

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Christianity and the Just War Tradition:

Is it Possible to be a Good citizen While Being a good Christian?

A Thesis submitted to the  
University Honors Program  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree  
With University Honors

Department of Political Science

by

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May, 1989

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Date: 5-12-89

JOURNAL OF THESIS ABSTRACTS

THESIS SUBMISSION FORM

AUTHOR: Philip M. Heuser

THESIS TITLE: Christianity and the Just War Tradition

THESIS ADVISOR: Dr. Gary Glenn

ADVISOR'S DEPT: Political Science

DATE: May 10, 1989

HONORS PROGRAM: NIU Honors Program

NAME OF COLLEGE: Northern Illinois University

PAGE LENGTH: 18

BIBLIOGRAPHY (YES OR NO): Yes

ILLUSTRATED (YES OR NO): No

COPIES AVAILABLE (HARD COPY, MICROFILM, DISKETTE): Hard copy

IS YOUR THESIS OR ANY PART BEING SUBMITTED FOR PUBLICATION? YES \_\_\_ NO X

IF ANY PART HAS BEEN ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION, PLEASE INDICATE WHERE \_\_\_\_\_

SUBJECT HEADINGS: (CHOOSE FIVE KEY WORDS) CHRISTIANITY, WAR, PACIFISM, JUST WAR TRADITION

ABSTRACT (100-200 words):

Christians are faced with a difficult decision when required to engage in war. By studying the ideas of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as more recent scholars, the logic of the just war tradition is examined. In opposition to this, the arguments of John Yoder, a proponent of Christian pacifism, are also analyzed.

The key difference between these viewpoints is the level of responsibility Christians should assume in directing historic events. The pacifist argument is that humility and suffering in faith by Christians wins the ultimate victory for good. The just war advocates state that military service is sometimes an obligation, as a way of better loving others i.e. through ending injustice. By comparing strictly controlled just warfare to an extended, international police protective act, it can be seen that it can be a Christian's duty to fight, out of love, for others.

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Christians are daily faced with social situations that require them to choose whether to follow their religious beliefs or to take the "easy way out". In almost all these cases, the Christian is reinforced in his decision to follow his religious beliefs because they coincide with public policy. These situations may range from the simple choice to return a lost wallet, to the more difficult decision of reporting an illegal act to the authorities and so risking criminal retribution. In both of these cases, following secular law coincides with following religious precepts (ie the old testament command against stealing, and the new testament teaching to cooperate with authorities who are opposing evil in Romans 13).

In very few situations will a Christian resident of any Western democracy be required to make a choice between following his religion and following the law. However, in the case of required participation in warfare, a conflict between these two codes of action is evident. How is it possible for a Christian to follow the teachings of Jesus to "turn the other cheek", and "love your enemies," and still follow his government's command to kill other humans in warfare?

The central focus of this paper will be on the question, "Is it possible to be a good citizen while being a good Christian?" as regards warfare. A good citizen may be required to kill other people while a good Christian is required to love all other

people. In order to resolve this conflict, both the Christian Just War Tradition and the arguments for Christian pacifism will be analyzed. The writings of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas as major contributors to the idea of just war in the early years of the Christian Church will be studied. Modern proponents of the tradition are also cited in this paper. John Howard Yoder's arguments for Christian pacifism will be analyzed in presenting the other side of the debate.

The first reported Christian soldiers were members of Marcus Aurelius' Roman army in AD 177 (Ramsey, p. xvi). Prior to that period, Christians had lived without military obligation within the Roman empire. However, over the years, Christianity became more widespread until by 403 AD all Roman soldiers were required to be Christians (Ramsey, p. xvi).

Augustine's arguments, which were to become the cornerstone of the just war tradition, were written at a time when the prominence of Christianity in the Roman Empire was being blamed for its military decline (Weigel, p. 27). While hating war, Augustine regarded it as an inevitable result of man's sinfulness (Deane, p. 154). However, he did not state that death itself was the main evil in war, because death is inevitable for all men. The worst evils in war are "the love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power..." (Deane, p. 161). These are the hateful emotions

and actions that lead men to commit violence for the wrong purposes.

