

Introduction to Ethics – War and Peace in Christian Ethics

HPRS4092

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War and Peace in Christian Ethics

We have explored a number of more personal ethical issues so far in the module – e.g. sex, gender, abortion, euthanasia – but with the last section on justice, we began to see a turn toward considerations of more corporate and social ethics.

We continue that turn with this section, which addresses the areas of war and peace within Christian ethical reflection. This section begins by unpicking some of the scriptural injunctions around violence and the moves on to considering the formation of the ‘just war’ theory – something you may already have come across – before finishing by considering Christian attitudes towards peace and pacifism.



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War and Peace in Christian Ethics



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War and

As usual with Christian approaches to ethical issues, we begin by considering the way that scripture speaks to them – this is because scripture provides access to certainty about the will of God for us, and showcases the correct ethical action in given situations.

In this particular ethical area, there are distinct approaches and contexts between accounts given in the Old Testament and the New Testament – in one, we have the story of a people in a violent world, in the other we have the story of an individual in a relatively peaceful society.



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War and Peace

The book of Exodus is a good example of the Old Testament and its covering of violence – telling the story of how the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, how God parted the Red Sea to aid their escape, and how the Egyptians were drowned.

It also describes how the Moses and the Israelites with him celebrated this incidence of violence (Exodus 15:2-6) – praising the Lord for saving them and associated him with martial imagery, as a warrior or as the shatterer of their enemies.

*“The LORD is my strength and my defence;
he has become my salvation.*

*He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.*

³ *The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name.*

⁴ *Pharaoh’s chariots and his army
he has hurled into the sea.*

*The best of Pharaoh’s officers
are drowned in the Red Sea.*

⁵ *The deep waters have covered them;
they sank to the depths like a stone.*

⁶ *Your right hand, LORD,
was majestic in power.*

*Your right hand, LORD,
shattered the enemy.*

Exodus 15:2-6



War and Peace in Christian Ethics

This approach to war and violence is relatively typical of both the historical time period of the Old Testament and to much of the Old Testament's text.

One of the critical themes undergirding the story of the people of Israel is the idea of 'covenant' – that in return for promising to honour God and worship him, the Israelites were promised a land of their own. Of course, the wandering of the Israelite people and the conquest of this land required them to fight, and win, against those already occupying it.

In doing so, we see a clear association emerge between victory in battle and proof that God was with them on their journey.



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However, this outline is perhaps too simplistic an overview of Old Testament attitudes towards war.

While the early texts in the OT tend towards this divine sanctioning of violence, later prophetic texts stress that violence is something that, with God's help, will be overcome.

Violence, while perhaps a necessary and inescapable aspect of human society in the here and now, was not forever – it would, in the end, be replaced by a peace.

² *Many nations will come and say,*

*“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.*

He will teach us his ways,

so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion,

the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

³ *He will judge between many peoples*

*and will settle disputes for strong nations far
and wide.*

*They will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.*

*Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.*

Micah 4:2-3



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War and Peace

The New Testament occurs in a very different context and occupies a very different genre to much of the Old Testament – it is much more personal in content, deals much more with intra-personal ethics, and less directly with ‘peoples’.

This is one of the reasons why the accounts of violence in the New Testament tend to focus on individual violence rather than social war, and on its relationship to justice rather than its relationship to covenant.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Matthew 5:9

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

Matthew 5:38-39



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War and Peace

Of course, just because the New Testament is largely concerned with inter-personal ethics, this does not mean that its teachings about violence do not have a central place in Christian accounts of War.

Consider the passage across this slide – how might this account of ethics and morality effect not just inter-personal violence, but also group and social violence?

How can we read this account as being relevant in different contexts to its origination, as well as a more general ethical principle?

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:43-48



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Just War



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Just War

What we call 'just war' theory is an attempt to mesh these differing accounts of violence and its moral import into a framework for reasoning about social violence and war.

In its most simple form, it is a justification for killing people – in some circumstances and with certain rules of conduct and behaviour governing it.

