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Christian Traditions of Peace: Just War and Pacifism

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Discipleship and the Moral Life



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"But I say to you that hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt....Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:27-36).

"All these factors force us to undertake a completely fresh reappraisal of war" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Second Vatican Council, #80).

On October 7, 2001, the U.S. launched its first military initiative in the now ongoing “war on terrorism.” U.S. citizens found themselves once again faced with questions of war. What has Christian ethics to say to September 11th and this newest war?

War seems to be an ineradicable feature of the human condition. It is always there. However, since it is rooted in particular social and historical contexts, each war seems to present new variables, new challenges. Those who find themselves opposed to war repeatedly find themselves faced with or in the midst of conflicts that seem to shout: in this instance, killing is justified. Think of Hitler, Rwanda, and now the attack on the World Trade Center.

How do Christians think through the moral propriety of particular wars? Although they will not find easy answers, Christians struggling with these questions will find resources rooted deeply in the Christian tradition. Two traditions of thought have shaped Christian responses to war through the millennia. These are the traditions of just war and pacifism.

In the following, I will outline (far too briefly) the history and main components of the just war theory and Christian pacifism. Shaping the discussions of these positions will be the challenge that our editors have set—how do we think about questions of war and traditions of just war and pacifism from the perspective of discipleship? Behind our discussion will be very important questions: What does “discipleship” mean in our contemporary context? How do we “follow Jesus” and his call to make real the Reign of God on a day-to-day basis, in the ordinary, everyday contexts of life, family, work, and society in which we find ourselves? How, more specifically, does our commitment to discipleship affect the way that we work through difficult moral questions? How do we “follow Jesus” when engaging in combat, supporting state-sanctioned violence, or contributing to the development of institutions whose purpose (directly or indirectly) is to take human life?

For most of its history, the Catholic tradition has attempted to balance the belief that war can at times be morally justified with the Gospel mandates to follow a crucified Christ in loving one’s enemies, forgiving others, and being peacemakers. Through most of history, the balance has tipped in the direction of the just war theory, with pacifism being relegated to saints, eccentrics, and those within religious orders. Since the Second Vatican Council and the Church’s shift toward a more biblically informed theology, the balance has tipped in the other direction. In the writings of the Council, Popes Paul VI through John Paul II, and the U.S. Catholic bishops, the dominant theme is one of peacemaking and nonviolence, with an allowance made for war in the most limited of circumstances. Understanding this historical trajectory will assist those who seek to discern the call to Christian discipleship in the midst of a world of violence.

The Tradition of Just War

St. Augustine is traditionally credited with introducing just war reasoning into Christianity. But, though many equate the just war theory with Christianity, the notion of a “just” war did not originate with Christians. As in much of his work, St. Augustine adapted the notion from the classical world in which he was situated. According to Roland Bainton, in his classic history of *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*, the seeds of the idea of the just war doctrine can be found in the Greek philosopher Plato. The doctrine develops as it passes through the hands of Aristotle and the Roman Empire, so that by the time it gets to Augustine (via St. Ambrose, the bishop who converts him) its basic outline is essentially in place. St. Thomas Aquinas and others developed it further.

Growing out of Greek antiquity and utilized until contemporary times by many secular or non-Christian thinkers, the just war theory is often employed or understood as a general justification of the morality of war. However, those who study just war theory and authentically attempt to apply it argue that the purpose of the just war tradition is not to justify war generally but actually to limit it. John Howard Yoder, in his book *Nevertheless*, goes so far as to include it as a variety of Christian pacifism. The U.S. Catholic Bishops, in their 1983 attention-getting pastoral *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, likewise see the just war tradition as consistent with the Christian mandate to be peacemakers, insofar as just wars are fought solely to protect or restore peace.

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Thus, those who employ the just war tradition in good conscience in their decision-making about when military violence can be justified start from a presumption against violence and in favor of peace. A just war must be fought to overcome injustice, but always with an eye to restoring peace. At its best, the just war tradition helps to clarify and limit when force may be used and to minimize the violence of war itself. It does this through a set of criteria that help to determine which wars one ought to *reject* as not morally acceptable. If a particular war fails on any one of these criteria, it fails the test of moral legitimacy.