Despite these evils, Augustine believed that Christians could rightfully participate in warfare under certain circumstances. Rulers could only justly commit their soldiers to specific types of military campaigns. The criterion for these just wars, as listed by Augustine, place severe limitations on allowable military action. Any defensive war, where a nation fights against an unprovoked attack to defeat the aggressor, is justified. Offensive wars are justified if the state to be attacked has "refused to make reparations for the wrongs of its citizens" or "fails to return property that has been wrongfully appropriated" (Deane, p. 160).

While sovereigns were able to deliberate on whether a potential military action was justified under these criterion, soldiers themselves had no such right. By the nature of their position, soldiers have a duty to fight as their sovereign commands them, according to Augustine (Deane p. 163). Even if the war is unjust the soldier must obey. Deane writes that, "Augustine leaves no room for disobedience based upon the citizen's or soldier's individual decision that the command he receives is unjust or illegitimate" (p. 163). However, the individual soldier is blameless if he does his duty as he is commanded.

Although war could at times be justified, it was nevertheless a very horrible and saddening occurrence. Men should realize that war resulted from all men's sinfulness, and should mourn their condition, which brought about such destruction. Augustine argued that justified war should only be a last resort; he praises diplomats who are able to resolve injustices which would otherwise lead to war (Deane, p. 159). However, Augustine believed that a just war was not only the rulers right, but his duty, if an injustice had been committed which could not be peacefully resolved. As Deane states, "The just war is the punishment imposed upon a state and upon its rulers when their behavior... violates even the norms of temporal justice" (p. 156).

The idea of justified war was a major departure from the pacifism of early Christianity. However, it can be argued that Augustine developed the just war idea to expand upon, not to contradict, the teachings of Christ. According to Ramsey, Christian participation in just wars is not a "descent" but "a change in tactics" in order to achieve the same goal. Loving and caring for others, as Christ taught, may require justified violence "in order to maintain the political and social orders needed to keep men alive" (p. xvi). This orderly system of government and society, called 'tranquilitas ordinis' (ie the tranquility of order) makes Christianity stronger by facilitating its teaching and practice (Weigel, p. 28-29).

Augustine regarded government a necessary evil; 'tranquilitas ordinis' was for him an unfortunate necessity due to man's sinfulness (Weigel p. 31). However, anarchy was a far worse alternative. This was because anarchy does not allow conditions under which the practice of virtue is possible.

Related to the need for law and order is Augustine's opposition to personal self defense. Although the ruler has a right to declare justified wars, and the soldier has a duty to fight in them, the individual has no right to defend himself if attacked by an outlaw. Ramsey states that Augustine would agree with St. Ambrose, who wrote that, "a wise man, when he meets an armed robber... cannot return his blows, lest in defending his life he should stain his love toward his neighbor... What robber is more hateful than the persecutor who came to kill Christ? But Christ would not be defended by the wounds of the persecutor, for he willed to heal all by his wounds" (p. 37).

Personal defense against outlaws then, is allowed only by the authorities, who are acting to protect the innocent, and end the wrong doing of the attacker. Police forces deal objectively in intervening, and so remove the need for an innocent man to either surrender his life or "stain his love towards his neighbor". Augustine places individual defense, as well as national defense, in the hands of the sovereign and his authority.



St. Thomas Aquinas expanded on the just war philosophy of Augustine in several ways. Aquinas' three requirements for a war to be just are: that it be declared by the authority of the sovereign; that its purpose be to punish a wrong act; that it has as its objective the restoration of peace (Weigel p. 36). This continues Augustine's theme that wars are fought to achieve lasting peace, and maintain order (Weigel p. 36).

Aquinas differed from Augustine in his belief that self defense could be justifiable, which he argued for in his idea of the double effect. This theory states that all actions have two effects: one is intended, the other is not. In self defense, or in intervening to protect an innocent party, the intended effect is to protect yourself or the innocent individual. The unintended effect of fighting back may be the injury or death of the assailant. However, because this is unintended, it is excusable (Ramsey p. 40).

