

Never Just about War: Reflections on an “Outdated” Theory

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One of Pope Leo XIV’s most controversial statements in *Magnifica Humanitas* is his reaffirmation that “just war” theory is now “outdated” (MH, 192). For some commentators, this marks a departure from traditional Catholic teaching, which, since Augustine of Hippo, has held that war, under certain conditions, is morally justifiable. Beginning with a brief overview of how Christian thinking on this issue first developed in response to Greco-Roman thought, this piece will show how an emphasis on the *intention* behind going to war and the corresponding goal of *peace* helps to illuminate the Pope’s recent disavowal of “just war” theory.

Early Christian Pacifism

For many of the early Church Fathers, the notion of justifying war would have been anathema to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Jesus consistently taught against retribution towards wrongdoers, advocating that his followers instead “turn the other cheek”, love their enemies, and refrain from doing violence to others: including those who sought to put him to death on the cross. One of the most pointed examples of this teaching is recorded in Matthew 26. Directly prior to Christ’s arrest and trial, his disciple Peter draws a sword and strikes a member of the arresting party (the high priest’s slave) in the Garden of Gethsemane. This provokes an instant rebuke from Christ, who tells Peter to put the sword back in its place, “for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

Just as Christ’s teachings and example had been unambiguous and unequivocal, so too the early Church’s insistence upon rejecting state violence was uncompromising.

Writing in *De Idolatria* (On Idolatry), Tertullian (160–220 AD) draws upon this episode to contend that in “disarming Peter”, Christ effectively “ungirded every soldier”. Similarly, Origen (185–254 AD) held that Christ “nowhere teaches that it is right for His own disciples to offer violence to anyone” (*Contra Celsum*, bk III, chap 7). Just as Christ’s teachings and example had been unambiguous and unequivocal, so too the early Church’s insistence upon rejecting state violence was uncompromising. Tertullian writes:

There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament, the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two *masters* – God and Cæsar (*De Idolatria*, chap XIX).

As many have noted, a paradigmatic shift occurred following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (312 AD). Pre-conversion, Christianity had been a minority sect whose members did not hold official positions or possess power

to affect civil policy. The camps of light and darkness (in Tertullian’s language) operated separately, with different personnel. After Constantine, however, various Christians – including those who held ecclesiastical offices – became figures of authority and political influence.

“Just War” Theory

The notion that wars under certain conditions may be “just” can be traced to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384–322 BC). Shortly before the advent of Christianity, this tradition was further developed by Roman Stoic philosophers: in particular, Cicero (106–43 BC). In *De Officiis*, Cicero argued that the only legitimate reason for war was to bring about relations of peaceful co-existence (bk I, xiv). This foregrounds the first Christian engagements with the possibility of “just war”: that of Ambrose of Milan (c.339–397) and Augustine of Hippo (354–430). What is notable is not just how these bishops drew upon the criteria of their non-Christian predecessors, but also how these criteria were baptised and given new meanings within Christian thought.

One clear illustration of this concerns “peace”. For Cicero, peace consists in a lack of conflict between sovereign states or empires. In Augustine, by contrast, peace – which he defines in the *City of God* as the “tranquillity of order” (bk XIX) – relates to the human being’s relationship to God, and from this to others. Augustine’s conception of *peace* here goes beyond a territorial *pax*. In a letter to Boniface (a Roman general), Augustine therefore urges his correspondent to:

“[t]hink, then, of this first of all, when you are arming for the battle, that even your bodily strength is a gift of God...Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity, and waged only that God may by it deliver men from the necessity and preserve them in peace.”

The reason for seeking peace, as well as the nature of this end, is informed by a prior consideration of God, *qua* benefactor of all that we possess (“even your bodily strength”) and ultimate source of all peace. Thus, while Augustine appears to share the same criterion for “just war” as Cicero – namely, that war must have the securing of peace as its end – it should be noted that “peace” has a very different meaning and valence for the Christian theologian.

In considering that war might be just, Augustine admittedly departs from the absolutist pacifism of Origen and Tertullian. However, he does so while continuing to stress Christianity’s imperative to love God with all one’s heart and (God-given) strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself – including one’s *enemies* in any conflict.

