

# Conclusion: Christian Traditions of War and Peace

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## Abstract

This article provides an overview of the contributions to this special issue. It organizes the contributions through three conceptual lenses: the person, the state, and the church.

## Keywords

Just war, Christian political thought, Christian ethics, Orthodox Christianity, Catholic Church, Protestant churches

## Introduction

All religious and philosophical traditions struggle with the problem of war. Because it is both so frequent in human history but also so disruptive of normal social and political life, religions and philosophies are compelled to address to it. Yet, perhaps because of war's moral complexities, these traditions of thought often speak with fractured and conflicting voices. Some moral problems, such as theft or dishonesty, can be more clearly addressed in ethical theories; war fits less easily into our standard ways of evaluating human life. War is, ironically, both central to the human condition yet also stands outside of normal human life.

Christian thought on war and peace suffers from the same dilemma. Ever since the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth became known, Christians have sought to align his largely apolitical and pacifist message with the reality of living in empires, principalities, and nation states in which the use of military force was and remains the norm. While early Christians were better able to negotiate this dilemma by keeping themselves separate from the Roman Empire within which they lived, when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity an accepted religion of the empire in the early fourth century, it moved from being a persecuted tradition to a central one. As its influence increased in Europe

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and then around the world, Christianity had to square its earlier resistance to normal political life with being integrated into a world in which violence was a part of that normality.

The articles in this special collection, the result of an inspiring workshop held at Radboud University, The Netherlands, in March 2023, provide a range of new insights into that Christian struggle with war and peace. Importantly, the articles stretch across different Christian traditions of thought, from Catholicism to Protestantism to Orthodox, thus giving us new insights into how these traditions, and Christians in different national contexts, continue to negotiate the space between Christian faith and the horrors of war.

This short conclusion will draw on these articles with a focus on three themes: the person, the state, and the church. Through these three themes, I will try to bring together some of the key points and suggest some possible ways forward for those thinking about Christianity and the just war tradition.

## **The Person**

The human person is, of course, at the centre of all social and political life. But how the person is understood in different parts of the just war tradition reflects certain ontological and ethical assumptions. For Christians, three key points are relevant when thinking about the use of force which can lead to injury and death of the human person. First, Christians of any tradition assume that the person is not simply a body that will end with death; instead, the human person is ensouled. This means that bodily harm is not the only concern for a Christian, but harm to that soul or inner person should be considered. This is perhaps more relevant for the one using force than it is for the one who is subject to harm. Second, Christians believe that all persons are created by God in God's image. This is not a point about evolution or creationism, which is not really relevant here. Rather, this implies that all persons should be treated as holy in some fundamental sense. The contemporary human rights regime emphasises human dignity, which is as close as a secular understanding can be to holiness. Third, Christians believe in some form of original sin. This is, of course, a more problematic notion today, but it continues to inform much of Christian theology and perhaps makes sense of the human proclivity to use violence.

So how do these three points relate to the just war tradition? The papers in this collection help us to see some of these assumptions in action. When it comes to the first point, that of being ensouled, Esther Reed's reflections on virtue ethics and the idea of character can help. While Aristotle is often seen as the foundation of the virtue ethics tradition, Aquinas took Aristotle's conception of character and translated it into Christian personhood. When individuals use force to harm others, they must consider not only the bodily harm they are doing to their adversary, but the harm that they might be doing to their own soul, or to their character as the virtue tradition says. The notion of prudence that Reed develops in her paper echoes this point, for prudent individuals orient their action not solely to the other but also to themselves. And prudent Christians know that if, over time, they continue to kill and maim others, their souls will continue to be blemished in such a way that they move further away from God.

Vassilios Paipais draws out some of the elements of an Orthodox tradition of war and peace. While not central to his article, he reminds us that within the Orthodox tradition those using force were prescribed from receiving Holy Communion for three years. This ban reflects, in a slightly different way, the same point made by Reed; that those using force are harming their souls, and the Church is responsible for ensuring that they understand their sin and must be purified as a result. This sensibility reflects the assumption that the human person is somehow ensouled and that using force can harm that soul. But alongside of this emphasis on sin, Paipais also highlights how the Orthodox tradition, through the concept of *oikonomia*, undertakes a more pastoral role to how it should support those using force and those subject to force.