What are the criteria? They have evolved over the millennia, but for our purposes eight factors must be met for a war to be considered just and therefore morally appropriate. These eight to ten criteria (the total number and exactly how they are described varies depending on who is writing the list) are usually divided into two categories. The first category is referred to as the *jus ad bellum* criteria. These criteria determine the question of *justice* as one moves *toward war*. These criteria can be found in many places (the following list is taken from the U.S. Bishops' 1993 pastoral *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace*):

- Just Cause—force may be used only to correct a grave, public evil, i.e., aggression or massive violation of the basic rights of whole populations;
- Comparative Justice—while there may be rights and wrongs on all sides of a conflict, to override the presumption against the use of force the injustice suffered by one party must significantly outweigh that suffered by the other;
- Legitimate Authority—only duly constituted public authorities may use deadly force or wage war;
- Right Intention—force may be used only in a truly just cause and solely for that purpose;
- Probability of Success—arms may not be used in a futile cause or in a case where disproportionate measures are required to achieve success;
- Proportionality—the overall destruction expected from the use of force must be outweighed by the good to be achieved;
- Last Resort—force may be used only after all peaceful alternatives have been seriously tried and exhausted.

These criteria clearly attempt to limit the resort to force. All other avenues of resolution must be tried first. It recognizes that one-sided claims of justice—though strongly felt—are rarely true. As war is only properly a tool for the defense of the common good, it can only be waged by a legitimate authority, and one's goals must be achievable and proportional.

Critics of the just-war theory note how difficult these criteria are to apply. In how many situations, for example,

is resort to force truly a last resort? In how many situations have *all* other peaceful avenues been exhausted, giving them sufficient time to work? How does one measure "proportionality"? How far back in a situation of historic wrongdoings does one go to determine which side has the upper hand in terms of comparative justice? Critics argue that those who wish to pursue war often use the just war theory as a way of providing moral legitimation to an action that would be otherwise suspect. Advocates counter that the criteria provide one of the only authoritative methods for saying "no" to particular military endeavors.

The second category is referred to as the *jus in bello* criteria. These criteria specify the minimum moral requirements for acting *justly* in the conduct of *war*. These are:

- Noncombatant Immunity—civilians may not be the object of direct attack and military personnel must take due care to avoid and minimize indirect harm to civilians;
- Proportionality—in the conduct of hostilities, efforts must be made to attain military objectives with no more force than is militarily necessary and to avoid disproportionate collateral damage to civilian life and property;
- Right Intention—even in the midst of conflict, the aim of political and military leaders must be peace with justice, so that acts of vengeance and indiscriminate violence, whether by individuals, military units or governments, are forbidden.

These criteria seek to limit the damage done by military forces during war itself. In other words, according to the just war doctrine, while one might be justified by going to war, the justice of one party's claim could be erased by what they do in war. The rules of morality apply even within war.

How does the just war theory square with a commitment to Christian discipleship? Some advocates argue that if nothing else, there are times—albeit limited—when Christians have a moral responsibility to take up arms as a last resort, as a concrete way of embodying Jesus' command to love one's neighbor. Christian discipleship—service to the concrete other in ways that may entail suffering to ourselves—calls us to come to the aid of an innocent "neighbor" who is victim to an attack, to stand against tyranny and evil. Others, following Aquinas, argue from a notion of the common good. The state, Aquinas and others have argued, has been ordained by God to protect the common good. It has a right and duty to defend itself from attack, and Christians, as citizens of the state, have a moral responsibility to participate in public life and contribute to the common good.

Although the just war theory has been the primary factor shaping Catholic response to the question of war since the time of Augustine, within this century Catholics have begun to join other Christians in questioning whether just war is an authentically Christian position. They advocate returning to the pacifism that distinctively marked the first three centuries of the Christian tradition.



Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called Children of God

Historians concur that from the time of Jesus until the reign of Constantine in 313 AD, the early Church was pacifist. There is some evidence, from roughly 180 AD onward, of sporadic Christian participation in military professions, but until 300 AD Christian bishops, theologians, and writers were united in their condemnation of violence, killing, and military service.

