

Christian Ethics:

Part 6: Christian Responses to War and Death (3/29/15)

The two primary responses of Christian teaching to war are **Pacifism and Just War Principles**. These concepts stand in contrast to competing causes for war such as revenge, conquest, “efficiency” in foreign policy, or mere economic interests.

Pacifism and Just War principles share in common the unconditional value of human life.

We are made in the image of God (though broken by sin) and we are all valued by God—saint and sinner alike. This is the foundation of the commandment to do no murder, and is implicit in Jesus’ call to love our enemies. Jesus died for us “while we were yet sinners,” showing us by example the self-giving love that we are to show—even to those who might hate or harm us.

Pacifism:

Because of these basic values, the preference of pacifism underlies all Christian responses to the use of violence and deadly force. It is appropriate, therefore, that we examine Pacifism first and build on its foundations for discussions of Just War Principles.

The Scriptural basis for Pacifism:

Genesis 1:26, 27 (*humans made in the image of God*)

Ezekiel 33:11 (“...says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked...”)

Matthew 5:38-48 (“...You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ... I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous...”)

Romans 5:8-10 (*Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners...while we were his enemies*)

Romans 12:14-21 (*Bless those who persecute you...do not repay evil for evil...never avenge yourselves...*)

Hebrews 10:32-36 (*cheerfully accepting persecution*)

1 Peter 2:21-23 (*Christ suffering as an example to us...he did not return abuse...*)

The witness of the church:

Though some Christians were soldiers in the pagan Roman Empire, many Christian leaders forbade military service. Christians followed the example of Jesus and willingly died merely for confessing that they were Christians. “Martyr” means “witness”—they offered witness to Jesus by accepting their execution when they refused to burn a little incense to the emperor. Thus the Christian witness of the early church was predominantly one of self-sacrifice and non-violence.

Others have followed in this path. In the face of the bloodiness of the Protestant Reformation, the Amish & Menonites practiced pacifism as a witness against the governing powers and the internecine bloodshed. Martin Luther King and his colleagues used non-violence grounded in Christian principles, accepting suffering rather than responding with violence, so that the hearts of his enemies might be changed. Self-sacrifice for the benefit of others is a calling for all Christians.

Just War Principles:

Though the early church generally taught against violence or military service, the church also taught that the government was responsible for maintaining order—indeed “by the sword.” So after Rome became officially Christian, and later when the church in the West played a crucial role in maintaining civil order in the face of barbarian threat, the church found itself in the position of those who maintain order by the sword. **How might the church reconcile these two priorities: the response of self-sacrifice to the value of human life on the one hand, and God’s justice for the protection of human life on the other hand?**

Ambrose and Augustine (in the 5th century), and later Thomas Aquinas in the late Middle Ages, began to put forward principles by which war might be justified in God’s eyes. These principles gradually developed into the major definitions shown below.

The Scriptural support for Just War Principles:

Though some might take note of several caveats to these examples, the Old Testament records how God directed and supported Israel in battle. Thus Jesus’ teachings are a further development of how to embody God’s mercy beyond the actions of the judges & kings and the calls to mercy by the later prophets. The key New Testament texts that might support maintaining the use of violence relate to the place of governing authorities and their vocation to use force in maintaining order. After starting with the premise given in several texts such as Acts 5:29 that “We must obey God rather than any human authority,” several passages encourage cooperation with authorities, and give them God’s endorsement for maintaining order, especially **Romans 13:1-4** (“...*be subject to the ruling authorities...the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.*”)

Just War Principles (based on the unconditional value of human life):

“Jus ad Bellum:” just principles for **going to war:**

Principle of Just Cause: only for the protection of innocent life

Principle of Just Authority: only when authorized by the proper authority

Principle of Right Intention: to protect innocent human life and never for revenge

Principle of Last Resort: only after all other attempts have been made to protect innocent human life

Principle of Proportionality: only when the good to be obtained outweighs the harm that is inflicted

Principle of Probability of Success: only when there is a reasonable chance that it will be successful in protecting innocent life

“Jus in Bello:” just principles for the **conduct of war:**

Principle of Proportionality: only when the good to be obtained outweighs the harm that is inflicted

Principle of Discrimination (Non-combatant Immunity): only against those who threaten innocent life and never against non-combatants

End of life issues:

Other end of life issues are similarly informed, especially with the question of agency: is my action primarily to protect life or to end it? To reduce suffering or to end a life? These are questions that inform decisions about capital punishment, suicide, euthanasia and the withdrawal of medical treatment. We can treat suffering without ending a person’s life, and we should take care not to make an idol of “quality of life” (a recent invention of comfortable western culture). Note that suffering is common to human life, even Jesus’ life in which he endured for us.