The Paradox of Wars and Culture Wars

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For the past thirty or more years, Americans have been embroiled in a seemingly endless conflict called the “culture wars.” The phrase was made famous by University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter, and it refers to the clash between traditional and progressive values that has been playing out not only in our political institutions, but also in every nook and cranny of our society: in colleges and universities, in advertising, in movies, and even in our churches. Indeed, so all encompassing and all consuming have been our culture wars that, according to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, Americans have never been more polarized at any point in our history, except perhaps on the eve of the Civil War.

On the very front lines of the culture wars, we find two groups of elite soldiers arrayed against each other in heated combat. On one
side is the Progressive Secularist who stands for liberation from the chains of tradition, especially religious tradition. He is for gay marriage, gender equality, sexual liberation, affirmative action, and social justice. He wants to put an end to what he regards as prejudice and bigotry in all aspects of life. And he sees orthodox Christians as bigots.

On the other side stands the orthodox Christian. He is for preserving the institutions and practices that have for untold generations kept humans stable, healthy, and holy. He defends traditional marriage, religious liberty, chastity, hierarchical power structures, and respect for authority (whether political or religious). And he sees the Progressive Secularist as a direct threat to all these goods.

This much is widely known. But if one looks inside the souls of the most engaged culture warriors one begins to detect a problem. A colleague of mine at Baylor is so ardent in her defense of radical progressive causes that she has begun to exhibit an unmistakable hatred toward conservatives. She assumes the absolute worst of their motives. She takes deep offense at the faintest appearance of injustice. And she slips easily into full-attack mode when she perceives a personal slight, even to the point of driving people out of their jobs.

This we might expect from an activist on the cultural Left. Hypersensitivity and disproportionate responses to relatively harmless situations are par for the course. But troublingly, a similar phenomenon seems to occur on the Right. Set aside for a moment the question of the rightness or wrongness of the causes for which we fight and focus instead on the interior disposition of some of our fighters. I have another colleague, not at Baylor but elsewhere, a Roman Catholic deeply enmeshed in the culture wars, who also expresses an implacable hatred toward his opponents. Like my colleague on the Left, he tends to be uncharitable in assessing his opponents’ motives, and he often acts in ways that violate proportionality. In fact, so much of his time is spent in what we might call “attack mode,” one wonders if he might not be sinning somehow. What does he relish more, the goods he is fighting to defend or the fight itself? It is really difficult to say.

So, here is the question. Do orthodox Christians need to be worried at all about ethical principles as we engage in the culture wars? And, if so, where might we find them? I want to suggest that even though the culture wars are metaphorical, not real, wars (in the sense that we are not actually attempting to kill our opponents), they are nevertheless susceptible to some of the same ethical dangers as war itself. Thus, we do indeed need ethical principles. And if we fail either to find them or abide by them, we shall do serious harm to ourselves and our culture. Where, then, do we look for guidance? The
writings of Thomas Aquinas are, I think, hard to surpass.

THOMAS AQUINAS ON WAR AND SIN

In his magisterial instruction manual for students of theology, the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas famously posed the question “Whether it is always sinful to wage war” (2-2.40.1). His answer was not a straightforward “yes” or “no.” Rather, he taught that in order for wars to be just, three things were necessary: the command of a sovereign authority, a just cause, and a rightful intention.

The notions of “sovereign authority” and “just cause” are relatively easy to understand. But what did Thomas mean by “rightful intention”? If we study the rest of his remarks, we find the beginnings of an answer. Thomas writes that belligerents must “intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil.” Wars should not be waged for “self-aggrandizement,” but should aim at “punishing evil doers” and “securing peace.”

Though rightful intention appears third on Thomas’s list of conditions for just war, he insists that it is a pivotal consideration. “For it may happen that the war is declared by the legitimate authority, and for a just cause, and yet be rendered unlawful through a wicked intention.” The danger here is that fighters, while prosecuting a perfectly just cause, may nevertheless slip into wickedness. What is the wickedness in question? Surprisingly, it is not the killing, as one might expect. Rather, it is the internal disposition that so often accompanies killing in war. It is “the passion for inflicting harm, the cruel thirst for vengeance, a disturbed and relentless spirit, the fever of revolt, the lust of power, and such like things. All these are rightly condemned in war.”

