

A Christian Perspective on War: Theological Reflections and Ethical Implications - *Brendon Naicker*

Abstract

War has historically provoked significant theological and ethical enquiries within Christian traditions. The Christian response to war ranges from pacifism to just war theory, with both perspectives rooted in Scripture and refined through theological contemplation. This paper analyses biblical doctrines, historical progressions, and contemporary applications, emphasising the appropriate Christian response to the prospect of war. We will explore Christian perspectives on war and peace by referencing esteemed scholars and ethical frameworks, while also offering practical guidance for addressing the moral dilemmas associated with conflict.

Introduction

The reality of war compels Christians to reconcile the apparent conflict between the directive to love one's enemies (Matthew 5:44) and the obligation to pursue justice and safeguard the vulnerable. Historically, Christians have contended with the ethical challenges presented by war, leading to varied responses that embody distinct interpretations of Scripture and theological doctrines.

This paper examines these responses comprehensively, commencing with the scriptural underpinnings of war and peace. It subsequently delineates the historical evolution of pacifism and just war theory, analyses the ethical principles that support these frameworks, and addresses current challenges, including the moral ramifications of contemporary warfare. The paper ultimately examines the essential inquiry regarding the appropriate Christian response in the face of impending war, providing both theological and practical guidance for managing such crises.

Biblical Foundations

Old Testament Perspectives

The Old Testament delineates a multifaceted relationship between faith and warfare. Although God is portrayed as a warrior in texts such as Exodus 15:3, “The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name”—this representation should be interpreted within its historical and theological framework. The conquest of Canaan, as delineated in Joshua, provokes substantial ethical enquiries. Academics like Walter Brueggemann contend that these narratives are primarily focused on illustrating God's sovereignty over history rather than endorsing violence. ¹

The prophetic tradition concurrently presents a vision of peace. Isaiah’s prophecy regarding swords being transformed into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4) envisions a future devoid of warfare among nations. ² This eschatological hope is fundamental to Christian pacifism, which perceives God's ultimate intention as one of reconciliation and peace.

New Testament Teachings

Unlike the Old Testament's narratives of divinely ordained conflicts, the New Testament underscores nonviolence and profound love. Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount contest the rationale of retribution: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'" However, I advise you not to oppose a malevolent individual. Matthew 5:38-39.³

John Howard Yoder emphasises the countercultural essence of Jesus' ethics, asserting that his adherents are summoned to exemplify a kingdom that repudiates the violence of terrestrial authorities.⁴ N.T. Wright contends that Jesus' message does not reject justice but rather redefines it, emphasising forgiveness and restoration.⁵

The apostle Paul acknowledges the state's authority to uphold order through the application of force (Romans 13:4). His exhortation to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21) suggests that Christians should prioritise nonviolent methods for resolving conflict whenever feasible.⁶

Historical Christian Approaches to War

Pacifism in the Early Church

The early Church's dedication to pacifism is thoroughly documented. During the Roman Empire, early Christians frequently perceived military service as antithetical to their beliefs. Tertullian's writings unequivocally denounce Christian involvement in warfare, embodying a prevalent conviction that adherence to Christ necessitates the rejection of violence.⁷

Origen, a notable early theologian, contended that Christians engage in a distinct form of warfare—spiritual rather than bodily.⁸ This viewpoint highlights the early Church's identity as a countercultural community, tasked with opposing the violent conventions of the surrounding society.

The Development of Just War Theory

Constantine's conversion and the ensuing alignment of Church and state altered the ethical landscape. Augustine of Hippo established the just war tradition to harmonise Christian ethics with governmental responsibilities. He contended that war, although inherently tragic, may be morally justified under certain conditions, such as the defence of the innocent or the restoration of peace.⁹

Thomas Aquinas elaborated on Augustine's concepts, presenting a systematic framework for assessing the morality of warfare. His standards for *jus ad bellum* (justice in the initiation of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in the conduct of war) continue to exert significant influence, informing both Christian and secular ethical discourse regarding warfare.¹⁰

Ethical Principles for War

Jus ad Bellum (Justice in Going to War)

Christian just war theory establishes criteria to determine whether entering a war is morally justifiable:

- **Just Cause:** War must address a significant injustice, such as aggression or oppression.¹¹
- **Legitimate Authority:** Only lawful governing bodies can declare war.¹²
- **Right Intention:** The purpose of war must be to restore peace and justice, not to seek revenge or territorial gain.¹³
- **Last Resort:** All nonviolent options, including diplomacy and sanctions, must be exhausted before resorting to war.¹⁴
- **Probability of Success:** War should not be undertaken if it is unlikely to achieve its objectives, as futile violence only compounds suffering.¹⁵

Jus in Bello (Justice in Conducting War)

Ethical conduct during war is governed by two key principles:

- **Discrimination:** Combatants must avoid targeting civilians, ensuring that military actions are directed solely at legitimate threats.¹⁶
- **Proportionality:** The harm caused by military actions must not exceed the benefits of achieving the intended objective.¹⁷

How Should Christians React When War is Imminent?

Discernment Through Prayer and Scripture

During crises, Christians should pursue divine guidance through prayer and contemplation of Scripture. Bonhoeffer's writings emphasise that faith necessitates grappling with moral ambiguity, relying on God's wisdom to reveal a way forward.¹⁸

Advocacy for Peace

Christians ought to promote peace, highlighting dialogue and reconciliation. This entails endorsing diplomatic endeavours and engaging in peacebuilding initiatives. The Church's prophetic voice can significantly challenge the inevitability of war.¹⁹

Support for the Vulnerable

Given that war disproportionately impacts the vulnerable, Christians ought to prioritise offering assistance and sanctuary to those in distress. This may entail assisting humanitarian organisations or providing church facilities to accommodate displaced individuals. Pope Francis emphasises this as a crucial element of the Church's mission during periods of conflict.²⁰

Moral Evaluation of Participation

For Christians engaged in warfare, discernment is essential. Military personnel and policymakers must assess their actions in accordance with the principles of just war, ensuring the maintenance of justice and the minimisation of harm.²¹

Preparation for Reconciliation

Despite the impending conflict, Christians must prepare for the necessity of post-war reconciliation. This entails promoting forgiveness, reconstructing communities, and tackling the root causes of conflict. Volf's theology of reconciliation provides a significant framework for this endeavour.²²

Contemporary Challenges

Modern Warfare

The intricacies of contemporary warfare, encompassing nuclear armaments and unmanned aerial vehicles, complicate the relevance of conventional just war principles. Hauerwas contends that these technologies frequently obscure the distinction between combatants and civilians, thereby requiring a reinvigorated dedication to non-violence.²³

The Role of the Church

The Church should exemplify Christ's peace, providing a counter to the culture of violence. Faith-based initiatives, exemplified by Quakers and Mennonites, illustrate the capacity for nonviolent resistance and peacemaking.²⁴

Conclusion

A Christian viewpoint on war is influenced by the conflict between the imperative for peace and the obligation to address injustice. Christians must approach the issues of pacifism and just war theory with humility and faith. In the face of impending war, their response must prioritise prayer, peace promotion, support for the vulnerable, and ethical discernment. By anchoring their actions in Scripture and theological tradition, Christians can testify to the transformative power of Christ's peace in a world afflicted by conflict.

References

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