It does this by two forms of justification: first, by reducing the incidence of killing and violence, and second, by building trust in authority to recognise and justify those incidences of necessary violence.



NATIONAL GALLERIES SCOTLAND

'Devoted Christian Troops' from the portfolio 'Images of War', 1914, Natalya Goncharova
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Just War

The formation of the theory of 'just war' emerges not only out of a desire of justify killing – but also out of a sense of moral responsibility to make sense of the nature, persistence, and meaning of violence.

As we can see with the passage from Augustine, one of the theories initial architects, opposite, the theory is an attempt by thinking human beings to find limits for acts that fundamentally throw our humanity into question.

Violence, killing, war – these are all inescapable moral challenges to our humanity that require a response.

“Will the wise man take his seat on the judge’s bench, or will he not venture to do so? Clearly, he will take his seat; for the claims of human society, which he thinks it wicked to abandon, constrain him and draw him to this duty. He does not think it a wickedness that innocent witnesses should be tortured in cases which are not their own, or that the accused are so often overcome by such great pain that they make false confessions and are punished in spite of their innocence... The philosopher does not consider that these many grievous evils are sins; for...the wise judge does not act in this way through a wish to do harm.”

Augustine, The City of God, Against the Pagans, XIX.6



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Similarly, the just war theory emerges out of a recognition that pacifism is not always an acceptable moral response to violence.

Partially this emerges from his historical context – a newly Christian Roman Empire facing military threats on all fronts – whereby the peace of the state was threatened by external actors, but also from a recognition of the contest relationship between Christianity and the State explored in an earlier section.

Ethics in this context is not reducible to simply ‘can I kill?’ but must involve a whole host of competing ethical demands.

“..why do I describe them as evils of peace? ... This is the dilemma: on the one hand going to war causes terrible evils, but on the other hand not going to war permits them. Whichever horn one chooses to sit on, the sitting should not be comfortable. Allowing evils to happen is not necessarily innocent, any more than causing them is necessarily culpable. Omission and commission are equally obliged to give an account of themselves. Both stand in need of moral justification.”

Nigel Biggar, In Defence of War



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Just War

How then do we ensure our actions, even when contested and complex, operate according to a Christian moral framework?

For Augustine, and later codified more clearly by Aquinas, this required an understanding of the conditions that would make declaring a war just, and the conditions according to which performing violent acts would be just.

These are termed *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* and follow cumulatively from one another – warlike actions in an unjust war cannot be moral.



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Jus ad Bellum

Aquinas develops the work of Augustine and proposes three necessary conditions for going to war to be just:

1 – Just Authority: The war must be ordered by a legitimate authority e.g. the king or pope

2 – Just Cause: There must be a just cause for going to war e.g. self-defence

3 – Just Intention: The intention of the war must be good e.g. to achieve lasting peace

Only when these three conditions were met, could the Christian consider the war, and actions within it, justified.

“Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations.”

Article 51, Charter of the United Nations

Jus ad Bellum

Further to these three principles of morality, we see further development in the 16th century by thinkers like Suarez and di Vittorio, who add three more:

4 – Proportionality: the extent of the war must be proportionate to its cause

5 – Last Resort: War can only be justified if all peaceful alternatives have been exhausted

6 – Reasonable chance of Success: futile or impossible wars can never be just

“For as long as men and women have talked about war, they have talked about it in terms of right and wrong. And for almost as long, some among them have derided such talk, called it a charade, insisted that war lies beyond (or beneath) moral judgement. War is a world apart, where life itself is at stake, where human nature is reduced to its elemental forms, where self-interest and necessity prevail. Here men and women do what they must to save themselves and their communities, and morality and law have no place.