There is, then, a certain paradoxical aspect to war. Insofar as we act rightly, Christians enter into war to do good; but we sometimes exit having done evil, not to the enemy but to ourselves. The sin catches us unawares, as it were, and exacts a terrible toll. This paradox deserves more sustained attention, because I think it goes much deeper than currently appreciated, and also because I believe it has a cultural, not merely a psycho-spiritual dimension.
A BROADER LOOK AT ST. THOMAS ON WAR

The key to interpreting Thomas’s reflections on war lies in noticing where, in the overall structure of the Summa, he brings war into focus. Contrary to what one might expect, he does not do so in his lengthy treatment of justice, even though just wars are, by definition, related to justice. Rather, he does so in his treatment of charity. Why? What does charity have to do with war?

According to Thomas, charity is the highest of all Christian virtues. It is the means by which we become united with God and our fellow men. Moreover, when we engage in acts of charity, something profoundly valuable occurs in our souls. We find ourselves (at least potentially) in a state of “peace,” a state in which our truest desires are not only attained, but attained “with tranquility and without hindrance.” For Thomas, then, charity leads to peace; and peace is *tranquillitas ordinis*, a “tranquility of order” within our souls.

So far so good. But, again, what does any of this have to do with war? The answer is not very encouraging for those who plan to participate in war, culture wars included. Within Thomas’s discussion of charity and peace, war comes to light as a vice that is directly opposed to peace, and thus ultimately to charity itself. War thus appears to be antithetical to the highest of Christian virtues. That is the sobering reality that Thomas wishes us to confront.

However, Thomas does not leave it there. Rather, this is the precise moment in the Summa when Thomas poses the crucial question I quoted above, “Whether it is always sinful to wage war.” And he answers in his roundabout way: No—it is not always sinful to wage war. But in order for war to be just, those three conditions are necessary: the command of a sovereign authority, a just cause, and a rightful intention.

We are in a much better position now to appreciate what is at stake in that third condition, “rightful intention,” and to see how this criterion might be applied directly to our culture wars today. War is an extremely perilous affair from a spiritual point of view. It is perilous because of what it potentially does to the soul of the belligerents. Insofar as it gives rise to emotions that stand opposite to charity and to the love of peace, it leads us unwittingly into sin. In fact, it negates the ultimate goods toward which we as human beings are meant to strive. War thus puts an obstacle in the way of our salvation. But despite the overwhelming perils of war, one can nevertheless engage in it safely if one can somehow manage to limit one’s intention to what is good: the love of God and of our fellow men (charity) and the love of peace.

But how on earth can one possibly do this? How can someone participate in something as
disordered, lawless, unrestrained, and polarizing as war (culture wars included) without suspending one’s commitment to charity and peace? Thomas actually answers this question, but his answer does not make the business of war any easier. He offers a few fundamental principles, and he leaves the rest to us. Here are the principles.

1. Those who engage in war are not necessarily opposed to peace. There’s a difference between a just peace and an unjust peace. And to wage war in pursuit of a just peace is not necessarily to violate the love of peace.

2. As one engages in war, one must intend the advancement of good or avoidance of evil. Intending a just peace serves to advance the good. Preventing wicked aggressors from succeeding in their work serves to avoid evil.

3. One should not intend things that are wicked and sinful. For instance, one should not intend aggrandizement, cruelty, revolution, harm as an end in itself, vengeance, the mere exercise of power for power’s sake, or the continuation of conflict for its own sake.

Thomas is certainly correct. These are indeed the principles that should guide us.

But to act according to these principles in the midst of conflict is no easy matter. And I would suggest that culture wars are even more dangerous than literal wars in this regard because they hit us “so close to home,” as it were; and there can be no safe distance or boundaries maintained between our opponents and us. And this brings us back to the paradox of war. Insofar as we enter into the culture wars—and who can avoid them today?—we do so in order to advance the good and thwart the wickedness that threatens to engulf us. But in fighting, we risk gradually giving in to feelings of anger and resentment; and our “intention” may slowly shift from the love of our fellow men (enemies included) and the love of peace to a love of the conflict itself and of the power by means of which we fight. Again, we enter war in order to do justice, but we leave having violated the requirements of charity, in effect sacrificing a higher good for a lower one, which no one should want to do.