These papers highlight how Christian traditions can discipline those using force. The growth of the just peace idea within the Catholic Church, something explored in a number of the articles, speaks to the second assumption noted above: that each human person is a reflection of God, so that each person deserves to be treated with dignity. This is perhaps why Pope Francis has moved away from the language of just war and adopted the language of just peace in its place; his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, issued in 2020, captures this idea through his reflections on the dignity and holiness of the other. As Greg Reichberg notes in his contribution to this special issue, this is not unique to Francis. Popes since the latter half of the twentieth century have avoided the language of just war. While the Catechism of the Catholic Church retains a discussion of just war, the voice from the Holy See has moved toward an embrace of this global fraternity as Francis calls it.

In his review of debates among German Catholics, Bernhard Koch highlights an important issue about the human person. He notes that the social sciences have informed debates among theologians and church leaders about how we should understand the person, or what he calls human nature. A key question is whether or not humans are prone to peace or violence. Social sciences can take us only so far on this matter. This brings out that third Christian assumption, that of original sin. While humans might be prone to peace at times, our natures as imperfect reflections of divinity and our struggles to orient our lived experience with the call to holiness too often results in violence.

## The State

The dilemma noted in my introduction—that Christians are called to peace but states use violence as a normal part of governance—creates dilemmas for Christians living in the modern world. As Max Weber famously argued, statehood is defined by some as the entity that can legitimately use violence. In international law, it is only the state that can use violence in relation to other states, though this has been greatly circumscribed in recent years by the development of international humanitarian law and the UN Charter. So, what do these articles tell us about this dilemma?

Since their use by the United States in 1945, nuclear weapons have been a source of debate and contestation among Christians. The 1983 US Catholic Bishops statement on nuclear deterrence drew heavily on the just war tradition, while also recasting that tradition toward what we might call the ‘just peace’ approach. Not all just war theorists felt that the bishops captured the essence of the tradition, but their statement remains a

powerful pastoral voice. Anna Scheid begins her article with the witness this letter provided, and then demands that the US Bishops issue a new letter, one that reorients the church more decisively toward peace and justice. She draws on the rich traditions of American peace activists to move toward a focus on non-violence rather than war. Christian Braun, while not drawing on the 1983 letter, does review some of the debates among church leaders around nuclear weapons, focusing his attention on Pope Francis. Braun argues that rather than abandoning nuclear deterrence, Christians should think about how it might be connected to the tradition of 'responsible statecraft' that emerged during the Cold War. Looking to the older ethical debates around nuclear weapons and combining those with contemporary developments in the just war tradition can provide some new ways of seeing this dilemma.

Germany has faced heated debate in recent years about the use of force. Due to its history and role in twentieth-century conflicts, combined with its attempts to advance more humanitarian solutions to global problems, German debate around Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine has become charged. Therese Feiler's account of the debates within the Germany Protestant churches critically evaluates how German Christians have tried to negotiate this space, not always successfully according to Feiler. As noted above, Bernhard Koch explores how German Catholics have sought to create a more just peace orientation. But, as attempts by the German government continue to support Israel yet also condemn its excesses, both these articles help us to see inside German Christian thinking on these complex issues.

Yuri Stoyanov explores how the Orthodox Church has grappled with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Because the Orthodox tradition is the dominant one in both countries, the use of force by Russia has created serious problems for the governance and relations of these churches. The Orthodox Church in Russia has been strongly supportive of the Russian use of force, having built links with Vladimir Putin's government over the years on social issues. The complexities of the different strands of Orthodox churches within both states have led to claims and counter claims which have made it difficult for the Orthodox Church to speak on this conflict, revealing what happens when churches tie themselves to national interests too closely.

