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On the crossroad between necropolitics and narcoreligion: walking the christological path of Christian pacifism in Brazilian favelas
Na encruzilhada entre necropolítica e narcorreligião: trilhando o caminho cristológico do pacifismo cristão nas favelas brasileiras

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Abstract
It is very common to associate Christian orthodoxy with the legitimate use of violence to deal with criminals. Although violence has been practiced by Christians throughout history, Jesus Christ lived a non-violent life. In a context where urban violence is linked to historical poverty and inequality, religiosity continues to be an essential component in the narratives that sustain power disputes in Brazilian favelas. This article presents the historical context of the formation of favelas and how religiosity has been and continues to be present in the discourse of drug trafficking and religious leaders in Brazil. Seeking a dialogue between religiously justified violence in favelas and the history of Christianity. This article finds important voices, including Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, C.S. Lewis and John Stott, as advocates of the use of violence based on Christian doctrine. The theologically justified violence is mainly exemplified by the just war theory. After presenting the historical context of religiosity in the favelas and influential voices of the just war theory, this article presents Christian pacifism as a model of faithfulness incarnated in Jesus. This model has been persistently and consistently marginalized since the time of Christ. This article presents Christian pacifism as a countercultural proposal to the necropolitics currently practiced in Brazil.

Keywords
Christology. Just war. Narcoreligion. Necropolitics. Christian pacifism.

Resumo
É muito comum associar a ortodoxia cristã ao uso legítimo da violência para lidar com criminosos. Embora a violência tenha sido praticada por cristãos ao longo da história, Jesus Cristo viveu uma vida não violenta. Em um contexto em que a violência urbana está ligada à pobreza e desigualdade históricas, a religiosidade continua sendo um componente essencial nas narrativas que sustentam as disputas de poder nas favelas brasileiras. Este artigo apresenta o contexto histórico da formação das favelas e como a religiosidade esteve e continua presente no discurso de lideranças do tráfico de drogas no Brasil, buscando um diálogo entre a violência justificada religiosamente nas favelas e a história do cristianismo. Este artigo encontra vozes importantes, incluindo Agostinho, Tomás de Aquino, Lutero, Calvino, C.S. Lewis e John Stott, como defensores do uso da violência com base na doutrina cristã. A violência teologicamente justificada é exemplificada principalmente pela teoria da guerra justa. Após apresentar o contexto histórico da religiosidade nas favelas e a formação da teoria da guerra justa, este artigo apresenta o pacifismo cristão como um modelo de fidelidade encarnado em Jesus. Esse modelo é persistente e consistentemente marginalizado desde os tempos de Cristo. Este artigo apresenta o pacifismo cristão como proposta contracultural à necropolítica praticada no Brasil.

Palavras-chave
Cristologia. Guerra justa. Narcorreligião. Necropolítica. Pacifismo cristão.

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INTRODUCTION

While working as a resident in family medicine in the interior of Brazil, I was surprised by the predominant demand of mental disorders among my patients. A biggest surprise was seeing that more than mental distress for economic reasons, I was immersed in a scenario where violence and a sense of continuous risk of dying was present. Killing was consequence of greed, but also part of the worldview of leaders of gangs and government that believed that violence is the solution to the promotion of wellbeing of our communities. More recently, political ideology is using religious discourse to defend the institutional use of violence.

This paper defends Christian pacifism as the most faithful way to live out Christian discipleship in the violent context of slums in Brazil. I assume that life in Christ is not an abstraction. Bonhoeffer said, "life is not a thing, an essence, or a concept" (Bonhoeffer, 2005, p. 249), but a person.[2] This paper defends Christian pacifism as a hopeful response that embodies God's merciful justice within Christian communities living in violent contexts. It also challenges Christian thinking about using institutional power (just war theory) and its argument about realism as the only way to promote justice and overcome conflicts in a fallen world.

