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The Christian Perspective on War

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Abstract: This paper offers a comprehensive and critical exploration of the Christian perspective on war through theological, biblical, historical, and ethical lenses. It examines the tension between the Old Testament's accounts of divinely sanctioned warfare and the New Testament's radical ethic of peace and nonviolence. The study analyzes key ethical paradigms embraced by Christian thinkers—activism, pacifism, and selectivism—highlighting their theological justifications and implications. Central attention is given to the development of Just War Theory, from its foundational articulation by Augustine and Aquinas to its modern applications in addressing nuclear warfare, terrorism, and humanitarian interventions. Eastern Orthodoxy's approach is examined as a model of tragic necessity, emphasizing war's toleration rather than glorification. Ultimately, the study affirms that Christian ethics perceive war as a result of human fallenness, only permissible under strict moral constraints, never as an ideal. It concludes that Christians are called to be peacemakers, actively pursuing justice while rejecting violence as a normative means for resolving conflict.

Keywords: Christian Ethics, War, Pacifism, Just War Theory, Activism, Peace, Violence

1. Introduction

War has always been a painful reality of human history and, at the same time, a major ethical challenge for religious thought. Christianity, as a religion that proclaims peace and love for one's neighbor, has over the centuries developed a complex view of war, seeking to reconcile the Gospel message of nonviolence with the unavoidable reality of conflict in a world marked by sin and injustice. This perspective is inherently multidisciplinary, bringing together elements of biblical theology—both Old and New Testament—, church history, which traces the evolution of Christian attitudes toward participation in warfare, political philosophy, through the development of just war theory, and sociology, analyzing the impact of war on society and the role of Christians in either promoting peace or supporting military action.

Today, more than two thousand years after the advent of Christianity, the ethics of war remain a pressing issue. Contemporary conflicts—from civil wars to the threat of global war—bring back urgent questions such as: Can a Christian participate in armed conflict? Is any war morally justifiable? Are there contradictions between the divine commands of the Old Testament and the peaceful message of the New Testament? Christian churches, theologians, and ordinary believers attempt to answer these questions by drawing on biblical revelation, the teachings of the Church Fathers, and ethical reflection accumulated throughout Christian tradition.

To explore this subject rigorously, we will examine the Christian perspective on war across several thematic sections. First, we will offer a comparative analysis of war attitudes in the Old and New Testaments, highlighting the tensions and continuities between the two. The Old Testament recounts numerous wars—some even commanded by God—whereas the New Testament brings forth a radical message of love for enemies and peace, apparently incompatible with violence. Next, we will discuss three major ethical positions Christians have historically taken in response to the dilemma of war, commonly referred to as activism, pacifism, and selectivism in scholarly literature. After that, we will turn to the tradition of the just war theory (*bellum iustum*), formulated in Late Antiquity by theologians such as Augustine and later developed by Thomas Aquinas and others. We will describe the conditions that an armed conflict must fulfill to be considered morally justified from a Christian standpoint. These include classical criteria such as just cause, legitimate authority,

last resort, and proportionality, which became normative in Western Christian thought. We will also note the nuances of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which did not develop an official theory of just war, but instead viewed war as a necessary evil, tolerated under the principle of *economia*.

Finally, the paper will conclude with an analysis of the current relevance of Christian war ethics, exploring how traditional principles apply in modern contexts (such as weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, or ideological wars), and what role Christian values (Rotaru, 2024, pp. 301-318) play today in promoting peace and justice.

Our aim, therefore, is to offer an academic and nuanced synthesis of how Christianity perceives the reality of war: as a tragedy resulting from human fallenness, and occasionally as a moral duty to protect the innocent, but never as an ideal to be pursued. As one contemporary author noted, "Christian theology, from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, has identified reasons why a war may be just, but never one that is holy" (Neamțu & Papahagi, 2022, p. 185). With this foundational view—that war can at most be justified under strict conditions, but never considered sacred or inherently good—we now turn to the biblical foundations of the Christian attitude toward war.

