

## **Can War be Justified?**

Onward, Christian soldiers,  
Marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus  
Going on before.

Christ, the royal Master,  
Leads against the Foe;  
Forward into battle  
See His banners go!

Onward, Christian soldiers,  
Marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus  
Going on before. (1)

Onward "Christian Soldiers"? Although the phrase "Christian Soldiers" is a metaphor we must realize that for two thousand years Christians have wondered and argued about the justice of war. Should Christians participate in war? Is war a sin? War itself causes great damage, poverty, frustration, pain, suffering, and death, but Christians sing of marching off to war with the cross of Jesus before them.

### **Definition of War**

In order to justify war, we need to know what war is. According to the [Random House College Dictionary](#), war is the "state of being engaged in conflict between nations, states, or organized parties." (2) General Sherman of the American Civil War once stated, "War is hell." (3) There are various types of wars, and they range from attacks and raids to low-intensity conflicts, border skirmishes, limited wars, general wars, and nuclear wars. The two World Wars would be considered "hot war" in which sovereign states took up arms against each other and wounded or killed members from the opposing side. The Cold War is a war in which the opposing powers did not actually take up arms against each other. The powers were at war because they were in conflict and competing against one another.

### **History of War**

Conflict and violence dates back from the time of Adam and Eve to the present-day disputes in Kosovo and East Timor. The first killing occurred when Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4). From that moment onwards, war and killing became part of our sinful lives. In the Old Testament, war is mentioned over and over again, and in Revelation, it states that the world is going to end with a great battle. In ancient cultures like in Egypt and China, wars were constantly being fought over land, money, and power. Warriors were honored and even recognized for their bravery and courage.

### **The Early Church**

Members of the early church were pacifists or they believed that Christians were not to participate in any form of war or battle. These believers stressed love and charity, and they saw they could not show love by killing others. There is no evidence that a single Christian soldier served in the Roman army until the second or third century. (4) Early Christian philosophers and theologians frowned upon those that chose to join the army. Believers would not join the army because if they were to join the army, it would involve an oath of allegiance to the emperor. The early Christians were tortured and persecuted because they would not work with the Roman government. Followers thought of themselves as a new, separate group or community that only worshipped and showed allegiance to the true God. They did not mix in with others and it led to hate and mistrust from the public. The most famous Christian theologians preached against war. Origen (185-254 AD) was the most celebrated Christian writer, teacher, and theologian of

the early church. He said that Christians should not physically go to war but instead, engaged in a spiritual battle. He stated, "We do not draw the sword against any nation, and we no longer learn to fight, because we have become, thanks to Jesus, Sons of Peace." (5)

Then, in the fourth century, there was a drastic change of the view on war by Christians. When Emperor Constantine (274-367 AD) was baptized and became a Christian, he announced that Christianity was the official religion of the Roman or early Byzantine Empire. (6) Soldiers and government officials also became Christians. Soon enough, the church started to honor warriors and soldiers such as St. Martin of Tours (31-397 AD) , who was a soldier known for his kindness towards the poor, and St. John of Jerusalem (1095-1099 AD), who fought in battles and also served as a medical personnel. (7)

## **Different Views on War**

### **Pacifism**

As was mentioned earlier, pacifism is the view that Christians are called to be peacemakers, therefore, Christians should not participate in war. There are many different types of pacifism. Some are nuclear pacifists condemn the use and production of nuclear weapons. Others are maternal pacifists, and they believe that women should be opposed to force because of their roles in life. However, some are radical pacifists, and they condemn all types of warfare. (8) They believe that killing another human being is never acceptable. For it says in the Ten Commandments, "Thou shall not kill." (Ex. 20:13) Through the New Testament, Jesus was the advocate of peace. In His Sermon on the Mount he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God." (Mt. 5:9) It also says in Mat. 5:38-39, 'You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.' Jesus commanded Peter to put down his sword in Gethsemane, "For all who draw the sword will die by the sword." (Mt. 26:52) Pacifists say that Christians are to live lives that resemble Christ, and Christ wanted us to be peacemakers and go the extra mile for others. Christians should rather suffer than to make war. In Matthew 5:29 it says, "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also," and in 1 Peter 2:21 it states, " To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps." Christians are to "love our enemies" and "over come evil with good." (Lk. 6:27; Rm. 12:17) (9)

