

# Just War Theory and the Crusades

## Holy Wars

Modern people often regard the idea of a holy war as a contradiction. Killing thousands of people and causing wholesale destruction seems to be as far from holiness as one can get. But religion and war have gone hand in hand for a long time. Armies go into battle believing that God is with them, often after prayers and sacrifices to keep God on their side. In tribal cultures (including Biblical ones) when a people lose a war they often have to change to the worship of the winner's gods. However involving God as part of the campaign does not make a war a holy war - for a war to be a holy war, religion has to be the driving force. Holy wars usually have three elements: (1) the achievement of a religious goal, (2) authorized by a religious leader, (3) a spiritual reward for those who take part. Many of the wars fought in the name of religion do conform to the just war conditions, but not all of them.

## The Crusades

The great series of western holy wars were the Crusades, which lasted from 1095 until 1291 CE. The aim was to capture the sacred places in the Holy Land from the Muslims who lived there, so it was intended as a war to right wrongs done against Christianity. The first Crusade was started by Pope Urban II in 1095. He raged at the capture of the holy places and the treatment given to Christians, and ordered a war to restore Christianity. He said that the war would have the support of God. The pope also absolved all who took part in the crusade of all their sins. The first Crusade captured Jerusalem after bitter fighting, and the residents of the city were brutalized and slaughtered by the Christian invaders. The invaders' conduct breached the principles of modern just war ethics, and the massacres still color Islamic politics today.

## Just War

The just war theory is a largely Christian philosophy that attempts to reconcile three things:

- taking human life is seriously wrong
- states have a duty to defend their citizens, and defend justice
- protecting innocent human life and defending important moral values sometimes requires willingness to use force and violence

The theory specifies conditions for judging if it is just to go to war, and conditions for how the war should be fought. Although it was extensively developed by Christian theologians (religious scholars), it can be used by people of every faith and none.

The aim of **Just War Theory** is to provide a guide to the right way for states (governments) to act in potential conflict situations. It only applies to states, and not to individuals (although an individual can use the theory to help them decide whether it is morally right to take part in a particular war). Just War Theory provides a useful framework for individuals and political groups to use for their discussions of possible wars. The theory is not intended to justify wars but rather to prevent them, by showing that going to war except in certain limited circumstances is wrong, and thus motivate states to find other ways of resolving conflicts. The doctrine of the Just War can deceive a person into thinking that because a war is just, it's actually a good thing. But behind contemporary war theory lies the idea that war is always bad. A just war is permissible because it's a lesser evil, but it's still an evil.

The principles of a Just War originated with classical Greek and Roman philosophers like Plato and Cicero and were added to by Christian theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. There are two parts to Just War theory, both with Latin names:

- **Jus ad bellum**: the conditions under which the use of military force is justified.
- **Jus in bello**: how to conduct a war in an ethical manner.

A war is only a Just War if it is both justified, and carried out in the right way. Some wars fought for noble causes have been rendered unjust because of the way in which they were fought.

### **Christianity on War**

The Christian view of war has changed throughout the history of the faith. The early church (the first 300 years) was strongly pacifist. Origen said that Christians "do not go forth as soldiers". Tertullian wrote "only without the sword can the Christian wage war: for the Lord has abolished the sword." Clement of Alexandria wrote "...he who holds the sword must cast it away and that if one of the faithful becomes a soldier he must be rejected by the Church, for he has scorned God."

This changed rapidly in the time of Constantine - the Council of Arles in 314 said that to forbid "the state the right to go to war was to condemn it to extinction", and shortly after that Christian philosophers began to formulate the doctrine of the Just War.

"They who have waged war in obedience to the divine command, or in conformity with His laws, have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

**Source:** St. Augustine, *City of God*, 426 CE

For many centuries Christians believed that it was right and proper to use violence (and thus war) to spread the faith and deal with its opponents. They did not regard violence as an inherently bad thing: whether it was bad or not depended on what it was being used for. This thinking is covered under holy wars - the main examples of which, for Christians, are the Crusades. From Constantine onwards, Christian writers and preachers have used warlike and soldierly metaphors in their writing about the faith.

### **Islam on War**

Islam sets down clear guidelines as to when war is ethically right, and clear guidelines as to how such a war should be conducted. In brief, war is permitted:

- in self defence
- when other nations have attacked an Islamic state
- if another state is oppressing its own Muslims

War should be conducted:

- in a disciplined way
- so as to avoid injuring non-combatants
- with the minimum necessary force
- without anger
- with humane treatment towards prisoners of war

Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors.

**Source:** Qur'an 2:190

A noble example of ideal Muslim conduct of war is the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187. Although a number of holy Muslim places had been violated by Christians, Saladin prohibited acts of vengeance, and his army was so disciplined that there were no deaths or violence after the city surrendered. The residents were taken prisoner, but their ransom was set at a token amount.

**Source:** All above content was compiled from the Ethics and Religion sections of BBC.co.uk.