2. Old Testament vs. New Testament: Continuity and Contrast in the Attitude Toward War

The Bible represents the starting point for any Christian theological reflection on war. However, Scripture does not speak with a single voice on this issue. At first glance, a pronounced contrast emerges between the Old and New Testaments regarding divine commands related to violence and warfare. On the one hand, the Old Testament records numerous wars involving the people of Israel, some of which are not merely permitted but directly commanded by God. On the other hand, the New Testament—especially through the teachings of Jesus Christ—delivers a radical message of love for enemies**,** forgiveness**,** and nonviolence, even calling upon His disciples to turn the other cheek when attacked.

This difference has generated debates and confusion throughout Christian history. How can the same God command the annihilation of enemies under the Old Covenant, yet command their love under the New Covenant? Some, such as the second-century heretic Marcion, went so far as to claim that the "vengeful and bloodthirsty" God of the Old Testament was entirely different from the God of the New Testament, who is loving and merciful—a conception firmly rejected by the Church as contrary to the Christian faith. The Church affirms the unity of God and the inspiration of both Testaments, prompting exegetes and theologians to develop nuanced understandings of these differences by considering the historical context and the progressive unfolding of divine revelation**.**

The Old Testament reflects an era when the chosen people, Israel, frequently engaged in warfare, whether for the conquest of the Promised Land or for the defense of its identity and survival. The Old Testament recounts what are often called the "wars of the Lord"—battles undertaken with the conviction that God fought alongside Israel (e.g., the conquest of Canaan under Joshua). Technical terms like *herem* (ban or devoted destruction) describe the total annihilation of enemies as offerings dedicated to God (see the command to destroy the city of Jericho in Joshua 6). A particularly emblematic passage is the divine command to King Saul: "Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant" (1 Samuel 15:3, ESV). Such commands for total destruction—including noncombatants—present an image of a God who at times sanctions extreme violence, a notion that can appear shocking to Christian readers familiar with the New Testament's message of love. As one theologian observes, *"*This type of divine command depicts God in a completely different light than that found in the New Testament" (Mihăilă, 2010).

In contrast, Jesus rebukes Peter when he draws his sword to defend Him: "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52, ESV). In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ proclaims: "Love your enemies… do good to those who hate you" (Matthew 5:44, ESV). Therefore, while the Old Testament appears to tolerate or even command war in certain contexts, the New Testament seems to implicitly prohibit it through its ethic of love and forgiveness.

It is important to note that in the Old Testament, Israel's wars were closely tied to salvific history. God is portrayed as a just Judge who punishes idolatrous and corrupt nations, sometimes through war. For example, the conquest of Canaan is interpreted theologically as divine judgment upon the Canaanites for their long-standing iniquities (cf. Deuteronomy 9:4–5). At other times, war serves to liberate God's people from oppressors, as in the Book of Judges, which recounts numerous wars of deliverance led by charismatic leaders against invading forces.

Modern scholars have used the term "holy war" to describe these Old Testament conflicts in which God's direct involvement is affirmed, from rallying the people to fight in the name of the Lord to ritual acts (such as purifying the army, bringing the Ark of the Covenant into battle, or offering sacrifices beforehand). While the term holy war is not explicitly found in the biblical text, scholars such as Walter C. Kaiser Jr. emphasize that Scripture speaks rather of "Yahweh's wars", that is, wars fought at God's command or with His participation (Kaiser, 2008).

Nevertheless, even within the Old Testament, we find pacifist themes and the ideal of future peace. The biblical prophets often denounce gratuitous violence, cruelty, and injustice, even though they acknowledge the legitimacy of national defense in some cases. Remarkably, the prophets Isaiah and Micah foresee a messianic age of universal peace, when "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" (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3).

Christians have interpreted this vision as referring either to the spiritual era of the Church, inaugurated by Christ—where the Gospel transforms violent hearts into peaceful ones—or eschatologically, to the final Kingdom of God, where Christ's peace will reign in full. Some early Christians saw a partial fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy even in their own communities. For instance, Justin Martyr, writing around A.D. 150, declared: "We who formerly murdered one another now refrain from making war even on our enemies" (Falls, 1948, pp. 74-75, Apology I, 39). This statement reflects the early Christian understanding that Isaiah's call to peace was being realized in the life of the Church, where believers abandoned violence and accepted martyrdom rather than killing.

