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Non-violence and the Legitimate Use of Force: A Critical Appreciation of Recent Developments in the Peace Ethics of the Catholic Church in Germany

1 Introductory Remarks

In my reflections in this essay, I would like to shed light on recent developments in the peace ethics of the Catholic Church in Germany. The official pastoral writings of the German bishops' Conference on this topic are important texts of reference in this respect. They are referred to as *Peace Statements by the German Bishops* (in German: *Friedensworte der deutschen Bischöfe*). The most recent of these writings was published just a few months ago, on February 21, 2024. It bears the biblical title "*Peace to this household*" (Luke 10,5). Although in comparison to smaller pastoral writings on specific issues¹ such as terrorism (The German Bishops 2011) it claims to be "a new elaboration with a *comprehensive* orientation" (The German Bishops 2024, 8; italics mine), it is emphasized that its intention is not to "supersede" the preceding Peace Statement entitled *A Just Peace* from the year 2000, but rather to build on the insights gained therein and to continue its reflections in the light of more recent developments. It therefore invites us to read the new Peace Statement in the tradition of the preceding one (The German Bishops 2024, 12).

To avoid misunderstandings, it should be added: The fact that the Peace Statements of the German bishops are important sources does not mean that they have arisen exclusively from their reflection. As far as the nature of such pastoral letters is concerned, at least in recent times, the latest is very clear: "It is not an instructional text laying claim to infallibility, but a statement of reflection in straitened times, a search for paths on which the Church wishes to embark, along with Her critical contemporaries, and a reminder of the values and the hope which Christianity has to proclaim at all times." (The German Bishops 2024, 8)

Regarding the process of its creation, it is pointed out that it "was preceded by a consultation process incorporating not only the expertise and experience of

¹ One of them is the declaration *Resisting Aggression, Winning Peace, Supporting the Victims* of March 10, 2024, on the war in Ukraine: The German Bishops 2022.

many church facilities and organisations, but also that of other experts.” (The German Bishops 2024, 11)

In my reflections I will focus on what is at the heart of recent developments in Catholic peace ethics, on the guiding principle of *just peace*. However, since this term stands for a wide variety of issues (and, accordingly, a wide variety of academic approaches play a role), I will take a closer look at what is said in the writings that follow the aforementioned guiding principle about the relationship between two fundamental principles that are *prima facie* in tension with each other, since these principles have the greatest impact on peace ethical considerations on the war in Ukraine:

- i. non-violence
- and
- ii. the legitimate use of force.

2 The Guiding Principle of Just Peace

The title of the bishops’ Peace Statement from the year 2000 *A Just Peace* was programmatic. It was intended to suggest a “re-orientation of peace policies based on ethical considerations” (The German Bishops 2000, 5). In their opinion, this was due to the fact that the political situation in Europe and worldwide had changed dramatically (The German Bishops 2000, 7). By way of explanation, the following statement from *The Ecumenical Council of the GDR* from the year 1989 is quoted: “Having through necessity overcome the institution of war, the doctrine of a just war intended by the Churches to humanize war is likewise becoming invalid. That is why we need to develop a doctrine of just peace now, grounded in theology and oriented by virtue of its openness towards universal human values” (The German Bishops 2000, 5).

After that, the concept of *just war*, which has a long tradition in Christian thinking, no longer appears in this text. In the latest Peace Statement by the bishops, it is also no longer to be found. The corresponding teaching, *the doctrine of just war*, has largely been abandoned as an independent piece of ethical theory, although there has been something of a renaissance of this tradition of thinking in secular ethics, making use of the corresponding resources in Christian thinking. Consider, for example, the important books *Killing in War*, written by Jeff McMahan, and *Just and Unjust Wars*, written by Michael Walzer (McMahan 2009; Walzer 2015). Even events such as Russia’s attack on Ukraine have not changed the guiding concept of just peace in Catholic peace ethics. It is explicitly affirmed in the latest Peace Statement of the German bishops – knowing well that some

might expect a change of course in the light of the completely changed geopolitical situation. The fact that they have a realistic idea of it is expressed, for example, in the following statement: “Despite all the hopes, there has not been less violence committed against people the world over in the first two decades of the 21st century, but in fact more” (The German Bishops 2024, 15).

