

# Christianity, Just War, and Military Ethics

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## *Introduction*

The just-war tradition has enjoyed something of a renaissance over the last forty years. Michael Walzer's seminal *Just and Unjust Wars* from 1977, the US Catholic Bishops' influential pastoral letter on war and peace from 1983, and President George H. W. Bush's explicit invocation of just-war categories before and during the first Gulf War in 1991 are three instances that have helped make just-war criteria a central part of the public discourse about war. Just-war criteria also form the backbone of the «Responsibility to Protect» doctrine of the United Nations, and they have become a key feature in ongoing philosophical debates about military ethics. The latter debates include the heated controversy – fueled not least by contributions from philosopher Jeff McMahan – over whether the justice of war can be judged apart from the ethics of the way in which it is waged and vice-versa.<sup>1</sup>

In the following, we will explore, however briefly, what the exact contribution of the *Christian* just-war tradition is to the field of military ethics. While just-war thinking has roots in Greek thought, and finds parallels in so to speak all other religious traditions, it is the Christian discourse on the rightness of us-

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from Michael Walzer's and the US Catholic Bishops' texts can be found in Gregory Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Endre Begby (eds.), *The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 642–652 and 669–682. For George H. W. Bush's use of just-war doctrine, see Daniel R. Heimbach, "The Bust Just War Doctrine: Genesis and Application of the President's Moral Leadership in the Persian Gulf War", in: Meena Bose and Rosanna Perotti (eds.), *From Cold War to New World Order* (Westwood: Greenwood, 2002), pp. 441–464. The main elements of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine can be found on several web sites, including <http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/> and <http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/ICISS%20Report.pdf>. For a discussion of Jeff McMahan's revision of just-war doctrine, with several references to his works, see Henrik Syse, "The Moral Equality of Combatants", in: James Turner Johnson and Eric Patterson (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Military Ethics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 259–270.

ing armed force that has had the strongest influence on what we today call the just-war tradition or just-war theory. Therefore, the specifically Christian element is worth exploring as such.<sup>2</sup>

We argue that the relationship between Christian moral thought and the waging of war can be summed up in three words: disengagement, paradox, and ethics. Let us explain what we mean by each of these three terms.

## *Disengagement*

In its early days, as Christianity grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire, Christians mostly saw themselves as outsiders to the affairs of the state. Awaiting the second coming of Christ, and seeing themselves as a community bound together not by politics or ethnicity, but by charity and common faith, the taking up of arms was simply not a central concern. Gradually, this changed, not least as the number of converts grew and the question of whether one could serve in the Roman army came up for more and more people.

Several early theologians from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, such as Origen and Tertullian, recommended against Christians embracing soldiery, and most of what they relatively briefly wrote on the issue can be labeled pacifist. However, historical records reveal that there were many Christians within the armed forces even before Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and the ethos of being a good citizen – and thus also a loyal soldier – seems to have been widespread. By the time Bishop Ambrose wrote on war in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, an acceptance that the sword may be used in defense of the innocent and the polity had indeed taken hold, even if the peaceful disposition of the Christian and of Christianity were repeatedly emphasized by an influential writer such as Ambrose.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the increasing acceptance of soldiering and the army, the main attitude coming out of early Christianity, up until and including much of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was one of disengagement. Arguably, this attitude has remained an integral element of much of the Christian just-war tradition ever since. Of course, when the Roman Empire became officially Christian, and Christian rulers came into power, war had to be engaged with, as a topic and as a reality, and not just as a concern of someone else. Hence, military virtues, such as valor and bodily courage, were also extolled in many Christian settings. Yet, there is an underlying

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<sup>2</sup> Parallels to just-war thinking in other traditions are explored in Gregory Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Nicole Hartwell (eds.), *Religion, War, and Ethics: A Sourcebook of Textual Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> This development is well chronicled and explained in James Turnes Johnson, *The Quest for Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), ch. 1; see also Reichberg, Syse, and Begby, *op.cit.*, ch. 6.

ing sense in much of the tradition that the military affairs of the state are not truly central to the Christian mission. We find this famously expressed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by St. Augustine, one of the most important and influential Christian proponents of the idea of just war. He emphasized that peace, not war, is the aim of the Christian life, that war should be waged as a lamented necessity, not as something to be pursued as valuable in itself, and that Christians should display love rather than hate or lust of revenge and domination when they wage war.<sup>4</sup> From this follows a certain «at-arm's-length» attitude to war, which certainly has ramifications for military ethics. It comes out quite markedly in the emphasis found on «right intention» in Christian just-war ethics. The core message is that war should not be waged with total abandon. It should be tempered by peaceful dispositions and by having peace as one's aim.