3. New Testament Ethics and the Early Church on War

The New Testament does not include any accounts of earthly wars fought by Christians—understandably, since early Christianity emerged as a non-political, unarmed religious community. Instead, the message of the New Covenant is centered on peace, love, and forgiveness. Christ is called the "Lord of Peace" (2 Thessalonians 3:16), and at His birth, the angels proclaim, "Peace on earth among those with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14).

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) raises ethical standards to a radical level, condemning not only murder but even unchecked anger, and urging believers not to respond to evil with violence: "But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). Furthermore, the command to "Love your enemies… and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44) stands in stark contrast to the concept of destroying one's enemies. The New Testament clarifies that the Christian's battle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil (cf. Ephesians 6:12). Although military imagery is present, it is spiritualized: the Christian is called to be a "soldier of Christ," but metaphorically—equipped with the "armor

of God", including the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:13–17). These passages emphasize that the Christian's primary conflict is not with human enemies, but with sin and the devil.

An important aspect of New Testament teaching is the attitude toward military service. Although Jesus and the apostles do not explicitly call for rebellion against Roman authority or conscientious objection to military service, certain episodes suggest that early Christians were cautious about violence. For instance, when soldiers ask John the Baptist what they should do, he does not tell them to leave the army, but advises: "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14). This implies toleration of military roles—provided ethical behavior is maintained.

In the Book of Acts and the epistles, we find examples of soldiers converting to Christianity, such as Cornelius the centurion, who becomes the first Gentile baptized (Acts 10). There is no clear indication that Cornelius was required to leave the military. These details have been interpreted in two ways: some argue that the New Testament does not prohibit military careers, thus leaving room for Christian participation in the army. Others emphasize that the ideal of Gospel nonviolence transcends the specific historical context and that the early Church generally discouraged the shedding of blood, even if it did not impose a universal prohibition.

4. The Early Church and War

In the first three centuries, before the Christianization of the Roman Empire, the Church was largely pacifist in practice or at least skeptical toward military involvement. Numerous patristic writings confirm that early Christians typically did not enlist in the military, and if already enlisted, many left the army upon converting to Christianity.

Tertullian, in his treatise *On the Crown*, argues that a Christian cannot wear the military crown (symbolizing loyalty to the emperor) without serving two masters—Christ and Caesar. His famous statement declares: "The Lord, in disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier"—a reference to the scene in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:52), interpreted as a general prohibition against Christian use of the sword.

Origen, another major theologian, offers a profound justification for refusing military service. Comparing Christians to pagan priests who were exempt from military duty, Origen claims that Christians fight differently—through prayer. He writes: "We help the emperor more by our prayers than do those soldiers who shed blood… We do not fight under his command, even if he demands it of us, but we fight for him by praying. We form an army of piety, offering prayers to God" (Chadwick, 1953, p. 509). This testimony is deeply revealing: Origen acknowledges that some wars may have just causes and that empires require defense. However, he insists that Christians fulfill their duty as "priests" for society, seeking peace through intercession rather than bloodshed.

The synthesis of biblical and patristic evidence is clear: early Christianity inherited from Judaism the belief in God's sovereignty over history—including over war and peace—but with the full revelation of divine love in Christ, the moral ideal shifted toward the elimination of hatred and interpersonal violence. War, from a Christian standpoint, remains tied to sin and the estrangement of humanity from God. Thus, the Church cannot glorify war; it views war not as something inherently good, but as a tragedy of fallen human existence. While the Old Testament records divine permission or even orchestration of war for purposes of judgment or pedagogy, the New Testament calls believers to deal with evil through patience, self-sacrifice, and spiritual combat, not through revenge.

Christians are called to live according to the ethics of the Kingdom of God—which is peace and love—even though, until the full establishment of that Kingdom, "wars and rumors of wars" will not cease (cf. Matthew 24:6). The next section will explore how, faced with historical realities, Christians developed varied ethical positions regarding participation

in war—oscillating between the Gospel ideal of nonviolence and the necessity of defending order and protecting the vulnerable.