For many contemporary Christians, this witness of the early Church is significant. Not only is the early Church considered by many to be uniquely positioned to interpret the Gospel message, similarities and differences between our social locations and that of our early sisters and brothers create a compelling argument in favor of peacemaking and nonviolence as imperatives for Christians.

In discussing Christian pacifism, a few comments are in order about what it is not. Some conflate pacifism with “passivism,” a position of “doing nothing,” “passively” submitting to evil done to oneself or others. Certainly Jesus’ own actions *vis a vis* the authorities that condemned him, as well as those of the early Christian martyrs, speak to a practice of *nonresistance* in the face of evil. But a deeper exploration of Jesus’ passion and the practice of martyrdom reveals that these ought rather be understood not in the negative—not primarily as simplistic passivity in the face of evil—but as complex, rigorous, powerful modes of action—of loving one’s enemies, as witnessing to God’s truth and power. It is important to read the actions of these figures as they understood them.

As the U.S. Catholic bishops note in their pastoral *The Challenge of Peace*: “The vision of Christian nonviolence is not passive about injustice and the defense of the rights of others; it rather affirms and exemplifies what it means to resist injustice through nonviolent methods” (#116). To read the stories of those who have practiced nonviolent resistance to evil is to read stories of immense effort, struggle, creativity, engagement, patience, and at times physical suffering and death. Christian pacifists work assiduously for peace and justice. Like the Christian martyrs, they are willing for their lives to be taken. They simply maintain that one means—that of killing—would contradict the end for which they work.

Alternatively, other critics of pacifism reduce it to a “rule-based ethic,” a simplistic and absolute rejection of war and violence. Christian pacifism, however, is actually not rightly understood as an abstract principle that is put forward as a response to the question of war and violence. As Lisa Cahill, in her book *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory*, notes the pacifism espoused and lived by Christians and Christian communities through the ages is fundamentally a corollary of a way of life. Historically, Christian pacifism has gone hand-in-hand with a serious commitment to communally embody Jesus’ call to realize and live in the kingdom of God. Christians are called to follow Jesus, to be merciful, perfect, and holy as God is merciful, perfect, and holy.

They are called, likewise, to live lives of mercy, forgiveness (“seventy times seven”), and compassion not only toward one’s neighbors, but more amazingly, toward one’s enemies. For those who attempt to live lives shaped day-in and day-out by these commitments, who strive to be shaped in body, mind, and spirit by practices of forgiveness, love, and service, killing becomes less and less possible.

This recognition that Christian pacifism is but one dimension of a life of discipleship points to an additional factor: pacifism or nonviolent resistance is the practice of a community. Although individuals must discern their own consciences, the practice of nonviolence is practically impossible apart from community. Without community it is difficult to be formed in the disciplines required to sustain a practice of nonviolence. Without the participation of many, it is difficult for nonviolence to be effective in the world. Stories of nonviolence—from the Christian martyrs, to Gandhi, to the civil rights movement—testify to its ineradicably communal nature.

A third criticism of pacifism is that it is “irresponsible,” that it is a position adopted by individuals who withdraw from society, who abdicate their responsibility to defend others or right injustice, who fail to contribute to the common good. Christian pacifists, however, would challenge some of the assumptions behind these claims. The early Christians, clearly, did not withdraw from society. They continued to understand themselves as Roman citizens and to follow the laws of their countries (laws that did not involve them in idolatry). They lived, worked, paid taxes, raised their families, and worshipped in full public view, while rejecting the war and violence of Roman culture.

While doing so, however, they offered an alternative and theological way of understanding the world. While they fulfilled the laws of their communities, they lived so as to witness to their belief that God, not the Emperor, rules the world. They sought to show how Christian practices—such as forgiveness, love of enemies, sharing of material goods, fasting, etc.—freed them from being controlled by the idols and gods that so often rule our lives (e.g., hatred, exclusivism, greed, gluttony, self-indulgence, etc.).