The dialogue between the just war theory and Christian pacifism is an effort to listen to every human being (Moyse, 2021, p. 159). When clear divergence happens, we are called to tell the truth in love with humility and patience. This dialogue is not exclusively for Christians. However, Hauerwas reminds us of the Church's unique role in sharing what we believe is true about salvation, which, in his words, is "God's work to restore all creation to the Lordship of Christ" (Hauerwas, 1999, p. 37). This is a hopeful paper because we believe the whole creation will gather in the end under the sovereign of Christ.

This paper has three sections that pay attention to three different voices. The first section attempts to listen to Brazilian *favelas* (slums) its context marked by *necropolitical* and *narcoreligious* forces within them. The second section hears some principles and voices of the *just war* tradition. The third section hears *Christian pacifism* and its arguments against the just war tradition. It presents a constructive christological path at the crossroads between narcoreligion and necropolitics in Brazil, with some real examples of people who are living this.

1 FIRST VOICE: NECROPOLITICS AND NARCORELIGION IN THE BRAZILIAN FAVELAS

Before knowing the current situation in Brazilian slums, it is necessary to understand the genesis of *favelas. Favelas* are marginalized communities in Brazil that reflect our deep inequalities. The *Morro da Favela* (in English, Favela's Hill) received its name in 1897 because of a plant that veterans saw on the battlefield of one of the bloodiest Brazilian civil wars and on

[2] In the same section, he said, "our action springs from the life in Christ".

the hill where they settled in Rio de Janeiro (Almeida, 1998).[3] *Favela* was present in the *Morro da Providencia* (Providence Hill) in Rio de Janeiro and in the countryside of northeastern Brazil, where the soldiers had killed the *rebels* under the leadership of a mystic Christian leader called Antonio Conselheiro (Alves, 2023, p. 40). Conselheiro was starting an alternative community inspired by the Book of Acts.

Favela's hill homed frustrated soldiers who faced unfulfilled promises of land after the victory of the *Canudos War.* They decided to live in illegal settlements alongside ex-slaves and poor immigrants who could not afford housing in organized neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro (Pereira, 2023). *Favela* became a synonym for poor and informal neighbourhoods in Brazil. They face "*chronic shocks*, or constantly recurring disasters, such as floods, severe illness, or violent police invasions" (Fahlberg et al., 2020). The shocks intensify as the police, in *pacifying* missions, kill many civilians (Barros, 2021; Miranda; Cabral Junior, 2021).[4]

The conflict between different gangs is the justification for the police invasion. But this violent approach from a neglecting state is, according to Barros, an expression of *necropolitics* (Mbembe, 2016). Necropolitics, according to Achilles Mbembe, uses weapons to cause maximum destruction of people and to create *deathworlds.* These *deathworlds* are "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 146).

The abandoned *favelas* received drug gang leaders in the 1980s and 1990s as they were joining the emerging global drug business. Fahlberg et al. (2020, p. 2) explain that favelas are the most appropriate place for drug dealers to operate with "little state intervention". They recruited vulnerable residents, providing economic and social growth and killed those who spoke out against their activities. The police reacted with a "militarized approach, including lethal invasions" (Fahlberg et al., 2020, p. 2).

Brazilian *favelas* are examples of what Mbembe describes as states that do not have the monopoly of the forces to subjugate life and claim the power to kill (death's power) (Mbembe, 2016, p. 139).[5] The drug gang confronts the police and rival gangs to stay in control of the favela. Gangs use their weapons to establish a parallel law and order in several *favelas*. Maldonado and Beraldo wrote about the origin of the current gangs, where hyper-incarceration served as a "fuel for the constitution of criminal groups". New gangs then emerged as a form of "self-protection among prisoners in a context of constant human rights violations" (Maldonado; Beraldo, 2024, p. 37). Unfortunately, the *necropolitics* of the prison system did not provoke alternatives that are much less violent, including in some religious expressions.

[3] Almeida argues that, in the Canudos War, the official reports tried to silence the losers and eliminate their stories. Still, the photographs could not omit the brutality of the state against children and women.
[4] The second study shows that one-third of people who were killed in the state of Goias in the center of Brazil were killed by a policeman.
[5] I am making here an association of territory occupation in *favelas* by the police or by drug dealers as an example of what Mbembe describes as an act of Sovereignty which "relegates the colonized to a third zone, between the status of subject and object".