5. Christian Ethical Perspectives on War: Activism, Pacifism, and Selectivism

Throughout history, Christian thinkers have developed three major ethical paradigms in response to the problem of war. These perspectives seek to answer a crucial question: *Can a Christian morally participate in armed conflict, and under what conditions?* The three classical positions are typically referred to as activism, pacifism, and selectivism (Geisler, 2010, p.220).

5.1. Activism (Militant Patriotism)

Activism—also known as the view of unconditionally just war or radical patriotism—holds that participation in war is always morally justified when commanded by legitimate civil authority. According to this view, any war declared by the state becomes a duty for the Christian citizen. The principle of absolute obedience to state authority is central. As one author summarizes: "Activism claims that it is always right for a Christian to go to war" (Geisler, 2010, p. 220).

The biblical foundation for activism is often Romans 13, where Paul writes: "There is no authority except from God… the ruler does not bear the sword in vain. He is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:1–4, ESV). Activist theologians, such as Norman Geisler, argue that God instituted government after the Flood by giving Noah the "sword" of justice (Genesis 9:6), implicitly authorizing the use of military force to maintain order. Old Testament examples—such as Abraham rescuing Lot with armed men (Genesis 14)—are cited to show that armed action can be divinely approved. The core belief of activism is: "The Christian owes total obedience to the secular authority; going to war at its command is obedience to God, who gave the state the sword."

5.1.1. Critique of Activism

Critics of this view point out that such unconditional obedience eliminates personal moral discernment. Under the banner of loyalty, Christians might be drawn into immoral or unjust wars. History records tragic examples—such as priests blessing weapons in wars of aggression or nationalistic churches endorsing bellicose ideologies. Thus, extreme activism is rarely endorsed by modern theologians. It implies that "any war is just if it is my country's war"—a view incompatible with the moral witness of the Church. Still, elements of activist thinking have surfaced during periods of close church–state symbiosis—for example, in the late Byzantine Empire or in some modern nation-states where patriotic loyalty was conflated with divine obedience.

5.2. Pacifism (Absolute Nonviolence)

In sharp contrast to activism, pacifism maintains that Christian participation in war or violence is never morally justified. The term stems from pax (peace) and denotes an ethical stance of absolute nonviolence. Pacifists believe that Christ's teachings and personal example forbid the use of lethal force, even in self-defense. Pacifist Christians take the Gospel commands discussed earlier very seriously: love for enemies, turning the other cheek, and the prohibition on drawing the sword. For them, Jesus' self-sacrifice—refusing to defend Himself or call down angels during His arrest (cf. Matthew 26:53)—is the ultimate model for facing evil: Do not repay evil with evil; overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21).

Historical support for pacifism is found in the early Church. For example, Eusebius of Caesarea writes that in apostolic times, "the conduct of Christians was a testimony to their virtue… they fulfilled the prophecy of beating swords into plowshares" (Eusebius, 1920, p.138). Christian pacifism has been embraced by various groups and eras: the early

Church (when most Christians avoided military service), late medieval radical movements (e.g., the Adamite Hussites who rejected weapons), and especially in the modern period by Anabaptist traditions (Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish), Quakers, and many evangelical groups. For these communities, nonviolence is a core element of discipleship. Contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas provocatively claimed: "One of the greatest gifts Christians can offer the world is the refusal to kill anyone."

5.2.1. Critique of Pacifism

Pacifism is often criticized as unrealistic—in a fallen world, evil may triumph if not forcefully resisted. Some consider it immoral in situations where refusing to act allows atrocities to continue. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, critiqued Christian pacifism as naïve and ineffective against gross injustices like tyranny or genocide. Pacifists respond that there are nonviolent means to resist evil—civil disobedience, protest, prayer—and that Christians should be prepared to suffer injustice or martyrdom rather than commit violence.

In any case, Christian pacifism remains a prophetic voice, reminding the Church of its peacemaking vocation. In the 20th century, leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., inspired by Christian principles, demonstrated the power of nonviolent resistance to injustice. While not all churches require absolute pacifism, many acknowledge the legitimacy of conscientious objection—the right of Christians to refuse military service on moral grounds, or to serve in non-combat roles (medics, chaplains, etc.). The Second Vatican Council stated: "Those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience should be respected" (Second Vatican Council, 1965, §79).