There are many modern day heroes and icons that were for peace such as Gandhi (1869-1948 AD) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968 AD) Gandhi wanted a peaceful liberation from British rule and unity among his people (Hindus and Muslims). King staged peaceful demonstrations in order to gain equal rights for whites and blacks. King believed that it took more strength to stand for love than to strike back, especially since the outcome of peace is friendship and understanding. (10)

Pacifism is an ideal stand on war, dependent on a condition when everyone on this globe takes the same stand. If every person on earth vowed to live in peace, there would be no need for war. (11) However, this utopia does not exist; therefore, pacifism is an unrealistic stand to take. If a Christian believes in pacifism, then he or she is neglecting the Old Testament. We cannot forget that war was common through out the Old Testament, and that God ordered his chosen people, the Israelites, to fight against other nations. Some theologians say that the Bible is a progression from the Old Testament and to the New Testament, and it is know as "dispensationalism." (12) When Jesus came to earth, it started a new chapter in the history of the world; therefore it is argued, the past (Old Testament) should not be regarded. The Bible speaks of war in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament, it tells us to live in love and peace among people.

In the Romans 13:1 it says, "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." If the government calls men into the army to fight and they do not fight, this would be defiance of the authority of the government. If pacifists do not take up arms, then would they defy the government? Pacifists argue that the kingdom of God is not of this world. (Jn. 18:36) Christians have citizenship in

heaven, and since the church and state belong to separate kingdoms of operation, the methods of defense and offense are different. For Christians, the church is therefore the higher authority. (13)

## **Nonresistance**

Nonresistance is the belief that Christians may only participate in war as noncombatants. Noncombatants are people who aid men that fight or take up arms in a battle, such as medical personnel and people that work in the production of weapons. Those that believe in nonresistance basically take the same stand as pacifists; however, they do acknowledge that wars took place in the Old Testament. This sounds like a good compromise between fighting in a war and avoiding it, but it also has its faults.

At times the noncombatant role in war is so similar to a combatant that it is hard to differentiate between the two. (14) For example, as a nurse in the battlefield, are you not helping a soldier who took up arms? If you do, why not take up arms yourself and fight in battle?

## **Preventive War**

Preventive war is war that is fought to stop attack or injustice before it has occurred. Many of the modern day wars would fit under this category, such as the Korean War (Conflict) and the Vietnam War. One could argue that fighting a war to prevent evil is necessary in order to bring peace. The Bible says, "Blessed are the peacemakers," and in order to bring peace there must be war.

The Crusades is the very best example of preventive wars. After the period of pacifism in the early church, their views on war changed drastically. Near the end of the Middle Ages, Pope Urban II (1040-1099 AD) ordered followers to make a Crusade to the Holy Land to reclaim Jerusalem, which was taken by the Muslims. A "crusade" is a series of wars fought for one's faith, and many of the wars in the Old Testament would be of this category. For example, God ordered the Israelites to destroy certain people and take over the Promised Land of Canaan. (15)

If God ordered the Israelites to fight, should we? There are problems with this view because by taking this view, we are forgetting the New Testament and its message of peace and love. When wars are fought before evil occurs, there could be mistakes and misunderstandings. In the Crusades, the Muslims did no provocative evil against a certain race, however, Christians of that time labeled them to be enemies. The Christians also ended up losing many men and harming others.

## **Just War Theory**

The "just war" theory is the position taken by many people today. The just war theory does not try to justify war, but it deals with the justification of how and why wars are fought. It lays down criteria for assessing whether a war is just. The just war theory is divided mainly into two parts, *jus ad bellum* (justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war). *Jus ad bellum* involves criteria that establish the right to go to war, while *jus in bello* determines criteria that is considered legitimate conduct in war. (16) The key of the just war theory is that wars must only be fought to "redress a wrong suffered" and to bring peace. (17) After centuries of thinking about this problem, the philosophers and theologians came up with a list of criteria for a just war.

### *Jus ad Bellum*

1. Just Cause. All aggression is condemned, and only defensive war is legitimate.
2. A just cause could be defined as self-defense against aggression or resistance against wrongdoing, and a just cause would include war undertaken to reestablish a social order that will promote justice and war undertaken to bring about peace. (18)
3. Just intention. The only legitimate intention is to secure peace for all involved.

