the early church. Though not a trained theologian, he has academic training and clearly understands the principles of good research. I just wonder whether the volume and diversity of data got the better of him here.

Megoran hits a stride when dealing with the Medieval and modern church's support for violence as codified by Just War Theory. He believes that the church's adoption of Just War theory came from Church leaders embrace of class privilege, a desire to be politically relevant, wanting to see evil defeated, and adoption of the belief that war was inevitable. Megoran excoriates Just War theory as a viable ethical theory because of its contradictions and lack of

assistance in making objective decisions. The arguments made here are not new. The question, however, that Megoran does not ask is whether the principles of Just War theory can have a heuristic role to help national leaders determine whether war making is justifiable. I suspect that Just War Theory has helped prevent far more wars than Megoran would acknowledge.

Perhaps the most controversial section of the book is the two chapters Megoran uses to discuss the thorny question of “What about Hitler?” World War II is often heralded as a “moral war.” Megoran disagrees and provides numerous stories about how morally messy the war actually was. His comments are certainly noteworthy. The Church, Christians, and even nations committed many errors before and during the war that made the situation far worse than it had to be. But war is a blunt instrument and I think the suggestion for moral perfectionism regarding the waging of war is misguided. For example, I am willing to grant Megoran’s suggestion that the failure of the Church to stand up to national leaders was a key factor in the march toward the mistreatment of Jews and others as well as nationalist expansion. But my question is what is to be done once Hitler invaded Poland? One can try to relitigate the causes. But that does not resolve the present.

The final two chapters provide a positive claim for what Megoran thinks the church should do. As noted earlier, Megoran does not believe the church should adopt pacifism or non-violence as he considers these positions to be inadequate. Instead, the author says the church should be the church. It needs to be the same whether in wartime or in peace. Specifically, the church should be about evangelism, worship, peacemaking, and social justice. Megoran thoroughly believes in the power of prayer and the importance of the church and its members

to speak the truth boldly in word and lifestyle, even if such behavior leads to martyrdom. He makes a strong case that too many Christians have allowed their faith to be polluted with nationalism. Though recognizing the benefits of nationalism, he details how nationalism can also heighten hatred, racism, violence, and warfare. The church, he says, must speak out against these attitudes and behaviors because all humanity bears the image of God, other nations harbor our fellow Christians, and we comprise the true “nation, i.e. the church” that is worthy of self-sacrifice.

I say too little when writing that this book is a passionate and sustained argument for Christians to abandon war making. I think Megoran should be commended for reminding Christians that our citizenship is a heavenly one. He is correct that too often we have allowed our love of country to prevent a sober evaluation of our nation’s wars. I found his arguments more compelling because he was an Evangelical with a high view of scripture, specifically he actually believes in the Gospel and its power to transform lives, churches, and the larger society.

Unfortunately, I have not been fully persuaded to his viewpoint because I am not convinced that war is sin. War is certainly the result of sin. But to suggest that all violence is evil runs the risk of making God an author of evil which seems strange in light of Exodus 15:3 and God’s behavior elsewhere. I think that Megoran improperly conflated righteous and unrighteous violence, thereby condemning both. His repeated mention of those that opposed the death penalty (pp. 80, 83, 119) simply confounded the question. For if Christians should not be involved in any violence no matter the justification then does this mean that a Christian cannot be a police officer who carries a firearm? I agree with

Megoran that the church should not be involved in violence, (e.g. Crusades). But to go further and say that a Christian cannot be a soldier or perhaps a police officer is a different story. The soldier and police officer are acting on behalf of the state not the church. The state has the right and the responsibility to defend its citizens, such as when the U.S. used violence to rescue its citizens from terrorists and/or kidnappers in recent years. This is no different than Abraham who used violence to rescue his nephew Lot. Thus, I think that, Megoran, in his zeal to correct the church's close ties with its host nation (especially those countries with national churches), oversimplified the individual Christian's relationship to violence and its use by the state.

