

A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL BAXTER

In his rich and thought-provoking essay, Michael Baxter approaches the problem of war from within the scriptural vision and practice of the peace of Christ, quintessentially embodied and renewed daily in the life and liturgy of the church. In so doing, he models a conviction that few among us would deny, but that, in Baxter's judgment, most U.S. Catholic social ethics falls far short of effectively embracing: Catholic social ethics must be an overtly religious ethics, rooted in faith and in service to the faithful. For Baxter, this means the discipline of social ethics must be Christian not only in its grounding and orientation, but also in its substance. Its theology must spring from and witness to "a faith to die for,"¹ and its moral reflection and directives must make clear the strict priority of Christians' identity as disciples of Christ over our identity as citizens of the nation-state. For, "only by giving primacy to our identity as Catholics over Americans, to our role as disciples over citizens, will we be free enough to carry out our mission to be a sign of peace to the nations."²

Over the past decade or more, Baxter has sought to demonstrate the failure of dominant strains in American Catholic social thought to infuse such a discipleship-focused theology into its political and social theory, and consequently, practice. Whether the pre-Vatican II ethics of John A. Ryan or John Courtney Murray; the postconciliar "liberal" catholicity of Charles Curran or Michael and Kenneth Himes's "public church"; analyses of economy or state by neoconservatives like George Weigel; or official social teachings of the U.S. Bishops from the National Catholic War Council in 1917 to the Archdiocese for the Military Services in 2004, Baxter finds them all (including prominent narrators of the history of American Catholic thought from John Tracy Ellis to Jay Dolan to David O'Brien) guilty of contributing to an anemic ethic, an ethic sapped of pastoral and transformational power by the limitations of its Americanist agenda and discourse.³

¹This is the title of a popular undergraduate course Baxter has taught at the University of Notre Dame.

²Michael J. Baxter, "The Sign of Peace: The Mission of the Church to the Nations," plenary address, meeting of the CTSA, 11 June 2004, 1.

³For criticisms, sometimes caustic, of John Courtney Murray, see Michael J. Baxter, "Writing History in a World without Ends: An Evangelical Critique of United States Catholic History," *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (Fall 1996): 440-69, at 443-47. "John Courtney Murray," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004) 150-64. John A. Ryan: Michael J. Baxter,

For Baxter, labeling U.S. Catholic social ethics "Americanist" is a way of pointing to what he regards as several, interrelated problems. First, mainstream Catholic social ethics has overemphasized the continuity and overlap between Catholic ideals and practices and those of U.S. culture. Second, Americanist Catholic social ethics treats the reign of God proclaimed in the gospels and the sociopolitical arena as necessarily distinct, and employs discourse that assumes and depends upon this separation. In the discursive field that results, theological truths can be brought to bear upon matters like war and peace only if they are filtered through the mediating discourse of natural law philosophy, or social theory, or social-ethical categories. Only when the stain of gospel particularity has been laundered out are such claims deemed fit to be seen in public.⁴ Third, Christians whose moral discourse and practice refuse to be denuded of their religious particularity and intensity are relegated to the confines of Troelstchian "sects." So situated, they may be praised as prophetic, but are by definition barred from any place at the table of "responsible" engagement with matters of public policy. Ironically, an "inclusive" moral language that enables Catholics to converse in the public square operates to exclude any stubborn Catholic voice (Baxter highlights representatives of an American Catholic "radicalist" tradition that includes Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, John Hanley Furfey, and Virgil Michel)

"Notes on Catholic Americanism and Catholic Radicalism: Toward a Counter-Tradition of Catholic Social Ethics," in *American Catholic Traditions: Resources for Renewal*, ed. Sandra Yocum Mize and William Portier, Annual Publication of the College Theology 1996, vol. 42 (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Press, 1997) 53-71, at 57-60. Charles E. Curran and Kenneth and Michael Himes: Michael J. Baxter, "Review Essay: The Non-Catholic Character of the 'Public Church,'" *Modern Theology* 11/2 (April 1995): 243-58. George Weigel: Michael J. Baxter, "Just War and Pacifism: A 'Pacifist' Perspective in Seven Points," unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, September 2003, 10-14; "Writing History in a World without Ends," 455n.57. The U.S. Bishops: Baxter, "Writing History in a World Without Ends," 460-62; "Just War and Pacifism." Ellis, Dolan, and O'Brien: Baxter, "Writing History in a World without Ends," 440-43, 447-52 (Ellis); 452-57 (Dolan); 458-62 (O'Brien).

