The Just War Tradition in the Present Crisis

Is it ever right to go to war? Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese provides understanding of just war tradition from a biblical perspective.

Searching for Answers

Recent events have prompted Christians to ask moral questions concerning the legitimacy of war. How far should we go in punishing evil? Can torture ever be justified? On what basis are these actions premised? These problems remain especially acute for those who claim the Christian faith. Fortunately, we are not the first generation to face these questions. The use of force and violence has always troubled the Christian conscience. Jesus Christ gave his life freely without resisting. But does Christ's nonviolent approach deny government the prerogative to maintain order and establish peace through some measure of force? All government action operates on the premise of force. To deny all force, to be a dedicated pacifist, leads no less to a condition of anarchy than if one were a religious fascist. Extremes have the tendency to meet. In the past, Christians attempted to negotiate through the extremes and seek a limited and prescribed use of force in what has been called the Just War Tradition.



The Just War Tradition finds its source in several streams of Western thought: biblical teaching, law, theology, philosophy, military strategy, and common sense. Just War thinking integrates this wide variety of thought through

providing Christians with a general orientation on the issues of war and peace. This tradition transcends denominational barriers and attempts to supply workable answers and solutions to very difficult moral problems. Just War has its origins in Greco-Roman thinking as well as Christian theology: Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin have all contributed to its development.{1}

Just War thinking does not provide sure-fire ways of fighting guilt-free wars, or offer blanket acceptance of government action. It often condemns acts of war as well as condones. Just War presents critical criteria malleable enough to address a wide assortment of circumstances. It does not give easy answers to difficult questions; instead, it provides a broad moral consensus concerning problems of justifying and controlling war. It presents a living tradition that furnishes a stock of wisdom consisting of doctrines, theories, and philosophies. Mechanical application in following Just War teachings cannot replace critical thinking, genius, and moral circumspection in ever changing circumstances. Just War attempts to approximate justice in the temporal realm in order to achieve a temporal but lasting peace. It does not make pretensions in claiming infinite or absolute justice, which remain ephemeral and unattainable goals. Only God provides infinite justice and judgment in eternity through his own means. "'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Deut. 32:35; Heb. 10:30).

The Clash of Civilizations

To apply Just War criteria we must first have a reasonable assessment of current circumstances. The Cold War era witnessed a bipolar world consisting of two colossal opponents. The end of the Cold War has brought the demise of strict ideological battles and has propelled the advent of cultural divisions in a multi-polar world. Present and future conflicts exist across cultural lines. The "Clash of

Civilizations" paradigm replaces the old model of East vs. West.{2} People are more inclined to identify with their religious and ethnic heritage than the old ideology. The West has emerged as the global leader, leaving the rest of the world to struggle either to free itself from the West or to catch it economically and technologically. The triumph of the West—or modernized, secular, and materialist society—has created a backlash in Islamic Fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism does not represent ancient living traditions but a modern recreation of ancient beliefs with a particular emphasis on political conquest. Fundamentalists do not hesitate to enter into battle or holy war (jihad) with the enemies of God at a political and military level. The tragic events of 9/11 and the continual struggle against terrorism traces back to the hostility Islamic fundamentalists feel towards the triumph of the West. They perceive Western global hegemony [ed. note: leadership or predominant influence] as a threat and challenge to their religious beliefs and traditions, as most Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals feel threatened by the invincible advance of modern secular society. The error of fundamentalism lies in thinking it can recreate the past and enforce those beliefs and conditions on the modern world. Coercion remains at the heart of fundamentalist practice, constituting a threat potentially worse than modern secular society.

This cultural divide causes Christians to reconsider the basis of warfare premised on the responsibilities of the state to defend civil society against the encroachments of religious extremism that fights in the name of God and for a holy cause or crusade.

This may sound strange at first to theological ears, but an absolute principle of Just War states that Christians never fight for "God and Country," but only for "Country." There is only a secular and civil but necessary task to be accomplished in war, never a higher mandate to inaugurate God's kingdom. In

this sense Just War thinking attempts to secularize war by which it hopes to limit its horrendous effects.

Holy War or Just War

An essential distinction divides Just War from holy war. Just War does not claim to fight in the name of God or even for eternal causes. It strictly concerns temporal and political reasons. Roland Bainton sums up this position: “War is more humane when God is left out of it.”{3} This does not embrace atheism but a Christian recognition concerning the value, place, and responsibilities of government. The state is not God or absolute, but plays a vital role in maintaining order and peace (Matt. 22:21). The Epistles repeat this sentiment (Rom.13; 1 Peter 2: 13-17; 1 Tim.2; Titus 3:1). Government does not act as the organ or defender through which God establishes his kingdom (John 18: 36).

Government does not have the authority to enforce God’s will on unwilling subjects except within a prescribed and restricted civil realm that maintains the minimum civil order for the purpose of peace. Government protects the good and punishes the evil. Government serves strictly temporal purposes “in order that we may lead a tranquil and quite life in all godliness and dignity” (2 Tim. 2:2). God establishes civil authorities for humanity’s sake, not his own. Therefore, holy war that claims to fight in the name of God and for eternal truths constitutes demonic corruption of divinely sanctioned civil authority.

