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“Justice and Peace Will Kiss” (Psalm 85:11): Christian Peace Ethics — Delusional in a Multipolar World?

The Global situation in international relations looks bleak in the middle of the third decade of the second millennium. The African continent is torn by a number of intra- and interstate armed conflicts, so is the Middle East, tensions between China and its neighbors loom large in Asia and in Europe, Russia’s war against Ukraine takes high death tolls, also among civilians.

In that situation, the divine promise in Psalm 85:11 has a strange ring to it: חֶסֶד־וֶאֱמֶת נִפְגָּשׁוּ צֶדֶק וְשָׁלוֹם נָשָׁקוּ׃ (Faithfulness and truth meet, justice and peace kiss. My translation). It is doubtlessly one of the most controversial passages in the 2007 peace memorandum of Germany’s Protestant church federation, the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD). Does this promise apply to our world at all? What validity can ideas like the one expressed in this quote claim in a multipolar world, scarred by terrorism and crimes against humanity? How can justice and peace thrive under the reign of authoritarian rulers who none too seldom come to power in the democratic elections they’re trying to do away with, when any notion of a world order based on rules is crumbling away? With a Russian Federation attacking an independent state for the criminal reason of imperial reminiscence? A US presidential candidate framing the NATO as a mob protection racket? A Global North bending trade regulations to their favor? A Middle East where terrorism and war crimes abound? And a disparate Global South sometimes unified only in holding a single nation responsible for all the evil in the world? Does not the talk of justice and peace on a Global scale have an almost delusional ring to it, as political theoreticians like John Mearsheimer hold?

The controversy around this biblical quote can be unpacked in three different directions. The first is hermeneutical. Just an example: in English translations, *tzedek* is understood as *righteousness,* in German ones, it is understood as *justice*. In a contemporary understanding, *righteousness* is an individual trait, while *justice* is, at least in John Rawls words, the virtue of institutions (Rawls 1999, 3). A translation focusing mercy and truth, righteousness and peace would then look to the individual virtues of a good ruler rather than a structural development. And of course, the languages applied here are English and German, not isiXosa, Ko-

Note: KJV and BHS count differently, in KJV it is 85:10, in BHS and Luther it is 85:11.

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rean or Quechua, for that matter, bringing the issue of decolonization to the fore. Which kind of hermeneutics should we apply here?

A second controversy may be marked by the different discourses in question. In the Anglo-Saxon world, ethical issues of war and peace are usually dealt with in the normative language of the just war tradition. Even those critical of its assumptions will use its concepts, thus, the thoughts of Jeff McMahan (2009), David Rodin (2003) or Cécile Fabre (2012) will go under a *revisionist just war theory* or a *cosmopolitan theory of just wars*. In the German speaking world, but also in Scandinavia, notably by the renowned Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), but also by comparable efforts like the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), a normative language of peace has been established, in case of the EKD or the Roman Catholic Church, it is the formula of *just peace*. The question then is where to start reflection: at war or at peace?

A third controversy finally has to do with a debate usually located in political sciences and pitting *realism* vs. *liberalism*. While the so-called realists (from Reinhold Niebuhr to Kenneth Walz, from John Mearsheimer to Herfried Münkler) understand nation-states as rational agents interested primarily in self-preservation and security pursued prominently by military means in an anarchic state system, liberals like Robert O. Keohane, Michael W. Doyle or Michael Zürn argue for cooperation and a broader range of interests and means of conflict solution. While the former accuse the latter of latent moralism and a naive view that doesn't take power relations and interests into account, the latter argue that realists treat states like black boxes as the internal processes are largely ignored. In a Christian vein, the conflict is exemplified for instance in the controversy between H. Richard (1932) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1932) or positions like Fernando Enns (2019) on one and Nigel Biggar (2013) on the other hand. In a way, it might be also seen as embodied in the controversy between Tinyiko Maluleke and Will Storrar, where white theologian Storrar (2011), arguing public-theologically for a public-political discourse of formally equal citizens is criticized by black South African theologian Maluleke who argues, among other things, that the reality of post-colonial inequality renders such attempts futile because the public sphere in South Africa and maybe even in the Global post-colony is in a constant state of war.

> It is not merely that some are men and others are women, but rather that men are gods and women their dispensable temptresses; not merely that some are white while others are black, but rather that the whites are masters and the blacks are servants; not merely that some like wine while others like beer, but rather that some have much to eat and drink while others have nothing; not that some believe in hell and others believe in heaven but rather that some live already in heaven while others live already in hell. These are the real

> differences in our public sphere. [. . .] Our language is violent and violence is our language. (Maluleke 2011, 86.89)

The following paper will try to tackle those controversies not from a position from nowhere, but from a given positionality that shapes my perspective: I am German, not Ukrainian or South African or Brazilian. The cultural memory of a people which has committed crimes against humanity from the beginning to almost the end of the 20th century in a sort of colonial empire and a fascist as well as a Stalinist dictatorship, against Nama, San, Jews, Sinti, disabled persons, Poles, French, against communists, homosexuals, with a Christian church widely acquiescent or even actively supportive and a post-war society drowning its shame in economic success, has deeply scarred me with a feeling of dread, which I try to turn into a sense of responsibility. Because for me, growing up in West Germany in the seventies, the church was a place of liberation from this materialistic anodyne remedy and a place of responsibility for justice, truth, and peace, the gospel a message of liberation.

