Ethics 2

Peace and Justice

The Old Testament

The Sixth Commandment (from the Ten Commandments, given to Moses) says, ‘You shall not murder,’ but there are occasions when the Jewish people are told by God to attack people who oppose them.

The famous Old Testament quotation used to justify war:

But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Exodus 21:23-24

The words are intended to limit revenge, not encourage vengeance. But revenge is not consistent with the later teaching of Jesus.

The New Testament

Jesus is often described as a pacifist. He taught:

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.

Matthew 5.9

When he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, his disciples wanted to defend him:

When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched the man’s ear and healed him.

Luke 22:49-51

Jesus’ anger

There are two occasions in the gospels when Jesus is obviously angry. One of these is in the Temple in Jerusalem:

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves. ‘It is written,’ he said to them. ‘My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.’

Matthew 21:12-13

The other event takes place outside of Jerusalem,

Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, ‘May you never bear fruit again!’ Immediately the tree withered.’

Matthew 21:18-19

Most Christians believe that war and fighting are wrong except in the most severe cases and they base their views on Jesus’ teaching about love:

A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

John 13:34

Christian involvement in war

In the past there have been many occasions when Christians have fought wars and when Christian countries have fought each other including:

* the Crusades
* the First and Second World Wars
* wars in Vietnam, Korea, the Falklands/Malvinos, South Africa, and Northern Ireland

Pacifism

Some Christians, such as The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), are totally opposed to fighting and during warfare they are conscientious objectors (taking a public stance against conflict). They are prepared to go into battle driving ambulances or doing other duties but they will not fight.

Other Christians are prepared to fight in the armed services and there are always chaplains attached to military units.

Most Christians today would probably not condone any war that was not fought according to the ‘Just War’ theory. A war is justified if it is fought for a reason that carries sufficient moral weight. The country that wishes to initiate the use of military force against another nation must demonstrate that there is a 'just' cause to do so.

Christians believe that they should protest when injustice is being done against other people, even though they may not be Christians.

First they came for the Jews

and I did not speak out-

because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists

and I did not speak out-

because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists

and I did not speak out-

because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me-

And there was no one left

to speak out for me.

Pastor Niemöller

Most religions offer teaching on war and conflict. And over time religion has been at the heart of conflict between nations.

War and power

The majority of people believe that fighting and killing are wrong but they might agree that in some situations war is inevitable, particularly for defence.

A Holy War and a Just War are different.

The aim of a Holy War is to protect the religion of the people concerned. A famous Holy War fought by Christians was the Crusades of a thousand years ago when Christian Europe claimed the Holy Land from the Muslims who governed it.

A Just War is just if it is fought for a reason that is justifiable, and that carries sufficient moral weight. The country that wishes to use military force must demonstrate that there is a ‘conditions for a Just War

A Just War is one which has to be fought but is conducted according to certain conditions. These were developed by Thomas Aquinas (c1225-74) and Francisco de Vitoria (c1483-1546) and are still referred to by Christians today.

The theory is not intended to justify all wars but to prevent them by showing that going to war - except in certain limited circumstances - is wrong. The intention was to motivate states to find other ways of resolving conflicts, prevent war and to limit its effects.

The conditions of a Just War are:

* it must be fought by a legal recognised authority, eg, a government
* the cause of the war must be just
* the war must be fought with the intention to establish good or correct evil
* there must be a reasonable chance of success
* the war must be the last resort (after all diplomatic negotiations have been tried and failed)
* only sufficient force must be used and civilians must not be involved

Some wars can appear to meet all of these conditions. For example, World War Two (1939-1945) would appear to have been a Just War:

* it was fought by Germany and the Allied countries who were legal authorities
* Germany was being attacked for invading other countries
* the intention was to correct the evil Hitler was doing for Nazi Germany
* the Allies felt that they had a reasonable chance of success and they did win
* all forms of negotiation with Hitler and the Third Reich had failed
* most of the fighting was limited to the armies concerned and to harbours and munitions sites

This looks as though it was a ‘properly constituted’ Just War, but actions like the Allied bombing of Dresden, a two-day raid by almost 2,400 bombers that destroyed the city and killed perhaps 135,000 civilians to virtually no military purpose, certainly broke the final conditions cause to do so.