



War – what is it good for?

A summary of Christian views on war & conflict

This summary sets out the main points of Christian reflection on issues of war and conflict, of which the two main strands are the Just War Tradition and Christian Pacifism. A brief introduction will be given to each of these, with particular attention paid to the Biblical sources that proponents of each view appeal to. Recommendations for further reading are given at the end.

Just War Tradition (JWT)

The key emphasis of JWT is that while war is always a last resort, there are situations in which it may be the morally just course of action, provided certain principles are applied (see box) and that any military action is conducted in an appropriate way. Traditionally, JWT has made a distinction between the potential justifications

Key Principles of JWT:

Jus ad bellum:

1. Just Cause
2. Right Intention
3. Legitimate authority
4. Last resort
5. Probability of success

Jus ad bello:

1. Discrimination (non-combatant immunity)
2. Proportionate force

for going to war (*jus ad bellum*) and the just prosecution of the war itself (*jus in bello*). The significance of this is that just because a military campaign may have a just cause, this does not lead to an 'ends justify the means' approach. Rather, the way that any military action is carried out is equally as important as the initial reasons that justified that action.

Biblical Basis

The Biblical passage that is most often used in discussions of JWT is Romans 13:1-7, which states that governing authorities are 'established by God' and thus have the authority to 'bring punishment on the wrongdoer'. While the emphasis in the passage is more on dealing with criminality within a state, the principle is that the government has the right - and duty - to use 'the sword', i.e. lethal force. A similar passage is found in 1 Peter 2:13-14.

Supporters of JWT also point to sections of the Old Testament that demonstrate that war can be permissible in God's sight, although not without conditions or limitations.

A third aspect of the Biblical case for JWT is the use of the concept of 'loving your neighbour' as taught by Jesus in Matthew 22:39. It is argued that the question must be posed, 'What does love require in a situation where the neighbour is under threat?' The answer given by JWT is

that in certain circumstances, our love for neighbour motivates us to intervene by force on behalf of a threatened neighbour, while recognising that the aggressor is also our neighbour and this imposes limitations on the extent of any attack.

JWT in the Christian Tradition

Today, JWT is often associated with self-defence. However, the main emphasis in JWT has been on military intervention to bring justice for a wronged party. St Augustine saw war as a necessary evil in an imperfect world, which must only be used to defend a third party against unjust aggression. The motivation in doing so is love for the party being attacked and a concern for the aggressor to be brought to justice, as doing so will help promote the common good of all in society.

Such concerns have been developed in the work of theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vittoria and Hugo Grotius.

JWT and Modern Warfare

The development of modern methods of war has led to fresh and significant challenges to JWT. First, with such powerful weaponry now available, maintaining the principle of proportionality is increasingly difficult. For example, many proponents of the Just War position today would consider themselves 'nuclear pacifists', being of the view that the use of nuclear weapons could never be justified under the criteria of JWT.

Another challenge is the difficulty in distinguishing military and civilian personnel, a problem particularly pressing when faced with an enemy using guerrilla warfare or when using long-range targeted missiles, which are prone to error as has been found in recent conflicts.

Despite these challenges, JWT continues to offer a framework by which to judge military intervention in the modern era. Its influence is seen in questions regarding the 'proportionality' of military actions and in

Example: JWT & World War 1
Biblical imagery was often used to make the case for war in WW1, particularly the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where the question was posed: 'what would the Samaritan have done if the robbers had still been there?' in relation to German aggression against Belgium.

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concerns over the committing of ‘war crimes’ in the context of an otherwise justified military action. This was evident when the House of Commons debated military intervention in Iraq in September 2014, wherein arguments on both sides of the house were couched in language derived from JWT.

Christian Pacifism (CP)

While JWT has been the dominant voice in the Christian tradition, there has also been a long-standing pacifist strand. Christian pacifists have always held that war and the ways of violence stand utterly opposed to the life of love, peace and forgiveness that Jesus lived out and Christians are called to follow. They hold that one of the primary functions of the Christian community is to stand out as a prophetic witness to the wider world, showing a better way of peace in contrast to the cycles of violence so prevalent elsewhere.

Biblical Basis

CP primarily roots its thinking in the example and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels. Key verses are ‘all who draw the sword will die by the sword’ (Matt. 26:52), ‘my Kingdom is not of this world; if it were, my servants would fight’ (John 18:36) and ‘Blessed are the peacemakers.’ (Matt. 5:9)

Such verses indicate that the Christian ethic is an explicitly nonviolent one, committed to love for one’s enemies, not their destruction. Jesus came at a time when Israel was under Roman rule, yet He explicitly rules out armed rebellion, even in the face of injustice. Furthermore, the Bible’s vision of the future is a renewed creation where all violence is banished and the ‘lion will lie down with the lamb’ (Isaiah 11:6 & 65:25).

Pacifism in the Christian Tradition

Christian Pacifists have argued that the task of the church is to bring something of the peaceful future prophesied in Isaiah into the present, as a sign and foretaste of the future.

CP has often been more closely associated with nonconformist groups than with ‘established’ churches, who have much closer ties to the state. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Christian pacifists have often found themselves viewed with suspicion by governing authorities as potentially subversive, especially since the advent of forced conscription in the 19th century. There

are many stories of those who refused to join the Army in the First World War taking a stance as conscientious objectors. The testimonial evidence demonstrates that this was often done on Christian pacifist grounds. Such suspicions are less prevalent today – and given the horrors of modern warfare, so graphically portrayed through modern forms of media, it could be argued that CP is in its strongest position for a long time. Christian pacifist theologians have included Menno Simons, John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas.

How does this help us today?

Both traditions are agreed that war is a human evil that was not part of God’s original and perfectly good creation. Their different approaches reflect what they think should be done in the face of this evil. Their key insights include:

1. War should always be a last resort, with a diplomatic or judicial solution always preferable if possible.
2. JWT gives a cohesive framework through which to evaluate each situation.
3. The Christian vision of the future gives hope that things will not always be as they are now and if justice is unattainable in the present, ultimately it will only be delayed, not denied.
4. The emphasis on love found in both main traditions urges against the demonization and dehumanisation of the enemy, recognising that all people are made in the image of God and have an inherent worth as such, even if, in JWT at least, that does not preclude the possibility of going into battle against them.
5. A recent example is seen in debates regarding ‘ISIS’ in the Iraq and Syria. Proponents of JWT have argued that military action against ISIS is justified under the JWT principles, while Christian pacifists argue that non-military means should be pursued instead and that military action will only escalate the conflict.

Further Reading:

- *War: Four Christian Views* - Robert G. Clouse (ed.)
- *When is War Justified?* – Andrew Goddard
- *In Defence of War* – Nigel Biggar
- *The Just War Revisited* – Oliver O’Donovan
- *Morality and War* – David Fisher
- *War and Christian Ethics* – Arthur Holmes
- *The Peaceable Kingdom* – Stanley Hauerwas