How did the concept of just peace come to be at the center of the Catholic Church’s peace ethical thinking in Germany?² This development is based on a very simple insight: “[. . .] a world that does not provide the majority of people with the basic needs of a humane life is not viable. Even when there are no wars, such a world is still full of violence. A situation dominated by long-term and severe injustice is inherently violent. It follows that justice creates peace” (The German Bishops 2000, 24).

I will only outline the features of this concept that are relevant to my further considerations:

- i. The term has a *bridging function*: It wants to explicate where the biblical message of the kingdom of God and political reason meet (The German Bishops 2000, 23).
- ii. With the “socio-ethical objective” of a just peace a social ideal designed to be a standard is provided to guide concrete political decisions and actions (The German Bishops 2000, II–1).
- iii. The concept is intended to free the doctrine of peace from the fixation on *negative peace* understood as the absence of war, so that the concept of peace gradually approaches the fullness of its meaning in the Old Testament’s promise of peace, which is proclaimed as being tentatively fulfilled in Jesus Christ (The German Bishops 2024, 27; Allan and Keller 2006).
- iv. The development of this vision of the goal involves a wide variety of topics such as responsibility for conditions that do justice to human dignity, democratization and the rule of law, orientation towards the common good in accordance with the guiding principles of justice and solidarity, fairer Global economic relations, preservation of the natural foundations of life, etc.

As already mentioned, the concept of just war is nowhere to be found in this context. As one commentator rightly put it, the corresponding doctrine only appears in a “transformed” way (Stobbe 2023, 6). In a few places there is still talk of *ius in bello* (right conduct in war). In principle, however, the aim is to move away from

² It is also the guiding concept of the Protestant Church’s peace ethics in Germany (Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland ²2007).

the static opposition between war and peace towards a process-based model of peace policy (Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland ²2007, No. 80).

3 A Virtue-Ethical Foundation: The Common Teleological Vision and Its Foundation in a Virtuous Character

There are a number of reasons why it makes sense for Christian peace ethics to focus on a *teleological guiding concept*, which means to start from a vision of a goal:

- i. One was already mentioned in passing, which is probably the most important one from the Christian perspective: the biblical vision of peace. The central importance of it for the proclamation of the Good News is expressed, among other things, in the Bible verse from which the title of the latest Peace Statement by the German bishops is taken. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his disciples: “Into whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this household’” (Luke 10:5).
- ii. Another reason could be that peace ethical thinking in the Western tradition began with a teleological concept of peace. Cicero and Augustine are often cited as the founders of peace ethics. However, the concept of peace plays a central role even earlier in the virtue ethics of Plato and Aristotle (Plato: *Laws* I; Aristoteles: *Politics* VII; Ricken 2017; Trampota 2024, 238–240). The two most important representatives of virtue-ethical thinking among the Greeks held the view that the goal the legislator has in mind when passing and establishing laws is *peace* and the *leisure* closely linked to it. These terms – along with the even more central concept of *happiness* (*eudaimonia*) – denote the *ultimate goal* towards which the entire normative order of the state is designed. War has its final goal in peace and work in leisure. From this teleological order the value system is derived with its distinction between what is *good in itself* (= intrinsically good; what is striven for or desired *for its own sake*) and what is only *good for the sake of another* (what is only *a means to an end*, i.e., only *instrumentally good*). Ethically speaking, the ultimate goal of individual human and state action can only be something that is *good in itself*. From this, an order of goals is derived with the distinction between lower and higher goals. From a secular perspective, this virtue-ethical approach could be used to argue for the guiding concept of just peace (Trampota 2024, 238–241).

- iii. In the case of *Christian peace ethics*, which appeals not only to the authority of *reason* but also to the authority of *revelation* (the biblical scriptures), another decisive reason for starting with the teleological guiding concept of just peace is that it represents *the joint vision of the two major currents in the tradition of peace ethics*, namely
 - a. the older *pacifist current* and
 - b. the somewhat later *current* (Augustine etc.), *which considers certain forms of the use of force to be legitimate* in a few, narrowly defined exceptional situations (Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* XXII, 74–75).