In Eastern Orthodoxy, although pacifism is not institutionally promoted, there are many saints who rejected violence, such as St. Maximilian of Tebessa, who chose martyrdom over military service.

5.3. Selectivism (Just War Theory)

Selectivism, also known as Just War Theory, is the intermediate position which argues that some wars may be morally justified, while others are not. Christian participation in war, therefore, depends on the nature and circumstances of the conflict. This position affirms that not all wars are the same: while some are unjust (e.g., for conquest or oppression), others may be tragic but morally necessary, as a last resort to defend the innocent and restore justice. Selectivism provides the foundation for what is classically known as the Just War Tradition (bellum iustum), which has become the dominant perspective in historical Christianity, especially in the Western (Catholic and Protestant) traditions since St. Augustine (4th–5th century).

Selectivists seek to reconcile the ethical demands of the Gospel with the responsibility to protect others and defend the common good. They argue that Christian love may require defending the innocent through force, if no other means are effective.

Thus, a Christian may morally participate in war only if the conflict meets strict ethical criteria, which will be discussed in the next section. These include:

- Just cause (e.g., defense against aggression or stopping a genocide)
- Legitimate authority (the state or institution with the duty to uphold the common good)
- Last resort (all peaceful means must be exhausted)
- Proportionality (harm caused must not exceed the good aimed)
- Reasonable chance of success
- Right intention (restoring peace and justice, not hatred or revenge)

Selectivism is so named because it discriminates—it selects between permissible and impermissible wars, unlike activism (which permits all wars) or pacifism (which permits none). This has been the position of most major Christian thinkers and denominations—from late patristic times to the present day.

5.3.1. Moral Emphasis on Peace

Although selectivism permits war in exceptional cases, it maintains that peace is the ultimate goal. As St. Augustine wrote: "Do not seek peace in order to provoke war; rather, war is waged in order to establish peace." Even when war is seen as necessary, selectivists consider it a tragic evil—a malum necessarium—to be strictly limited by ethical norms. In Eastern tradition, St. Basil the Great affirmed that although killing in war is not equivalent to murder, those who kill in war should undergo a penitential period, such as being barred from communion for three years. (Nicodemus, 1957, pp.772-773). This expresses a deep theological tension: *war may be tolerated or justified, but never idealized.*

6. Just War in Christian Tradition: Conditions and Evolution

The Just War Theory *(bellum iustum),* as previously noted, represents the classical expression of Christian selectivism. It emerged in the historical context of the Christianization of the Roman Empire, when the Church transitioned from marginalization to societal influence and had to address war directly. The Empire still needed a military for defense, and Christians—now increasingly in positions of authority or integrated into public life—could no longer avoid involvement in political and military matters.

6.1. Augustine: Founding the Just War Framework

St. Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo, is widely regarded as the founder of Christian just war theology. He sought to construct an ethical framework in which a Christian could engage in war without sinning—or more precisely, in which war could be viewed as a morally responsible act under certain conditions. It is important to note that Augustine was not a warmonger. On the contrary, his writings express a clear preference for peaceful solutions and a deep commitment to the Christian imperative of love. In one of his works, he stated that wars should be fought with sorrow, out of necessity, not desire; the goal should be peace, not revenge (Augustine, 2003).

For Augustine, a war is just if it (1) is declared by a legitimate authority, such as a ruler or government responsible for the common good; (2) has a just cause, such as repelling aggression or correcting a grave injustice ("beware of provoking war, but if it breaks out due to another's wrongdoing, it must be fought to restore peace"); and (3) is waged with right intention, meaning the motives of those fighting must not include hatred or cruelty, but a genuine desire to protect the innocent and re-establish justice.

He placed great emphasis on internal motivation: even if the external act of killing in war might be justifiable, the Christian must guard against the demons of hatred and vengeance. Paradoxically, a Christian is called to love even the enemy he must restrain, desiring their correction, not their destruction. Moreover, Augustine explicitly condemned atrocities during warfare, such as massacres, rape, and wanton destruction. He laid the groundwork for what is now known as us in bello (justice in the conduct of war), emphasizing clemency toward the defeated and protection of civilians. In a letter, Augustine lamented the excesses of Roman war campaigns and insisted that no victory is glorious if it is stained with the blood of innocents.