⁴Baxter detects "a crucial continuity in the discursive structure of preconiliar Catholic social theory with the postconciliar field of Catholic social ethics" linked to "the overwrought dichotomy between theology and social theory" operative in each. "This discursive structure posits two separate spheres—theology/secular society—then proposes a set of mediating terms that, by means of a process of translation, somehow links the two spheres." The result is, "a social ethic evacuated of specifically Christian content," wherein "theology is limited to functioning as a kind of conceptual reservoir providing ideals, principles and themes to be applied to policy issues facing the larger public called 'society.'" Michael J. Baxter, "Reintroducing Virgil Michel: Towards a Counter-Tradition of Catholic Social Ethics in the United States." *Communio* 24 (Fall 1997): 499-528, at 521-22.

that won't bleach out in the mediating social-ethical wash.⁵ Finally, U.S. Catholic social ethics has focused nearly exclusively on efforts to influence policy and policymakers, leaving it woefully inadequate to the pastoral task of assisting the faithful in forming personal conscience or discerning specific moral duties vis a vis culture, economy, or political matters like war and peace.

However well-intentioned, this way of doing U.S. Catholic ethics, Baxter argues, defeats the church's mission to the nations by substituting for robust forms of discipleship and witness a generalized, policy-oriented social ethic sapped of the energy of gospel life, passion, and power. Under its aegis, the day-to-day experience of being Catholic in America ends up being a fairly comfortable affair. Any moral friction Catholics may feel between the social lives they are called to live and those their culture expects or rewards is limited to an important but narrow set of bioethical issues. Though much academic and official ink has been spilt on matters of economy and war, "watered down natural law principles" and an operative dichotomy between kingdom and history upon which the U.S. Bishops and their ethicists rely⁶ consistently leave their pronouncements with little traction. What Baxter calls a nationalized American church thus serves up to its followers a kind of Wonder Bread social ethics, lacking either spiritual nutrition or moral fiber. Offering such a diet, it is no wonder U.S. Catholic social teaching and ethics garners such little attention and generates so little response.

Baxter locates himself squarely within the radicalist tradition he finds excluded by the reigning Americanist Catholic paradigm. Coming from this radical perspective, his writings and lectures to date reveal a gifted intellectual pugilist, a contender who skillfully draws on scriptural, patristic, liturgical and historical resources to spar, feint, and parry opponents both "liberal" and "neoconservative." In this response, I do not counter what seem to me to be a number of problems in Baxter's characterization of an Americanist U.S. Catholic approach to war and peace.⁷ Instead, I wish to pick up the thread of his

⁵Baxter decries a dominant ethical paradigm and accompanying, "neo-Constantinian," historical narrative that denies radical or evangelical forms of Catholicism normative moral status. "The discursive field is rigged in favor of 'public Catholicism,' which, as it turns out, is the kind of Catholicism that congratulates [radical] types for providing an inspiring example to those who dedicate themselves (more responsibly) to the real business at hand: forming committees, gathering statistics, calling in experts, holding hearings, drafting pastoral letters, and then circulating them in the [in Baxter's view, ungrounded] hope that the decision makers inside the beltway will follow some of their policy recommendations. . . ." "Writing History in a World without Ends," 462.

⁶Ibid.

⁷A detailed critique of Baxter's Americanist narrative, including his dystopic portrayal of our discipline and its practitioners, must therefore await another day. To offer but one point: Baxter's interpretation of the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, paragraphs 55-56, as (a) dismissing the scriptures as having nothing specific to say about questions of war and peace; (b) installing a Niebuhrian split between kingdom and history;

observation concerning business-as-usual social ethics' frequent lack of pastoral effect. My strategy will be to embrace the heart of Baxter's affirmative argument concerning peacemaking, and to elaborate some directions it adumbrates for critical collaboration among reformist and radicalist Catholics. Read against the backdrop of his more combative previous work, I find Baxter's focus and style of presentation in this essay intriguing and heartening. Both his subject matter and his mode of discourse point to some promising avenues for moving both radicalists like himself, and the reformists (both liberal and conservative) he has often criticized, out of the academic boxing ring and toward badly needed dialogue and collaboration around matters of common, burning, concern for church and society.

