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## Ethics of war - introduction

### Introduction

Human beings have been fighting each other since prehistoric times, and people have been discussing the rights and wrongs of it for almost as long.

This section of the BBC Ethics site covers a wide range of the issues involved.

### War is bad

The Ethics of War starts by assuming that war is a bad thing, and should be avoided if possible, but it recognises that there can be situations when war may be the lesser evil of several bad choices.

War is a bad thing because it involves deliberately killing or injuring people, and this is a fundamental wrong - an abuse of the victims' human rights.

### War ethics

The purpose of war ethics is to help decide what is right or wrong, both for individuals and countries, and to contribute to debates on public policy, and ultimately to government and individual action.

War ethics also leads to the creation of formal codes of war (e.g. the Hague and Geneva conventions), the drafting and implementation of rules of engagement for soldiers, and in the punishment of soldiers and others for war crimes.

### The three key questions are:

- [Is it ever right to go to war?](#)
- [When is it right to wage war?](#)
- [What is the moral way to conduct a war?](#)

## Christianity and the ethics of war

The main Christian view of **war ethics** is contained in the doctrine of the **Just War**.

The basic assumption of modern Christians is that war is rarely justified and should be avoided unless the Just War conditions are met.

An individual Christian may believe that the standard of evidence and argument required for them to support a war is higher than the standard of evidence that national leaders may require to go to war.

Christianity is no longer (if it ever was) wholly against war. Some say that modern Christianity has a 'presumption against war', but others say that it has a

'presumption against injustice' - and the bias against war comes from the injustice that war can do.

This view says that the aim of Christianity is to promote a world in which peace and justice flourish everywhere: war may sometimes be the tool needed to do this, and waging war may sometimes be a lesser evil (a lesser injustice) than allowing injustice to persist or tolerating the victimisation of innocent people.

## How do Christian chaplains in the armed forces feel about war?

### Pacifism

Christians have a long history of refusing to take part in war. Many Christians are **pacifists** of various types. These range from peace activists to those who need a great deal to convince them that war is justified.

The Christian argument for pacifism is based partly on Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and other places, and in the example that Jesus sets Christians through his life.

Those who argue against this say that Christ's pacifist nature and behaviour were part of his unique role as redeemer of humanity. Christians are not redeemers and so their conduct should follow Christ by seeking to bring peace and justice to the world even if this means not always 'turning the other cheek'.

Christian groups that emphasise pacifism include:

- **Mennonites**: a church that grew out of the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the early 1500s. Mennonites believe Christ's injunction to "love your enemies" prevents them from participating in any way in military action against another country.
- **Quakers** (or The Religious Society of Friends): a Christian group with a total commitment to non-violence. In 1660 the Quakers declared "...the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of the world."

### Types of Pacifism

There are several different sorts of pacifism, but they all include the idea that war and violence are unjustifiable, and that conflicts should be settled in a peaceful way.

The word (but not the idea) is only a century old, being first used in 1902 at the 10th International Peace Conference.

People are pacifists for one or some of these reasons:

- religious faith
- non-religious belief in the sanctity of life

- practical belief that war is wasteful and ineffective

Many believe that pacifism is more than opposition to war. They argue that it must include action to promote justice and human rights. (Consider for example whether the preservation of peace throughout the British Empire justified the human rights violations of that colonial regime.)

## Levels of pacifism

It's important to see the difference between the morality of pacifism as it applies to an individual, and the application of that morality to the behaviour of a nation-state.

Not appreciating this difference can lead to real difficulties in discussing pacifism and non-violence.

## Consistency

Pacifists are often thought of as totally opposed to killing, but they don't have to be. A pacifist can logically support euthanasia and abortion, although they would need to have thought their position through very carefully.

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## Categories of pacifism

### Absolute pacifism

An absolute pacifist believes that it is never right to take part in war, even in self-defence. They think that the value of human life is so high that nothing can justify killing a person deliberately.

To stick to this principle consistently is hard. It views it as unethical to use violence to rescue an innocent person who is being attacked and may be killed, and this is not a comfortable moral position.

Absolute pacifists usually hold this view as a basic moral or spiritual principle, without regard to the results of war or violence, however they *could* logically argue that violence always leads to worse results than non-violence.

### Conditional pacifism

Conditional pacifists are against war and violence in principle, but they accept that there may be circumstances when war will be less bad than the alternative.

Conditional pacifists usually base their moral code on Utilitarian principles - it's the bad consequences that make it wrong to resort to war or violence.

### Selective pacifism

Other pacifists believe that it is a matter of degree, and only oppose wars involving weapons of mass destruction - nuclear or chemical and biological weapons - either because of the uniquely devastating consequences of such weapons, or because a war that uses such weapons is not 'winnable'.

## **Active pacifism**

Pacifists are heavily involved in political activity to promote peace, and to argue against particular wars.

During a war many pacifists will refuse to fight, but some will take part in activities that seek to reduce the harm of war; e.g. by driving ambulances, but other pacifists will refuse to take part in *any* activity that might support the war.

Not all pacifists are brave enough to act according to these beliefs and to refuse to fight, but many have, bravely choosing punishment, and even execution, rather than go to war.

Nowadays most democratic countries accept that people have the right of conscientious objection to military service, but they usually expect the objector to undertake some form of public service as an alternative.

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## **Arguments against pacifism**

### **Pacifism cannot be national policy**

Pacifism as national policy for a nation is almost unheard of, for the obvious reason that it will only work if no-one wants to attack your country, or the nation with whom you are in dispute is also committed to pacifism. In any other circumstances adopting a pacifist stance will result in your country rapidly being conquered.

