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Forum: A Christian Perspective on War For Youth Workers

Topic: A Christian College Professor Talks about Christians and War

The last few weeks have been hard on most of us. I know that I have had conflicting emotions and thoughts for the past three weeks. I have fluctuated between wanting revenge, wanting justice, and showing love, to those responsible for the World Trade Center attacks. About two weeks ago, Dr. Craig Boyd, a Philosophy and Religion professor at Greenville College, gave a talk in chapel that helped me to put a Christian Perspective on War. I asked his permission to print his notes here, to which he graciously agreed:

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON WAR

Note that I said from *a* Christian perspective because I don't believe that there is just ONE Christian perspective on this issue. One of the virtues of the Wesleyan theological tradition, which shapes our most basic theological assumptions here at Greenville College, is that we are able to listen to the voices of ALL the Church, not simply the one or two voices of narrow sectarianism that we find in much of contemporary fundamentalism and the reactionary elements of evangelicalism. Indeed, this morning we will look briefly at the ideas from authors from such diverse backgrounds as the Anabaptist tradition, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism and the early Church Fathers. As Wesleyans we are the inheritors of all these theological traditions because we believe that each one of them has something important to contribute and teach us. Indeed, my own views share deep sympathies with all three approaches to the issue.

As we consider the question whether war is ever morally justifiable from a Christian perspective we find three historic traditions: the first is pacifism, the second is just war theory and the third is "Christian realism."

PACIFISM

The biblical impulse: the pacifist tradition sees Jesus' commands to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you" and "turn the other cheek." Indeed, here we find the basic appeal is to the Christian principle that love overcomes all evil.

Elements of a pacifist viewpoint:

- Violence is absolutely inconsistent with the Law of Love—as preached by Jesus. Myron Augsberger asks "How can we kill another human being for whom Jesus

died?” How can we adopt the attitude that “Jesus loves you, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to kill you”?

- It is better to suffer violence than to commit it—Christ Himself refused to sanction violence but rather suffered on the cross, even unto death. He never told his disciples to kill but to submit.
- Violence is a result of our idolatry—if we were not such materialists and capitalists we wouldn’t feel the need to protect ourselves and our property by means of violence. As Stanley Hauerwas observes, it is our sinful attachment to things that requires the use of violence in defense of them.

The use of violence shows a lack of faith—when we resort to the use of violence we are engaging in the practices of the world and we show that we are not truly disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, who conquered death not by violence but by submission to the will of God.

JUST WAR THEORY

A second, and no doubt, more popular view among Christians is that of the “Just War.” The just war approach is based upon the moral theory known as “natural law morality.” According to natural law morality, all people know that certain kinds of behavior are immoral, irrespective of their own religious loyalties. Thus, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians all declare murder, theft, and dishonesty as immoral. But this applies not only within a society but across all cultures. So, the Nazis, following WW II were tried and convicted for their “crimes against humanity,” a result of natural law morality employed by the international community.

The biblical impulse here is that justice must be our guiding principle. God always demands justice and especially so when people are being oppressed. Greater evils will be prevented if we engage in war on behalf of the innocent and those who have been victimized. Not only justice, but Christian love for the victimized may also motivate the just war theorist. Does God prefer that evil people who hate should triumph over those who practice love?

Elements of the Just War Theory:

- Declaration by a lawful government (i.e., war is not declared or waged by private citizens or by pirates or other usurpers)
- Just cause (i.e., self-defense or to redress some grievous injury to a nation-state)

- Just intent (i.e., the restoration of a just peace)
- Last resort (i.e., all other means for resolving the conflict must be thoroughly explored first)
- Immunity of non-combatants (under no circumstances are non-combatants to engage in the conflict or be targeted by the enemy)

The just war theorist appeals to the idea of retributive justice as seen particularly in civil punishment. Just as the government of a state has the responsibility to punish those citizens that harm the common good, so too, the government has the responsibility to punish those who are not citizens and harm the common good. That is, any enemy of the state that threatens the well-being of the state can, and should, be punished.