6.2. Ambrose and the Duty to Defend

Simultaneously, St. Ambrose of Milan (4th century)—a former governor turned bishop—also contributed to the just war tradition. Sensitive to the duty of the Empire to defend itself from barbarian invasions, Ambrose argued that failing to defend the oppressed, when one is able to, makes one complicit in injustice. This argument—the complicity of passivity—became a pillar of just war theory: Christian love of neighbor may sometimes imply a moral obligation to intervene, even with force, to protect victims of violence. Ambrose, like St. Basil the Great in the East, also

stressed limits: monks and clergy were to abstain from direct combat, preserving a sacred space untainted by bloodshed (Schaff, 1896, p.22).

6.3. Thomas Aquinas and the Systematization of Just War

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) codified the just war doctrine in his *Summa Theologica*, building directly on Augustine's work. He specified the three classical criteria: "In order for a war to be just, three things are required: first, the authority of the sovereign; second, a just cause; and third, a rightful intention on the part of those waging war" (Summa Theol. II-II, q. 40, a. 1). Later medieval and early modern thinkers expanded this framework. Canonists such as Gregory of Bologna introduced the criterion of a reasonable chance of success (waging war in vain is immoral), and the need for strict proportionality (the harm caused by war must not exceed the evil it seeks to prevent).

In the 16th century, Spanish theologians like Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suárez integrated just war theory into the foundation of international law. They argued that neither the discovery of pagan peoples in the New World nor their refusal to accept the Gospel could constitute a just cause for war—thus limiting imperial ambitions based on religious or economic pretexts.

Gradually, many principles of Christian just war theory were secularized into international legal doctrines. For example, the United Nations Charter allows military force only in self-defense or with Security Council authorization—a reflection of just cause and legitimate authority principles.

6.4. Eastern Orthodoxy: A Theology of Tragic Necessity

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, although a systematic scholastic theory of just war was never developed, the underlying principles are very similar: only defensive wars are considered tolerable, while wars of conquest are condemned as unjust. A striking historical example occurred in the 10th century, when Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros Phokas proposed that soldiers who died fighting Muslims be declared martyrs of the faith. The Patriarch and Holy Synod rejected this, affirming that even if the war was defensive and justified, those who die with a weapon in hand are not equivalent to martyrs who die nonviolently for Christ. Instead, the Church held memorial services for fallen soldiers and recognized them as heroes of the nation, not of the faith. This distinction highlights a key aspect of Orthodox theology: war, even when accepted, is a sad concession—a "lesser evil" employed to prevent a greater evil, such as subjugation or genocide. Greek theologian Georgios Mantzaridis expressed it this way: "The Gospel of Christ leaves no room for justifying war. The Church has never supported a doctrine of just war, because war always has injustice at its root. Yet the Church has been forced to tolerate defensive war as a lesser evil, in order to protect greater goods such as life, faith, and freedom" ((Mantzaridis, 2010, p. 317). Thus, the Orthodox view prefers to speak not of just war, but of the tragic necessity of armed defense. A frequently cited example is the defense of Constantinople against Ottoman invasion—seen as a sacred duty of defense, not as a holy war aimed at converting others.

6.5. Seven Conditions for a Just War

A traditional list of seven criteria for a just war—traced back to the medieval tradition—includes:

1. Last Resort (ultima ratio): War must be the final option, pursued only after all peaceful means have been exhausted (diplomacy, arbitration, etc.).
2. Legitimate Authority: Only recognized public authorities (e.g., sovereign states or international institutions) may declare war.
3. Just Cause: The war must aim to correct a serious wrong, such as resisting armed aggression, preventing genocide, or restoring sovereignty. Expansionism or forced conversion are not just causes.

4. Right Intention: The motivation must be just and honorable—seeking to restore peace and justice, not revenge or domination.
5. Comparative Justice: The side waging war must have a clearly stronger moral claim. Not all sides are equally right.
6. Proportionality: The anticipated harm must not outweigh the justice sought. This applies both to the war itself and to tactics used (jus in bello).
7. Reasonable Chance of Success: It is immoral to wage war when there is no realistic possibility of achieving the just objective, as it would waste lives unnecessarily (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994, para. 2309).