Inter arma silent leges: in time of war the law is silent”

Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars



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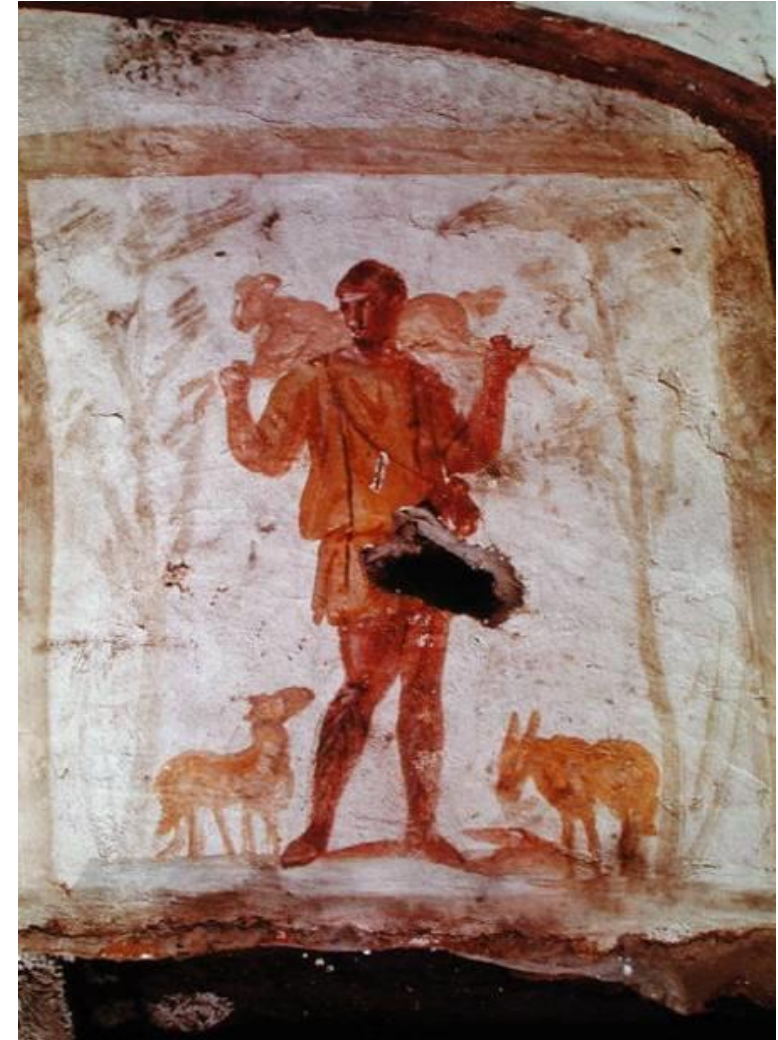
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Jus in Bello

Only when the cumulative conditions of the *jus ad bellum* tradition have all been met has the Christian tradition generally accepted the moral character of war – the lack of any single aspect places the war outside just character.

Equally important for this tradition is, once a just war has been declared, that the actions taken within the war are themselves morally justifiable.

One cannot wage a just war unjustly – remember our discussions of intent and purpose in ethics and their relation to action.