At the same time, I am a citizen of one of the most affluent countries in the world, a West German brought up in a democratic and liberal society with its share of inequality, but a by and large well-working social security system that has granted me upward mobility and that we tend to take for granted, even though it is not. And I grew up in a society where East Germany, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and Russia were seen as somewhat backward – with today's hindsight I would call that a neo-colonial attitude that tends to prevail if we look at the economic behavior of the EU – which in turn leaves me self-critical regarding my own blind spots but also generally critical towards claims for moral superiority. And this concerns, of course, also the present-day controversies in the German Protestant mainline churches, where some call for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine in the name of peace (Kramer 2023) and others call for European or even German nuclear armament in the name of security and propose to give up attempts at human rights universalism in the name of contractual pluralism (Evangelische Militärseelsorge 2023, 32–37).

While this chapter is about war and peace in Ukraine, it is necessary to remember that this is just one of many terrible conflicts in the world and that the war between Russia and Ukraine is situated in a Global context where attention and regard are scarce and tend to be bestowed according to perspective and position: while the wars in Ukraine and Gaza command attention in Europe, the ongoing conflicts in Sudan or the DR Kongo do so to a much smaller degree, even though they are no less cruel.

Nonetheless, I will try to tackle the controversy focusing the war in Ukraine by claiming, firstly, that the biblical text should be understood as pointing to a

divine promise of an abolition of war through the perspective of structural nonviolent conflict resolution, which implies, in the words of Amnesty International Secretary General Salil Shetty, a "compelling vision for humanity which resonates with ordinary people" (Shetty 2018), combining goodness and faithfulness, justice and peace. That then implies, secondly, that we have to start with a concept of peace rather than focusing on an alleged inevitability of war. And this in turn will lead us to an epistemological perspective that challenges the framing of a distinction like the one between realism and liberalism (or idealism, for that matter) exactly by focusing the grim reality of the conflict in Ukraine.

1 To Kiss or to Fight?

As Jürgen Ebach (1996) points out, the Hebrew verb *naschaq* has a dual meaning. It may mean kissing in greeting or reunion, but it may also mean fight or arm oneself. Sigrid Eder (2017) argues that personified justice and peace have to be understood as aspects, angels of God's presence, coming together in an intense dynamic after having been absent – as do love and faithfulness. This encounter is located in a situation of deprivation and attributed to God's epiphany (Seybold 1996, 335–336) – with very real consequences. The dynamic of the psalm itself depicts a bleak situation in which the remembrance of God's promise procures hope for the future.

Regarding the meaning of the terms, we have to take the literary context into account. Evidently, all four personifications belong first and foremost to God, and thus have foundational impact on the world, as God is the source of all four – for that reason, they are not to be understood simply as individual human virtues. According to Klaus Koch (1953, 1955), *tzedakah* and *tzedek* signify a relational obligation to the community rather than quantifiable equivalencies as in the Aristotelian sense of justice, the difference being that different agents are obliged in different ways to uphold the community. According to Ebach (1996, 45–46), *chesed* implies love in the sense of a voluntary, but reliable, emotionally charged care, *emet* truth in the sense of veracity or authenticity. Gillis Gerlemann (1973) has traced the root *šlm* back to the concrete sense of having one's fill, being satisfied, thus it is more than the absence of war.

But what exactly is the dynamic between the four personified terms? Ebach posits the encounter in different receptions in Jewish and Christian theology, in midraschim and psalters, showing that both interpretations, kissing and fighting, have been applied. In Midrash Genesis Rabbah on Gen 1:26 the auxiliary angels argue about the creation of man: Justice and love are in favor, as man will be

able to do works of loving justice; truth and peace are opposed, because man will be a belligerent liar. But as commander in chief, God doesn't hear them out but interrupts them: creation of man is accomplished already. In Midrash Exodus Rabbah on Exod 4:27, Moses and Aaron meet and kiss, and Aaron is taken to represent love and peace as a priest, Moses to represent truth and justice as a prophet. Ebach goes on to trace similar developments in the Christian tradition, and we could go on, but the point should be clear. In consequence, Ebach recommends leaving the question of kissing and fighting open in interpreting the relationship of all four as part of a discourse already begun in the psalm itself.

The hermeneutics in question posit neither the biblical text nor its interpreters as authoritative in the sense that they give us a fixed meaning, but rather suggest an open discourse in which participants, media and issues need to be negotiated incessantly. As decolonial exegesis rightfully points out, those negotiations are entrenched in power asymmetries and power struggles and need to be kept open (Sugirtharajah 2012, 142–173): in the light of an isiXhosa translation/interpretation of the Bible, the terms might assume a different meaning still, as they did and do when interpreted in Greek, Latin, German, or English. The beauty of the biblical text in question is that the strife of love, peace, truth and justice carries the promise of a concrete good life on the land.

Where does that leave us? I would like to stress three aspects.

First of all, we need to be aware that the terms in question shouldn't be understood as abstract individual virtues but – as God's properties – are foundational and relational at the same time. Truth, love, justice and peace describe communal relations that are beneficial in a very basic way, regarding the fruit of the land, a basic subsistence for all.

Secondly, the good life people hope and pray for is not a prestabilized harmony but an energetic encounter of truth and love, justice and peace. Fighting – in the sense of arguing – and kissing are not mutually exclusive. What is prevalent in which situation is by no means certain, but the good life needs all four and the continuous negotiation of the relation between those four. No peace without justice, no justice without peace, no love without truth, no truth without love, but what takes the precedence in any given situation needs to be determined.

