

Can War Be Just?

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Once again, the prospects of war cause Christians to look beyond their own reasoning for answers.

As the leaders of our nation, as well as those of other countries, seemingly lay the groundwork for possible war with Iraq, thoughtful Christians are again turning their attention to the issue of war and peace as a theological matter in its widest sense and not merely as a political issue or a concern of only statesmen, diplomats, soldiers and sociologists.

Two historical extremes

The just-war tradition has commonly been distinguished from two other ethical options espoused by individual Christians. The first is pacifism; the second is the "crusade."

Pacifism has a long history in Christian thought. Pacifists are convinced that Christ condemned all forms of violence. Appeal is made to such Biblical passages as Matt 26:52 ("All who draw the sword will die by the sword"); Matt 6:89 ("If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also"); and Luke 6:27 ("Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you"), in which Jesus commands meekness and peace-making. Thus, argues the pacifist, if true followers of Christ are genuinely called to imitate their Master and follow His example, they cannot sanction military service as a combatant.

Some historians contend that pacifism was the universal position held in the Christian church during its first 150 years of existence. For example, the second-century apologist Justin Martyr said that Christians would gladly die for a righteous cause but would refrain from making war on their enemies.

During the Middle Ages, absolute pacifism as the genuine practice of the Gospel was championed by various sectarian groups. It eventually culminated in the so-called "radical reformation" of the Anabaptists in the 18th century. The Anabaptists repudiated *all* forms of political or secular activity as intrinsically contrary to the Gospel. They believed that the church should be a disciplined community in direct reliance on the Holy Spirit. The ethic of nonviolence was an integral part of their confession of faith. The "peace churches," such as the Quakers and Mennonites, continue to hold this view.

The crusade idea also has its roots in Christian history, especially in the crusade movements of the 11th and 12th centuries. The crusade is war on God's behalf, or "holy war." As do the pacifists, supporters of this view appeal to the Bible, primarily the Old Testament record of God's people at war - such episodes as the inhabitants of Canaan being exterminated to make way for the possession of their land, or Joshua meeting a stranger with a drawn sword before the walls of Jericho.

While developments in international law and historic political judgment have also contributed to the evolution of the just war theory, in specifically Christian usage this position is as old as the fourth century when St. Augustine formulated it. He amalgamated the Greek and Roman teachings of Plato (who discussed the "rules of war") and Cicero (who connected war with moral law) with an interpretation of Scripture. His concepts are, by and large, those that have served large segments of Christendom to this day in discussing the justice of participating in warfare.

The foundation for his view was the condition of fallen humanity. War was both a consequence of sin and a remedy for it. Although Augustine acknowledged that sin originated in the corrupt will of people rather than in their actions, when the evil will led to sinful acts, war provided a punishment.

This general notion led Augustine to posit a series of specific points that became part and parcel of just-war thinking: war was to be waged in order that peace might prevail. A good ruler will not initiate wars of aggression or conquest. No wanton violence or massacre should be committed. A war must be undertaken under proper authority.

The next notable contribution to the Christian just-war tradition came from Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. He followed the path of Augustine to a great extent, but also extended the discussion to include the legitimacy of revolt against tyrannical government. If a tyrant violates the natural law on which authority rests, it is legitimate for those next in authority to use force against the tyrant for the common good.

Lutheran view

The "just war" position is Protestant as well as Roman Catholic. It is inconceivable that Martin Luther did not know it or that he was not affected by it. Moreover, the concept is prominent in the writings of 17th-century orthodox Lutheran fathers such as Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard.

While the Lutheran confessional writings do not treat the subject of war at length, they do contain significant references to it (for example, in Luther's commentary on the Lord's Prayer in the *Large Catechism*, in Article 21 of the *Augsburg Confession*, and in Article 4 of *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*).

Most important, perhaps, is the specific reference to just wars in Article 16 of the *Augsburg Confession*: "Christians may without sin ... engage in just wars, serve as soldiers." Lutheranism inherited the just-war doctrine. For Lutherans, of course, its theological foundation lies in the analysis of the Christian's life in "two kingdoms." This teaching was based on the tension between Christ's rejection of violence in the Sermon on the Mount and those passages in Scripture that admonished obedience to secular governments ([Rom. 13:1 - 2](#); [1 Peter 2:13 - 14](#)).