I hope readers will take this analysis seriously. We tend to imagine that the culture wars are not dangerous to engage in, indeed that we are simply virtuous insofar as we fight the good fight. And I do believe we are fighting the culture wars for just causes. But if we listen to St. Thomas, we are invited to see that the most serious spiritual dangers of war occur independently of the question of just cause. They are sins that occur in our own souls, in what we intend; and they are very grave.

OUR CULTURAL PARADOX OF WAR

But there is still more to observe about this disturbing paradox, because while it plays itself out on
one level in the souls of individuals, it plays out also on the level of culture. Let me explain by offering a brief vignette that may at first seem unrelated to our wars and culture wars, but which, in fact, reveals the cultural dimension in the starkest of terms.

Imagine a virtuoso pianist at the peak of his career who, looking out at the culture around him, realizes that appreciation for classical music is rapidly fading. He senses a crisis: if things continue, there will be no audiences, no careers in music, and no future great performances. He deems the situation so dire that he decides to step away from his instrument in order to defend the value of classical music nationwide. He gives speeches about composers in grade schools, lobbies Congress for increased support for the arts, and solicits wealthy donors to sponsor classical music ensembles.

His work is noble, but it consumes him, and the crisis proves so severe that his task is never done. Tragically, he never returns to the life of music he had enjoyed earlier. When he has time now to play, which is rare, he is a shadow of his former self. Practice sessions find him always distracted. His music paradoxically suffers from his effort to save music.

This image can be plausibly reproduced across a wide range of disciplines. We can imagine a great surgeon who leaves his practice to fight the healthcare battles in Washington, D.C. Or we can imagine a distinguished Dante scholar who becomes first a dean and then a provost in order to defend the place of great literature in an increasingly business-oriented university. The sacrifice made by such defenders of culture is unquestionably noble. And yet, we have to admit that a categorical difference exists between the act of “soldiering” and the ends for which we soldier. The defense of music performance is not itself a musical performance. The defense of sound healthcare policy is not the practice of medicine. Certainly, these activities relate to and even depend upon each other in interesting ways, but they are not even close to being the same thing.

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From this vantage point one can observe that the more battle oriented our culture becomes, the more we also run the risk of sacrificing the very things for which we fight. We cannot fight for X and be X at exactly the same time. This too is a “paradox of war.” But it is one that occurs on the level of culture more than in the souls of individual Christians.

Since we are searching for sound principles to guide us in the troubled waters of cultural warfare, let me cite a principle from Thomas again, but this time from a different Thomas—not Aquinas, but Hobbes. I know this will seem a strange source for Christian wisdom, but on the cultural plane Hobbes was acutely aware of the costs of conflict. In his Leviathan, Hobbes describes a condition of war that is, admittedly, much nastier even than our culture wars, a condition in which “every man is enemy to every man.” Under this extreme
condition, says Hobbes, all culture grinds necessarily to a halt.

In such conditions, there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Bk. 1, ch. 13).

Though the culture wars in America fall far short of the total war described by Hobbes, the basic principle still holds. Just to the extent that our society becomes more warlike, it simultaneously suffers from a proportional degree of cultural atrophy. We may well feel required to fight in defense of cultural institutions, especially ones that convey the blessings of truth, beauty, and goodness to future generations of men. And yet, as I indicated above, we cannot fight for X and be X at exactly the same time. Or, again, the fight to defend cultural institutions is not the same as participating in those institutions, to say nothing of advancing them or creating new ones.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us, I suggest, with a double paradox that we cannot easily avoid and yet might be able to diminish through a heightened awareness. The paradox cannot be avoided, because war itself, both actual war and cultural war, will never go away as long as we remain on this side of the eschaton, the end of the world as we know it. And yet the paradox can be diminished, because as Thomas Aquinas teaches, and Thomas Hobbes too, in his own way, careful reflection can help us to chart the safest course. We can, in other words, know in advance that war, while sometimes necessary, is also extremely perilous and costly. And we can guard against the most serious dangers of war by trying always to keep it within bounds. What this means concretely is that when we must engage in war we should endeavor, on the one hand, to maintain our highest commitment to charity, as challenging as that may be; and, on the other hand, to participate in and even to advance the cultural institutions that are essential to human flourishing. To do otherwise would mean damaging our culture and ourselves.

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