Besides the emergence of more rigorous moral values among gang leaders, another phenomenon has been happening in the last 20 years: the growth of Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism as the new *narcoreligion* in Brazilian *favelas* (Poggi, 2021; Costa, 2023; Cunha, 2014). Viviane Costa perceived a correlation in the narcoreligion between the "conquering of territories and religious symbols, which creates a narrative of a war between gods" (Costa, 2023, p. 23-24). Costa describes a "theology of domain" with a dualist tone reflecting gangs` disputes for lives and territories.

The inclusion of biblical texts in the billboards of the *Favela do Acari* is sponsored by the same group of traffickers that are destroying religious symbols related to other religions of different criminal groups. They also destroyed an icon of the local Catholic patron of warriors (São Jorge/St. George) and worship spaces of African-Brazilian religions, like Umbanda and Candomblé *terreiros* (Costa, 2020). These violent acts are framed within the proclaimed desire to bring prosperity to communities after overcoming the command of non-evangelical leaders. In this sense, there is a religious and moral justification for destruction. This integration of political power with a religious justification for conflict is present in the *just war theory,* which is the theme of the next section (Costa, 2023, p. 121-122).[6]

2 SECOND VOICE: VIOLENCE AND JUST WAR IN BRAZILIAN FAVELAS

According to Patterson, just war theory started with Augustine and was structured in medieval times by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) (Patterson, 2023, p. 46). Aquinas was responsible for setting the principles of just war that are followed by Christians and by the United Nations to this day. To be just, a war necessarily has the legitimacy of the authority that is responsible for the commonwealth of a people and has exclusive use of force; a just cause for the attack as the fault of the wrongdoers who need to be punished; and the intention to fight must not be greed or vengeance, but the advancement of good and the avoidance of evil (Patterson, 2023, p. 47-48).

Like the people in Brazilian favelas today, Aquinas lived during many conflicts in the late medieval years, and it might have affected his perception of the reality about who deserves to be punished and who does not. Aquinas relied on local authorities as legitimate and with good intentions, and the same might happen in *favelas* today. His ideas supported the European crusades as a legitimate counterattack against Muslims. To Aquinas, Christian leaders must provide "order, justice, and peace". To reach those goals, he agreed to force to "deter, punish, or protect" (Patterson, 2023, p. 46-49).

[6] Costa describes how *Peixão (Big Fish)* is planning to "kill his enemies" to conquer new territories and "make a difference" in the life of youth. Costa also shos how Peixão speaks against *favela* indwellers robbing old women or becoming users of crack (he is concerned with the damage to the health of the next generation). *Peixão* also said he wants to "teach a new doctrine" and his gang as the "Army of the Living God, from Israel."

Luther and Calvin adopted a similar biblical interpretation of the role of force by the government, echoing Aquinas and Augustine (Calvin, 2017).[7] They followed Augustine in not applying Jesus' teachings from the sermon on the mount to the state's role in promoting justice. Calvin defended moderation as a key concept, based on the precepts "truly expounded by Augustine, as tending to prepare the just and pious man patiently to sustain the malice of those he desires to become good" (Calvin, 2017). More specifically, to Calvin, moderation is important for Christians and

> will not prevent them, with entire friendship for their enemies, from using the aid of the magistrate for the preservation of their goods, or, from zeal for the public interest, to call for the punishment of the wicked and pestilential man, whom they know nothing will reform but death (Calvin, 2017, p. 982).