For Luther, God ordained the *spiritual kingdom* by which the Holy Spirit produces righteous people under Christ, and He also ordained the *temporal kingdom* by which

wicked are restrained and outward peace maintained. "No Christian," Luther wrote, "shall wield or invoke the sword for himself and his cause. On behalf of another, however, he may and should wield it and invoke it to restrain wickedness. ..."

Ethical framework

The cumulative effect of Christian thinking on the just war throughout the centuries has been the formulation of specific criteria for the application of justice to warfare. The precise list of these criteria vary, but in its most essential form, the classical just-war doctrine involves seven points which can be grouped into two categories - one governing the choice to go to war and the other governing proper actions during war. The criteria relating to the justification for going to war are:

Just cause. The right to self-defense against an aggressor has consistently been regarded as fundamental. Only defensive war is legitimate.

Last resort. War may be waged only when all negotiations and compromise have been attempted and have failed. In his "Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount," Luther remarks that "anyone who claims to be a Christian and a child of God, not only does not start war or unrest; also he gives help and counsel on the side of peace wherever he can, even though there be a just and adequate cause for going to war."

Formal declaration. Since the use of military force is the prerogative of government and not of private individuals, properly constituted procedure for declaring and waging war must be followed. As Thomas Aquinas commented, it is not the business of a private individual to declare war ... as the care of the common weal is committed to those who are in authority."

Just Intention. War must be carried out to secure a just peace, not for territorial conquest, economic gain, or ideological supremacy. The only legitimate intention of war is to secure peace.

The criteria relating to just conduct in the midst of war are:

The principle of proportionality. The weaponry and force used should be limited to what is needed to secure a just peace and attain better conditions after the conflict than existed prior to it. (The Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard took up the question of the use of cannon balls and said that they should not be approved because of the extensive damage they cause.)

The principle of discrimination. Since war is an official act of government, noncombatants and civilians should be immune from attack.

The principle of limited objectives. Since the purpose of a just war must ultimately be peace, unconditional surrender or the complete obliteration of the social or political institutions of a nation is unwarranted.

Today's questions

What does it mean to have a just war in an era of "weapons of mass destruction"? Can a nuclear war be a just war?

Weapons of mass destruction have reversed the customary procedure for deliberating the justifiability of war. Traditionally, one began with the just cause, then proceeded to the other criteria of the just war theory, such as just means. The prospect of weapons of mass destruction has drawn the means of war into the forefront. If nuclear or biological or chemical warfare cannot fit the just war criteria of just means, then the justifiability of *any* war with such weapons is called into serious question.

Finally, current discussions of an unprovoked "first strike" against another country challenge the application of the historic just-war doctrine. In recent weeks, one group of American Roman Catholic bishops expressed to President George Bush serious reservations about the ethical legitimacy of preemptive use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq. At the same time "conservative, evangelical" Christian leaders issued a statement that a first strike against Iraq was consistent with the "time-honored" criteria for just war.

Is severely menacing behavior acceptable as a legitimate basis for initiating an act of self defense?

As challenging and complicated as such questions may be for the Christian today, one thing is clear. Never is the issue whether war is good or not! The issue is whether war is in all cases entirely avoidable.

In his "Instructions of the Visitors" in 1528, Martin Luther called for the twice-ringing of the church bells to be retained. The people are to be instructed that it is not done to tell the time of the morning or the time when workers in the fields are to go home at night. Rather, said Luther, "the ringing of the bells is done as an exhortation to intercession, particularly for peace." The people are to be instructed in what a wonderful and precious thing peace is. "The orderly process of the law, all discipline, and the service of God perish in time of war. For that reason we should plead with God daily not to punish us with the scourge of war."

Even the realism of the Christian just-war tradition does not diminish for us the fervency of that petition.

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Romans 13:1 - 2 - Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

1 Peter 2:13 - 14 - Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.