The following distinctions separate holy war and Just War beliefs. Holy war fights for divine causes in Crusades and Jihads to punish infidels and heretics and promote a particular faith; Just War fights for political causes to defend liberty and religious freedom. Holy war fights by divine command issuing from clerics and religious leaders; Just War fights through moral sanction. Holy war employs a

heavenly mandate, Just War a state mandate. Holy war is unlimited or total; anything goes, and the enemy must be eradicated in genocide or brought to submission. The Holy War slogan is “kill ’em all and let God sort them out!” Holy war accepts one group’s claim to absolute justice and goodness, which causes them to regard the other as absolutely evil. Just War practices limited war; it seeks to achieve limited temporal objectives and uses only necessary force to accomplish its task. Just War rejects genocide as a legitimate goal. Holy war fights out of unconditional obedience to faith. Just War fights out of obedience to the state, which is never incontestable. Holy war fights offensive wars of conquest; Just War fights defensive wars, generally responding to provocation. Holy war battles for God to enforce belief and compel submission. Just War defends humanity in protecting civil society, which despite its transitory and mundane role in the eternal scheme of things plays an essential part in preserving humanity from barbarism and allows for everything else in history to exist.

Why Go to War?

Just War thinking uses two major categories to measure the legitimacy of war. The first is called *jus ad bellum* [Latin for “justice to war”]: the proper recourse to war or judging the reasons for war. This category asks questions to be answered before going to war. It has three major criteria: just authority, just cause, and just intent.

Just authority serves as the presupposition for the rest of the criteria. It requires that only recognized state authorities use force to punish evil (Rom. 13:4; 1 Pet. 2). Just War thinking does not validate individual actions against opponents, which would be terrorism, nor does it allow for paramilitary groups to take matters in their own hands. Just authority requires a formal declaration. War must be declared by a legitimate governmental authority. In the USA, Congress

holds the right of formal declaration, but the President executes the war. Congressional authorization in the last sixty years has substituted for formal declaration.

Just cause is the most difficult standard to determine in a pluralistic society. Whose justice do we serve? Just War asserts the notion of comparative or limited justice. No one party has claim to absolute justice; there exists either more or less just cause on each side. Therefore, Just War thinking maintains the right to dissent. Those who believe a war immoral must not be compelled against their wills to participate. Just War thinking recognizes individual conscientious objection.

Just cause breaks down to four other considerations. First, it requires that the state *perform all its duties*. Its first duty requires self-defense and defense of the innocent. A second duty entails recovery of lost land or property, and the third is to punish criminals and evil doers.

Second, just cause requires *proportionality*. This means that the positive results of war must outweigh its probable destructive effects. The force applied should not create greater evil than that resisted.

Third, one judges the *probability of success*. It asks, is the war winnable? Some expectation of reasonable success should exist before engaging in war. Open-ended campaigns are suspect. Clear objectives and goals must be outlined from the beginning. Warfare in the latter twentieth century abandoned objectives in favor of police action and attrition, which leads to interminable warfare.

Fourth, *last resort* means all alternative measures for resolving conflict must be exhausted before using force. However, preemptive strikes are justified if the current climate suggests an imminent attack or invasion. Last resort does not have to wait for the opponent to draw “first blood.”

Just intent judges the motives and ends of war. It asks, why go to war? and, what is the end result? Motives must originate from love or at least some minimum concern for others with the end result of peace. This rules out all revenge. The goals of war aim at establishing peace and reconciliation.

The Means of War

The proper conduct in war or judging the means of war is *jus in bello* [Latin for "justice in war"], the second category used to measure conflict. It has two primary standards: proportionality and discrimination.

Proportionality maintains that the employed necessary force not outweigh its objectives. It measures the means according to the ends and condemns all overkill. One should not use a bomb where a bullet will do.

Discrimination basically means non-combatant immunity. A "combatant" is anyone who by reasonable standard is actively engaged in an attempt to destroy you. POW's, civilians, chaplains, medics, and children are all non-combatants and therefore exempt from targeting. Buildings such as hospitals, museums, places of worship and landmarks share the same status. However, those previously thought to be non-combatants may forfeit immunity if they participate in fighting. If a place of worship becomes a stash for weapons and a safe-house for opponents, it loses its non-combatant status.

A proper understanding of discrimination does not mean that non-combatants may never be killed, but only that they are never intentionally targeted. The tragic reality of every war is that non-combatants will be killed. Discrimination attempts to minimize these incidents so they become the exception rather than the rule.

Killing innocent lives in war may be justified under the principle of *double effect*. This rule allows for the death of

non-combatants if they were unintended and accidental. Their deaths equal the collateral effects of just intent. Double effect states that each action has more than one effect, even though only one effect was intentional, the other accidental. Self-defense therefore intends to save one's life or that of another but has the accidental effect of the death of the third party.

The double effect principle is the most controversial aspect of the Just War criteria and will be subject to abuse. Therefore, it must adhere to its own criteria. Certain conditions apply before invoking double effect. First, the act should be good. It should qualify as a legitimate act of war. Second, a good effect must be intended. Third, the evil effect cannot act as an end in itself, and must be minimized with risk to the acting party. Lastly, the good effect always outweighs the evil effect.

Given the ferocity of war, it is understandable that many will scoff at the notion of Just War. However, Just War thinking accepts war and force as part of the human condition (Matt. 24:6) and hopes to arrive at the goal of peace through realistic yet morally appropriate methods. It does not promote war but seeks to mitigate its dreadful effects. Just War thinking morally informs Western culture to limit its acts of war and not to exploit its full technological capability, which could only result in genocide and total war.

Notes

1. The following books are helpful sources on Just War thinking: Robert G. Clouse, ed. War: Four Christian Views (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991); Paul Ramsey, War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall the Modern War be Conducted Justly? (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, "The Just War Tradition and Nuclear Weapons in the Post Cold War Era" (Master's Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1994).

2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

3. Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 49.

© 2011 Probe Ministries