According to these theologians, Romans 13 should be interpreted as imperative instead of descriptive, and the sword is not only a symbol of authority but a tool to reform "the wicked and pestilential man" (Calvin, 2017, p. 982). Stott, an influential pastor for Brazilian Evangelicals, also interpreted the use of force by the government as part of the government's call to act as "servants of God" (Stott, 1985, p. 110).[8]

Just war is skeptical about the capacity and effectiveness of pacifism and nonviolence. Reinhold Niebuhr, during World War II and Paul Ramsey during the Cold War, resisted pacifism as they called leaders for active use of weapons based on a necessary *realism* (Patterson, 2023, p. 57,63). Oliver O'Donovan remembers how this tradition was rooted in medieval concepts of soldiers and judges pictured with the same holiness as hermits (O´Donovan, 2003, p. 1).[9] This romanticized military force is still present in Brazilian political discourse. According to Cunha, the former president, Jair Bolsonaro, uses Christian eschatology and mosaic laws in his discourses. Bolsonaro adopted "images of force and order calling for the recovery of a mythical Israel present" (Cunha, 2023, p. 304).

Another influential voice that rejected Christian pacifism and supported just war theory is C.S. Lewis. Lewis, like Stott, is very influential among Brazilian Evangelicals. He fought in the First World War and was important in broadcasting messages of hope during the Second World War. He defended the war with three points: reason (facts, intuition, and logic), history, and trust in authorities. He considered the voice of the government and historical example of positive results like the defeating of the nazis, alongside the mainstream's interpretation of Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2,14, as decisive to reject pacifism. But his rejection is not absolute, as

[7] This chapter discusses how Romans 13 informs the Christians' duty to respect the magistrates' role of punishing the "wicked" and resisting tyranny.

[8] Stott raises the point that nonviolence is unrealistic, in the same way, Niebuhr and Ramsey will say. He points out that the teaching of Jesus was not contradictory to the teaching of Paul because the teaching of Jesus was not applied to politics and states, only to interpersonal relationships.

[9] O'Donovan refers to the *Ghent* Altarpiece as an illustration of soldiers and judges as legitimate and honoured pieces of the worshippers of the land, at the same level as saints and pilgrims. He mentions "romanticized Christian Knights" as one of the "great achievements of the late medieval times".

he said "it may be, after all, that pacifism is right. But it seems to me very long odds, longer odds than I would care to take with the voice of almost all humanity against me" (Lewis, 2001, p. 53).[10]

The last voice in academic theology who is a leader in supporting just war theory is Nigel Biggar, from Oxford University. Biggar reminds us that we need to keep the common good as a priority over our individual interests in our decisions about how to proceed when a violation of our innate dignity happens. He uses Aquinas to affirm that the dignity of every human being as the image of God is attached to the vocation of every human being to the common good. He states that for Aquinas, just war is justified when human beings lose their primary vocation. Augustine also encouraged the punishment for those, in Biggar's words, who are *culpable wrongdoers* (Biggar, 2014, p. 4-5). These patristic and medieval arguments direct Biggar to adopt a realism aligned with Calvin, Luther, Niebuhr, Ramsey, Lewis, and Stott.

Just war theory in Brazilian narcoreligion is not a category adopted in academic papers about the war in our *favelas.* However, this theory might be underneath the absence of criticism in a religious environment where violence is denounced as normalized. Both the police and gangs assume violence as the only way to live faithfully a responsible way of leading when they are people in power. Different interests support the effort to conquer the *favela,* but the means to impose authority is the same: through an ethos of war. The gangs consider themselves legitimate power and use the ethos of the wars of the Old Testament to justify their conquest of territory (Zaremba, 2023). In the same way, the Brazilian police occupied *favelas* by killing and arresting drug dealers and destroying religious symbols considered heterodox (Miranda et al., 2022, p. 652).[11]

The authority of Scripture also justifies violence in some contexts of Brazilian Pentecostalism. Drug dealers justify wars using biblical texts without considering any authority of Augustine, Aquinas, or the pioneers of the Protestant Reformation. Nevertheless, Zaremba describes the *favela* spirituality of drug dealers as influenced by the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. Zaremba describes how some Evangelical traffickers "make sense of their experience and perpetuate storylines they pick up on, adapting them on the process" (Zaremba, 2023, p. 96). Where they read the Bible by themselves and make their own conclusions.

