

## Christianity and Conflict

The Question of War  
By Reid Monaghan



From the dawn of time with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, humanity has been wrought with the perilous crimes of violence and murder. Along with this we have also seen throughout history peoples, groups, and nations in a constant state of enmity and war with one another. The Old Testament records a world of warfare where the survival of certain tribes hung in the balance of success on the battle field. The question we must ask tonight is this: Is it ever right to fight? By *right* we mean the virtuous course of action, not simply a bad thing that sometimes has to be chosen while holding our moral noses as it were. Many questions are related to this. Should we allow our families to be raped, pillaged and our towns ransacked by aggressive invading armies? Does the government have the right to execute guilty criminals, for indeed a government waging war is capital punishment on a broad scale? Tonight we look at the question of war.

We will not simply be asking “War! What is it good for...” for stopping with this question falls too short of a normative ethical position. For if we only looked at what results could or could not happen from an action our action we would not be able to discern whether our actions in themselves are *moral* and *right*, for although some may say “whatever means necessary to achieve a good result”, the follower of Christ must never use evil means to attempt to arrive at a good result.

### The Relevant Positions

Although many nuanced positions have been held by believers in the history of the church, most are a derivation of the following views

*Activism* – A person has a duty to obey governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17). All wars are therefore to be fought in if the government calls us to fight. Obey government always. This view also resembles classical thinking such as that of Plato who viewed the State as man’s parent, who provides for the people and one then has a reciprocal duty to fight if asked by the state.

*Pacifism* – No war is ever right. All war is wrong and we should never resort to violence to solve problems. Does not mean lying down and surrender to oppression and corruption. But that war is an immoral means to fight it – Nonviolence is the preferred means of resisting aggression and oppression by the hands of the unjust.

*Selectivism* – Some wars are right, others are wrong – we should only fight just wars. When the war is just it is actually the good and moral action to fight and not a necessary and tolerated evil.<sup>1</sup> CS Lewis reflects this view in the following statement:

*War is a dreadful thing, and I can respect an honest pacifist, though I think he is entirely mistaken. What I cannot understand is this sort of semi-pacifism you get nowadays which gives people the idea that though you have to fight, you ought to do it with a long face as if you were ashamed of it.*<sup>2</sup>

### A Position Taken

Any Answer we give must take into account a Biblical view of God, humanity, and life. We would do injury to our efforts if we were to simply launch off into philosophical speculations or begin stating our opinions and emotions about the issue. We must think through the issues with a theological vision of the world in light of God and his relationships with his creatures. So in all of our Inversion Intersections we want to approach the issue through a Biblical vision of the world. So after a short historical sketch, I will seek to think through the topic at hand through the schema of Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation; for in this we see by the truth

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of these viewpoints see Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Harper Edition ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

of God's Word as a guide to our thoughts and actions. Now we turn our attention back to the Question of War.

### *The History of the Christianity and Warfare*

The God of the Bible is called a warrior, he is one who is said to fight on behalf of his people and this took place quite literally throughout the Old Testament. Yet the gospel calls us to follow a Savior who preached for us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you. The question of war and the involvement of Christians has therefore been with the church from the time of Christ and will puzzle new believers likely until the end of this age.

The early theologians of the Christian church lived in an empire which was founded and maintained by the sword. The glory that was Rome certainly was maintained by the Roman legion; well organized and well trained warriors. Although the thoughts of the early church fathers were not unanimous on the question of war, it does appear that there was never a universal pacifistic outlook. The most often quoted as a pacifistic father is *Origen of Alexandria (185 - 254 A.D.)*. Though Origen opposed church members fighting for the emperor, he is in fact on record saying that Christians should pray for the success of the Roman armies fighting in a just cause.<sup>3</sup> The issue was quickly brought to the forefront when a man who would become emperor, Constantine, converted to Christ in 312 A.D. Following the Edict of Milan in 313, Christianity was made a legal faith in the empire. From this point forward the church was somewhat univocal about the use of force; it should only be used as a last resort in a just cause. The writings of Augustine (354-426), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and John Calvin (1509 – 1564) in his refutation of the Anabaptists all bear out this trend in church teaching on war.<sup>4</sup> To the Biblical issues we must now turn.