4. Revenge, conquest, and economic gain are not justified as a "just intention." (19) War can only be defensive against an offensive aggression. According to the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, "Possessing good intention constitutes the only condition of moral activity, regardless of the consequences envisioned or caused, and regardless, or even in spite, of any self interest in the action the agent may have." (20) The requirement of a just intention could prevent rash initiation of war and also minimize vengeful dispositions that might prolong hostilities and fighting. As another person has observed, "A war which is otherwise just becomes immoral if it wages out of hatred. A war of self-defense becomes immoral if, in its course, it becomes an instrument of expansion. A war to vindicate justice becomes immoral if, as it goes on, it becomes a means of aggrandizement. The facility with which nations rationalize their resort to war is a commonplace of diplomatic history." (21)
5. Last Resort. War may only be entered when all negotiations and compromise have been tried and failed.
6. All citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war. However, as long as the danger of war persists and there is no international authority with the necessary power, governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed. (22)
7. Formal Declaration from a Legitimate Authority. The highest authorities in a government must officially declare a state of war; a private individual cannot declare war.
8. A formal declaration of war gives clear notice to the declared enemy of impending military action, and it could also serve as the last threat before actual attack. The formal declaration by legitimate authority was developed in order to limit the use of force to a small number of actors. This is to prevent criminals and pirates invoking justice as a method for using force. Terrorists, by definition, cannot invoke just war theory since they do not constitute an "authority." Guerrilla groups may have that authority if they can claim to be able to exercise control over a clearly defined and delimited territory. (23)
9. Reasonable hope for success. The costs and benefits of a campaign or war must be calculated and considered before aggression.
10. Before waging war, the government should consider the amount of economic resources, soldiers, and supplies within the country. If a nation is threaten by invasion and lacks resources for a campaign, there could be other alternatives such as civil disobedience or forming alliances with other nations to increase the chance of success. (24)
11. Proportionate means. The force and use of weaponry should be limited to what is needed to stop aggression and further attack. Total or unlimited war is ruled out.
12. The "just cause" of the war should be proportionate in means so that it minimizes the destruction caused by war. The ideas are to only attack enough to achieve the goal and not to cause great destruction and loss. If war is waged to correct injustice, it cannot be justified if the level of force used creates new and greater injustices. (25)  
*Jus in Bello*
13. Limited objectives. If the purpose is peace, then unconditional surrender or the destruction of a nation's economic or political institutions is not an objective.
14. This is like the "proportionate means" point above. It deals with what kind of force is morally permissible. In fighting a just war only military targets could be attacked, and neutral areas should be avoided; these would include hospitals, private and public property, and sacred places such as churches. (26)
15. Noncombatant immunity. Only those who are official agents of government may fight, and individuals not actively involved in the conflict should be immune from attack.

People during war can be divided into various categories. Combatants are "all those who are engaged in the actual promotion of war." (27) Direct combatants are the fighters themselves. Indirect combatants are the unarmed helpers of the soldiers in military contexts such as transporters of supplies and weapons producers. Noncombatants are those people who are members of the enemy nation that are chaplains, medical personnel and civilians. Also there are neutral people who are not part of either warring party and are not involved in the hostilities. The killing or wounding of enemy combatants falls under the idea of self-defense. The indirect killing of non-combatants or neutral

observers is permissible only if such killing was unintentional and unavoidable. Direct killing of such people is murder, that is, when it is intentional and avoidable. POWs and the injured should also be treated without cruelty and receive food, water, and medical care.

## History of Just War Theory

Famous Graeco-Roman (Greek-Roman) philosophers first created the just war theory. Plato (423-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC) urged limited amount of fighting and the necessity of peace. However, Cicero (106-43 BC), the great Roman orator, jurist, and philosopher was the first to deal with the questions of justifiable wars. Cicero held that the use of force was justifiable only when the war was declared by an appropriate governmental authority acting within specific limits. For Cicero, the ability to wage war rested with the state, and the state alone, and war could be lawfully waged only "after an official demand for satisfaction has been submitted or warning has been given and a formal declaration made." (28) Cicero also believed that one has a just cause to wage war if another causes dishonor to the name of one's government.