Thirdly and finally, the psalm reminds of past blessings in a supposedly bleak situation to invoke a divine promise to comfort and give normative orientation at the same time. God's presence with the dynamic encounter of justice, peace, truth and love is a reason for hope as well as an opportunity to get one's bearings, to reflect on the plausible relationship of justice and peace, truth and justice in a given situation. It invites an ethics of correspondence that looks at human, finite answers to God's promise in the realm of the penultimate and draws on sources like Barth's, H. R. Niebuhr's, Soelle's and Moltmann's political theology, but also

on liberation theologies. All of those share Bonhoeffer's sharp distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate: we cannot achieve or obtain God's kingdom or God's peace, but we may and should answer to that promise. In that vein, the 2007 peace memorandum argues that the significance of the biblical promise of the encounter of justice and peace as God's gifts lies in the perspective of a new understanding of peace as a process involving justice rather than the absence of war, resulting in the idea of *si vis pacem, para pacem*: 'if you want peace, prepare for peace'.

2 Just War or Just Peace?

As a matter of course, the language of *just war* is the predominant paradigm in international security discourse, and usually it is defended by its alleged realism. It goes back a long way. Developed in stoic circles, the just war tradition has been famously and paradigmatically rephrased by Thomas Aquinas (1966, q40, 82–96) in a forensic way, as war is understood as the ultimate means to right wrongs. His conceptualization is characterized by a number of distinct aspects framed in the criteria he gives. Most importantly, the objective of just wars must be peace. Thomas unpacks this requirement in a twofold criterion. The rightful intention, *intentio recta*, states that the agent needs to aim at peace if a war is to be just. That, however, has a second implication. The rightful intention entails the use of means that do not embitter the enemy so as to preclude peace, a criterion that has later been rephrased *debitus modus*, the required operating mode. Thomas discusses the consequences of this criterion at length and concludes that cruelty, lies and ambuscades need to be avoided. This intentionality, however, makes sense only in the setting Thomas envisions for just wars: the remedy of evil. This setting is framed as the criterion of *causa iusta*, the just cause. War is only to be waged to fight an unjust lesion, a crime. Additionally, a just war implies that this crime, or lesion, can't be punished in any other way. This precondition is phrased in the criterion of *legitima potestas*: only if there is no other, higher political authority the victim may turn to in order to right the wrongs committed, may war be justified. Thomas devises his concept of a just war in the context of the mediaeval Western world, which was understood as a Christian universe, *orbis Christianus*, ordered by the Roman church and led by the rightful emperor. In theory, then, everybody had a higher authority to turn to and just war was almost ruled out. In practice, however, things were quite different: the range of power of any emperor was severely limited, nobles and knights were in constant feuds, and church and regal authorities were often at odds. And of course, the *orbis Christi-*

anus, the Christian universe, was divided at least in two spheres of influence in Thomas' times, the Roman and the Byzantine Empire. Regarding just war outside of the Christian world, Thomas has nothing to say at all.

After the Thirty Years' War in Europe, framed as a post-Reformation religious conflict but actually giving rise to the emerging modern nation state, the idea of an *orbis christianus* lay shattered. With not even a nominal overarching authority in place, each nation-state would declare its warfare just: the Westphalian system implied a *bellum iustum ab utraque parte,* wars fought justly for both of the belligerent parties, leaving open the question of justice and seemingly impossible to decide.

In his somewhat ironic memorandum on *eternal pe*ace – the title alludes to a Dutch tavern of that name, situated besides a graveyard – the philosopher Immanuel Kant reflected on this situation (Kant 1977). His argument was twofold. On one hand, he assumed that a republic with the people as a sovereign would not be interested in wars, as ordinary citizens did not stand to gain from them but would lose out in terms of the haleness of life and limb as well as prosperity (first definitive article). His experiential background was of course a historical epoch in which feudal lords and monarchs pursued warfare mainly for reasons of the consolidation of dynastic power. On the other hand, he argued that an international federation of peace (2nd definitive article) would be desirable and probable, which would end the continuous threat of war between states and thus form a surrogate to the civic state of law. In the amendments Kant then tried to supplement his moral reasoning with a political one based on his teleological concept of nature governed by regulative ideas. According to Kant, war has been nature's device to afford the human population of the most remote areas of the earth, since less warlike peoples have been forced by more aggressive ones to populate even barren areas. The threat of war from their neighbors then forces all peoples into the formation of a lawful nation-state, which alone affords the coordination needed to repel aggression by others, and the spreading of this lawful state then would prepare for a law of peoples. Kant argued that the emergence of a single world nation was rather impossible due to human malice, the diversities of language and religion and the overstretching of governing power. A legally binding federation, however, would be conceivable exactly because of the forces of individual interest and the lessons learned nationally regarding the favorable outcomes of a rule of law: even though individual nations are not inclined to hold the peace, the spirit of commerce rooted in self-interest would eventually guide them to achieve such a federation, which affords protection. Even though Kant tried to argue for the political feasibility of his philosophical ideas – which included a harsh critique of colonialism – this concept was little more than a nice idea in his time. And in spite of Kant's critique of colonialism, he assumed a Euro-

centric normative teleology that juxtaposed *civilized* and *savage* peoples and severely tainted his universalistic ideas of human dignity.

When the idea of a federation of nations was taken up politically after World War I by US president Woodrow Wilson, it was universally considered naive and impossible. Only after World War II, the concept of an assembly of United Nations took hold, and even then it was in fact governed by the rivalry of the two military superpowers of the time, the United States of America and the Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics, who ferociously fought for their political and economic zones of influence, often in so-called wars by proxy, especially in countries freshly independent from their colonial European masters.