However, the idea of pacifism, and of seeking non-violent solutions to disputes between nations, plays a significant part in international politics, particularly through the work of the United Nations.

### **The logical case against Pacifism**

Those who oppose pacifism say that because the world is not perfect, war is not always wrong.

They say that states have a duty to protect their citizens, and that citizens have a duty to carry out certain tasks in a Just War.

It doesn't matter that pacifists are motivated by respect for human life and a love of peace. The pacifists' refusal to participate in war does not make them noble idealists, but people who are failing to carry out an important moral obligation.

A second argument says that pacifism has no place in the face of extreme evil.

The war against Nazi Germany was a war against extreme wickedness, and in 1941 an editorial in the Times Literary Supplement wrote:

We have discovered that there is something more horrible than war - the killing of the spirit in the body, the Nazi contempt for the individual man. The world reeks with the foulness of the crimes in occupied Europe, where a Dark Age has begun anew.

## **Pacifism and remembrance**

Because most societies regard going to war as fulfilling a citizen's ethical duty, they honour and remember those who give their lives in war.

If we believe that war is governed by ethics we should only honour those who give their lives in a Just War, and who followed the rules of war.

So, for example, it should be wrong to honour dead soldiers who killed the enemy or wounded or raped enemy women. (But this distinction is not usually made about those who fought on 'our' side.)

A more tricky moral dilemma is presented by the case of soldiers who died while fighting 'justly' for an unjust war.

Many soldiers died fighting honourably and decently for Germany in World War II. But since the war was a blatantly aggressive and unjust war would it be wrong to honour such soldiers for their sacrifice?

## **The UK Experience**

Pacifism became widespread as a reaction to the scale of killing in the First World War and the use of universal male conscription, and gained further support after the creation of nuclear weapons.

However, the Holocaust, and other industrial scale abuses of human rights, caused many to think that there could be cases when war was the least-bad course of action.

In World War 1 those who refused to fight were known as 'conscientious objectors'. They numbered about 16,000.

While the name was intended to make it clear that it was conscience not cowardice that kept pacifists out of the military, it was rapidly shortened to 'Conshie' and used as a term of abuse.

Some pacifists were prepared to work in non-combat roles as medical orderlies, stretcher-bearers, ambulance drivers, cooks or labourers, while others refused to do anything that might help the war effort. Over 500 of these were imprisoned under harsh conditions.

There were two major pacifist organisations in World War 1: the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the No-Conscription Fellowship (both founded in 1914). In 1923 a Christian Pacifist MP was elected to parliament. In the middle 1930s the Peace Pledge Union gained wide support.

Pacifism gained great publicity from a 1933 student debate in the Oxford University Union that voted for a resolution that 'this House will in no circumstances fight for King and Country'.

In World War 2, there were 59,000 British conscientious objectors, who received rather better treatment than in the previous war.

## **Religion and Pacifism**

Some religions, such as Buddhism, promote pacifism. Others have strong pacifist elements, such as Christianity, but have accepted that war is inevitable and sought to provide moral guidance in dealing with conflict.

Judaism, like other religions, is strongly opposed to violence, and where violence is permitted the minimum necessary should be used.

But Jewish law does occasionally argue that violence may be the only solution: it imposes a moral obligation to save the life of a person who is being killed, even if the only way of doing so is to kill the attacker. (This demonstrates that Judaism regards going to the aid of someone who is being attacked as a higher moral duty than not injuring people.)

Jewish law also specifically obliges Jews to use violence on the Sabbath as a response to an invasion.

## **Just War - introduction**

### **Introduction**

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, it can be used by people of every faith and none.

### **Purpose**

The aim of Just War Theory is to provide a guide to the right way for states 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 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.

## 'Just', or merely 'permissible'?

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.

## Origins

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.

## History

- 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.
- 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.
- The idea that violence is not inherently bad can also be seen in some versions of the Just War doctrine - violence (war) can be a vital tool in restoring justice and peace.

## Elements

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.

## Against the Theory of the Just War

Some people argue that the Just War doctrine is inherently immoral, while others suggest that there is no place for ethics in war. Still others argue that the doctrine doesn't apply in the conditions of modern conflicts.

Here are some of the arguments that have been put forward:

- all war is unjust and has no place in any ethical theory
  - morality must always oppose deliberate violence
  - just war ideas tend to make violence OK, rather than restrain it
- war so disrupts the normal rules of society that morality goes out of the window.
- the just war theory is unrealistic and pointless
  - in a conflict "the strong do what they will, and the weak do what they must"
  - the decision to wage war is governed by realism and relative strength, not ethics
  - morality thus has no use in war
- if God 'requires us to make war' it would be wrong to disobey him, regardless of the requirements of the Just War theory
  - in the Bible God is frequently on the side of those waging wars that don't conform to just war theory
- The overriding aim of war should be to achieve victory as quickly and cheaply as possible
  - if the cause is just, then no restrictions should be placed on achieving it
  - the rules of conduct of war are mere camouflage because they are always overruled by 'military necessity'
- the existence of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons of mass destruction requires a different approach to the problem
  - these weapons can only be used for unrestricted war and so the condition of proportionality can't be met if they are used
  - using these weapons guarantees civilian casualties, and thus breaks a basic rule of the conduct of war
  - since these weapons can't be uninvented they render just war theory pointless
  - in recent times it has become possible to target such weapons quite precisely, so the problems above only apply to indiscriminate versions of such weapons
  - the ethics of weapons of mass destruction are a different topic
- terrorists are inherently uninterested in morality, so following any ethical theory of war handicaps those whom terrorists attack - thus a different approach is needed