After Constantine announced that Christianity was the official religion in the Roman Empire; there was a need to develop a compromise between pacifism and waging war. If the soldiers become Christians, and the Christian church supported pacifism, then how could the Romans continue controlling their vast empire? Many known theologians of the time tried to seek an answer. St Athanasius (293-373 AD), St Ambrose (340-397 AD), and St Basil (329-397 AD) all taught that killing in combat may be justified for the good of the whole society and for the defense of property and religion. However, it was left to St. Augustine (354-430 AD) to formulate the first systematic theology of war, which was later to be expanded into the "just war" theory in which a Christian could both serve God and his army as well. St. Augustine was one of the most influential fathers of the early Christian church, and he helped develop many of the ideas that shape our beliefs today. St. Augustine took the Graeco-Roman ideas and incorporated them with Judeo-Christian ideas of love and charity. He said, "The natural order conducive to peace among mortals demands that the power to declare and counsel war should be in the hands of those who hold the supreme authority." (29) Those subject to the rulers must obey unless the rulers command something against the teachings of the Bible.

For St. Augustine the only reason for waging a war would be to defend the nation's peace against serious injury. He says, "A just war is wont to be described as one that avenges wrongs, when a nation or state has to be punished, for refusing to make amends for the wrongs inflicted by its subjects, or to restore what it has seized unjustly." (30) The intention of the war is very important for St. Augustine. He said, "The passion for inflicting harm, the cruel thirst for vengeance, a non-peaceful and relentless spirit, the fever of revolt, the lust of power, and such things, all these are rightly condemned in war." (31) St. Augustine emphasized the idea of restoration of peace as the main motive of war. He mentioned, "**We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace.** Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace." (32) So in St. Augustine's thinking a war "was limited by its purpose, its authority and its conduct." (33)

In the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD) continued to develop the just war theory. He revised and added points to St. Augustine's ideas. Aquinas presented the general outline of the just war theory. He discussed not only the justification of war, but also the kinds of activity that are permissible in war (*jus in bello*). He emphasized St. Augustine's statements about war and added a little to them. He followed a similar reasoning, breaking up his argument into three necessary conditions for a just war: authorized authority, just cause and rightful intention. Aquinas also emphasized that the sovereign state has the responsibility for the common good of those committed to its care. Only it can declare war. The sovereign state has the right to use "the sword" to defend its people against danger by punishing those who do evil. This is justified by the apostle Paul in Romans 13:4. He said, "For he (rulers or government) is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for

nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to punishment on the wrongdoer." (34) Therefore it is the government's duty to defend the common good against enemies by having the right to use arms. A just cause is required to wage war. Aquinas considers a just cause to be "that those who are attacked, should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault." (35) Finally Aquinas discussed the right intention for waging war. Only two possibilities are presented: either the furthering of some good or an avoidance of some evil.

The ideas of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were finally completed during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries by a series of theologians. The first two names of importance regarding this development are Francisco de Vitoria (1492-1546 AD) and Francisco Suarez (1548-1617 AD). They were Roman Catholic philosophers that divided hostilities into two classes: an armed attack against a peaceful society and injurious actions taken against the same (generally defined as an infringement of a right). The first class from which an armed response resulted would be considered as a defensive war. This type of war was distinguished from the second class hostility. An armed response to an injurious action was considered an offensive or aggressive war. According to Vitoria and Suarez, an offensive war needed "no special moral justification." (36) They saw an armed response as an involuntary act forced upon a nation. On the other hand, the aggressive war needed to be justified. An injurious action done does not involve destruction and death, so how was it possible for the Christian willfully to choose war as a response? The problem for them arose from the conflict between a Christian wanting love and peace but responding with death and destruction. So they proposed conditions under which a Christian could respond to injurious action while preserving Christian values. So for them the just war conditions only apply to aggressive wars. They keep the three conditions of Aquinas in their theory, but they added two more: the war must be fought as a last resort and provide noncombatant immunity.

The next name of importance is the Dutch Protestant, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645 AD). He also helped conclude the theory and called for the beginning of a "body of international law" intended to control international conflict, to bring it under the rule of law, and ideally to eliminate war altogether. (37) This is the idea of the League of Nations or the United Nations founded after the World Wars.