Hence, as far as the goal is concerned, there is a broad consensus among Christians: The goal must be a just peace in a positive and comprehensive sense. Regarding the *action-guiding teleological vision*, which arises on the basis of *virtuous dispositions of character including active non-violence*, there is no dissent between the representatives of the two currents of tradition. This is probably one reason why *active non-violence* is a key concept in the most recent Peace Statement of the Catholic bishops. At a central point in this text there is talk of “[a]ctive non-violence as a form of struggle for a just peace” (The German Bishops 2024, 49).

Active non-violence is considered to be a virtue since it is more than a *mere renunciation of violence* and a *passive toleration of violence*. Non-violence and renunciation of violence are therefore not signs of weakness, but an expression of inner strength (The German Bishops 2024, 49–50).

4 Virtue-Ethics-cum-Deontology: The Disagreement over the Deontological Principles Associated with Virtue

In the context of my reflections, the term “virtue ethics” and concepts derived from it do not stand for an independent paradigm of ethics alongside the consequentialist and deontological approaches. There are a number of thinkers who hold this view (Hursthouse 1999; Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2023). In my opinion, virtue ethics cannot be separated from deontological principles or from the weighing of the consequences of actions. But the virtue-ethical perspective is crucially important in many areas of ethics because it places the agent and his or her character dispositions at the center of ethical reflection – it is *agent-centered*, not *action-centered*. The focus of ethical reflection is on persons and their character qualities. The other ethical dimensions – *the quality of the actions* and *the conse-*

quences of actions – do not become insignificant as a result. This is also the point of view that has characterized the broad stream of ethical thought in the Christian tradition.

The above mentioned two major peace ethical traditions are united by their shared vision of the goal and its foundation in virtuous character. Disagreement arises when it comes to the question of *the deontological principles*³ that go along with this and are *action-centered*, not *agent-centered*. This is evident when one asks the inevitable question of

- i. whether non-violence is a “preferential option” that allows for *exceptions under certain, narrowly defined conditions of action*, or
- ii. whether it implies *an exceptionless moral norm*⁴ (Finnis 1991, 2; Curran 1998, 72ff.) stating that no form of violent force is legitimate, even if it represents a lesser evil.

The criteria for determining the permissible exceptions are roughly as follows:

- i. In principle, (violent) force is only legitimate in the form of counterforce, namely (a) in situations of self-defense, (b) when it comes to emergency protective measures or (c) to protect defenseless victims of the most serious and systematic human rights violations.
- ii. Even in these cases, the use of force is only legitimate as a last resort and on the basis of international legal regulations and procedures.
- iii. Furthermore, the use of force must be proportionate, target-oriented, and based on the rules of *ius in bello*.

In short: There are legitimate forms of the use of force. But they nevertheless constitute an evil that must always be limited to the lowest possible level (The German bishops 2024, 2.3.2, 2.4.2). The criteria listed can be applied in an analogous way to other forms of the use of force, e.g., by the police.

At this point, which is marked by the question of whether there are legitimate forms of force from a Christian perspective, there is an unbridgeable gap. This is reflected in the massive accusations made in this context, including the accusation of betraying the gospel of Jesus. For Christians, the key question in this context is whether the Christian commandment of love, which also includes love of one’s enemies, *excludes* these forms of a use of force that many consider to be

³ Deontology, deontological – derived from the Greek *to deon*: what we ought to do, the duty, obligation.

⁴ Similar formulations: an absolute moral norm / an unconditionally valid principle / a universally valid negative precept, immutable and unconditional / universally binding moral norms . . .

legitimate and necessary. The official Catholic position – following Thomas Aquinas – makes the distinction between the love of the enemy *as an enemy* and the love of the enemy *as a human being* and argues that the love of the enemy does not require us to love the enemy *on the basis of his enmity*, but *on the basis of our common humanity*. The love of the enemy is not about loving *the enmity of the other*. Hence, one is allowed to defend oneself against the enemy (The German Bishops 2024, 48).

5 Preferential Option for Non-Violence, but Not an Absolute Renunciation of Violent Force

What I have just said also indicates what the bishops' common position is in the aforementioned disagreement. Despite their advocacy of a constructive dialog between the two major traditions, they argue for the (deontological) norm: Primary option for non-violence, but not an absolute renunciation of the use of violent force (The German Bishops 2024, 51).

