A FACT SHEET ON JUST WAR THEORY

12/3/2001

Thoughts on applying the Christian tradition's guidelines for waging war

What is just war theory?
The Christian just war theory is a 1600-year-old attempt to answer the questions "When is it permissible to wage war" *(jus in bello),* and "What are the limitations on the ways we wage war?" *(jus ad bellum).*

Where did just war theory originate?
The first Christian thinker to write extensively about the subject was St. Augustine of Hippo. For Augustine, war was a logical extension of the act of governance. And governance itself was, as St. Paul wrote in Romans 13.1-7, ordained by God.

This, however, doesn't mean that all wars are morally justifiable. Augustine wrote, "It makes a great difference by which causes and under which authorities men undertake the wars that must be waged." This led him to describe the conditions under which war could be waged justly.

What does just war require?
For Augustine, the first requirement was **proper authority**. As he put it, "The natural order, which is suited to the peace of moral things, requires that the authority and deliberation for undertaking war be under the control of a leader." The leader Augustine had in mind was one whom God had entrusted with the responsibility of governance. In his time, this was the emperor. Later, it would be kings and princes. Today, it's our elected leadership. These people are answerable to God for the welfare of their states in a way that no private citizen is.Proper authority is not the only requirement. For Augustine, **proper cause**, the reasons for which we go to war, was as important as who authorized the action. He specifically ruled out as justifications for war such causes as "[t]he desire for harming, the cruelty of revenge, the restless and implacable mind, the savageness of revolting, [and] the lust for dominating." Augustine saw war as a tragic necessity and we should keep in mind his admonition to "[l]et necessity slay the warring foe, not your will."

Are there other requirements?
Augustine's ideas have been expanded upon over the years. In addition to **proper authority** and **proper cause**, Christian just war theory requires that there be a **reasonable chance of success**. Even if you have a good reason to attack, you cannot simply send young men out to die. Human life is too precious, too sacred to waste.

The final requirement is one of **proportionality**. In waging a war, authorities must make sure that the harm caused by their response to aggression does not exceed the harm caused by the aggression itself. Annihilating the enemy in response to an attack on one of your cities is an example of disproportion.

Similarly, **proportionality** has also come to mean that non-combatants must be shielded from harm. They can never, for any reason whatsoever, be the targets of an attack. The history of modern warfare is characterized by "total warfare," the expansion of targets beyond strictly military ones. That's why, of all the requirements of just war theory, proportionality is the most likely to be violated, even by governments with the most just of causes.

The War in Iraq

The debate over the war in Iraq intensifies in Washington and across the nation day by day. Just last week, I was asked by the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* magazine to respond to a question about the war on their "On Faith" website. The question was: Is the Iraq war just?

It's a question a lot of people continue to argue about. And it was a great question to ask in 2002. Now, in 2007, it's not the right question.

At the time when American troops were first committed to Iraq, the issue was whether the war met the Augustinian "Just War" tradition with its various criteria: like just cause, proper authority, right intention, etc. I believed that just war standards were met by the threat presented.

There were precedents, as well, for a preemptive attack; as Sir Thomas More put it, "if any foreign prince takes up arms and prepares to invade their land, they immediately attack him in full force outside their own borders." But it was a close call at the time, and particularly so now, in light of the failures of U.S. intelligence.

But however the war started, the just war criteria are not in question now. In fact, in all the debate about pulling out our troops, no one is really asking the right question. For better or for worse, the United States made promises and commitments to the Iraqi people. So the question now is this: Is it morally acceptable for U.S. forces to leave Iraq in the midst of the bloodshed?

I know what I'm about to say is not going to be a popular thing. But to pick up and leave would break the promises we have made to the Iraqi people, would leave hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians defenseless, would lead to massive chaos and bloodshed, and would be an act of moral dishonor. It would be akin to what the Allies did after World War II, when they abandoned Eastern Europe to the Soviets and returned millions of Russian refugees and POWs to lands occupied by the Red Army—even though the Allies knew that, for many, it meant death and, for the rest, tyranny. That was one of the most shameful chapters in the history of the West—an abandonment of our most fundamental moral principles.