One of those wars, the Vietnam war of notorious memory, became the trigger for the modern classic of just war theory. In a fresh communitarian approach to ethics, Michael Walzer (2006, 3–20) argued that war, even though terrible, had never been devoid of moral rules, and he proposed a set of criteria for the distinction of just and unjust wars, rooted in concrete historical cases and their reflection in context. Invoking the distinction of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*, Walzer first of all argued for the *ius in bello* principles of discrimination and proportionality. As war constitutes a separate moral sphere, the liability to be killed is morally bound to the capability to kill by carrying and operating arms, which implies a discrimination between combatants and non-combatants who must be spared (Walzer 2006, 41.138–159). Additionally, Walzer argues for a principle of proportionality echoing the idea of *debitus modus* and avoiding excessive cruelty in favor of the least destructive military means necessary to reach a given goal. But Walzer also tackles the problems of *ius ad bellum* that had been left untouched in the Westphalian system of *bellum iustum ab utraque parte*. Starting from the intuition that the antigenocidal intervention by the allies in World War II was justified while the Vietnam intervention was not, Walzer argued that self-defense and the intervention "to assist secessionist movements (once they have demonstrated their representative character), to balance the prior interventions of other powers, and to rescue peoples threatened with massacre" justify military intervention (Walzer 2006, 106–107). But Walzer walks a tight line between so-called idealism and realism, and he goes even so far as to reflect on cases of "supreme emergency" when, in his opinion, the principles of just war must be jettisoned (Walzer 2006, 251–268). In the struggle of idealism and realism, Walzer takes an inconvenient middle position when he acknowledges the necessity to abandon moral principles in extreme situations and have those who executed those decisions dishonored afterwards (Walzer 2006, 323–325) – in the case of nuclear deterrence, he argues at the same time for its abolition and its necessity:

> Nuclear war is and will remain morally unacceptable, and there is no case for its rehabilitation. Because it is unacceptable, we must seek out ways to prevent it, and because deterrence is a bad way, we must seek out others. [. . .] I have been more concerned to acknowledge that deterrence itself, for all its criminality, falls or may fall for the moment under the standard of necessity. But as with terror bombing, so here with the threat of terrorism: supreme emergency is never a stable position. (Walzer 2006, 283)

Walzer's approach is characterized by an uncomfortable balancing act between the insight into the factual impact of morality in warfare on one hand (Walzer 2006, 3–20) and the acknowledgment that moral principles may give way to opportunistic calculations in extreme situations (Walzer 2006, 251–268), all the while fully aware of the danger in invoking situations of supreme emergency (Walzer 2006, 283). In so many words, then, Walzer acknowledges that even just wars aren't so just after all.

And albeit all the emphasis on morality in warfare, Walzer never questions the inevitability of war. The idea that the institution of war might be overcome, does not really enter his argument. His rationale is explained in an afterword (Walzer 2006, 329–335) where he deals with the question of nonviolent defense and states: "Nonviolent defense depends on noncombatant immunity" (Walzer 2006, 334).

Classical just war tradition framed war in a forensic way, trying to mitigate the cruelty of war to promote peace. With the emerging nation states, however, this concept became less cogent, and war was increasingly seen as a plausible extension of political means (Clausewitz 1834, 140), as an instrument to foster national unity or even as morally beneficial. Such positions that see war not only as an unavoidable evil but as beneficial in some way have been labeled *bellicist*. On the other hand, proponents of pacifism have for a long time pointed to the problems of the just war approach (Huber and Reuter 1990, 105–115).

First of all, killing is usually considered morally wrong in most cultures and moral codes, the prohibition of killing being one of the most widespread moral principles. Warfare implies mass killing, modern warfare implies mass killing on an industrial scale, in the case of nuclear warfare with cataclysmic consequences that elude any attempts at justification. If morals are valid in war, as Walzer contends, his argument may also work towards a problematization of killing in war, as protagonists of the revisionist just war theory have contended (cf. McMahan 2009; Meireis 2017). In a Christian perspective, killing and violence may even be seen to constitute original sin, as the Hebrew root denoting sin (*chatah*) appears first of all in the story of Cain's killing of Abel (Gen 4:7, cf. Kiefer 2017, 30–31).

Secondly, as may be argued in a more utilitarian vein, war tends to destroy what it seeks to uphold or to remedy because it effects lasting and even hereditary trauma in combatants and noncombatants alike. Additionally, war is one of

the major drivers of environmental degradation and climate change (Closman 2009; Meaza et.al. 2024). Its potential for sustainable conflict resolution (*ius post bellum*) is minimal, especially, as wars not necessarily end with peace treaties: more numerous are cases of temporary subjugation, a more or less hurtful stalemate, a frozen conflict that can rekindle any time or a total military victory by one side, which, however, does not necessarily resolve the underlying conflict but breeds new tensions (Kingsbury and Iron 2023, 4–7; Johnson 2023, 41–42).

Thirdly, war usually not only entails killing, but crass violence and cruelty that can never be fully contained. Thus, even the most important principle of containment of violence, the distinction between combatants and noncombatants, or, in revisionist just war theory, the innocent and the guilty, is always blurred, especially as regular interstate wars only comprise 15 percent of all wars since 1945 (Schreiber 2021). The issues of collateral damage and atrocities committed by traumatized or brutalized soldiers (even in armies of democratic states), which are almost impossible to avoid, make the justification of war highly problematic. Moreover, those problems are not mitigated by the increasing use of highly automated weaponry or robotics, but rather on the contrary (Singer 2009, 382–412).

Finally, the security-based prerogative *hope for the best, prepare for the worst* may lead to a primary option for the military and thus to a security dilemma in which exactly the investment in military security by one agent leads to insecurity on the part of its neighbors, who are then motivated to bolster their own military on their behalf, which may lead to a spiraling of insecurity on all sides and may result in exactly the armed conflict that was to be avoided.