This ethical norm is also the background for their position on the war in Ukraine. It is based on the following political assessment: “We deplore the invasion of an internationally recognised country, a war of aggression that violates the ban on the use of force enshrined in the United Nations Charter – and was therefore rightly condemned by a large majority of the UN General Assembly” (The German Bishops 2022, 1). Building on this, they “consider arms deliveries to Ukraine, which serve to enable the country under attack to exercise its right to self-defense, guaranteed under international law and also affirmed by the Church’s peace ethic, to be legitimate in principle” (The German Bishops 2022, 2).

The virtue of active non-violence goes hand in hand with a strict and absolute commitment to a continuous action-guiding orientation towards peace. *The corresponding deontological principle* has exceptions. It is not an unrestrictedly valid negative precept, a moral norm that applies without exceptions. However, the exceptions are – as already mentioned – narrowly limited.

Analogous to this, with reference to the commandment to love one’s enemies, one can argue that the radical nature of the Beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel, which portray the radical nature of Jesus, concern *the virtues and the goals given with them*, and that they must not be directly translated into *universally valid principles of political ethics*. The correct hermeneutical approach to the impact of the biblical writings on Christian ethics is: “[T]he Bible’s most effective contribution to Christian ethics is *to form the character of the ethical decision maker*” (Deidun 1998, 26–27; italics mine).

6 Does it Follow from the Thesis “War is Contrary to the Will of God” That War Can No Longer Be an Act of Justice Today?

Important theological and anthropological convictions flow into the Catholic bishops’ considerations on peace ethics. This becomes clear, for example, when in *Just Peace* the following passage from Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World entitled *Gaudium et Spes* is quoted, which states that a peace without the threat of war is theologically only conceivable as an eschatological reality: “Insofar as men are sinful, the threat of war hangs over them, and hang over them it will until the return of Christ” (Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, chp. V, no. 78; quoted in The German Bishops 2024, 109).

The reference to the much-quoted thesis of the First Assembly of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) in Amsterdam in 1948 “War is contrary to the will of God” (World Council of Churches 1949, 89) therefore does not help to overcome the controversy over the question of which deontological principle corresponds to the virtue of active non-violence. Even within the radically pacifist movement of the Catholic Church *Pax Christi*, which today is a strongly ecumenical movement, there have been increasing differences of opinion in this regard since the beginning of the war in Ukraine (Pax Christi 2022).

It is indeed right to say “War is contrary to the will of God”. But the ecumenical World Council of Churches (WCC) also stated that there is certainly no unanimous answer to the inescapable question of whether war can still be an act of justice today (World Council of Churches 1949, 89–90).

There are good reasons for abandoning *the concept of just war*, such as the fact that it can be so easily misunderstood. But we cannot get rid of the question of *the legitimate use of force*, which is what the tradition of just war thinking has essentially been about (Mayer 2005; Rudolf 2014). The theory of just war will only be truly overcome once an international legal order has been established in which (a) international law applies *and* (b) can be enforced. When this is the case, the distinction between *just* and *unjust* wars will be replaced by that between *legal* and *illegal* wars (Habermas 2004, 102). This is the Kantian program – a program that is currently highly endangered (Kant [1796] 2006; Habermas 1995)! As long as there is a lack of the capacity to enforce the law by means of the lawful use of force in many places, we will continue to think about whether a war is just.

7 The Specific Nature of the Peace Ethical Approach of the Catholic Social Doctrine

It makes sense to conclude the preceding reflections on the relationship between non-violence and the legitimate use of force with thoughts on the specific nature of peace ethical thinking within the framework of Catholic social teaching. The aim is to sharpen its profile from a methodological perspective and illuminate its possibilities and limitations.

First of all, it is important to emphasize that it is not a *secular, philosophically conceived* peace ethics, but a *theological-ethical* one! Despite the frequent use of the word “ethics” and related terms, which are generally associated with a specific type of *philosophical* thinking, the method of ethical reflection in the context of Catholic social and peace teaching is strongly influenced by *theological* principles from the beginning.