For Aquinas, the case of warfare, when a soldier is acting for the common good, is the only time when Christians may intend to kill the attacker (Ramsey p. 41). The doctrine of double effect is only important in the case of self defense, when the authorities are absent. Aquinas believed that man is capable of self defense without having enmity for his attacker, while Augustine did not. However, both argue that these men under authority (eg soldiers and policemen) are justified in intending

to kill the enemy or the outlaw if they are following their orders.

The just war tradition can be summarized as follows: war is just if it is caused by the actions of an aggressor, or is for the purpose of punishing an unjust act (the two specific cases Augustine speaks of have previously been mentioned). It must also be ordained by the sovereign, and have as its objective the restoration of peace and order.

By attaining this 'tranquilitas ordinis' the practice of Christian virtue is promoted, as Weigel argues, because justice and order allow men to more easily do good things (p. 31). For example, if a man's basic needs are met, he will be better able to love his neighbor than if he were starving, and forced to steal or kill for food. Justified violence may be needed to keep order, and so keep the individual from starving.

The lasting peace of 'tranquilitas ordinis' does not allow injustices to continue, which many unjust peaces do. Stalin's regime existed for many years in peace, but created great injustices for its people. Hitlers evil government may have lasted for years in peace if the Nazis had been less aggressive. Just wars are fought to break this kind of unjust, temporary order in order to promote real, lasting peace (Ramsey, p. 29).

The just war doctrine is reconciled with a numerous Biblical commandments against killing in several ways. As mention before,

Ramsey argues that justified war is merely a change in tactics for Christians. Coercion and violence may be wed in a spirit of love, with the goal of helping the oppressed, and ending the sinful actions of the oppressor. Augustine compares this to a father disciplining his child; "For in the correction of a son, even with some sternness, there is assuredly no diminution of a father's love" (Deane, p. 165). Ultimately, it can be argued that just warfare is a result of following Christ's teachings. Augustine states that "our action, it taken with no desire for revenge and no pleasure in inflicting pain, is an act of love and benevolence, which is not a violation but rather a fulfillment of the commandments of Christ" (Deane, p. 162).

The question arises as to whether these lines of argument are in fact twisting the meaning of Christ's teachings Weigel argue that Augustine's teachings are not "relativizing" or "accommodating" but are based on the realization by early Christians "that a detailed set of rules for public Christian life in the interim between the Resurrection and the Second Coming are not to be found in the sayings of Jesus" (p. 30). Therefore, the development of the just war tradition is a case of Christianity growing and define itself.

The Christian pacifist would argue that Christ's teachings, though not a complex code of specific laws, do provide ample guidelines for how Christians should live in relation to violence

and warfare. Teachings such as are found in Matthew 5:39 are perfectly clear on the subject: "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also". In general, Christian pacifism points to Christ's example of rejection of violence, and his command to "love your enemy" as its main support.

In addition John Yoder in The Politics of Jesus, argue that the old testament was fought by the Jewish people were all directed by God. He commanded there taking place and brought about any victories won by the Jews. Yoder argues that the message here is to trust in God, not in weapons. This theme continues into the New Testament.

The words of Paul in Romans 13 do not constitute the central teaching in the New Testament on the relations between Christians and the state, because Chapter 13 cannot be studied out of context with the rest of the book of Romans. Yoder states, "The entire test thus sees Christian nonconformity and suffering love as driven and drawn by a sense of God's triumphant movement..." and that "any interpretation that would make it (Chapter 13) the expression of a static or conservative undergirding of the present social system would therefore represent a refusal to take seriously the context" (p. 198). Therefore, the message of Romans 13 is to respect the authorities, and obey them to the extent that their laws do not contradict the Gospel.

Yoder distinguishes Christian pacifism from other types of pacifism in three ways. These distinctions define the real logic behind his arguments. Firstly, being pacifist does not mean total cooperation with the enemy, only a refusal to use violence to oppose evil. In addition, Christian pacifism differs from some types of pacifism which choose to follow nonviolent means to control their opponents actions. Most importantly, Christian pacifism has no validity if Christ was not in fact the divine Son of God.