But if war cannot be justified morally, is pacifism an alternative? Positions of absolute pacifism propagated by authors like Stanley Hauerwas (2003) or Fernando Enns (2019, 2017, 2013) have to deal with a different problem: the reality of violence.[1] As Walzer had insisted, nonviolent resistance is dependent on Global public moral attention to take effect or has to actively incur and condone martyrdom. Public moral attention is a scarce resource and tends to fade quickly, martyrdom, on the other hand, cannot be demanded from others but only be taken upon oneself voluntarily.

For that reason, a position of conditional pacifism has been proposed. The Protestant Church in Germany (EKD 2007) memorandum thus approaches the problem from a different angle. The prioritization of peace over war is not predominantly understood as the absolute dedication to nonviolent defense, but as an epistemological operation that starts with a broad look at instruments of conflict resolution rather than with the fact and phenomenology of war. Even though

1 For a thorough discussion of the arguments cf. Kunkel 2024, 116–280.

inspired by the divine promise of ultimate peace and harmony in Psalm 85:11 and elsewhere, it does not purport to bring such a peace about. Rather, it envisions humans corresponding to this divine promise by attempting to overcome violence and war, especially in a time of weapons of mass destruction. Religious promises thus motivate thinking about the possibility of ending war without pretending access to God's power to end conflict in harmony, while the assumption of an inevitability of war may preclude the timely analysis of conflict causes and the scrutiny of non-violent measures of conflict resolution.

This perspective, labeled *just peace approach* in its German-speaking Christian theological variety, may be characterized first and foremost by the epistemological operation mentioned above. Focusing peace instead of war, it starts with an analysis of conflicts, their reasons and emergence, it then scrutinizes possible ways of nonviolent conflict resolution and defies the assumption of an inevitability of war. The suspension of violence, the fostering of individual freedom, the mitigation of human need in a quest for Global justice and the propagation of cultural recognition are then understood as basic principles of conflict resolution (Reuter 2022; Meireis 2012).

Accounting for the reality of violence in human affairs, this approach reserves force as an ultimate ratio to forestall atrocity and unmitigated violence, but without mistaking force as a means of conflict resolution. Rather, force or the threat of it are understood as instruments of suspending violence so as to make nonviolent conflict resolution viable. As a means of last resort on different levels, force may be applied in self-defense, in regard to policing, in cases of legitimate resistance against violent oppression or in cases of national defense against unwarranted aggression (UN Charter Art. 51). However, as the use of force usually implies the threat of violence or violent practices, it may never be fully justified morally and thus implies incurring guilt (Bonhoeffer 1992, 256–299, esp. 275; see also Kunkel 2025, 340–350).

Following Kant's lead and the emergence of an international human rights regime, the EKD memorandum then argued mainly for international law like the UN Charter and United Nation institutions such as the Security Council to be employed for conflict resolution. The legal cooperation on a Global scale thus was understood to regulate the anarchic relationship of nation states in lieu of a world state (EKD 2007, 57–79).

While the ethical argumentation holds, the emerging multipolarity as well as the far-reaching failure of political institutions like the Security Council widens the gap between a moral understanding of law as presupposed in the EKD memorandum and the political maneuvering in the arena of positive law (cf. Reuter in this volume): sanctions against Russia's clear breaches of humanitarian law have repeatedly been vetoed by security members for political reasons. The contrast

between universalist moral principles and political behavior dedicated to egocentric moral considerations and the question of how to deal with that contrast has led to an intense debate in political sciences, where protagonists of a so-called liberal view favor strategies of international cooperation for peace, whereas defendants of a so-called realist position put their trust in strategies of national military security.

3 *Realism* or *Idealism* in the Perception of International Relations?

The paradigms of realism and liberalism – or sometimes, idealism – as understood in the political sciences of international relations form a backdrop also for discussions in Christian theology in Europe – but also in other parts of the world. Theologians like Ulrich Körtner (2024) or Nigel Biggar (2013) argue in favor of just war theory, military intervention and, in the case of Körtner, even a nuclear military build-up from a so-called realist position. As Biggar stresses, however, *realism* may mean very different things in various reference systems, although it is mainly a presumed attitude of wishful thinking that the claim of realism is pitted against (Biggar 2013, 1–15). In moral theory, 'realism' denotes the view that moral principles and values are objective facts rather than social conventions; in theological anthropology, realism refers to the sinfulness and moral ambivalence of humans (Biggar 2013, 12–13). Biggar grounds his reasoning mainly on two ideas: the moral principle that evil needs to be resisted for reasons of love[2] and the assumption that the historical balance sheet of violence against non-violence is beyond our reckoning (Biggar 2013, 61–91, 326–331). In a political perspective, however, the concept of realism signifies a number of strong assumptions regarding the nature of international relations and political entities that may be briefly characterized in turning to John Mearsheimer's paradigmatic offensive realism.

In a famous article, Mearsheimer (2014) has argued for a Western responsibility for the war between Russia and Ukraine on the grounds of an interest collision: "The West's triple package of policies – NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion – added fuel to a fire waiting to ignite." (Mearsheimer 2014, 4) This analysis is based on a number of assumptions regarding interna-

2 Biggar argues with Augustine for an understanding of love encompassing 'harsh kindness', which may result in killing (Biggar 2013, 61–91). For a contrary view that understands love as an end of violence, cf. Meireis 2018.