Immanuel Kant famously argued that ethics⁵ essentially has two major tasks, which should be clearly distinguished. The primary task is to explain and justify the criteria we can use to distinguish between “morally right” and “morally wrong” (or “good” and “evil”), and in this way to provide us with standards by which we can convincingly explain the binding nature of certain moral principles such as “It is morally wrong to kill innocent people!” This narrow core area of moral thinking is primarily concerned with the question of which actions are morally *prohibited*, which are morally *permissible* and which are morally *required*.

However, this is only one of the two key questions in ethics: the question of the criterion for distinguishing between morally right and morally wrong. The principle at issue here is called *principium diiudicationis*: the principle of adjudication or judgment; that is the principle by which we judge the quality of a course of action from a moral perspective. The other is the question of moral motivation which asks about the moving force that leads to ethical action. The principle at issue here is called *principium executionis*: the principle of execution or motivation; that is the principle which explains how what has been recognized as morally right comes about (Trampota 2010, 139ff.).

If one approaches the Catholic social teaching of the last two Peace Statements with these questions in mind, it is evident that both questions are answered in a distinctly *theological-ethical* way. Is this clear from the outset anyway? Not at all, since the Church’s peace doctrine addresses the faithful on the one hand, but also – as we read again and again in official church documents –

⁵ He speaks of moral philosophy.

“all people of good will,” especially in ethical matters. In “*Peace to this household*,” for example, we read: “In following Jesus, we are [. . .] called upon to seek an exchange with all people of good will” (The German Bishops 2024, 150). Hence, the peace ethical considerations in the Peace Statements operate on different levels, as the following Statement from *A Just Peace* makes clear: “If the Church expresses opinions on political issues, she does so on the basis of a faith that is obviously not shared by everyone. Her arguments, however, are founded in common reason” (The German Bishops 2000, 23). In specific contexts it is not always easy to distinguish on which basis she operates, that of faith or that of common reason.

7.1 *Principium Executionis*

As far as the *principium executionis* is concerned, i.e., the question of execution and the motivation required for this, it is clear that the potential motivating force that springs from faith goes far beyond what might be considered reasonable from a secular point of view. The source of this motivation is *the anticipation of the messianic peace* that characterizes the kingdom of God, which has already dawned for the believer but is not yet complete. Only believers have access to this *expectation of God’s just peace*. For it presupposes – I am paraphrasing a thought from *A Just Peace* – that people trust God and each other *without reservation* and, hence, can renounce violence. To the extent that they are able to do so, it is possible for Christians to transcend the order secured by the threat of force. Here is what the German bishops’ Conference says:

[. . .] faith can help reason to surpass itself without abdicating reasonableness. Faith encourages and propels reason to take the initial steps towards a messianic peace within the existing system in order to create a more reasonable and humane world. Christians can partake of this experiment, secure in and strengthened by the experience that faith, the unconditional trust in the power of God’s love, has made possible. Such experiences sharpen our awareness of the negative aspects of a peace protected by the threat of violence. Such an awareness can lead to dissatisfaction with the status quo and keep alive the desire for messianic peace. (The German Bishops 2000, 23)

This is the special faith-based motivation for the anticipation of a just peace (Trampota 2024, 241ff.). The theologian Moltmann describes the heart of the Christian *messianic ethics* as follows: “[It] celebrates and *anticipates the presence of God in history*. It wants to *practice the unconditioned within the conditioned and the last things in the next to last*” (Moltmann 2006, 47; italics mine).

7.2 *Principium Diiudicationis*

The reference to specific *theological* principles in the peace ethical thinking of the Catholic Church is not limited to the *principium executionis*. It also shapes the *principium diiudicationis*. This becomes evident, for example, in the following passage, which emphasizes *the special epistemic access to reality* that is opened up by faith: “The Christian faith *inspires a new way of seeing by opening our eyes*. It is with this new perspective that we offer the fundamental principles of the Catholic social doctrine to all as a framework for ethical orientation” (The German Bishops 2024, 24; italics mine). The statement can be found in the context of reflections on the Second Vatican Council’s description of the mission and constant duty of the Church as “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, 4).

