

On the Christian Theory of Just War

For the Christian any act of war must be an act of love.

Revised and updated October 2007

Rodney J. Marshall

Coram Deo Academy, Headmaster

Following you will find classroom-teaching notes on the Christian theory of just war. As with all topics, we seek to develop a distinctively Christian heuristic for evaluation. We begin by understanding that for the Christian any act of war must be an act of love because for the Christian every act must be an act of love.

When Lorraine ran from our sixth grade classroom crying into the arms of her mother, I knew something dreadful had happened. It was 1967 and Lorraine's Dad was at war an ocean away. Upon arrival at home, mother described how Platoon Captain Martz had died saving a draftee caught in enemy fire behind the lines. He raced his jeep straight into withering fire scooped up his fallen subordinate took shrapnel and died shortly after delivering the eighteen year old soldier to safety amongst his comrades in arms. Tears burned my cheeks when I dropped to pump off as many pushups as my skinny arms could muster, and drained back across my ears while reeling off the sit-ups intended to ready myself to wreck vengeance on behalf of my friend's fallen father. When I learned six years lay between then and eligibility to join the army, I wondered about the sorrow of this family now fatherless who sat just a few pews away at First Presbyterian Church of Wappingers Falls and attended Sunday school with me and my four older and younger siblings. "Where is Vietnam anyway?" The atlas showed a divided country squeezed onto the continent by the South China Sea. "What in the world, was Captain Martz doing at war for America over there? Did he die to make his family and our country safe?"

In junior high, I learned how the communists from whom we sought protection under our desks during air raid drills would be thwarted from dominating the whole world nation by nation like falling dominos by stopping them in Southeast Asia. My dad did not buy that theory but rather reasoned from the perspective of a war motivated by desire to secure the regions natural resources for economic gain. In high school, the debate heightened void of reason. One was either wrapped in red, white and blue, or burning it. President Nixon accused war protesters of un-Americanism for questioning why against their own will they should hurl bullets and napalm to destroy an enemy so called who seemed to pose no immediate danger to America and where the average life expectancy a freshly commissioned lieutenant was less than a week. Was this war justified? Moreover, was it right to burn villages filled with women, children, and old men to stop the enemy? By what means of reason could entering a war find justification and by what principles must we justly fight? No one seemed to have a well-organized answer for a church-going young man silent before the black and white TV screen watching to see if his number would come up in what turned out to be the last draft call.

The Christian theory of justifiable war provides a rubric or organized system for evaluation consistent with the Word of God and Christian intellectual tradition by which we must determine whether we enter a war and if we do how to prosecute it. Matthew 22:37 – 40 states, “...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself...” Brother John Raymond reasons, “In discussing the natural law, this author argues from individual rights to those of the State. Since an individual can defend himself against unjust aggression, so can the State. An individual is allowed to seek justice for an injury or loss therefore the State can use force to compel another nation to make reparation.” Therefore warring must be for love of God and neighbor supported by the natural law idea of the right to self-defense and restitution.

By the rise of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire, just or justifiable war theory emerged as the thinking of Christians. Borrowing from Cicero, other ancients and the Holy Bible, St. Augustine articulated the theory of just war later refined by Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. The following assumptions summarize their thinking to enable the contemporary Christian to evaluate past, current and future wars consistent with historic Christianity.

Just War Theory Practically Applied to Wars Past, Present and Future

1. War is defined as a state of conflict between two or more sovereign nations carried on by force of arms. Only an injury so grave that it outweighs the risks of war is justification for making war.
2. War exists because of sin.
 - a. List the seven deadly sins and a litany of unjust reasons for war illuminates the moral (immoral) landscape.
 - b. However, because such sinfulness exists, a nation must be prepared to defend its citizens as an act of love for them.
3. Theories of War
 - a. Pacifism – The perspective that use of force and especially deadly force is never right is only applicable to an individual-by-individual choice. National pacifism by rulers or refusal of citizens to participate in a justifiable war is wrong. Failure to carry out a just war may be the opposite of loving one’s neighbor. National rulers are duty bound to protect the peace of citizens.
 - b. Realism – The idea that war is always evil but necessary is an incorrect justification for the Christian. A Christian is prohibited from committing evil deeds. If war is always evil then it is always prohibited. It is not evil for a nation to defend its citizens by force of arms – in fact, it is the responsibility of rulers to defend the peace of its citizens and their lawful endeavors.