American policymakers must also consider the serious consequences for American security and for the security of our closest ally in the region, Israel. A total withdrawal now would only embolden al-Qaeda (which is active in Iraq and Afghanistan), and it would embolden Iran, whose president, a Holocaust-denier, has declared publicly and often that Israel must be wiped off the map. I believe that abandoning Iraq now could leave Israel's very existence in question.

As we weigh our moral responsibilities, we need to remember that Thomas Aquinas put the just war doctrine—the idea of government wielding the sword—under the heading of "Love" in his great *Summa Theologiae*. He did that because being willing to defend innocent civilians is an act of Christian charity.

The job of government biblically is to wield the sword to preserve order and protect life. A policeman in the middle of a gun battle that starts during a robbery cannot just walk away when the shooting gets too heavy. It is his duty as a magistrate to stay and restore peace. Isn't that the same position we are in now in Iraq?

The politicians tell us we should bring our troops home, and everything will be just fine. Sadly, in a fallen world, it doesn't work that way. The innocent will die.

2002

By Chuck Colson
1/1/2002

A Prospective

The final gasps of the presidential election, an economic downturn, the attack on America, and the war on terrorism. 2001 gave thinking Christians plenty of challenges. On BreakPoint we've tried to look at these enormous issues through the lens of a Christian worldview.

A great deal can be said about the challenges of 2001, but today I want to focus on the challenges of the new year. Discerning the issues that we will face takes no crystal ball or special gift. They're very clear, and wisdom dictates that we plan ahead.

In February or March the Senate will take up the human cloning ban that the House passed last fall. The cloning debate is, at its core, a question of what it means to be human. The notion that humans are begotten in the loving embrace of husband and wife is being challenged by the manufacture of human embryos in the laboratory. That which is begotten is cherished in spite of defects. That which is manufactured is . . . well, what do we do with a broken clock radio or worn out car? We toss them out without a thought.

Cloning and other bioethical issues place our very humanity at stake. And you'll hear a lot more about bioethics on BreakPoint this year.

A second issue is the ongoing war on terrorism. I believe that Harvard professor Samuel Huntington was correct -- that we are engaged in a clash of civilizations

with the Muslim world. The utopianism inherent in Islam -- or any system that believes human beings are perfectible through force or law -- is at odds with the Western traditions of religious freedom, tolerance, and freedom of conscience inherited from Christianity.

As I've said repeatedly this fall, Christianity and Islam are not the same, and the terrorists didn't hijack a "peaceful religion" -- they took Islam seriously. As that truth becomes evident over the next year, the clash of civilizations will become sharper as well.

Which leads me to the worldview challenges inherent in the war itself. At the end of November, I was a part of a meeting of religious leaders with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to discuss the moral limits of war. I reported to you at the time that our military is doing its very best to conduct the war in Afghanistan according to the precepts laid down in the just war doctrine -- a Christian doctrine that allows legitimate governments to fulfill their duty in wars to do justice and defend citizens while banning unnecessary cruelty and the slaughter of innocents.

I was very encouraged with what I heard that day and with what I continue to hear in the news.

But as the war on terrorism moves beyond the borders of Afghanistan -- and it will -- new and troublesome questions will arise, like the legitimacy of preemptive attacks, for example. Christians need to speak to these issues clearly. Christian worldview thinking about justice and civil liberties needs to guide us on the domestic front, as well, as the FBI and other law enforcement agencies act to root terrorists out among us.

These, of course, are not the only issues that will tax our thinking in the new year as we attempt to apply biblical truth to the challenges of our day. There will be additional issues we can't imagine right now. But the important thing is for us to examine whatever transpires in the light of biblical revelation and sound doctrine. We'll make one new year's resolution: To do precisely that on Breakpoint.

From all of us here, we wish you a happy, blessed new year.