Of course there is one very real problem for this analogy. While an individual citizen may appeal to the state as an arbiter and judge in matters of internal political quarrels, there is no such judge in international affairs. And so matters of justice often simply become matters of political interest with the strongest imposing its will on the weakest.

CHRISTIAN REALISM

The last view we can consider is that of “Christian Realism” as developed by Reinhold Niebuhr. The biblical impulse: recognizes BOTH the absolute character of the “law of love” as well as the universal presence of sin. We find here a devout adherence to the absolute claims Christ makes on our lives to love, amidst the present reality of sin. Accordingly Romans chapter 7 sets the agenda here, where Paul says that whatever I do that evil is always present with me.

This attitude can be seen historically in the views of Martin Luther, the 16th century protestant German reformer, who when confronted with an uprising of the Peasants said that they should be put to the sword—as any anarchist should. While we should be rightly disgusted at this callousness, the view can be seen in a more sophisticated form in the works of one of the 20th centuries greatest theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr says that “The Christian faith ought to persuade us that political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners. It ought to mitigate the self-righteousness which is an inevitable concomitant of all human conflict.” (Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist, 309)

Elements of Christian Realism:

- Humans are sinful—there is no area of human life that remains untouched by the effects of sin. Even so-called “just wars” are sinful.
- War is evil—it is always a result of human sinfulness. It is part of the human condition
- Christian hope is in God’s grace amidst sin—while we may never be free from the ubiquitous consequences of sin, we must steadfastly hold to the hope of grace found in Jesus Christ.
- War may be necessary—in order to prevent greater evils.

Niebuhr says that the pacifist is wrong, that we must occasionally use violence against our enemies. Thus, he writes “The pacifists draw the conclusion from the fact that justice is never free from vindictiveness, that we ought not for this reason ever to contend against a foe. This argument leaves out of account that capitulation to the foe might well subject us to a worse vindictiveness. It is as foolish to imagine that the foe is free of the sin which we deplore in ourselves as it is to regard ourselves as free from the sin that we deplore in the foe.” (ibid. 309)

Historically, we can view the Civil War as the result of human selfishness and violence. Was it necessary? Yes. But was it evil. Likewise, we must say “yes.”

World War II the result of the Treaty of Versailles that humiliated the Germans, thereby creating the economic hardships that prepared the way for Hitler. The allies were partially to blame for Hitler’s rise to power. And the bombing on Pearl Harbor was not without provocation. Clearly, our support for the allies helped precipitate the bombing on that dreadful day in December of 1941.

CONCLUSION

So where does that leave us now? Well, the U.S. is partially responsible for Osaama Bin Laden as we trained him to fight against the old Soviet Empire. Once the Berlin Wall came down, and the U.S. had the audacity to place troops in Saudi Arabia, Bin Laden turned his U.S. trained anger towards the hand that fed him. So too with the Iranians and the Iraqis. The Shah of Iran was supported by the U.S. government and it was that support of an oppressive regime that turned the Islamic Fundamentalists against the U.S. in 1979. So

in order to prevent Iranian fundamentalism from taking over the Asian sub-continent, we supported the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein. We must admit that our government has had a hand in the troubles that we now face. Am I suggesting that we “caused the attack” on the WTC and the Pentagon? Absolutely not! The intentional taking of innocent human life is a most abominable act—the terrorists were callous to the precepts of love and justice. Their fanatical zeal has caused unimaginable pain and suffering due to their own idolatrous loyalties. But we must take care to understand why our enemies act the way they do and we must confess our own sinfulness. But we must rely most especially on the grace of God in spite of our sinfulness.

Can there, should there, be disagreement among Christians on this matter? Absolutely, because we only disagree about matters of truth, never matters of private taste or opinion. May God guide us in our thoughts, in our deeds and in our attitudes towards each other, towards the stranger and may we all work and pray for the kingdom of God to radically transform our lives and our world. Amen.