



## Aren't Christians responsible for most wars?

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I am often asked how I can believe in God when there have been so many wars caused by religion. The implication is that if only people would leave behind their convictions about the existence of a God the world would be a much better, more peaceful place.

Of course very few people ever reflect on the fact that the very reverse of this was demonstrated in the 20th century, which saw the atheistic communist and Nazi ideologies rise. In fact, that century saw more killing than the previous 19 put together.

None of this is to say that religion has not at times been a cause or significant factor in war. In fact, because of our current context with the rise of Islam and, in particular, of violent Islamic terrorism all over the world, it is true that horrific acts played out on our televisions day after day are religiously motivated.

It may be that someone who is asking questions of us is unable to distinguish between Christianity and Islam and is equating the two. The first task here is to draw clear distinctions between Christ and Muhammad, as well as the Bible and the Qur'an, on the issue of violence.

It may be important to point to Jesus Himself, as He healed the ear of the arresting soldier when Peter had drawn a sword in defence of Him and cut it off.

### True Christian responses

Christians, however, would be the first to hold

their hands up and say that violence committed in the name of Christ in history, such as the Crusades or the Inquisition, is certainly not a true reflection of what Jesus came to say and accomplish. In fact, true Christian responses at the time of the Crusades resounded from leaders such as Francis of Assisi and John Wycliffe, who roundly condemned any killing or warfare in the name of Christ.

But what is a Christian view of war, if killing people in the name of Christ is wrong? The New Testament itself does not condemn the vocation of a soldier if the work is carried out in a responsible and lawful fashion (Matthew 8.5, Luke 3.14, Acts 10.1-8 and 34-35).

And yet other passages such as the Beatitudes seem to point towards pacifism: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5.9).

There are broadly four historical Christian positions when it comes to seeking a biblical position on the concept of war:

§ Militarism – any war, anytime, any place, any cause.

§ Selective Militarism – only when the state declares the cause is just.

§ Selective Pacifism – only when the individual thinks the cause is just.

§ Pacifism – no fighting anytime, any place, on any cause.

Most Christians today would fall into the middle two. However, the early Church response to war was initially pacifism that allowed for the possibility of Christian converts staying on in the army. Pre-Constantinian theologians and Church leaders such as Tertullian took the rebuke of Peter as an absolute position; they spiritualised the battles in the Old Testament and did not allow for any Christian approval of war.

It is the great Christian thinker Augustine who introduces "just war" theory into Christian thinking. "Just war" thinking originates in classical civilisation, but Augustine developed it, building on this and the work of the 4th century theologian Ambrose.

The first set of principles deal with reasons for a nation going to war (*jus ad bellum*): The only just

cause is defence against aggression. The only just intention is to restore a just peace to friend and foe alike. The use of military force must be a last resort after all other negotiations have failed. The decision must be made by the highest governmental authority.

The second set of principles deal with the *modus operandi* or conduct of a war (*jus in bello*): War must have limited ends only sufficient to repel aggression and redress its injustice. The means must be limited by proportionality to the offence. Non-combatant immunity from intentional and direct attack must be respected. Combat should not be prolonged when there is no reasonable hope of success within these limits.

Most protestant and Catholic churches adhere to these rules about war, and Scripture is clear that war is a disastrous tragedy from which the innocent always suffer along with the guilty. The psalmist laments war, the prophet looks for the day when swords will be beaten into ploughshares and the kingdom of Shalom appears, and the New Testament blesses peacemakers, while Jesus resists being made king by force.

## A cosmic battle

From beginning to end, the story of the Bible takes place in the context of a cosmic battle between good and evil, which is introduced to us in Genesis and runs through until Revelation. At different moments in history this war takes different forms.

As God's chosen people are commanded to enter the physical land that He gives them, they are to displace the evil practices that have gone on there and not allow themselves to be drawn into these things themselves. This happens at a moment in history but does not give a license for any individuals or subsequent nations to go and do likewise.

All of this must also be seen in the light of the reality that God raises up other nations' armies to come and judge Israel. They too experience the judgement of God against their sins.

When the New Testament comes, Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises and longings of the Old

Testament; He is God come to earth in human flesh.

Jesus conquers evil through His death on the cross and calls His followers to appropriate that victory in their own lives, and to continue the spiritual battle through prayer and a life of service following Him.

When wars occur between the nations of the world, Christians in different contexts must work out their involvement and reaction to those wars using biblical principles. The development of "just war" theory by theologians and Christian thinkers of previous generations helps the contemporary Church do this in faithfulness to Christ and His word.