Christian pacifism does not require total cooperation with a conquering enemy, because obeying God's commands still has precedence. If those in power present the Christian with a choice between committing a moral wrong and loosing his life, the Christian must accept the latter. Therefore, a Christian pacifist would, for example, have helped hide Jews from the Nazis, in Germany rather than follow the law and report their whereabouts. Their refusal to commit violence does not entail cowardice or an abandonment of principals for Christian pacifists.

Yoder draws a sharp distinction between Christian pacifism and nonviolent resistance, such as practiced by Gandhi and his followers against the British. "In this context it seems that sometimes the rejection of violence is offered only because it is a cheaper or less dangerous or more shrewd way to impose one's will upon someone else, a kind of coercion which is harder to

resist" (p. 243). Christians should not practice pacifism as a means to force change, but as a symbol of their refusal to yield to the temptation of earthly power.

This leads to the crux of Yoder's argument, which is that Christian pacifism depends for its success on the fact of Christ's death and resurrection and what this means for mankind. Yoder states that an analysis of non-pacifist Christian ideals reveals three assumptions: that through management of cause and effect man can change society; that we are wise enough to get the right goals for society; and that, "Interlocked with these two assumptions and dependent upon them for its applicability is the further postulate that effectiveness in moving towards these goals which have been set is in itself a moral yardstick" (p. 235). The question of effectiveness is the key to the difference between Christian pacifists, and non-pacifists.

Because Christ was crucified, his actions appear ineffective to the nonbeliever. He did not lead a revolt against the Romans in Palestine; instead he scorned any efforts to use violence for his benefit. He declined all earthly power and accepted death when it was forced upon him with no opposition. He chose not to be effective in any way which required taking earthly power. His teachings were spread by disciples who also had no earthly power in the traditional way ie they were not government officials or generals. His effectiveness is supernatural; because of his death

and resurrection.

Therefore, those following Christ's teachings must also resist the temptation of earthly power. Those who try to be effective in changing society of the course of history by using violence or coercion are forgetting Christ's example. Yoder asks "... is there not in Christ's teaching on meekness, or in the attitude of Jesus toward power and servanthood, a deeper question being raised about whether it is our business at all to guide our action by the course we wish history to take?" (p. 236).

Yoder argues that the movement of history is being directed by God, and that man's responsibility is to be obedient to the word of God. Therefore, "the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power, determines the meaning of history, the key to the obedience of God's people is not their effectiveness but their patience" (p. 238).

In summary, Yoder's arguments for Christian pacifism spells out a rejection by Christians of all earthly power involving violence, any particularly killing. God has condemned killing in both the Old and New Testaments; we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. This prevents Christians from serving as soldiers in war, and from certain police activities.

As pacifists, Christians are a witness to their complete faith in God, and in his wisdom in directing the historical course of events. Christians, knowing the relative worthlessness of the

earthly life in comparison with life in heaven, will not be afraid to give up their lives rather than kill another person. Man's responsibility to sovereign authority does not require him to contradict these commitments to God.

The primary difference between the just war tradition and the Christian pacifist argument is the level of responsibility Christians should accept in effecting the course of worldly events. The pacifist argues that this course is to be controlled by God, that it is presumptuous for Christians to believe that they can act to do God's will be engaging in warfare. The just war argument is that Christians must occasionally engage in coercion in order to create an atmosphere which allows people to better follow God's will. The subject of accepting responsibility is the theme under which both arguments can be analyzed.

Yoder agrees with the just war theorists that police forces are acceptable. Police may use "Violence or the threat thereof" (p. 206) to maintain law and order. This is acceptable because, Yoder argues, it is different from warfare. "In any orderly police system there are serious safeguards to keep the violence of the police from being applied in a wholesale way against the innocent. The police power generally is great enough to overwhelm that of the individual offender so that any resistance on his part is pointless" (p. 206). Therefore, police actions are permissible because any violence is strictly controlled. Christians may take



responsibility for the protection of their fellow citizens as police officers.

However, it is apparent that the just war which Yoder rejects can be viewed as an extended police action. As a police officer intervenes to protect an innocent individual from an attacker, so the armed forces of a nation may intervene to protect an innocent nation from an invading army. If Christians are responsible for protecting the lives of others on an individual level, then fighting a just war to protect the lives of many others is also their responsibility.