tional relations and, on a larger scale, anthropology. The insights that humans are social beings and that the capability for reasoning about basic principles of life is limited lead Mearsheimer to three important conclusions: firstly, that a plurality of social groups with distinctive cultures is a given; second, that politics and political institutions are inevitable for social cooperation and are essentially about the quest for power; and thirdly, that survival is the central and all-encompassing rationale for individuals and social groups (Mearsheimer 2018, 15–17, 34). Since he rates human ability to transcend the limits of a certain culture rather low (Mearsheimer 2018, 35–38) and understands relativism as the last word regarding moral beliefs (Mearsheimer 2018, 33), survival and the quest for power become the central motives for political institutions of social groups, which by definition act in an anarchic setting (Mearsheimer 2018, 40). This is because a practical consensus on normative principles governing society or the relationship of a number of societies is, in that view, ruled out by the essentialist assumptions about the unchangeable cultural differences of groups and individuals, and the limits of reason. As survival is the central rationale in an anarchic setting, the quest for military power becomes all-encompassing:

> "The importance of power in anarchy is not that it determines who writes the rules, because rules do not matter much in intergroup relations, but that it is the best means for societies to protect themselves against violent threats from another society. They want abundant material resources, especially military ones, to maximize their prospects of survival in the face of existential threats. In the absence of a higher political authority, fear is a powerful motivator. [. . .] No society can ever be too powerful relative to its competitors. (Mearsheimer 2018, 40)

Mearsheimer perceives liberal ideas that focus on the importance of individual rights and norms of peaceful conflict resolution, a mutual interest in prosperity or an inclination to follow rules in international relations, for that reason, as delusionary: "In the realist story, states worry about their survival above all else, and this motivates them to pursue power at each other's expense" (Mearsheimer 2018, 191). And even if peaceful cooperation between a number of given nation states can be achieved, the theory holds: "But as long as there is some chance of war between any two states in the system, every state has little choice but to privilege survival and act in accordance with realist principles" (Mearsheimer 2018, 193). Combined with a scathing critique of attempts at liberal hegemony by force (2018, 120–151) and the firm belief that "anarchy is here to stay" in international relations (Mearsheimer 2018, 151), Mearsheimer advocates for restraint in international relations, especially regarding the protection of human rights (Mearsheimer 2018, 152–187). Even though he by no means rules out war as an instrument of realist politics, he argues that realist policies will result in less warfare

than liberal ones, firstly, because realists are interested in "maximising their share of Global power, there are only a limited number of regions where they should be willing to risk a war" (Mearsheimer 2018, 222). Secondly, they are aware of the balance-of-power logic, which brings with it caution towards other powerful agents. Thirdly, they are aware of the fact that war almost always brings about unintended consequences (2018, 222–223).

For those reasons, it is perfectly in line with his argument to advocate for the cutting of military aid from the West:

> One also hears the claim that Ukraine has the right to determine whom it wants to ally with and the Russians have no right to prevent Kiev from joining the West. This is a dangerous way for Ukraine to think about its foreign policy choices. The sad truth is that might often makes right when great-power politics are at play. Abstract rights such as self-determination are largely meaningless when powerful states get into brawls with weaker states. Did Cuba have the right to form a military alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War? The United States certainly did not think so, and the Russians think the same way about Ukraine joining the West. It is in Ukraine's interest to understand these facts of life and tread carefully when dealing with its more powerful neighbor. (Mearsheimer 2014, 12)

Recent interviews of Mearsheimer's and an open letter from a number of realist scholars strongly discouraging an inclusion of Ukraine into NATO point in a similar direction (Open Letter 2024, Mearsheimer 2024 a, b).

Of course, self-professed realists may differ considerably in their views: while Biggar and Mearsheimer both believe in an inevitability of warfare, Biggar advocates going to war for moral reasons of 'harsh love' in an Augustinian spirit, while Mearsheimer would restrain military operations to those motivated by strict national self-interest in the expansion or conservation of power, avoiding any overstretching.

An alternative view is offered by political scientists like Michael W. Doyle or Michael Zürn who identify as belonging to a tradition of liberal theory in international relations – seconded by philosophers like Charles R. Beitz – and stress the significance of human rights (Beitz 2009, 197–212, 2007). Doyle, who is one of the leading figures of a democratic peace theory approach in international relations, has recently suggested to strive for a 'cold peace' instead of a 'cold war' in international relations. Doyle distinguishes between national corporatist regimes, in the case of Russia and China also autocratic, and liberal democratic ones, which are, however, under strong assault from right wing movements fueled by a "combination of increasing domestic inequalities in some places (such as the United States) with seeming loss of control of borders and economy in others (as in Europe)" (Doyle 2018, 7). He then argues against explicit strategies condoning a hot or cold war, even though he is in favor of a continued Western support of Ukraine

that empowers the country to negotiate a cease-fire with Russia that does not amount to a Ukrainian surrender (Doyle 2023a; 2023b, 225–227). While *hot war*, in his language, denotes armed conflict against territorial integrity or political independence, *cold war* means hostility and subversion just short of armed force. *Warm peace* then denotes shared legitimacy, mutual respect, peaceful cooperation and competition, *cold peace* means rivalry, mutual suspicion and lack of shared legitimacy, but also détente, limited cooperation and refraining from subversion (Doyle 2023b, 11–16). In the tradition he stands for, a precondition for peace is seen in the coincidence of economic interdependency, jointly managed international institutions and democratic regimes (Zürn 2022, 406). Thus, contrary to realism, the possibility of multilevel cooperation even in multipolar settings is acknowledged, rendering them not simply anarchic; and the internal affairs of nation-states are perceived as relevant to international relations. Neither one of those elements, however, is a guarantee for stability and peaceful relations in itself: democracies tend to be peaceful only against other democracies, are under the temptation to impose their political systems and values on non-democratic countries and may – in the case of the United States – also be in danger of falling into the 'Thucydides trap' of trying to preemptively defend their hegemony against other rising powers (Doyle 2018, 6). Economic interdependency is an important argument, but people might be willing to sustain prosperity losses for the sake of security, as the costly German shift away from the dependency on Russian gas shows. And international institutions may be instrumentalized or abused – and it is not always the autocratic regimes who are responsible for such instrumentalization (Zürn 2022, 405; 2018, 84–88, 107–136, 170–194; Zürn, Wolf and Stephen 2019, 372).

