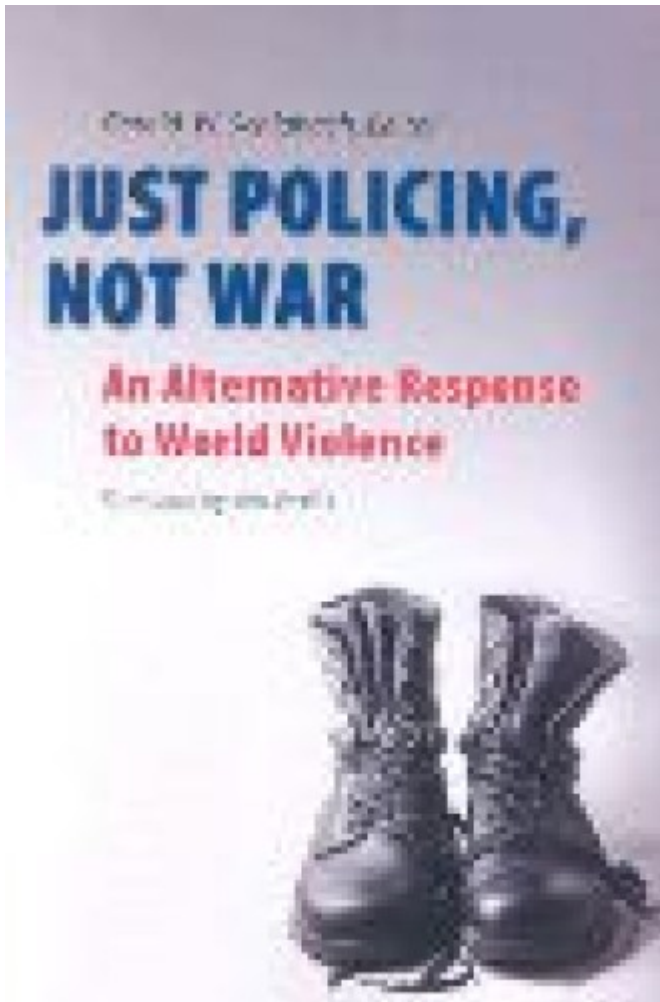


# Police force

By [Donald W. Shriver](#) in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## **Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence**

Gerald W. Schlabach, ed.  
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A few days after 9/11, a good friend of mine called to ask me to help preside at the funeral of his son, age 26, who had perished in the World Trade Center. He wondered aloud if this was war or something else. “No,” I said, “it was murder.”

Around the same time we were called by our president to make war on terrorism and even to join a “crusade.” Soon his advisers told him that the word *crusade* was inflammatory to most Muslims. But he never gave up on the word *war*.

We now use the word for our struggle against all sorts of things we don’t like: war on drugs, poverty, crime, drunk driving, pollution and so on. The eight authors of the ten essays in *Just Policing, Not War* make the case that now that the ultimate violence of a nuclear war can threaten human existence, we need to discipline our use of the war metaphor. One author, Tobias Winright, a former police officer, quotes ethicist James Childress on the point: metaphors “shape how we think, what we experience, and what we do by what they highlight and hide.” Hidden in the Bush “war on terrorism” is the absence of any locatable foreign enemy. He found one, of course, in Iraq, and set the stage there for a civil war. He also threw at the U.S. military a set of challenges that now resemble what we expect of a police force: limiting violence against civilians, ferreting out murderers, reestablishing civic peace neighborhood by neighborhood, enforcing respect for laws that protect us against the worst harm we can inflict on one another.

Such laws have been assumed for centuries in the Western world’s concept of the just war. But many of us believe that the American invasion of Iraq failed on many counts to be a just war: the Iraq government was not the agent of 9/11, war was not really a last resort, we had not calculated our chances of turning a whole country into a democracy in a few months, and we did not acknowledge that our invasion might result in a half million or more Iraqi civilian deaths. The only way to call this a just war is to forget the rigor of those classical tests, which are designed to inhibit war as much as to facilitate it, even though politicians have used the doctrine more often to take us into wars than to keep us out of them.