In calling for a reconstructed, more pastoral U.S. Catholic response to war and state violence, Baxter rejects appropriations of radicalist claims that would either domesticate them, or pen them in at a safe, "sectarian" distance. On the contrary, inspired by Virgil Michel's belief that Christians must engage secular culture in order to "face and transform it unto Christ,"⁸ Baxter argues that the

and (c) therefore leaving Catholic consciences without direction in matters of concrete decision making, is questionable on grounds of what the bishops' text actually says. Compare, e.g., Baxter ("Sign of Peace," xx): "The long exposition on scripture concludes with a startling statement that it provides no specific answers to the problems besetting the nation regarding nuclear weapons. . . . [I]t enjoins us to assume a certain attitude or disposition toward peace, it points us in certain directions for peacemaking, but it does not provide us with moral norms to be embodied in concrete action," with the U.S. Bishops (*The Challenge of Peace* [Washington DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1983] para. 55): "[E]xamination of war and peace in the scriptures makes it clear that they do not provide us with detailed answers to the specifics of the questions which we face today. They do not speak specifically of nuclear war or nuclear weapons. . . . The sacred texts do, however, provide us with urgent direction when we look at today's concrete realities. . . . As disciples and as children of God, it is our task to seek for ways to make the forgiveness, justice and mercy and love of God visible in a world where violence and enmity are too often the norm." It is also questionable in light of Baxter's own numerous appeals to *The Challenge of Peace* in making his affirmative argument.

⁸Michel nowhere suggested that Christians should abandon modern neopagan culture to its own devices; that would be tantamount to abandoning the mission of the church. On the contrary, the Christian must not indulge in general condemnations of culture, but rather must learn to be conversant with his or her culture, for in this way the Christian is able to engage the world and thus 'face and transform [it] unto Christ.' " Baxter, "Reintroducing Virgil Michel," 515. Michel's social theory thus "call(s) for the creation of an alternative space from which the body of Christ can mount a critique of the debilitating life forms produced by capitalism . . . and the nation state and at the same time generate forms of life exemplifying the true nature and purpose of God's creation. . . ." Ibid, 525. Baxter further agrees with Michel that, "The natural life of society, in order to be truly natural, requires the supernatural life that radiates from the liturgy of the church." Ibid, 516.

greater emphasis on pacifism/nonviolence, and new questions about the viability of just war theory one finds in recent Catholic teaching augur a more radical and gospel-hewing point struggling to make its way into the normative center of Roman Catholic thought and practice. The point is this: The heart and soul of the Christian response to war and violence is the prior and universal call for Christians to share the gift of peace given in Christ. No ethic, whether pacifist or just war, can be *Christian* unless it is grounded in and expresses the radical gospel demand that Christians be, above all, active, self-sacrificial agents of peace and reconciliation in a violent world. Christians of all political, ideological, and academic stripes are joined in this profoundly spiritual yet practically urgent mission. Faced with contemporary war's frequency and savagery, radicalist and reformist Christians will frequently diverge in their responses to the question, What, then, ought we do? But Christ, and the church's call to be the sign of Christ's peace, remain the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of every authentically Christian ethical response toward the use of state violence, and toward the pressing pastoral questions that such violence requires Christian citizens to address.