Under the Ciceronian framework, peace should be sought because a preference for discussion rather than physical force

is what separates (civilised) human beings from brutish animals (*De Officiis* bk I, xi). For Augustine, every human being seeks peace – just as they seek their own “good” (that which seems beneficial) because of their being *creatures*. Whereas Cicero illustrates his theory by contrasting human beings’ potential for civility with non-rational animals’ resolution of disputes through physical force, Augustine highlights how both human and non-human creatures exhibit an innate orientation towards peace:

For the most savage animals...encompass their own species with a ring of protecting peace...what tigress does not gently purr over her cubs, and lay aside her ferocity to caress them? What kite, solitary as he is when circling over his prey, does not seek a mate, build a nest, hatch the eggs, bring up the young birds, and maintain with the mother of his family as peaceful a domestic alliance as he can? (*City of God*, bk XIX, chap 12).

If just war requires an intent towards, and consideration of, the peace of civilians on the other side of the battlelines, then the advent of modern technologies – including the prospect of nuclear weaponry – arguably renders this requirement unsatisfiable.

One of the implications of this theology of creaturehood for human moral psychology is that even those who wage war *unjustly* (because they lack public authority or a just cause), do so out of a desire for “peace” – albeit, on their own terms. In the *City of God*, Augustine describes how “even wicked men wage war to maintain the peace of their own circle...It is thus that pride in its perversity...abhors, that is to say, the just peace of God, and loves its own unjust peace” (bk XIX, chap 12). True peace is arrived at through love of God, which entails loving one’s neighbours – and therefore also seeking *their* peace. This represents a seismic shift. Augustine’s primary concern is “just peace”, rather than just war.

In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas expands upon and systematises Augustine’s view. In keeping with Augustine’s peace-centric paradigm, Aquinas addresses the subject of “war” within the context of its potential opposition to peace, which is defined by Aquinas as the internal effect of charity. Aquinas affirms Augustine’s requirements of “just authority” and “just cause”, and further makes explicit the implicit (if inchoate) heart of the Bishop of Hippo’s thought: there must be a right *intention* (ST II-II, Q.40, A.1).

By specifying that “right intention” is necessary for “just” war, Aquinas’ framework lays the foundations for what later became “just war theory”. In subsequent centuries, Francisco De Vitoria (1483–1546) and Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) added further conditions: all other means of solving the problem must have failed; there must be a probable chance of succeeding; the war must be conducted in a just manner. As theologian David Brown has argued, all of just war’s conditions from Augustine to Suárez may in fact be construed as extensions of the requirement that war be waged with the “right intention”.¹ For Aquinas (as for Augustine), this is inextricably tied to love for one’s neighbour and a desire for (just) peace.

Along with war’s connection to peace, and peace’s connection to charity, it is instructive here to briefly reflect upon the relationship between peace and *wisdom*. As with peace, wisdom for Aquinas is an effect of charity (ST II-II, Q.45). The closeness of these theological-moral siblings is illustrated, for Aquinas, in the seventh beatitude of Matthew: “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). As Aquinas elaborates, the beatitude concerns both peace and wisdom jointly through their mutual relation to charity: in charity (love for God and neighbour) one is at peace; through wisdom, one *makes* peace (ST II-II, Q.45, ad.1). In this too, the implications for the ethics of war are notable. A just peace is pursued through the exercise of wisdom, just as an unjust peace (or unjust war) is often the result of wisdom’s *failure*: the sin of folly (ST II-II, Q.46).

Modern War

These reflections help contextualise Pope Leo XIV’s remarks that “just war” is now “outdated” (MH, 192). In making this statement, the Pontiff is recalling Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. “At issue”, Pope Francis there wrote, is “the enormous and growing possibilities offered by new technologies”, such as bio-chemical and nuclear weapons, and how these advancements portend “an uncontrollable destructive power over great numbers of innocent civilians”. On this basis, Pope Francis observes that “[t]he truth is that ‘never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely’” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 258; citing *Laudato Si’*, 104).

If just war requires an intent towards, and consideration of, the peace of civilians on the other side of the battlelines, then the advent of modern technologies – including the prospect of nuclear weaponry – arguably renders this requirement unsatisfiable. As recent events have tragically demonstrated, modern warfare invariably entails the widespread destruction of civilian domiciles and their natural environments, leading not only to unconscionable levels of human injury, but also to the uprooting of whole communities and consequent mass displacement of peoples. There is thus a deep incongruity between modern warfare and a concern for the peace and wellbeing of others (i.e. charity), as well as with the possibility of making or maintaining this peace (i.e. wisdom). This, I suggest, underlies the truth of Pope Leo XIV’s assessment that “just war” theory has expired and should be laid to rest. RIP.

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Endnotes

- 1 See David Brown, *Choices: Ethics and the Christian* (Blackwell, 1983).