In this context, it is explained what is meant by “the new way of seeing, which is inspired by the Christian faith”. It is emphasized that it “is not a matter of another reality, or of ‘alternative facts’” (The German Bishops 2024, 22). However, although for the Church “the description and analysis of a specific historical situation in social science terms” (The German Bishops 2024, 22) is important, her interpretation of the signs of the times – it is emphasized – “does not [. . .] merely reiterate in religious language” (The German Bishops 2024, 22) this description and analysis because it sees this reality with different eyes. A little later, the light in which the altered view of reality is possible, is described as *the light of divine prophecy*:

The News of the Kingdom of God draws a promising contrast which corrects any ideological blurring of the violence as it really occurs, and provides a motivation to resist because it feeds hope for change. It is on this hope that criticism of the Old Testament prophets is based, and following on from this tradition, the Church assumes Her responsibility vis-à-vis policy-makers and society by endeavouring to ‘see human reality in the light of divine prophecy’.⁶ (The German Bishops 2024, 22–23)

If Catholic social teaching – as we have heard – is also offered to non-believers as an ethical framework for orientation, the question naturally arises as to whether and how this is possible independent of the special epistemic access to reality based on faith.

⁶ The German Bishops 2000, 8.

7.3 “Moments of Continuity” but also “Learning and Realization Processes” (The German Bishops 2024, 11)

As has already become apparent, the most recent history of Catholic peace teaching stands in a certain continuity with what has been taught over the centuries, but on the other hand also claims a path of development and speaks of “reorientations” (The German Bishops 2024, 27). On the one hand, the conviction is expressed “that the fundamental insights which [. . .] [the] Church [. . .] [has] gained over the centuries are right” (The German Bishops 2024, 12). On the other hand, her social teaching is described as a constant learning process: “The Catholic social doctrine is [. . .] executed as a constant process of learning in which knowledge flows together from a variety of sources” (The German Bishops 2024, 22). An important example of continuity is the conviction that the norm of a primary option for non-violence does not include refraining absolutely from the use of violent force (The German Bishops 2024, 51). Examples of reorientations in Catholic social teaching include the entrenchment of the idea of human rights and the realization of the importance of development and ecology for peace (The German Bishops 2024, 27).

7.4 Ethics or Philosophy Respectively Theology of History?

Much of what is discussed in the context of the Catholic peace and social doctrine under the headings “ethics” and “peace ethics” is reminiscent of an *ethically formed philosophy resp. theology of history* as we know it for example from Hegel’s philosophy with its dialectical analysis of development processes (Henrici 2009; Angehrn 2014). A good example of this is – as previously mentioned – that in the most recent Peace Statements the concept of just war only appears *in a transformed way* in the context of the concept of just peace. This reminds us of the Hegelian concept of sublation (*Aufhebung*) with its three dimensions:

- i. sublation as destruction (*negatio*),
- ii. sublation as preservation (*conservatio*), and
- iii. sublation as elevation to a higher level (*elevatio*) (Hegel [1812/13] 1978, 57).

Against this background, one could say that the concept of just war is “sublated” in this threefold sense into the concept of just peace. But regardless of this specific example, the peace ethical thinking of Catholic social teaching in general has many similarities to this kind of thinking because ethics is so closely intertwined with the “analysis of society and societal change” (The German Bishops 2024, 2.2.).

From a secular ethical perspective, however, it is crucial to distinguish between the theory of just war and the theory of just peace *in terms of action theory*.⁷ Then one realizes that the theory of just war, if it is understood positively as *a theory of the legitimate use of force* (Rudolf 2014, 6), is essentially a *reactive* doctrine which is based on the concept of *negative freedom*: freedom *from something*. From an ethical perspective it is a contribution to the establishment of a *negative peace* understood as the absence of violence, conflict and war by *limiting* and *overcoming* these negative forces! In contrast to this the doctrine of just peace focuses on the *positive concept of freedom*: freedom *to something*. It is a contribution to *preventing* violence, conflict and war by establishing everything that is needed (protection against violence, promotion of freedom, reduction of poverty, promotion of Global justice . . .) to bring about a *positive, lasting peace* which is more than the absence of violence, conflict and war. Seen in this light, it is highly questionable whether one theory can be replaced by the other or “sublated” into the other.

