

Just War Theory

The Pacifism of the Christ

Any discussion of Just war Theory within the Christian tradition, must come to terms with Jesus' words, which include,

“But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. (Matthew 5:39) and “Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. (Luke 6:29)

One must also consider Jesus' life in which he submitted to death rather than leading an armed revolution against the Roman Empire.

On the otherhand, there is Jesus' encounter with a centurion in Matthew chapter 8, in which he heals the Centurion's servant while making no direct statements against the Centurion's occupation. In fact, he says of the soldier, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.”

Early Christian Tradition

In the Book of Acts, Peter talks to a centurion who then converts to the Christian faith. Rather than condemning the man or his profession, Peter says, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.”

Furthermore, Paul in his letter to the Romans (13:3-5) seems to justify the state's use of force in saying, “For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.”

Yet as soldiers were both charged with killing others and were required to sacrifice to the emperor as a God, Christians came to see soldier as a job incompatible with faith. As Hippolytus wrote in “Apostolic Tradition” in 215, “A military man in authority must not

execute men....Nor must he take military oath. If he refuses, he shall be rejected....The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.”

Constantine at Milvian Bridge

In 312, Constantine faced an estimated 100,000 troops in Maxentius' army, with only 20,000 soldiers of his own. Yet, the emperor of a soon-to-be-united empire marched with confidence to Rome. Constantine claimed that vision assured him that he should conquer in the sign of the Christ, and his warriors carried Christ's monogram (called a Chi Rho) on their shields even though the majority of the soldiers were pagans. On October 28 of that year the opposing forces met near the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber River. Maxentius' troops were soundly defeated and their leader killed in battle. In early 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, making Christianity legal throughout the Roman Empire, it would later come to be the state religion.

This transformed Christian thought as for the first time, Christianity was the state religion of an empire with its own needs for security and a presumed obligation to protect its people. This lead to Augustine of Hippo's well thought out statement on Just War Theory.

Augustine's Just War Theory

Augustine of Hippo thought that when it came to individual self-defense, St. Augustine one's own life or property was never a justification for killing one's neighbor. Yet, he felt that a Christian state had the duty to protect its citizens. He came up with the principles of going to war as well as the principles for justice as one engaged in war:

Principles of justice of going in to war:

- Just Cause
- Just Authority
- Right Intention
- Last Resort
- Probability of Success
- Proportionality

Principles of justice of in war:

- Proportionality
- Non-Combatant Immunity

Christians from Constantine forward mostly assumed that a Christian nation had an obligation to defend itself. Just War Theory therefore was applied, not to defense of a nation under attack, but to how a nation might decide when it was justified in an act of aggression toward another nation which was not (perhaps yet) directly attacking its borders.

Later Christian Tradition

Augustine's opinions held sway, but in the 16th and 17th century, his statement of principles *in war* were amplified (particularly by Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suarez) to include violent acts done against things connected with religion (churches can be harmed only in military necessity), against people and against property. According to Vitoria and Suarez, people during war can be divided into these categories:

- direct combatants
- indirect combatants
- noncombatants
- neutral people

The killing or wounding of enemy combatants falls under the natural law idea of self-defense. The indirect killing of noncombatants or neutrals was deemed permissible if such killing is both unintentional and unavoidable. Direct killing of such people is murder, that is, when it is intentional and avoidable.

This later tradition asserted that an enemy's military property may be confiscated or destroyed at will and public, nonmilitary property may be occupied and movable goods appropriated. However, private property both movable and immovable must be respected and only taken for some necessary purpose of war.

King
of
Peace
Episcopal Church - Kingsland, Georgia

P.O. Box 2526 ☞ Kingsland, Georgia 31548 ☞ www.kingofpeace.org

Christian Ethics

Making moral choices
in the real world



A Guide to
Just War Theory