- c. Just War – When is war just? How can warfare be prosecuted justly? The just war tradition was developed by Augustine based on the thinking of Cicero and others in conjunction with Christian ideas about justice and charity. To Augustine, war needed to be an act of charity. Just war tradition was not developed as a tool of statecraft, a checklist for justifying predetermined aims, but as an aid to moral reasoning for Christian grappling with serious matters of violence and coercion. It informs the prophetic voice of Christians.

Just War Questions Need Affirmative Answers to Justify War

1. Is there a just cause for warfare? A war to defend a nation or people from an aggressor has never been questioned as a just cause except by those wrongly adopting pacifism. Just preemptive war requires a known condition in which a grave act of aggression is imminent. If a government knows that their nation or another is about to become a victim, it can act to prevent the injustice before it takes place. Just War Theory condemns unprovoked aggression or war for conquest and territorial or economic expansion.
 - a. To defend a nation's peace
 - i. Unprovoked attack
 - ii. Prevention from immanent attack
 - b. To defend the peace of an ally or a weak neighboring nation
 - c. To avenge wrongs – seek retribution for refusal to make amends for injuries caused
 - i. Injury to people
 - ii. Restoration of what was seized or destroyed
 - iii. Reparations
 - d. Grave injury to the honor or natural right of a nation
 - e. Grave injury under positive law (international law and treaties)
 - f. Not conquest
 - g. Not cruel thirst for blood, power or vengeance
2. Is the intention just? The war must have the right intention to restore or secure a fair peace for all parties involved. A nation must employ just motives for going into war. War must be engaged in such a way that upon attainment of a just peace hostilities cease.
 - a. Restoration of a just (fair) peace
 - b. Not territorial expansion through conquest
 - c. Not cruel subjugation
3. Is warfare the means of last resort? Other means of resolution such as diplomacy and economic pressure must have been reasonably exhausted before war becomes a just option.
 - a. Diplomacy
 - b. Economic pressure
 - c. Patience
4. Is the war lawfully declared by a legitimate authority? Only properly constituted authority such as a legitimate government can legitimately declare war, not individuals or militias or terrorist organizations.

- a. Formal declaration by constituted authority
 - b. Not individuals, militias etc.
 - c. The difficulty of terrorists – What legitimate authority do they represent?
5. Is the means of war a proportionate response to the wrong done?
- a. To destroy a nation for refusing to provide fair trade practices would not be proportionate
 - b. Enemy combatants must not be subjected to greater harm than is necessary to secure victory and peace
6. Will the immunity of non-combatants be protected? Military forces must respect individuals and groups not participating in the conflict and must abstain from attacking them.
- a. Combatants include all those who are engaged in the actual promotion of war.
 - i. Direct combatants are the fighters themselves
 - ii. Indirect combatants are the unarmed helpers of the soldiers in military ways such as transporters of supplies and weapons producers
 - iii. Military property can be confiscated or destroyed
 - iv. Public property can be occupied or movable property appropriated
 - b. Noncombatants include all those who are not engaged in the actual promotion of war.
 - i. Those people who are members of the enemy nation that are chaplains, medical personnel and civilians
 - ii. Neutrals who are not part of either warring party not involved in hostilities
 - iii. The indirect unintentional, unavoidable killing of noncombatants or neutrals is regrettably permissible
 - iv. The direct killing of noncombatants is murder
7. Is there a reasonable probability of success?
- a. War is not justified when self-annihilation is assured
 - b. To initiate war that may result in an unwinnable imbroglio is not justifiable.

Conclusion. The Christian theory of just war should be used both to evaluate when warfare is a legitimate and necessary act of love. It is the rubric by which authorities must justify avoiding warfare, for the legitimate entry into war and a just conduct of a legitimate war. War, a state of conflict between two or more sovereign nations carried on by force of arms must consider that only an injury so grave that it outweighs the risks of war is justification for making war. War exists because of sin. However, because such sinfulness exists, a nation must be prepared to defend its citizens as an act of love for them.

On the Christian Theory of Just War

For the Christian any act of war must be an act of love.

Just War Theory Practically Applied to Wars Past, Present and Future

Just War Questions	Scale 0 – 10 0 = no 10 = yes	Explain your answer
1. Is there a just cause for warfare?		
2. Is the intention just?		
3. Is warfare the means of last resort?		
4. Is the war lawfully declared by a legitimate authority?		
5. Is the means of war a proportionate response to the wrong done?		
6. Will the immunity of non-combatants be protected?		
7. Is there a reasonable probability of success?		
Total		A low total mitigates against and a high for a just war finding