While there have been many examples of starkly opposite attitudes to such disengagement in the history of Christianity, not least among millenarian Christian movements that have linked war with the battles of the «end times» or battles against the «absolute enemy» (witness much of the Radical Reformation<sup>5</sup>), the mainstream of the Christian just-war tradition has been clearly different on this score. It has been marked by a certain disengagement rather than full-throttled support of war.

## *Paradox*

Secondly, there lies a paradox at the core of the Christian Just War tradition. On the one hand, the New Testament strongly recommends attitudes of forgiveness, turning the other cheek, and abstaining from violence. On the other hand, this very same tradition values sacrifice and defense of the weak. There is also in New-Testament ethics an encouragement to be a good citizen and to give to the authorities their proper due.

This ambivalence, linked to the «disengagement» discussed above, comes out in much of the Christian just-war tradition. The Christian is and should be *fully in this world*, and should defend the integrity of the state and the safety of one's fellow human beings. At the same time, the means and methods of the individual Christian ought to be different from those of outward force, with an emphasis on love, forgiveness, and non-violence. Again, the criterion of right intention constitutes an attempt to solve this riddle: Yes, war may be waged, but never for selfish gain, cruel revenge, or lust for domination. The need to have a

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpts from Augustine's works in which we can find this attitude can be found in Reichberg, Syse, and Begby, *op.cit.*, ch. 7, see especially the excerpts from books 4 and 19 of *The City of God*, pp. 72, 78–79.

<sup>5</sup> See Reichberg, Syse, and Begby, ch. 26.

strict criterion of just cause as well as an insistence on proportional use of force, with force being seen as a last resort, reflects the same attempt to balance these two sets of requirements, which on the face of it come across as, indeed, something of a paradox – a paradox that has to be embraced rather than abandoned.

## *Ethics*

The aforementioned reflections lead us to our third and overarching point, namely, that questions of war cannot be disentangled from ethics. Arguably, this is the Christian just-war tradition's most enduring contribution to the philosophy of war: that waging war without moral considerations or qualms ignores the very nature of war.

In the early Christian thinkers, we see this especially in their constant fear that war is potentially destructive of virtue.<sup>6</sup> Where the Greek and Roman civilizations, which so much of Christianity grew out of, largely saw war as an unavoidable facet of human life, bringing glory and victorious conquest as much as death and destruction, Christianity instills a deep-seated *worry* about war (admittedly with roots back to Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero). Indeed, the Christian just-war tradition, by being thus worried about not only the outer but also the inner destructiveness of war, insists on linking war intimately with basic questions of human morality. These moral questions include the proper limits to human power, how to pursue reconciliation rather than conflict, and the way in which each individual can maintain his or her integrity, virtue, and conscience in the midst of warfare.

## *Conclusion*

So, if we ask what the Christian just-war tradition has contributed to how we think about war, and more specifically to military ethics, these three elements give us much of the answer. Firstly, the core of Christian just-war theorizing represents a certain *disengagement* from war, not seeing it as a perfect means, nor as an aim in itself, but rather as a necessity in an imperfect world. Secondly, it carries with it a *paradox* or a *tension*, between an attitude of self-effacing charity on the one hand and an attitude of active protection and loyal citizenship on the other. And thirdly – largely as a result of the former two attitudes – it links the whole idea and practice of war with *ethics*, both in the sense of moral character and in the sense of rules and regulations for warfare. And so this tradi-

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<sup>6</sup> Book 22 of Augustine's *Contra Faustum* is a case in point; see the excerpt in Reichberg, Syse, and Begby, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

tion comes to the conclusion that war cannot be waged rightly and properly without due attention to such deeply ethical concerns as the legitimacy of authority, the rightness of one's cause, the uprightness of one's intentions, and the proportionality and discrimination of one's employment of force. While there are significant differences of emphases and opinions throughout the Christian just-war tradition, elements of these three ideas remain in one way or another at its core, marking it off from other Christian and non-Christian ideas about warfare.

It is certainly the case that the just-war tradition gives us an invaluable vocabulary and framework for discussing the morality of war. That is true, quite apart from its Christian moorings and bearings. Yet, we claim that its more distinctly Christian elements – as we find them expressed in the tradition from Ambrose and Augustine, via Aquinas, to Vitoria and Suarez, just to mention a few central figures – reminds us of certain basic moral attitudes without which, we would hold, the tradition loses much of its vitality and meaning.

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