### *Looking at War through a Biblical (Both Old and New Testaments) Grid*

#### *What we Believe about Creation*

We believe that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth (*Gen 1:1, Acts 17:1-3*) and that all he created was good (*Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31* – very good in reference to human beings). We know that the earth and the fullness thereof all, all the people that dwell here *belong to Him (Ps 24:1)*. He is the rightful owner of all things. Human beings are precious to God; they are uniquely created in his image and are of the highest value in the universe. Human beings belong to God; with this being true, we have no right to unjustly kill that which belongs to God. For in this context, we understand that murder is always wrong (*Gen 9:6* - whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image and *Ex 20:13* – You shall not *murder* רָצַח *rāṣaḥ* – murder, slay, kill)<sup>5</sup> In view of human beings being created in God's image, we have no right to wantonly kill that which God gives – life itself. *So actions like personal revenge, personal vengeance by way of violence, and murder find no excuse in Scripture (Matt 5:38-44 and Romans 12:17-21)*. For only God and the instruments of his wrath can take life – not individuals, never Christian individuals.

#### *What we Believe The Fall*

Unequivocally, without confusion, the Bible states that human kind is in a state of rebellion against God and his good laws. That if we are left to our own devices we persist in all manner of sin against God and one another. This reality of the sinfulness of humanity, that we are capable of and do heinous evil is perhaps one of the more demonstrable things about human being. For how many Rwandan, Sudanese, Bosnian genocides does it take to convince us that the heart of man is indeed bent on evil. For how many 9/11's, suicide bombers, crusades, and reigns of terror does it take to

<sup>3</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953). VIII.73

<sup>4</sup> For a good yet brief treatment on the history of the church and warfare see Darrell Cole, *When God Says War Is Right: The Christian's Perspective on When and How to Fight* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> R. Laird Harris, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999, c1980). *rāṣaḥ* is a purely Hebrew term. It has no clear cognate in any of the contemporary tongues. The root occurs thirty-eight times in the OT, with fourteen occurrences in Num 35. The initial use of the root appears in the Ten Commandments (*Ex 20:13*). In that important text it appears in the simple Qal stem with the negative adverb, "You shall not murder," being a more precise reading than the too-general KJV "thou shalt not kill."

shake us loose from the delusion that we are all just good people corrupted by unjust societies. The British journalist Steve Turner comments in his satirical poem *Creed* about modern humanity's view of itself.

We believe that man is essentially good.  
It's only his behavior that lets him down.  
This is the fault of society.  
Society is the fault of conditions.  
Conditions are the fault of society.<sup>6</sup>  
(Which I might add is made up of people.)

So this reality of the sin of humanity gives light to other Biblical passages, namely the role of the state in our lives for *Romans 13:1-7* stipulates how God bears his wrath and restrains evil in this current age. He gives the sword to the state, the civil authorities both through *policing actions* and when necessary *armies* raised in civil defense. So the state has a God given mandate is to restrain evil in light of Biblical teaching. So at this point we observe two truths. We should not murder others, we have no right to take life as individuals, yet the state is mandated by God to protect its people from aggression and the one who seeks to destroy life.

#### *What we Believe Redemption*

From eternity past the decree of God was to create a world out of which he would redeem a people for his very possession (*Titus 2:11-14*) who would magnify and exalt his glory on the earth. This would be accomplished as God sent his Son into the world, from the people of Abraham, to die on a cross for the sins of the people. The plan of God has been instituted so that the gospel is preached in all nations and that his chosen ones will respond as they hear it. Believers who are therefore redeemed by God are then called to obey God and live at peace with all as far as it is dependent upon them (*Romans 12:18*). The Christian who is called to govern then has a great interest in maintaining a society of a just peace and free conscience so that the gospel is free to go forth so that people might love the one true God and love one another. God has used force to maintain his decree in both the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament Israel defended itself and God preserved his people in a violent world so that this divine Son, Israel's promised Messiah, would be brought forth in the fullness of time (*Gal 4:4*) fulfilling the covenant promise of God to Abraham. War therefore was necessary and served two purposes in the Old Testament: first, the *preservation* of God's People and secondly a *demonstration* of God's protection and providence. In fact God's fighting on behalf of Israel is presented as an opportunity to praise and worship God (see *Psalms 24* for an example). In the New Testament Era, in light of the reality of human sin (see above) and love for neighbor there are times when the state must defend its people against the wickedness of men. *John Calvin* in laying out the duty of the magistrate (his word for statesmen or government official) says this:

*It is righteousness (justice) to take charge of the innocent, to defend and avenge them, and set them free: it is judgment to withstand the audacity of the wicked, to repress their violence, and punish their faults.*<sup>7</sup>

So there is a God ordained time for war, yet it should be both contemplated and executed with justice and right actions. War should never be fought to convert others to true religion and the way of the church should not be one of war. This state of warfare, we are told, will continue (via the mouth of Jesus, *Matt 24:6*) until the end of this age, and then the glorious work of God in re-creation/consummation shall come upon the earth.

#### *What we Believe Re-creation or Consummation*

At the end of the age, in the coming Kingdom of God, there awaits a future where all warfare will cease and justice will reign under King Jesus and his just reign. Both Old and New Testaments

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live without God?* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1996). 42-44.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV, XX, 9 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846).

describe this coming age of the consummation of all things. Listen to the wonders of what God will do in this coming Kingdom:

*Micah 4:1-3* It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his way and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many Peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, *neither shall they learn war anymore*; (emphasis added)

*Revelation 21:1-4* Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, *and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*" (emphasis added)

God created human beings in his image. They are of extreme value and their lives are not to be taken by our hands. Yet the sinfulness of human beings requires there to be order and justice so that virtue and goodness may be lived out peaceable under Christ. So that the gospel may be believed by people...our longing for a world free of violence will not be achieved in the way *imagined by John Lennon*, through some imagination of the goodness of the human heart, but rather through the triumph of the Son of God in the hearts of people and the ushering in of the Kingdom of God when all sin, death, war, and weeping shall cease. We both rejoice and look forward to this day! This is the Biblical view as I understand it. Now to a summary.

### **Just War Tradition – A Selectivist Position stated in terms of Public Policy**

The Christian Just War tradition finds its way Augustine where Christianity and Rome were united in the empire. The tradition continued in Aquinas<sup>8</sup> and later Calvin<sup>9</sup> where love for your neighbor and the state's duty to defend and protect the innocent was upheld. Both Catholics and Protestants have held to some version of Just War Doctrine throughout history and it has informed even the post-Christendom West's view of conflict until this day. The following is but a brief sketch of Just War Theory.<sup>10</sup>

#### *The Criteria Followed – Jus ad Bellum*

- *Public authority* – The first one means that only a legitimate government may wage war. Vigilantes and terrorists can't do it...people and citizens are to overcome evil with good, to love their enemies, while only public authority of the state can bear the sword of wrath against evil.
- *Just cause* – The second one means that war may be waged only to save innocent life, to make sure people can live decently, and to protect their natural rights. A war for evil purposes is itself immoral and wrong.
- *Right intention* – The third criteria means your just cause has to be your actual reason for going to war, not some other reason. To steal a country's natural resources or put their people to work as slaves.
- *Probability of success* – One should not march out to a slaughter.
- *Comparative justice* – The evils fought must justify killing

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, "Part II, Question 40," in *The Summa Theologica*. It is noted that Aquinas treats war under his section on *Charity*. He treats war under "Vices opposed to peace" in defending just wars.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin.

<sup>10</sup>This treatment follows the dialog in J. Budziszewski, *Ask Me Anything: Provocative Answers for College Students* (Colorado Springs, CO: THINK Books, 2004).

- *Proportionality* – that you have to have good reason to think the war will stop more evil than it causes.
- *Last Resort* – all other efforts have failed...WWII Germany had to be opposed.