Rather than focusing on a single state, Anna Blackman's article on the Catholic Worker movement brings out one of the most important critical traditions of thought on the relationship of the church and state. Highlighting the anarchist elements of the thinking of figures such as Dorothy Day, Blackman reminds us that for some Christians there is no rectifying the relationship of the church and the state. To live in the mystical Kingdom of God means abjuring any links with the purposes and approaches of the state, especially its use of force. Day's pacifism, Blackman reminds us, challenges our efforts to conceptualise a just war in any way. From a different perspective, John Berkman's careful study of Donald MacKinnon and his influence on Elizabeth Anscombe looks to how activists and peace advocates can draw on the just war tradition rather than abandon it. As with Dorothy Day, MacKinnon directly confronted wars going on around him, in his case the Spanish Civil War, which drew on competing ideologies and also drew in the Catholic Church. World War II, which inspired Anscombe's and others' thinking about war, led to a revival of the just war tradition. The use of force by states and within states can, in other words, lead to very different forms of

Christian witness, from the pacifism of Day to the embrace of just war thinking by figures such as MacKinnon and Anscombe.

## The Church

In referring to the Church here, I do not mean just one Christian denomination, but the Christian Church as a whole. Because the Christian tradition has so many variations, it is difficult to identify any unified voice on matters of war and peace. The just war tradition provided that at various moments in the history of the church, but it no longer seems to do so, even in the Catholic Church where its Thomistic heritage would seem to be most at home. The papacy of Francis has moved the official voice of the church even further away from just war. As Greg Reichberg demonstrates, however, Francis is not that far distant from Aquinas on matters of war and peace. In his careful exegesis of Thomas's work, Reichberg argues that the language of just war was something he inherited rather than something he invented to justify war. He, along with almost all church teachings, theorised just war against the background of peace, for it is peace toward which all thinking should be oriented. Reichberg's article demonstrates that Francis's invocation of peace and scepticism about just war thinking is not that distant from the overall church's approach to such matters.


Joseph Capizzi continues with this focus on language, pointing to how Francis's encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* makes the important point that the language of just war is what concerns Francis. That is, rather than turning to pacifism, Francis is telling us that we must be careful not to be trapped by the language of just war, which is now invoked in almost every use of force in the international community today. Capizzi's account reinforces Reichberg's, that critical attention to the language of just war rather than making judgements about particular wars may be where scholars need to devote their attention. Lisa Sowle Cahill exemplifies what this might mean when she carefully unpacks words like 'necessity' and 'victory' in the teachings of the church and in the just war tradition more widely. At the same time, in discussing how Francis and the wider church understand these ideas, she also points to Francis's actions as evidence for his approach to war and peace. Not only does his language in encyclicals and public statements distance himself from the just war tradition, actions such as bringing refugees from war to the Vatican also embody that witness to peace.

Adam Cebula's study of Francis's statements and reactions to the war in Ukraine seeks to find out whether or not just war remains relevant. As with the article by Fred van Iersel and Bart van Dijk, Cebula makes the case that the just war remains part of the Christian tradition, giving us a framework within which to make judgements about war. These two articles draw upon and critically evaluate the wider Christian tradition, making clear that the protection of a state like Ukraine from the predations of Russia can be a just cause for the use of force, both for Ukrainians themselves and for those providing aid.

Finally, we should not forget that the Church makes itself known not only in statements from leaders but in how Christians participate in worship and prayer. Robert Wawer's article points us to how the Orthodox Christian churches invoke matters of war and peace more often in their liturgical practice than do Catholic and Protestant traditions. His article then turns us back to the Bible, the fundamental source for all

Christians about how they should think of social and political life. He recalls the story of Cain and Abel, a story of murder by one brother of another. Reminding us that the war between Russia and Ukraine is a fratricidal war, perhaps understanding Cain and Abel in that light might remind those in Russia and Ukraine that as brother churches, they should strive toward unity and not discord. Indeed, as these articles speak across so many Christian traditions, and demonstrate the diversity of Christian thought on matters of war and peace, can we not hope that the Church might move closer to a language of peace and justice? The just war tradition, which seeks justice but hopes for peace, may give us that language, even as we continue to engage in dialogue about what it means. Perhaps it is through our liturgies, our prayers and our study of the Bible that we need to start moving toward that unity and find a way past the destruction that war so often brings to our lives.

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