All in all, then, the witness of Christian pacifism from the early Church onward has been an attempt of Christian communities to follow Jesus, to “put on the mind of Christ,” and to live in the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed broke into historical reality in him, “fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). Traditional theology has proclaimed that with the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom of God has become “already” a reality in the world, although it is “not yet” fully realized. To follow Jesus is to work to live in the kingdom “already,” to create communities of love of neighbor, love of enemy, forgiveness, worship, including within one’s community the poor, the marginalized, and the enemy. As such, the kingdom “already” is not simply an interior conversion—it is inescapably social.



With Constantine all this changed. This change went hand-in-hand with a change in Christian social location. With the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which effectively established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christians gained social power. Many understood this as the historic vindication of the truth of the Christian faith, of the sacrifice of the martyrs, and saw themselves called to build a Christian society.

But the honeymoon did not last long, and within decades this new Christian society was under attack from without—by the “barbarians.” Augustine and others believed that the Church was required to defend the society that God had established. To fight the barbarians was equally to defend the faith. Pacifism and nonviolence became relegated to the internal sphere—as the proper feelings and attitudes one ought to have even while killing the enemy—or carefully circumscribed to the realm of those living the monastic life, those called to a “higher” or more authentic form of Christianity.

As Christianity remained allied with the state through the Middle Ages and beyond, the just war tradition remained its basic position on questions of warfare and violence. This position was challenged as early as the late Middle Ages by those communities that have come to be known as the “historic peace Churches”—those in the Anabaptist tradition (the Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, and Brethren) as well as the Quakers. The Anabaptists especially championed a reformation of the church and understanding of the meaning of discipleship for lay Christians that looked to the earliest communities of faith as their model.

Where Just War and Pacifism Meet: Vatican II and the U.S. Bishops

In the 20th century, many Catholics and Protestants have likewise begun to take seriously the claims of the historic peace Churches that the Christian gospel is one of nonviolence. Significant Catholic figures would include Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Gordon Zahn, the brothers Berrigan, and most recently John Dear. These, in the ecumenical company of compatriots across the Christian faith, have issued a compelling challenge to contemporary Christians in favor of pacifism.

The magisterium has taken note of this. The Second Vatican Council marked a decisive shift in its analysis of the questions of war and peace. *Gaudium et spes*, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, closes with a chapter on “The Fostering of Peace and the Promotion of a Community of Nations.” This title itself is significant. They certainly retain for governments “the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted,” and by reminding those in the military that as long as they fulfill their roles properly they should “regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples...making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace” (#79). Nonetheless, this short discussion is framed within a

long section on the Christian responsibility to be peacemakers. Moreover, the document also calls for the legal protection of conscientious objection. This is the first time in history that such a statement has appeared in a Catholic document of such prominence.

This two-fold approach to questions of war and peace is carried forward by the U.S. Catholic bishops in their 1983 pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response.” Easily three-fourths of the document is devoted to revisiting the Gospel message of peace, commending pacifism as a Christian way of life. Like the *Pastoral Constitution*, they seek to describe pacifism and just-war theory as complementary approaches within the Catholic tradition that both aim at peace. They retain for governments the right to defense and laud those who serve in the military as contributing to the common good. They employ just war theory as a tool for critiquing the nuclear arms race and as a way to provide a moral analysis of deterrence. But apart from this, the overriding message one comes away with is that the heart of the Christian faith is one of peace, and many have credibly questioned whether the magisterium can consistently maintain its commitment to both just war theory and Christian pacifism.

Thus it is that two days following the commencement of bombing in Afghanistan, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, through its then-president Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza, followed their traditional habit and issued a statement on the morality of the war. Their position is clearly stated: “Military action is always regrettable, but it may be necessary to protect the innocent or to defend the common good.” But if one goes to the USCCB website for materials surrounding the attack on the World Trade Center, one finds overwhelmingly materials on peacemaking and anti-violence.

Charting a path forward for individual Christians and Christian communities remains no easy task. Our first step must be to remember that we are called to be disciples, to make real the Gospel message of peace, forgiveness, and God’s reign over all in the actions of our day-to-day lives in the midst of our communities and countries. Our responsibility as Christians is to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel in the world, as we discern how we are to love both our neighbors and our enemies.



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