One may ask if this means *we may murder for good reasons or just causes*. Author J. Budziszewski is helpful here in his book "Ask Me Anything: Provocative Answers for College Students"

"That's because murder is always wrong, even in wartime. The idea of these criteria isn't to figure out when murder is OK, but to figure out when killing is murder and therefore wrong. Christians are not allowed to say 'Let us do evil that good may result.' That's the world's way of thinking. Our job is to do the right thing, and let God take care of the results." "I think I see that," Javier said slowly. "But here's what I don't get. If a particular war is justified, then in that case it's OK to kill the enemy, right? So how can an act of killing in wartime ever be murder?" "Easy. For example, it's one thing to shoot soldiers, but it's another thing to blow up school buses. Do you understand?"<sup>11</sup>

#### *Manner of Fighting a Just War – Jus in Bello*

- *Discrimination* – not killing innocents non-combatants (In the authors opinion it appears that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were perhaps unjustified due to the mass destruction of non-combatants)
- *Proportionality* – not killing a whole village because you were invaded, tactics are just, in order to bring a just peace – using only the amount of force to restrain evil. Ambrose, an early Christian bishop, gave the following admonition - At the same time, the Christian should use no more force than necessary to subdue the attacker, for that person too is someone for whom Christ died. Charity thus justifies the resort to force in defense, not in self but of the other; yet at the same time it limits the force that can be used against the evildoer to what is necessary to end the evil."<sup>12</sup>

#### *A Summary of What I feel is a good Contemporary Christian Position from authors Feinberg and Feinberg*

No sane person, regardless of their position, wants war. But is war totally avoidable? We do not think it is. Ours is a fallen world, a world under Satan's power. This means there will likely be wars no matter how hard we try to avoid them. History and common sense bear this out, and so does Scripture.

Given these facts about human nature and the apparent unavoidability of war, we cannot see pacifism as a realistic position on war. As argued in our discussion of the biblical basis for pacifism, we do not believe Scripture mandates pacifism for all or even just for believers. Moreover, while we greatly value life, we believe there are religious and human values worth fighting for and even dying for, not least of which is protecting others and ourselves from genocide and from the enslaving regime of a totalitarian dictator.

Despite our rejection of pacifism, we do think it is important to limit the wars in which Christians may participate and how they may conduct themselves in those wars. Thus, we hold the just war theory in spite of the difficulties complex modern warfare presents it. We must add, however, that we would always uphold the right of conscientious objection for those who could not in good conscience participate in any war.<sup>13</sup>

#### *A Few Final Objections*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> James Turner Johnson, *Just Cause Revisited* (Ethics and Public Policy Center, September 1, 1998 1998, accessed February 3rd 2005); available from [http://www.eppc.org/publications/pubID.1998/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.eppc.org/publications/pubID.1998/pub_detail.asp).

<sup>13</sup> John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996, c1993). 381.

- *Probability of Success – You can never know for sure what an outcome will be and it is Utilitarianism to base the justice of one’s action upon outcomes. Reply: Even if a cause is just one may not always choose to fight. Jesus himself gives an example which speaks to prudence when facing an overwhelming enemy. Luke 14:31 – Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? It is wise not to lead your people to a slaughter in a just cause.*
- *The nature of Modern Warfare – Nuclear, Biological etc. make all wars unjust. Reply: This is a point well taken and many find it difficult if not impossible to justify the use of certain weapons according to the Just War Tradition. Whether the proliferation of nuclear weapons serves as a deterrent is a topic for another day.*
- *Terrorism and the lack of “states” makes it difficult to discriminate between civils and those we are fighting. Reply: Yes, this can put us at a disadvantage – terrorists who blend into civilian populations, despots and tyrants who use their own people as shields make it difficult to execute a just war (*Jus in Bello*) but we must do everything we can to use caution in not killing the civilian – even if it means a disadvantage in fighting – we have no right to fight in a immoral and evil way, even if our enemies choose to so do so.<sup>14</sup>*
- *Some Wars are Immoral – Yes, this is the point, we do not hold all wars to be just and the Church should serve as the conscience and chastiser of an unjust government – using non-violence and preaching against injustice and oppression in the world. If tomorrow, we were to invade Mexico – because we wanted to have their resources or their people to work for us, etc. I would object, dissent and call upon our government, in the name of Christ to cease this injustice. Mode of dissent of the church – non-violent – God has not given the sword to the people to use on the state.*

I pray this “Intersection” of truth and life has been a stretching, a wrestling, and an encouragement to you as you seek to walk with Christ in this world and love him with all your minds. A Bibliography is included for your further chewing on truth.

Submitted before our Lord – February 7, 2005. Soli Deo Gloria

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<sup>14</sup> For more on Christianity and Terrorism see Gene Edward Veith, *Christianity in an Age of Terrorism* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2002).

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