St. Augustine to the contrary, just war thinking is secular in its modern origins, and robust Christian theologians have seldom been content to ally themselves unambiguously with its mandates. Our problem, of course, is Jesus. His teachings on violence compelled Christians in the earliest times of the church to opt for pacifism as the only truly Christian ethic in this regard. A minority among us

worldwide—Quakers, Mennonites, monastics like St. Francis—keep reminding us of Jesus.

Every seminary graduate knows that the church's three main approaches to violence have been pacifism, just war and crusade. The latter dropped from legitimacy long ago, and since then the chief argument has been between the other two. This important book asks us to consider a new third party to the argument: policing.

The book emerges from an unprecedented five-year dialogue between Catholic and Mennonite scholars who are seeking a model for international conflict that stops short of traditional war. Two of the eight authors, Glen Stassen and John Paul Lederach, represent the peace-church tradition. The other six are Catholics (two of whom, Schlabach himself and Ivan J. Kauffman, have a Mennonite background) who have thought long and deeply about the subject. All are uncomfortable with both the compromises of the just war tradition and the absolutism of pacifism, and all are fearful of humanity's capacity for destroying itself in another world war. They draw cautious wisdom from both just war theory and pacifism but settle on neither as our main hope for the future. Some violence may tragically be necessary as a last resort to curb other violence, they concede, so the overarching question is how to build a peace that protects our future from the massive war deaths of our recent past.

Can we eliminate violence from the human scene? These authors think not. Can we diminish and control it with the help of new ways of thinking and new institutional constraints? Yes, they say, if we will work at transforming our thinking about international conflict from the metaphor of just war to the metaphor of just policing and if we build international law, international institutions and an international police force that is subject to constraints similar to those intended to rein in domestic police forces.

There are key differences between an army and a police force. Police are embedded in a community whose members assume that the police force is working on their behalf. Unlike soldiers, police are not trained primarily for armed combat. They know how to use arms but are to use them only as a last resort, one of the classic principles of just war. Many police officers pride themselves on how infrequently they have to draw a gun and how often their work overlaps with that of people in other helping professions. Their specialty is saving life, not destroying it.

Biblically rooted Christians know that one murder is always one too many. Killing can never have more than ambiguous justification. How else are we to read Genesis 4 and its grief over the murder of a brother by a brother? Basic to those early chapters of Genesis is the insistence that God the Creator means to bless the whole of humanity. *Just Policing, Not War* calls us back to this truth, which has new urgency in the 21st century. There was once a time when “one worlders” and “lovers of humanity” were shoved aside by nationalists, racists and “realists,” rejected as hopeless romantics. But now is the time for religious people to begin identifying themselves with the whole of humanity rather than just their respective nations, and for followers of Jesus to define as neighbor every human on earth.

It’s a rigorous standard, especially for those of us called to testify to the gospel of Jesus in pulpits, classrooms and conversation. We ministers and priests need to keep saying to our people that when Christians rally around the national flags of our wars, we risk denying God’s love for the world. When we go to war with enthusiasm, we are denying the *theos* in that word. And when we lament the deaths of 4,000 American soldiers while neglecting to mention the deaths of at least a half million Iraqis, we are commending a truncated Christian ethic.

As a disciple of the Reformed mainline tradition, I read this book as an invitation to all segments of the world church to join this sober dialogue between two often-alien wings of the Christian community. These authors call us to some serious *metanoia*—some real mind-and-behavior change—about war and peace. One of them, Kauffman, summarizes the gist of their discussion:

We must acknowledge the essential defect in the just war tradition, which is the assumption that violence can somehow achieve justice. And we must with equal courage acknowledge the essential defect in pacifism, which is the assumption that justice can somehow be achieved simply by opposing violence.

Jesus said that the peacemakers are blessed, not just the violence-opposers. Several of these authors ask us to remember the occasions in recent history that are full of promise for our ability to overcome our collective propensity for organized violence: Gandhi’s India, Mandela’s South Africa, Walesa’s Poland, Havel’s Czech Republic and King’s United States. Even if we cannot eliminate violence from the human scene, we can diminish it, subject it to judicial restraint, treat the lives of us all as worth preserving, and do so with the help of police-protectors who take us toward a world of men and women who deserve the name “civilized.”