And of course, a simple assignation of falcons and doves is out of the question: Realists will not always advocate for war, and liberals will not always vote for peace (Zürn 2022, 398–401).

In the same way as the label of 'realism' is at least multi-faceted, the simple distinction between 'realist' and 'liberal' positions may be misleading. Political scientists like Michael Zürn have pointed to the fact that the landscape is much more diverse. Institutional approaches, even though taking legal rules and moral norms more seriously than the realists, do take military force into account and may even advocate for it.[3] Theorists seeing some merit in realist positions have suggested a distinction between the theory and the heuristic of realism: while, in

3 Zürn 2022, 400 – Zürn's argument is here that the 'realist' approach stressing power balances and national security by military force does not provide a criterion for the preferability of restraint or force in a given situation.

their opinion, the theory allows for helpful perspectives, especially if combined with other views, the heuristic promises a simplistic and none-too-helpful catch-all approach (Driedger 2023a).[4]

In an ethical vein, a 'realist' position like the one propagated by Mearsheimer has two distinct disadvantages: normatively, it professes neutrality while actually favoring an egocentric moral view where the survival and security interests of the agents in question claim attention first and foremost. At the same time, those moral decisions are not acknowledged as choices but declared as based on invariable anthropological fact. Descriptively, it tends to underestimate the factual impact of normative attitudes, also in international relations.

Doyle's position profits from insights into the balance-of-power logic professed by the concept of realism, but tends to be more complex. It takes into account that social realities are a matter of construction regarding their perception and formation and tends to include a wider variety of factors; additionally, it is usually aware and reflexive concerning the moral choices that ground its research, even though it is of course descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature. In that regard, one might even claim that it is more realistic than realism, as it is better equipped to describe complex realities.

For that reason, Christian ethics might be well advised to acknowledge that a simple binary of 'liberal' and 'realist' is misleading, and the heuristic of 'realism' (Driedger 2023a) with its claim to a non-ideological view of the 'pure facts' is outright dangerous, while the institutional theory of international relations may just incorporate enough realism to come to terms with social and political reality. While the just peace approach outlined in the last paragraph strives for a 'warm peace' and the rule of mutually endorsed and respected international law in international relations, the emerging multipolarity and also the shortcomings of the institutional regulations and the misdemeanors of autocratic as well as liberal states (Zürn 2018) make this a long-term goal rather than a short-term one. Theological realism then implies taking God's promise seriously and not giving up hope. It faces grim realities with a clear view of conflicting interests, intersectionalities and one's own limitations. Meanwhile, Doyle's suggestion to work for a 'cold peace', implying a measure of cooperation and non-subversion between different agents, and to avoid hot and cold wars where possible seems to be a realistic aim which may be reconciled with the idea of a sensitive long-term commitment to universal human rights, an orientation towards a Global governance

4 Driedger 2023a (cf. also the contribution in this volume) provides a very thorough and detailed blow-by-blow analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict regarding the explanatory power of realism, coming to highly ambivalent results.

(Zürn 2023) and the epistemic perspective of conditional peace ethics, even if it entails painful compromise.

If we adopt the epistemic perspective advocated for by Christian just peace ethics with its motto of *si vis pacem para pacem*, 'if you want peace, prepare for it', analytical procedure would start with conflict analysis and the scrutiny of possibilities of nonviolent conflict resolution. It entails a broad concept of security and integration of Global economic conflict issues without involving strong cosmopolitan assumptions: even if the claim to universality of human rights and the beneficence of democratic participatory structures may be upheld, it needs to be recognized as a disputable ethical claim that cannot and must not be implemented by force but has to respect regional and national self-determination (Rawls 1999b, 4.58–88). If all else fails, a containment of violence by forceful means, always incurring guilt, may be necessary to prepare non-violent solutions. Under the label of law-sustaining force, the 2007 EKD memorandum reserved this for cases of legitimate self-defense against unwarranted aggression and to prevent crass atrocities (EKD 2007, 65–70), but it argued for restraining forceful intervention into the affairs of another nation in the most rigorous way (EKD 2007, 70–79).

Upholding a claim to universal human rights as a consequence of corresponding to God's promise of peace must, however, not leave human rights language and practice unchanged – the multiple tasks connected to that effort can only be indicated very briefly here: In acceptance of postcolonial critique, human-rights language must be reconstructed to decenter European perspectives, for instance regarding development trajectories (Mutua 2008; Shetty 2018). In the same vein, international law needs reconstruction to overcome neocolonial approaches (Anghie 2004), and, as a matter of course, UN institutions are in need of a reconstruction that allows for more equitable terms (Zürn 2018, 219–247). The fact that those endeavors involve long-term effort does not render them less realistic, as they provide a map for orientation so as not to lose one's way in troubled times.

4 Ukraine and Christian Theory of Just Peace

How the current situation in Ukraine developed is widely known. On February 24, 2022, Russia attacked the sovereign republic of Ukraine with all-out war claiming the prevention of an alleged genocide in the Donbas, the ousting of a Nazi regime and the restitution of greater Russia annexation (Putin 2022). This unwarranted attack was a clear breach of international law and was subsequently answered by UN resolution ES 11/1 of March 2, 2022, approved by a majority of 141 states

and only rejected by five (Walker 2024). Additionally, states like Finland and Sweden gave up on their neutrality and joined NATO. War crimes committed by Russian troops in Bucha and elsewhere (OHCR 2022) became notorious, and also Russia's warfare from the start targeted civilian infrastructure and cities. Already before, in 2014, Russia had annexed Crimea following an internationally non-recognized referendum and the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine. Despite the Minsk Agreements of 2014/15 fighting continued in the Donbas, where Russia conducted hybrid warfare (Walker 2023).