As police officer's actions are reviewed by higher authorities so soldiers fighting in a just war must be commanded by the sovereign. Their actions must be aimed towards the purpose of ending the injustice perpetrated by the enemy, and restoring lasting peace. Like police officers, soldiers in a just war must not use excessive violence to achieve their ends. The requirements of just war place severe limitations on the actions of military men, but they are not impossible to meet. Respect for such ideas as non-combatant immunity, and the rights of prisoners of war help keep soldiers within the bounds of just warfare.

Failing to wage war when it is the sovereign's duty constitutes an abandonment of responsibility. Because Christ commanded that we love our neighbor, how can his plight be ignored when he is being attacked? Aquinas' argument for the double

effect of actions shows how individuals may intervene, using violence if necessary, to protect the innocent while still loving the attacker. By ignoring the situation, a Christian is in fact refusing to show love for both the attacked and the attacker. The innocent person is not being cared for, and the aggressor, by not being rebuked for his action, will continue to do evil. Likewise, a nation which is not stopped from committing unjust acts will continue to do so, and millions of innocent individuals will not be cared for.

The pacifist response to this is that God directs historical events: the suffering of the innocent if for a purpose, and the actions of the aggressor will ultimately be punished. It is not the Christian's place to intervene by force. However, by reversing the situation to the individual scale, the flaw with this argument can be seen. If an individual were to happen upon an infant being harmed by a psychopath, to take an extreme example, he must intervene. The psychopath is committing a sin, and must be stopped, or else the onlooker may as well be participating in the crime. It has been shown that intervention may take place out of a spirit of love, and if the onlooker does so, he is doing right. The pacifist argument, carried to this extreme, would prevent using capital force in intervening, which may very well be necessary. By refusing to intervene, the onlooker abandon all caring for the infant's life and soul. If it

were God's will that somehow, the child should die, then the intervention would probably be rendered unsuccessful by God.

Pacifism seeks to expand Augustine's 'no self-defense' argument to an international scale. Augustine did not condone self-defense because, on the individual level, Christians should love their neighbors as Christ did, and therefore not return violence for violence. The Christian, certain of eternal life in heaven, would rather give up his own life than do violence to his assailant. His refusal to commit violence may perhaps be a witness of the meaning of Christianity to his attacker.

Whether all Christians would be willing to sacrifice themselves in this way is questionable. Such an action would require a great strength of faith. However, the structure of civilization, with its customs, laws, and police forces does not require Christians to face this test on any other than the rarest of circumstances. Law and order make pacifism very possible on the individual level.

On the societal level, however, complete pacifism would require Christians to face this terrible test whenever an enemy attacked. Even under the best circumstance, with all Christians willing to accept death rather than commit violence because of their religious understanding, the non-Christians would have no such understanding. They would die unconverted, with responsibility for their well being abandoned by their Christian

neighbors. Only for the individual Christian's life, or in a completely Christian society, therefore, would Christian pacifism be reasonable.

Support for the just war tradition, however, does not imply that Christians are pro-war, or more apt than non-Christians to fight in a war. Strict adherence to the just war position would require rulers to very carefully examine a conflict before going to war as a last resort. The tradition also requires soldiers to act very responsibly while engaging in warfare.

It is doubtful that many of the wars fought throughout the course of history would qualify as just wars from either side's standpoint. World War Two, from the allied stand point, meets many of the qualifications, although tactics such as obliteration bombing certainly do not (Walzer, p. 257). The Korean conflict is perhaps a more clear cut example, although there is no perfect case. However, this does not change the fact that situations arise which require Christians to fight in order to care for their neighbors. The just war tradition provides a guideline to follow when faced with the terrible decision of whether or not to go to war.

In certain cases, then, it is possible for a Christian to be true to his faith, and be a good citizen, as regards warfare. This fact does not totally disprove the pacifist arguments which have been examined, however. When only one's own life is at

stake, the pacifist argument holds. In the face of totalitarianism such as was seen under Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot, however, a Christian must remember his responsibility to the lives and souls of others as well.

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