Given this shared foundation and mission, what *ought* reformist and radicalist Catholics to do? Pressing a trajectory Baxter has launched in this paper, I propose we join forces to discern and advance a *radically transformative* social ethics of war and peace.⁹ Eschewing both a radicalism that dismisses the political sphere as utterly irredeemable, and a liberalism able to fund only the weakest social critique and the mildest ameliorative efforts, a radical-transformationist approach attempts dialectical and hybrid modes of analysis and argumentation aimed at contentious alliances among radical and reformist ways of proceeding, for the sake of enacting change. Sounding amid a range of often dissonant tones and motifs, a radical-transformationist ethic's distinctive voice will mount a gospel-inspired critique of systemic evils plaguing public life in light of a compelling vision of kingdom justice. Simultaneously, it will fashion bridge discourse and strategic coalitions among thinkers and actors engaged in different forms and styles of justice-seeking. A radical-transformationist Catholic social ethic would seek, for example, to bring radicalist witness *into dialectical solidarity with* reformist policy initiatives; to hone a nuanced natural law language *overtly anchored in and accountable to* scripture and liturgy; insert Christians into secular society to serve their neighbors *in response to and as witnesses of* the love of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. By locating moral reflection at the discomfiting, potent crux between, say, the

⁹I have discussed the notion of a radical-transformationist ethics in "Christian Feminists, James Luther Adams, and the Quest for a Radically Transformative Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21/2 (Fall 1993): 275-302; and "James Luther Adams and U.S. Liberationists: Mutual Pedagogy for Transformative Christian Ethics," *American Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 17/1 (January 1996): 71-92.

radicalism of a Dorothy Day and the reformism of a John A. Ryan, such an ethics can more fruitfully articulate and harness the gifts and talents of disciples who find themselves called in different ways to struggle against the evils embedded in the present order, and to preserve and nurture the good also germinating within it.

I am aware that terms like collaboration, coalition, and dialogue can have a disappointingly nonradical ring. Worse, as Baxter has elsewhere noted, they can function to water down or repress needed debate about the concrete justice and peacemaking demands that discipleship entails.¹⁰ The upshot—more Wonder Bread—is a result neither radicalists nor reformists desire. Given U.S. culture's predilection for cheap tolerance, and Catholic tendencies to subsume conflict in capacious, "both-and" syntheses, avoiding this outcome will require a healthy dose of suspicion toward superficial "let's get along" schemes, especially when such schemes are advanced by those holding greater power in present academic and pastoral settings. But it will also demand that reform- and radical-minded Catholics commit ourselves to practicing serious intellectual hospitality toward one another, prerequisite to holding each other to mutual account to our common identity as stewards and missionaries of Christ's peace.

Contention among Christians undertaken for the sake of truth, of course, has a pedigree traceable to the Gospels, Acts, and Paul. But its benefits—and its legitimacy—depend on the degree to which such disputation is infused by the love of neighbor (including the neighbor who may be or seem an enemy) on which these same scriptures insist. Along with reconciling debilitating separations between gospel and social life in U.S. Catholic ethics, therefore, I propose that the work of peacemaking must extend to equally debilitating separations and divisions among camps presently marking U.S. Catholicism today. What if Catholic radicalists and reformists pledged to support one another in our respective forms of discipleship? What if, as *The Challenge of Peace* exhorts, adherents of diverging ethical positions concerning war and peacemaking sought out opportunities to listen to one another, made efforts to pray and commune together, and self-consciously interacted in light of the maxim voiced by Pope John XXIII at the start of his pontificate: "in essentials, unity; in uncertain matters, liberty; in all things, charity"?¹¹ By foregrounding pastoral matters that

¹⁰Baxter comments on "the way conflict gets concealed in liberal settings. Beneath an apparent consensus, there often lurks a much more substantive set of disagreements [on specific issues] . . . and also regarding . . . the nature of genuine consensus and thus the conditions under which it is proper to use such descriptions as 'agreement' and 'disagreement.'" Michael J. Baxter, "Not Outrageous Enough," *First Things* (May 2001): 14-16, at 14.

¹¹Pope John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedrum* (1959) paragraph 72. The Latin phrase, *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*, often attributed to St. Augustine, is in fact of seventeenth-century German Reformed provenance. See the discussion by

can surface areas of commonality among just war and pacifist Catholics, Baxter illuminates one promising avenue toward breaking down stereotyped characterizations and enmities that often mar our faith and academic communities, to the detriment of our mission of peace-bearing to one another, much less to the nations.

