

When is a War a Just War?

The Augsburg Confession XVI affirmed, “Christians may without sin occupy civil offices or serve as princes and judges, render decisions and pass sentence according to imperial and other existing laws.” Christians may “punish evildoers with the sword, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, take required oaths, possess property, be married, etc.”

This thinking about just wars was not new. In the fourth century BC the Greek philosopher Aristotle assumed that, because just rulers were expected to keep the peace, they had the right to wage war. The Christian bishop Augustine (354-430 AD) also took this for granted. He affirmed the Scriptural principle that citizens were expected to obey their governments. Christian thinking was guided by the view that God has ordained lawful authority. Since Marsiglio of Padua (c. 1275 to 1342 AD) the view has become current in so-called “democracies” that the state derives its authority from beneath, from the people. However, Christians would maintain that, even when governments have been elected by a majority of the people, God has ordained those governments (R 13:1-7).

Augustine stated conditions that governments should not use war to avenge wrongs, to make amends for wrongs that its subjects have inflicted, or to recover what the nation had previously seized unjustly. The chief issue was the intention of any war. It could not be considered just simply to inflict harm. Augustine also said that the restoration of peace after a just war was a primary motive. For Augustine, its purpose and its authority limited a just war.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who is still considered a foremost dogmatist in the Roman Catholic Church, developed Augustine’s ideas. He laid down three conditions that he had taken from Aristotle on any war that might be considered just. These were national defence, the punishment of some fault, and the furthering of good and avoidance of evil. Later theorists about when a war was just added two more criteria: the war had to be fought as a last resort and fought in a proper manner. In other words, innocent persons should not be killed.

This article is not intended to be a political statement, but a guide for Christian thinking. Not all Christians will agree on the application of these principles. Pacifism and Christian conscience are also not considered here. Let me comment on the criteria for a just war from a Christian standpoint. Here they are presented as five.

By way of introduction it should be observed that, these days, when the mass media are so influential, one of the first casualties in any war is the truth. Often citizens are misinformed about the real aims and objectives by government propaganda. However, it has to be said that where a citizen may have doubts, he has to be sure that any disobedient action against his own government is done in higher duty to God, and he can expect to suffer consequences of resistance to his government. A Christian has to remember that, when he has doubts, his doubts will probably be outweighed by his certain duty to obey his government.

1. A war is just if it is an attempt to defend an undoubted right that has been violated. In other words, **a just war must have just reasons**. The reasons should not be merely selfish national interest or a desire to subjugate others for the personal popularity of people in government. It should not be fought for the sake of economic or expansionist aims. Revenge, aggression, conquest, and ideological supremacy should not be reasons for a just war.

2. **A just war should only be fought only as a last resort**, after all diplomacy, compromise, and other peaceful means of settling a dispute have been exhausted. This recognises that God created human life in His own image, and, although the killing of enemies in warfare is not murder, human lives are precious and should not be taken indiscriminately. It recognises that war is a terrible thing. Some argue that a “just cause” implies the condemnation of all aggression, even to forestall a worse situation, and argue that only defensive wars are legitimate.

3. A just war is one that has been **undertaken by lawful authority**. This is similar to the principle in society that a citizen may not take the law into his own private hands. Joab was a military commander, but, when he killed a personal enemy in peacetime, in revenge, he was accountable for murder. Soldiers fight in a just war under the authority of constituted government. It should be recognised that the use of force is an instrument of peace and good order. God has given governments the power of the sword, and swords are not used to caress people, but to kill them. “[The state] is God’s minister for your benefit. But, if you do wrong, you should be afraid, because it does not bear the sword for nothing. It is God’s minister, an avenger that is an agent of wrath to anyone who does wrong.” (Rom 13:4-5). Terrorists who use weapons to kill civilians are pirates or brigands, and Christian citizens call on their governments to resist them. Although force is used in a just war, the violence should not be excessive. One political issue that is very unclear, as it was in the 1930s with the League of Nations, is what authority a body such as the United Nations really has over a country like Australia. Another difference is that, years ago, wars were fought after they were formally declared. Nowadays hostilities often begin without a formal declaration of war by a government in power. Strategists reckon on surprise to gain an advantage at the outset of war.

4. A war is just if it **offers a reasonable hope of victory with justice**. A just war has **limited objectives**, and is fought with good intentions, without the purpose of utterly humiliating the enemy. The final moral objective should be peace. Therefore the aim of unconditional surrender, unjust reparations, the destruction of a nation’s economy or political institutions are unwarranted objectives. A just war is not drawn out after due satisfaction has been offered. The conditions of peace may not be crushing, unless such severity is necessary for present self-defence. Another sad aspect in modern times is that usually only people in a defeated country are likely to be tried for war crimes. This is an aspect of the principle of love to the neighbour. It is unjust to go into a war without giving thought to the restoration of the moral order in a defeated country. In a war there are priorities in love. The duty to obey the government overrides love for the enemy in battle. However, a wounded enemy still has a claim on a soldier’s love. The Christian principle of love for the neighbour means that, after the war, justice should be restored in the country of the enemy as well. The good that the war aims to achieve should outweigh the evil that the war will bring about. It is foolish to go to war if the result is likely to be defeat or still worse conditions after the war.

5. A just war should be waged with humanitarian concerns. In other words, **a distinction should be made between**

combatants and non-combatants. As it is wrong for a government to harm its own peaceful citizens, so it is unjust to strike down citizens of the enemy nation who are not contributing to the conflict. These include prisoners of war, military casualties, and all civilians who are not participants in the war. Theorists call this “selective immunity.” However, it has to be pointed out that, with the expansion of modern weaponry, the actual soldiers, less than ever before, make their own weapons. Many civilians are engaged in modern war efforts. Soldiers have to be equipped, fed, and the wounded tended as part of the overall war effort. Modern weapons have had an increasing tendency to strike non-combatants, as in the mass bombing of whole cities during the Second World War. Many conventional bombs do not easily discriminate, and neither did the two nuclear bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Arrangements should be made to avoid mass slaughter. This is another way of saying that, although war is violent, the **method** of it must be just. There is a place for the Geneva Convention and international law. Total or unlimited war conflicts with the principles of a just war. Some serious thinkers raise doubts whether the availability of chemical, bacteriological, and nuclear weapons, with their indiscriminate harm to civilians as well as to soldiers, calls for the theory about a just war to be revised. In modern warfare the soldiers themselves are often better protected than their families, whom they leave to go to battle. This implies that the weapons used in a just war should be limited to what is needed to repel the aggression and deter future attacks. The issue has been muddied by the increase of terrorist activity. Such people, who care nothing for lawful authority, are often willing to strike peaceful citizens as part of their objectives.

In the light of this, Christian thinkers should assess whether an attack on Iraq would mean that it is a just war. We all need to pray fervently for a peaceful resolution, and for the future of all countries in the dispute.

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