If most or all of these conditions are fulfilled, a war may be considered just from a Christian moral standpoint. If not, Christians are morally obliged to oppose participation. Of course, reality is rarely black and white—many wars fall into gray areas, and sincere believers may disagree when applying the same principles to complex situations. Nevertheless, just war theory offers an objective ethical framework, unlike the extremes of activism ("my country is always right") or pacifism ("no war is ever justified").

7. Historical and Contemporary Applications of Just War Theory

Elshtain emphasizes the moral responsibility of nations to intervene against gross injustices, under conditions aligned with just war principles (Elshtain, 2003, pp. 65-67). One of the most frequently cited examples of a just war is World War II, particularly the effort by the Allied powers to stop the Nazi regime. From a Christian perspective, the war had a just cause (resisting aggression, halting genocide), legitimate authority (coalition of sovereign states), right intention (liberating Europe from tyranny), proportionality (the evil prevented arguably outweighed the destruction caused), and reasonable success prospects (which were ultimately realized). Consequently, many theologians viewed participation in the resistance against Hitler as not only morally permissible but even necessary. However, other conflicts—such as the religious wars of the Crusades—present more ambiguity.

The Crusades were initially preached as just wars of defense, meant to protect Christian pilgrims and Eastern Christians from Muslim attacks, and to reclaim the Holy Lands. Some historians argue that the First Crusade (1096–1099) had elements of just war: it was a response to the Byzantine Empire's plea for aid against Seljuk incursions and thus a case of defensive intervention. However, the conduct of the Crusades—marked by massacres, fanaticism, and political motivations—undermined the integrity of the just war claim. Even during the Middle Ages, Church leaders such as Bernard of Clairvaux warned crusaders to fight without hatred or racial pride—advice rarely followed (Bernard of Clairvaux, 1997, p. 35). Over time, the crusade ideology shifted toward a "holy war" concept, rather than a restrained just war, which has been widely critiqued by later theologians.

8. Modern and Contemporary Applications

In modern times, major Christian denominations have reaffirmed the principles of the just war tradition—while placing a strong emphasis on peacebuilding.

- The Catholic Church, through its 1992 Catechism, outlines clear conditions for legitimate armed defense (mirroring classical just war criteria), but stresses that peace is the ultimate goal.
- The Romanian Orthodox Church, declared that peace is the natural state willed by God for humanity and that war represents hatred and destruction. While not systematizing a just war doctrine, the Orthodox tradition implicitly recognizes defending one's homeland as a legitimate duty of believers.

Overall, modern Christians are increasingly active in peace initiatives, conflict mediation, and international cooperation. Just war theory today serves more as a tool to limit violence than to justify it.

In recent international debates—such as those surrounding humanitarian interventions (e.g., Kosovo 1999, Syria 2013)—just war arguments have been used both for and against military action. Some leaders have proposed the concept of "just peace", emphasizing prevention, reconciliation, and restorative justice rather than reactive violence.

The emergence of weapons of mass destruction (especially nuclear weapons) has significantly complicated the application of just war theory. Many Christian authorities have concluded that nuclear warfare is inherently immoral, as it violates proportionality and discrimination (nuclear bombs indiscriminately kill civilians and soldiers alike, with catastrophic long-term effects). Even the doctrine of nuclear deterrence is morally questionable.

Similarly, contemporary terrorism poses new dilemmas. Terrorist groups are non-state actors, which disrupts the classic just war requirement for legitimate authority. Responding with full-scale "wars on terror" raises difficult questions about proportionality, combatant identification, and the use of force in asymmetrical conflicts. Many Christian ethicists advocate non-violent strategies (e.g., intelligence, diplomacy, international policing) over traditional warfare.

9. Conclusions: The Contemporary Relevance of Christian War Ethics

In the 21st century, the Christian ethical perspective on war remains of crucial importance. Despite technological advances and inter-cultural dialogue, the world continues to face the threat of armed conflict—from inter-state wars to civil unrest, terrorism, and global dangers such as nuclear proliferation. In this context, the Christian perspective offers both a moral critique and a message of hope.