Pondering collaboration among believers holding diverse stances on peacemaking evokes questions about the larger spectrum of debated issues besetting Catholics in the United States today. How might Catholics in the pews and in academe enact Christlike peacemaking among our own ranks, neither selling out essential doctrine or our deeply held convictions, nor lapsing into the pseudopeace of silent dismissal, nor succumbing to the urge to "demolish" contending positions? As scholars and parishioners strive to further the theology and ethics of reconciliation, facing the demons of war and division that infiltrate our own concrete ways of proceeding surely must be part of our undertaking.

Finally, as U.S. Catholics seek to embody radically transformative, peacemaking discourse and practices, greater docility—in the Thomistic sense—toward what Baxter calls our U.S. Catholic radicalist heritage is certainly in order.¹² But reformist and radicalist Catholics also have volumes to learn from the struggles and wisdom of Americans among us whose histories have been branded by systemic violence, exclusion and marginalization.¹³ In particular, Native Americans, African Americans, and other persons of color, especially the poor and women among them, have been the objects of egregious, state- and church-sponsored injustice at the hands of those—the vast majority of them Christians—who could trade on a "white" identity often invented for that very purpose. It is no coincidence that the history of Euro-American-dominant U.S. Catholicism is marked by chronic blindness both to the experiences and contributions of its members of color, and to the crucial role that racism and variant forms of "otherization" play in breeding and sustaining war and violence. Herein lies another tragic narrative of the church's failure to resist violence, one that awaits fully truthful telling and authentic reconciliation.¹⁴

James O'Donnell with relevant excerpts from Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:650-53 (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1965) at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/quote.html> (accessed June 1, 2004).

¹²See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q. 49 art. 3.

¹³I am focusing on African-American experience here, but the faith and theological contributions of other historically oppressed communities must also be borne in mind. These contributions are glimpsed in sections III and IV of *The Modern Theologians*, rev. ed., ed. David T. Ford (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997): see esp. M. Shawn Copeland, "Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American Theologies," 357-89.

¹⁴On U.S. Catholicism's systemic marginalization of Black history and theology, see, e.g., Bryan Massingale, "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism," *Theological Studies* 61/4 (December 2000): 700-32; Bryan Massingale, "The

Uniquely, though not exclusively, important for the peace education of the U.S. Catholic community are the narratives of African-American Catholics, whose long and bitter experience of injustice has yielded deep reservoirs of insight into the structural evils of American society. The history of *these* American Catholics has preserved them from naïve assumptions of harmony between loyalty to Christ and loyalty to the nation, between being Catholic and being American, or, for that matter, between their Catholic faith and the treatment afforded them by their fellow U.S. Catholics. Creating their own distinctive forms of radical transformationist ethics in the face of staggering obstacles, Black churches and communities have modeled ways of life that protested the injustice of the nation-state, while witnessing to, and making space for, a more just way. During the same decades that Euro-American Catholic ethicists were underscoring compatibilities between American and Catholic values and saying too little about race, Black churches served as faith-fueled sites for organizing and deploying strategies that concretely challenged and eventually began to change the culture, laws, and policies supporting U.S. racist apartheid. Catholic peace-seekers searching for ways to resist and dismantle state-sanctioned violence, whether perpetrated directly or in racist/sexist/classist guise, will do well (and do justice) to cultivate solidarity marked by docility—teachability, anchored in humble attentiveness—with these and other wounded healers in our midst.

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Ethics of Racism," *Origins* 28/4 (26 November 1998); Jon Nilson, CTSA Presidential Address, "Confessions of a White Racist Theologian," *Origins* 33/9 (17 July 2003); Margaret F. Pfeil, "The Option for the Poor: Dismantling White Privilege as Part of the Theological Vocation," paper presented at the annual meeting of the CTSA, Cincinnati, June 2003. On racism in twentieth-century U.S. Catholic parish life, see, e.g., John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). On Black Catholic history and Black theology, see esp. Cyprian Davis, OSB, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and Thought to Catholic Theology*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee WI: Marquette University Press, 1997); M. Shawn Copeland, "Traditions and the Tradition of African American Catholicism," *Theological Studies* 61/4 (December 2000): 632-67; *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*, ed. Linda Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).