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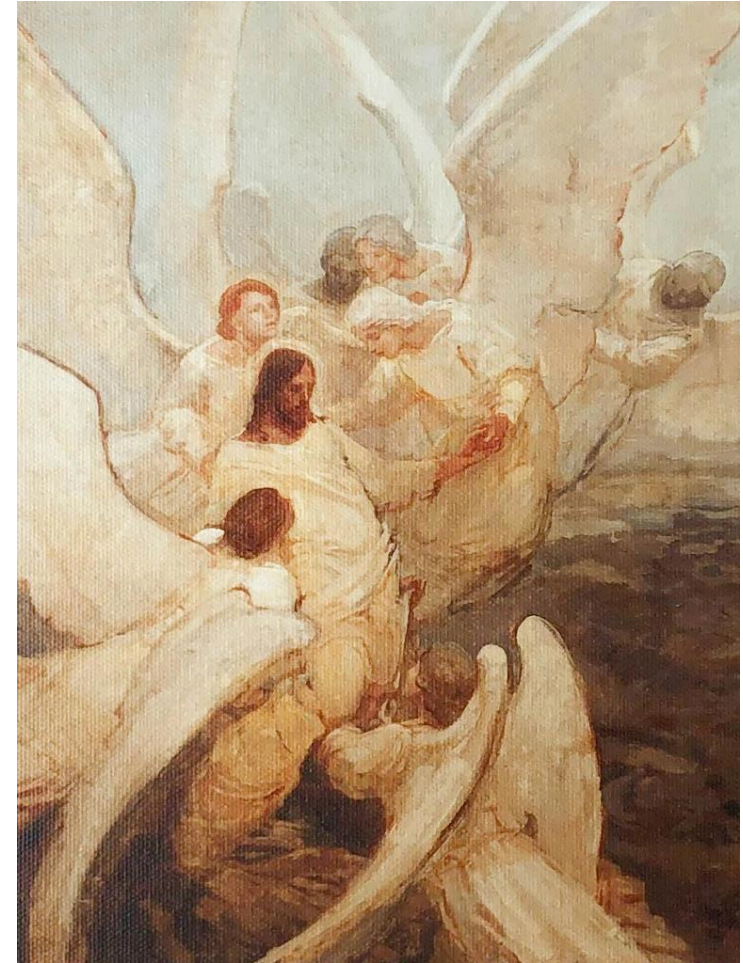
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Jus in Bello

The *jus in bello* strand of the just war theory focuses on this aspect of violence – how can it be constrained in order to be morally justifiable?

There are two primary conditions for just warfighting, that:

- 1 – Innocents should, wherever possible, not be harmed and should not be deliberately targeted
- 2 – That force used should be minimised as much as possible, and should be appropriate to the situation.



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Jus in Bello

These principles guiding appropriate and justified use of violence in warfare are relatively clear to apply to an era of swords or spears, but become increasingly difficult to apply in our contemporary age.

The identification of innocents and combatants has become increasingly difficult as modern technology has had an impact on the battlefield – which is now often formed by civilian towns or villages.

How do we preserve these principles in an age of nuclear weapons, trans-national terror groups, and autonomous weapons?



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Contemporary reflection on the Just War theory has grappled with these contemporary difficulties, attempting to preserve aspects of the tradition while raising serious questions about its contemporary applicability.

Rather, might we be better off thinking of war as sometimes the lesser of two evils (e.g. Biggar), rather than war ever being *just*?

Is war just a tragedy of human existence, part of our fallen nature, and should it be thought of in that frame?

While war may sometimes be a good, does this mean that it has to be *just*?



Peace

There is a great deal of discomfort around the just war tradition in contemporary Christian communities as we have come to live in a plural and globalised world, as technology has radically changed our capacity for violence, and as the theory has seemed to lead us away from the New Testament vision of a coming eternal peace.

The just war theory is not the only Christian approach to these matters - many of the early Christians were pacifists and refused to fight, and some modern-day Christians hold the same view.



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Peace

This tradition manifests clearly in Christian activism against nuclear weapons, military activity, and weapon sales, but is perhaps most prominently found in the Christian tradition of the Quakers (The Society of Friends).

This tradition foregrounds the importance of the non-violent confrontation of evil, and the superiority of peaceful reconciliation to violent measures – not just in personal, face-to-face, ethics, but also in the political and social arena, such as the English Civil War and the opposite passage.

‘That Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move unto it. And we do certainly know, and so testify to the world that the Spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ nor for the kingdoms of this world.’

Quaker Peace Testimony 1660



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Reading

The compulsory reading for this section is:

Koontz T, "Christian Non-violence" in Coleman, J. A. (2008). Christian political ethics (Course Book). Princeton University Press.

Finnis J, "The Ethics of War and Peace in the Catholic Natural Law Tradition" in Coleman, J. A. (2008). Christian political ethics (Course Book). Princeton University Press.

Gill R, "The Arms Trade and Christian Ethics" in Gill, R. (2012). The Cambridge companion to Christian ethics (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press

Elford R, "Christianity and War" in Gill, R. (2012). The Cambridge companion to Christian ethics (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press



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