One pattern common to the new narcoreligion and the traditional just war tradition is the avoidance of a canonical interpretation of Scriptures, including the lack of conversation with Jesus' teaching, life, and death, with a preference for prooftexts to support theologically informed *necropolitics.* Although the voices that support just wars are powerful and loud, I will finish this paper with a voice that is marginalized but present throughout the entire history of Christianity and Judaism (Long, 2011).[12]

[10] After summarizing his arguments, Lewis is honest about his uncertainty (2001, p. 53).
[11] The police action included destroying sanctuaries and symbols of Catholicism and Candomblé (a synthesis of religions with elements of traditional African religions and Roman Catholicism).
[12] Long presents samples of discourses in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, patristic times, the medieval age, and modern and contemporary theologians to reveal that Christian pacifism is not an

3 THIRD VOICE: CHRISTIAN PACIFISM AND THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PATH IN BRAZILIAN FAVELAS

The servants of God are seen as the devil by mothers of victims of police violence in Rio. Costa describes the cry of a mother: her son was a teenager who was killed *accidentally* during a police invasion. "The State, it comes to kill, to steal, and to destroy. This is what they are doing for us" (Costa, 2023, p. 87). Hauerwas points out that violence is divergent from the Christian faith. The church, he says, "does not seek to rule through violence, though it necessarily manifests God's rule", and it "triumphs by remembering the victory of the Lamb through the witness of the martyrs" (Hauerwas, 1999, p. 38).

The Church, when she has Jesus as the king in the Kingdom of God, denies the lordship of Caesar or any other earthily power. When she confess the lordship of Christ, she is rejecting violence as a way of rule, at least it is what the Christian pacifists did throughout the history. Our lives will be led by anxiety for control and self-centered pursuit of pleasures if we do not love God above all things and our neighbours as ourselves as the absolute value of our lives. This is what Hauerwas argues when he says Christians need to remember Augustine's rejection of the values of the Empire, but even Augustine did not remember this true consistently. The Empire's absence of love for God, including in the ecclesiastical empires, led it to its ambition for power and playfulness because there was "literally nothing for which it is worth dying" (Hauerwas, 1999, p. 44). In the same direction, Bonhoeffer, a martyr against the nazi regime during the Second World War, denounced the risk of following cultural values instead of relationships. He mentions the risk of "idolizing values and sacrificing people" (Bonhoeffer, 2005, p. 259).

The neglect of Jesus's teachings to interpret other New Testament texts compromises Christian discipleship. Clough points out that relativizing Jesus's teaching on the sermon on the mount demoralizes and separates the church in the 21st century from the Church in the first century. To him, we are part of the same group that lives between Christ's resurrection and his return (Clough, 2009, p. 209). He defends that Christians should keep the commandments of Jesus to avoid similar mistakes of former generations that supported things that we now regret. To him, the life, death and teaching of Jesus were the supreme authority and examples of non-violence (Clough, 2009, p. 210).

Hauerwas and Wells point to how pacifism is a response that trusts Christ's sacrifice as the ultimate sacrifice, and Christians need to be patient because Jesus Christ made the last sacrifice (Hauerwas; Wells, 2011, p. 223). He argues that if we receive salvation in the life,

innovation but does have a long and consistent tradition. He includes Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Basil of Caesaria, Pelagius, Benedict of Nursia, Peter Damian, Francis of Assisi, Erasmus, Menno Simons, Bartolome de Las Casas, William Penn, Charles Spurgeon, Dwight L. Moody, Leo Tolstoy, Howard Thurman, Dorothy Day, Desmond Tutu, pope John XXIII, Thomas Merton, Cesar Chavez, Jacques Ellul, dom Hélder Câmara, Oscar Romero, Ronald Sider, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, Glen Stassen, Miroslav Volf, Richard Hays, and many other names in the list of advocates for an alternative approach of Christians, resisting violence as the only way to respond to evil.

death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as celebrated in the eucharist, we need to avoid other narratives of salvation based on ideas of just war and crusades. To Hauerwas, there is no longer a sacrifice to be exercised by killing others. Instead, Jesus sacrificed for the faith by dying, not killing. Therefore, Hauerwas denounces the war as a false liturgy because the liturgy celebrated on the table is where we receive God's life; it is the true response to the world's injustices (Hauerwas; Wells, 2011, p. 225). This reframe helps us not to look at stories of killers; we need to look at the story of the Christ who died for us and other people's living sacrifices on the margins of the world.