It might be better to think of them as complementary (Bormann 2023, These 4; Trampota 2024, 243–244), unless of course one starts with the firm conviction that history must be imagined as a constant upward movement and that the next phase will be a more positive replacement for the preceding – as the above quoted passage from the Ecumenical Council of the GDR might suggest: “*Having through necessity overcome the institution of war, the doctrine of a just war intended by the Churches to humanize war is likewise becoming invalid*” (Italics mine). But then the question would arise what the foundation for such a conviction is: faith or common reason or neither of the two?

The decisive reason why the theories of just war and just peace are (a) *different* and (b) *complementary* from an ethical point of view is that human flourishing in the ethical sense has an *active-reflective* and a *passive-receptive* dimension, both for the individual as well as for the (state) community – two dimensions which were clearly distinguished in the early days of Western ethics. On the one hand, human flourishing is about *doing the right thing* by first and foremost *refraining from doing wrong*; but on the other hand, it is also about making oneself strong enough to protect oneself against *suffering injustice from others*, for example by *becoming a victim of violence*. “[N]either to do wrong oneself nor to suffer wrong from others” (Plato, *Laws* VIII, 829a) is a formula often used in antiquity

⁷ Action theory is an area of philosophy that understands human actions as intentional bodily movements, drawing on concepts such as desire, purpose, deliberation, decision, intention, trying and free will.

that combines these two fundamental ethical aspects and emphasizes their complementarity.

A distinction is thus made between two action-theoretical perspectives, which are *different* from an ethical point of view. Neither can be reduced to the other because one represents the *active-reflective* side, whereas the other represents the *passive-receptive* side of the agent. Both are equally constitutive for the flourishing of *rational beings with mind and body* such as humans. Hence, the two sides are complementary. And that is why both the theory of just peace and the theory of just war are indispensable.

The two theories are complementary because human life is as much about *containing and limiting violence, conflict and war* as it is about *permanently overcoming them*. Anyone who attempts to “sublate” this duality and complementarity of action theory and ethics, which has anthropological roots, into philosophy of history or theology of history, must ask themselves whether they are not undermining the ethical perspective by means of a myth of progress. They must confront sociological theses such as that of Hans Joas, who claims: “Anyone who takes the history of violence of the 20th century seriously can hardly believe in myths of progress” (Joas 2000, 11).

As we have seen, there are good reasons that speak in favor of the teleological guiding principle of just peace. But those who draw the conclusion from this that theories that pursue more limited and modest objectives are “sublated” into this comprehensive vision of the goal should take seriously what peace researchers such as Ernst-Otto Czempiel have said about the concept of peace: “Peace research has no clear concept of peace. Its guiding cognitive interest is distinct but diffuse” (Czempiel 2002, 43; my translation). From this he concludes that peace research should outline its object of knowledge more precisely to be able to work on it successfully in a scientific way, and he argues that this object can only be the elimination of war (Czempiel 2002, 45) – or as one could perhaps add: the elimination of violence, conflict and war. Johan Galtung (1975, 48) has already expressed the view that, just as medicine deals with human health but focuses on disease and its elimination, so peace research must work on bringing about the indefinable peace – *per negationem* – through the elimination of violence, conflict and war.

8 Conclusion

As indicated above, there are good reasons for adhering to *the teleological guiding principle of just peace*. But it by no means follows from this that *the deontological*

principle “Si vis pacem, para bellum” (If you want peace, prepare for war!),⁸ which in connection with this teleological guiding principle has played a central role since antiquity, is therefore *replaced* by the principle “Si vis pacem, para pacem” (If you want peace, prepare for peace!) or that the former is *sublated* into the latter. In any case, this is not possible if the topic is not only social teaching and philosophy resp. theology of history, but also ethics, law, and a rule- and law-based international political order. If one does not see the traditional theory of just war (Brunstetter and O’Driscoll 2017) as a pragmatic instrument for legitimizing violence (a theory which helps us find reasons for going to war), but as a normative theory that provides us with the categories that give structure to a public discourse on justifiable forms of the use of force *from an ethical point of view*, then it is of great importance, not least in the assessment of *military force*, but also for the evaluation of *the law-preserving and law-restoring coercion* that is an integral part of our concept of law (Rudolf 2014, 5–6; Trampota 2024, 244; Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland ²2007, 3.2). In the world in which we live, such a theory is indispensable.

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8 The basic idea behind this principle can already be found in Plato: *Nomoi* VIII, 829a.

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