9.1. Continuity of Moral Principles

The core Christian values regarding war—love of neighbour, the sanctity of life, justice, and peace—remain as valid today as in centuries past. For example, the principle of just cause urges a critical examination of the motivations behind military engagement: Is this about protecting innocent lives, or about economic or geopolitical self-interest?

The principle of discrimination (protecting non-combatants) has now been codified in international humanitarian law, such as the Geneva Conventions. Christians have historically contributed to these developments; for instance, Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, was deeply motivated by his Protestant faith. Thus, the Christian just war tradition has helped shape what is today considered universal moral conscience, even if secular discourse does not always acknowledge its roots.

9.2. The Prophetic Role of the Church

Across the globe, Christian churches serve as advocates for peace and agents of mediation. They bring to public discourse a voice that reminds political leaders of the human cost of war and the imperative of peaceful resolution. For example, Pope Francis has been an active voice calling for ceasefires and peace (e.g., in Syria and Ukraine), organizing prayer initiatives and diplomatic visits. Similarly, the World Council of Churches and other Christian organizations promote the concept of "Just Peace"—an expansion of just war theory that emphasizes building sustainable peace before and after conflict, through reconstruction, reconciliation, and restorative justice.

Christians understand that true peace is not merely the absence of war, but the presence of justice and healing. This spiritual emphasis often transcends the technical dimensions of secular ethics. Moreover, the Church plays (Rotaru, 2017, pp. 57-66) a central role in post-war healing, ministering to veterans, victims, and communities, and fostering forgiveness. In post-conflict zones such as Rwanda, Christian communities have been essential to national reconciliation after genocide.

9.3. New Challenges, Adapted Responses

As mentioned earlier, the existence of nuclear weapons has prompted many Christian theologians to argue that no war in the modern era can satisfy just war conditions. Some advocate for Christian pacifism as the only viable moral path in an age where full-scale war could result in global annihilation. Others argue that the principles of just war theory can still restrain state violence—if carefully applied. For example, the Catholic Church has increasingly condemned even the threat of nuclear deterrence as unacceptable. Other challenges include asymmetric warfare (state vs. terrorist groups) and cyberwarfare, which raise novel ethical questions. Can a devastating cyberattack count as a *casus belli*? Is it justifiable to respond militarily to non-physical aggression? The Christian ethic, grounded in permanent values, must offer new discernment for these evolving situations—while remaining focused on protecting the innocent.

9.4. Personal Witness of Christians

The credibility of Christian ethics lies not just in theory, but in the lives of believers during times of conflict. In the war in Ukraine, for instance, Christian pastors and priests have remained alongside their communities, offering humanitarian aid and spiritual hope under fire. Many believers have shown radical love of enemies—such as praying for the victims on the opposing side or treating enemy prisoners with compassion. These acts give real-world credibility to the Gospel message. They show that even when Christians must take up arms to defend the innocent, they are still called to reject hatred and to seek peace as soon as justice is restored.

9.5. A Firm Rejection of "Holy War"

Today, there is growing concern about the revival of religiously framed violence, not only in the context of Islamist jihadism, but also in pseudo-Christian nationalist rhetoric. Balanced Christian theology stands firmly opposed to the idea of "holy war." Historical churches have learned from the tragedies of the Crusades and past religious wars; contemporary popes have publicly repented for violence committed "in the name of God." Mature Christian war ethics therefore function as an antidote to extremism: no armed conflict should ever be sacralized. All wars are at least potentially tainted by sin. We must approach them with humility, caution, and ethical rigor.

9.6. Eschatological Hope

Finally, the Christian vision of war always includes an eschatological dimension—the hope that one day, war will cease forever. Christians believe in a God who will ultimately bring perfect peace: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more" (Revelation 21:4). Until then, Christians are called to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)—whether by preventing conflict, defending justice, or comforting those in suffering. The Christian ethic of war is, at its core, an ethic of peace, which acknowledges the tragic necessity of force only to limit evil—never to glorify violence.

As a synthesis, the Christian perspective on war is marked by tension and balance: the tension between the ideal (nonviolence, unconditional love) and the reality (the need to confront evil), and the balance between justice and mercy, duty and compassion.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

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