When C. S. Lewis looked at history, he probably did not see it as Yoder did. For Yoder, the conquerors, the army, and the gangs are not the main history-makers. He says:

> instead of interpreting with ever-greater finesse the documents produced by literate minorities, we will ask how illiterate sages communicated to their grandchildren the historical depth of their culture. We may find that water tables, or the level of infestation by rats, or mutations in epidemic-causing microbes, or the discovery by some blacksmith of a new way to sharpen a pruning tool would make more difference to the quality of ordinary human existence than did the conflicts which ruling house was collecting the taxes (Yoder, 2010, p. 68).

What can make a difference in very violent communities in Brazil is not more violence. According to Hauerwas, Clough, and Yoder, it is the opposite. Some people have the courage to stand at the intersection, at the crossroads between narcoreligion and necropolitics, and they do not embrace any of those ideologies. It is a narrow path requiring faith, hope, and love. I want to show three cases.

Two people were presented in the intersection between "the law of God, the law of the State, and the law of crime" by Maldonado and Beraldo (2024, p. 34). One mother buried two men who died in battles among gangs. Now, she has become the leader of an organization that advocates for human rights among prison indwellers in Brazil. In the same paper, Maldonado and Beraldo tell the story of an ex-drug dealer who became a pastor and now is a peacemaker, working for the government and educating youth to pursue alternative lives. They became advocate and empowering agents for people that experience imprisonment and grief in context of conflict and hopelessness.

The final example is Antonio Costa, a Presbyterian pastor who founded *Rio de Paz* (River of Peace). He is respected for his active pacifism, advocating for black lives killed in the drug wars. He was invited to help in a judgement in a *favela,* to help a drug dealer who was the judge of a case of indebtment. He helped the gang leader exercise mercy and promote reconciliation among *favela* indwellers (Costa, 2015, p. 164).

These are people who stand on the crossroad of powers. They proclaim the cross of Jesus, which Rowan Williams presented as "always both ours and not ours; not a magnified sign of our own suffering, but the mark of God's work in and through the deepest vulnerability; not a

martyr's triumphant achievement, but something that is there for all human sufferers because it belongs to no human cause" (Williams, 2002, p. 73). Only the cross of Jesus declares God's condemnation and salvation to all human sufferers, and our call is to walk through this narrow path, proclaiming and practicing mercy for all. Instead of attaching our decisions to abstract rules of law and order, we need to consider compassionately the people that we encounter on the path of life.

CONSIDERAÇÕES FINAIS

Like the Samaritan, in the parable that Jesus told in the gospel of Luke, chapter 10, our call is not only following our liturgical duties, but paying attention to the suffering of real people who surround us. The negligence of the levite and the priest in the parable might be comparable to the negligence of many Evangelical and Catholic pastors and leaders in Brazil. Unfortunately, I believe that we are doing even worse, while the cross of Jesus was God's way to suffer for the sinners, we are acting as judges of the world and promoting the same kind of violence that killed our Lord and kept killing Jewish people and other religious minorities in the history of Christendom. Thankfully, the final message of Jesus is that we are forgiven, and we are called to repentance and believe in him and his words of life and reconciliation.

This paper is a call for repentance and spiritual renewal that goes beyond the boundaries of our prayer rooms and places of public worship. It is a call to listen to the words and to see the works of our lord Jesus Christ. The same spirit that operated in him to make him a peacemaker is available for everybody who repents and accepts his forgiveness. As the gospel of John reveals in the post-resurrection conversation. The call for the community that receives the Holy Spirit is to forgive people, not to block people's access to the love and forgiveness of God. May God have mercy on us and transform us by the power of his spirit, to the glory of his name.

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