Explanations for this behavior are numerous and vary according to theoretical perspective (Driedger 2023a, b): While authors like Mearsheimer (2014) have held the attempts to extend NATO or EU membership responsible considering them as a threat to Russia's need for security in its claim for an unchallenged sphere of interest and as disturbing a balance of power, others have stressed Putin's internal strife for unchallenged authoritarian rule (Heinemann-Grüder 2022, 25) or argued for a systems conflict between liberal and authoritarian regimes (Doyle 2023, 63–151; Zürn 2022, 404).

In the background of the conflict looms the retreat of the United States as unchallenged hegemon and the succession of an emerging multipolar geopolitical Global situation, where US military hegemony is challenged by its nuclear contender Russia and a number of other regional powers; economic hegemony contested by China and the EU as well as rising countries like India or South Africa; and of course the question of the type of desired international order.

Suggestions regarding short-, medium- and long-term strategies and reactions vary correspondingly, even though a given theoretical perspective does not necessarily mean consensus regarding measures (Zürn 2022; Driedger 2023a). While some realists vote for deterrence, but also a long-term concentration of forces and therefore an abstaining from offering Ukraine NATO-membership (Open Letter 2024), others plead for the inclusion of Ukraine in NATO to restrain Russia (Knop 2023). In the short term, most Western theorists argue for an ongoing support short of direct military intervention, whereas for instance Chinese scholars see the Russian outright aggression as a legitimate intervention and reaction of a cornered state (Guihai 2024) – which also goes for European right-wing politicians like Viktor Orban or the German Party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), but also for the German leftist party *Die Linke*. Long-term recommendations again vary: while liberal institutionalists like Doyle opt for a model of 'cold peace' involving a multiplicity of measures (Doyle 2023, 220–244), others plead for a national military build-up.

A just peace approach cannot follow a 'realist heuristic' that underestimates the complexities of national, regional, and Global situations, even though it might profit from 'realist' insights like the importance of a balance of power. While ac-

knowledging the reality of violence and oppression, it needs to keep a vision of sustainable peace as the guiding line for political thinking from a Christian mindset. Thus, projecting the choice of strategy into an alternative of prosperity transfer, appeasement and deterrence (Münkler 2023, 71–85) falls short of the mark and is less realistic than claimed. As institutionalists contend, economic interdependence is only one factor important in the support of peaceful relations, but not enough to secure them (Zürn). The term *appeasement* on the other hand already implies that the strategy tries to satisfy a bully by giving him reign without consideration of legitimate interests on any side. And *deterrence* is a strategy based on the risk evaluation of rational agents who also might fail to grasp the situation (Driedger 2023b). Instead, a policy that supports forceful legitimate self-defense of Ukraine to curb unmitigated oppression and violence in the sense of law-sustaining force in the absence of a functioning international rule of law seems to be plausible (EKD 2007, 67. Reuter in this volume). At the same time, it is necessary to look for viable ways to negotiate at least an armistice that would not amount to a freezing of the conflict, during which time Russia could regroup and regenerate its military forces for the next strike – a scenario that could not possibly be suggested to Ukraine. The question of when legitimate self-defense should be halted to allow for negotiations is, of course, not a trivial one and is a matter of political decision in which the most concerned, i.e., the Ukrainian people represented by its democratically elected government, should have the strongest voice.

As has become clear, the Christian response is more than divided upon the issue of war in general (see section 2 in this chapter), but also in regard to war in Ukraine. This is not only true regarding the different autocephalous orthodox churches, notably the Russian Orthodox Church with its doctrine of Russkiy Mir and Patriarch Kirill's strong alignment with Russian warfare (Clark and Vovk 2020). The World Council of Churches (WCC) – where the Russian Orthodox churches have member status – has repeatedly criticized Patriarch Kirill for the characterization of Russia's aggression as "holy war" (WCC 2024) and urged Russia to stop its aggression (WCC 2022). Pope Francis' encouragement of a negotiation addressed at the Ukrainian government (Watkins 2024) was widely understood as a call to surrender, but rectified later by the Vatican's secretary of state Cardinal Parolin who condemned Russia's war as an unjust invasion (Starcevic 2024). In Germany's Protestant Church, debate arose not only over the question of supporting Ukraine with arms, but also in regard to the doctrine of just peace in general (Körtner 2024; Evangelische Militärseelsorge 2023; EKD 2019), a debate in which one faction moved towards a position of absolute pacifism and the other in the direction of just war doctrine and nuclear deterrence. Since religious agents like the Christian churches are often important agents in societies and theological

debate may contribute to the formation of imaginaries of faith and public opinion, this debate is not futile, but necessary.

A Christian position originating in just peace theory, even though acknowledging the necessity of force as a last resort of self-defense or the prevention of genocide in situations where an effective legal sanctioning system is absent, may not narrow down its scope of thinking to the immediate necessities of one given party in a situation of war. Instead, it needs to think from a broader perspective of conflict analysis, that takes past and future of the warring parties, the geopolitical and also the Global economic situation into consideration. In particular, it needs to reflect on its own contributions to the problematic situation and to bring those into the political debates of Christians and a wider public in the society where a given Christian community is located. And it needs to take God's promise of peace as a beacon that motivates its strife for a Global warm peace, however imperfect and arduous the way. In that sense, it is not delusional but highly realistic.

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