Great Roman Catholic theologians mainly developed the just war theory, but Protestant Reformers also addressed it during the Reformation including figures such as Martin Luther (1483-1546 AD) and John Calvin (1509-1564 AD). Luther and Calvin supported the idea that "the use of the sword is divinely entrusted to governments in order to repel injustice and keep peace." (38) The Roman Catholic Church and most major denominations such as the Reformed, Lutheran, and other Protestant groups accept the just war theory. It played a major role in the thought and practices of the churches during conflicts or disputes on war. However, there are also groups that are fiercely opposed to the theory, such as the Anabaptists and the Society of Friends (Quakers). (39)

### **Difficulties in the Just War Theory**

In the Geneva and Hague conventions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, major powers came together and agreed to limit certain types of warfare, set the conditions to the treatment of POWs, and other matters. (40) However, most of these agreements were broken during the World Wars. The just war theory is a good compromise between war and peace, but it does have its problems. Many of the points of the theory are extremely vague and allow too much room for different interpretations. How would you define a "just cause", "right intention," or "proportionate means"? One state may define nuclear warfare to be "proportionate means" during war while another state define "proportionate means" to be only the use of infantry. We are only to go to war if a "legitimate authority" orders us to, however, how would you know that your government is just and right? Who do they take their orders from? In World War II, Hitler, the "legitimate authority", ordered the young men of Germany to fight and kill Jews, communist, and those lesser than the Aryan race. Is this just?

The concept of the "legitimate authority" also generates problems when discussing revolutions and civil wars. Many countries are grateful for their revolutionary wars because it freed them from oppression and brought great change, but those that began the war did not receive acknowledgement from a "legitimate

authority" to initiate the violence according to the theory. Just war theory has a basic incompleteness to it. In some ways, the theory looks as if it should drive you to a neat conclusion: this war is just or unjust. However, the theory does not always work that way. War may be just in some aspects and unjust in others, and one must make decisions about participation or resistance based on different considerations. (41) The just war theory also only looks at one side of the argument or conflict and is made so that the one side can justify its claim for pursuing a "just war." Both sides of the conflict could claim that it has a "just" cause to start a "just" war.

The vast destructive power of modern weaponry arouses new difficulties for the just war theory. With the development of large-scale ABC (atomic, bacterial, and chemical) weapons, many theorists become "nuclear pacifist." (42) The development of new machinery of war has caused great changes about the views of war and its theories. The development of gunpowder, cannons, airplanes, tanks, atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, and biological weapons. Each development causes theorists to reconsider and question the theory.

The biblical picture basically supports the traditional just war theory. In the Old Testament, God ordered the nation of Israel to go to war. Deuteronomy 20:1 says, "When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, **do not be afraid of them, because the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, will be with you.**" The New Testament, on the other hand, teaches individuals not to use violence against other individuals, as it was mentioned in the section on pacifism, but through out the New Testament the authors of the books often compared Christians to warriors and soldiers like in Ephesians 6:10-20. The Bible also tells us to obey our government and trust its decisions (Romans 13). So in considering of the just war theory and the Bible: The use of force in resisting and punishing violence is entrusted to the government. Force is limited to only what is needed to secure peace and justice. Vengeance and aggression is not permissible. Love as well as justice requires action to protect the innocent and to repel aggression. (43)

After carefully analyzing the justice of war, we believe that the just war theory is the best compromise for all the different aspects for war. We do realize that with the development of complex military systems and weapons of mass destruction there can be **no just wars!** A war is only just if God Himself ordered the war to be fought, but in this modern time, God does not tell nations to wage war. We are left with the obligation to decide of ourselves when, how, and why wars are fought. Wars are also unavoidable. People wish, hope, and pray for world peace, but war is a perennial event. Look at the suffering war has caused in Vietnam, the Middle East, Somalia, Sudan, and recently, Chechnya, and the cruel dictators like Hitler, Pol Pot, and Stalin. The only answer to all the problems, difficulties, and pain caused by war is Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Jn. 3:16) "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (Jn. 14:6)

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,  
where there is hatred, let me sow love,  
where there is injury, pardon,  
where there is doubt, faith,  
where there is despair, hope,  
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

**~ St. Francis of Assisi (44)**

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