

VIOLENCE IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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Anthony Harvey offers a very different perspective. From the standpoint of Christian history those who have believed in absolute non-violence have always been in the minority. Instead the Church has taken a practical view and developed "just war" and other codes to guide us and restrain us. These have recently formed the basis for the Hague conventions and the UN Charter. He suggests that the development of these global institutions should properly be seen as a steady effort toward reducing the level of armed conflict in the world. The downside is that we have on occasion to be willing to use force. CS

Should Christians ever use force to protect themselves and others from attack? Should they ever assent to a war, or serve in the armed forces? These questions have divided Christians from very early times. On the one side are what appear to be the clear teachings of Jesus (enjoining on us never to retaliate, to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek), and his example of total non-resistance on the cross; on the other is the responsibility that seems to belong to every citizen, whether Christian or not, to promote justice, punish wrongdoing and maintain peace, all of which are stressed in the Hebrew scriptures as duties laid upon us by God, but which may at times inevitably involve the use of force and even active engagement in military action. Throughout Christian history the view that the New Testament leaves us with no option but to renounce all use of force has been courageously held by some; but they have always been in the minority. Despite being able to appeal to apparently unambiguous scriptural texts enjoining a complete renunciation of the use of force, and despite a strong conviction that the use of violence by one human being on another is contrary to God's will and offensive to his very nature,¹ those who have committed themselves to this form of discipleship – though they have offered a powerful witness to the human possibilities of non-resistance and non-violence and have helped to keep alive a truly Christian vision of human society as it is intended to be by God – have nevertheless failed to persuade the majority of their fellow Christians. For many centuries their witness was borne mainly by individuals, who preferred to suffer and even to die rather than resort to the use of force in self-defence. In more recent times, certain small denominations, such as the Quakers and the Mennonites, officially made pacifism a part of their understanding of discipleship, and in the twentieth century "Christian pacifism" began to appear as an organised movement in a number of mainstream churches.

Those who have taken the opposite view have by no means been insensitive to the evils that attend the use of force, both in private disputes and in warfare; hence the long Christian tradition of seeking as far as possible to limit the use of force. Given that the threat or declaration of war, for example, may sometimes seem to be the only way to prevent a still worse evil, much serious thought has been given, from Augustine to Aquinas to the present day, to the limits within which military action should be confined. Only certain objectives are legitimate ("just cause") and the conduct of war should be subject to strict rules for the protection of non-combatants and the avoidance of disproportionate uses of force. This just war line of thinking influenced the formulation of "the laws of war" and the Hague conventions, and lies behind the UN Charter. The latter narrowed the scope of "just cause" by outlawing any military action by an individual state other than in self-defence (Articles 2, 5 and 42). Indeed, in the run-up to the war against Iraq in 1991, and again in 2003, many of the arguments used were implicitly or explicitly based on traditional just war principles.

In recent decades the pacifist position (which is, of course, also held by many who are not Christians) has been confronted by new questions in view of the undoubted progress that has been made in establishing international instruments for the preservation of peace. The existence of the UN, the deployment of peacekeeping troops in zones of tension (often without weapons), the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC), are all steps in the direction of creating a world in which "the scourge of war", as the Preamble to the UN Charter calls it, is eliminated. These steps are no doubt tentative and faltering, and often appear to be ineffective, but they represent a steady effort by the world community to reduce the level of armed conflict, and no Christian should withhold approval and support. But all of them, even the ICC, involve at least the possibility of the use of force. The UN cannot exercise its function without being able to resort to military action if all other measures fail. Peacekeeping troops cannot be exposed to a high risk of danger without being authorised to defend themselves. A criminal court cannot function without being able forcibly to arrest the accused and to impose appropriate penalties for serious wrongdoing. Pacifists can hardly withhold approval and support for such progress as is being made towards a world in which armed conflict becomes obsolete; but they inevitably remain uneasy at

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the implication that these new institutions may have to resort to the use of force in extreme circumstances.

But surely, it may be said, there are some uses of force which are outlawed altogether? Along with progress in regulating international disputes peacefully, there has been increasing protection given to individuals through legislation on human rights, and this protection implies that no one should be subjected to undue physical duress. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved by the UN in 1948 has been followed by other regional instruments such as the European Convention, which has been incorporated into the legal systems of most European countries² and offers protection to individuals against any action of government that threaten to violate their basic human rights.

The Church has been slow to recognise that human rights are a legitimate concern for Christians and that Christianity contains principles which strongly support them. This has been due in part to a change of culture since biblical times. For various reasons the Bible speaks less of rights than of obligations. In Deuteronomy 24.19–22, for example, farmers are instructed to leave some remnants of the harvest to be gleaned by the poor; but this does not confer a right on the poor to glean the field. Moreover, much in the teaching of Jesus (and subsequently Paul, e.g. 1 Cor 6) seems to conflict with the claiming of rights. A Christian is instructed to lend without expecting return, to be insulted without seeking redress, to be commandeered without protest. The language of human rights, with its emphasis on claiming that to which one is entitled, seems alien to the spirit of Christian discipleship. Moreover, the emergence of rights language in the eighteenth century, particularly in slogans exploited in the French Revolution, was accompanied by violent anti-Christian and anticlerical disturbances, and it is only recently that the Roman Catholic Church has been able to overcome its distrust of principles associated with a violent revolution and to give official endorsement to the concept of human rights.³ ‘However, most Christians now realise that supporting human rights is not simply a matter of joining the bandwagon. The protection of the weak and vulnerable has always been a fundamental Christian concern. Human rights legislation, which typically protects the vulnerable individual from the oppression of the state, has become an invaluable resource for promoting an essentially Christian cause. The official theology of the churches now generally seeks to derive human rights from the doctrine of the creation of human beings in the image of God. Our God-given

dignity is such that any disrespect for it must be condemned. This is precisely the intended role of human rights legislation.

But what are these “rights”? What began as a statement of the basic conditions in which human beings may maintain their individual dignity – the right not to be tortured or undergo humiliating treatment, the right not to be imprisoned without trial and so forth – rapidly developed into a network of rights (social and economic) covering the worlds of work, communication, economic development and many others. At the same time, there was an explosion of rhetoric surrounding the whole issue. Human rights were said to be “inalienable and indivisible”. This is plainly untrue. For example, governments are permitted to derogate from their human rights obligations in times of national emergency,⁴ therefore these rights can be “alienated”. “Economic rights”, such as the right to work, depend on work being available and cannot be guaranteed in a situation of high unemployment, but a right to a fair trial may be entrenched in a constitution, therefore these rights can hardly be said to stand or fall together, to be “indivisible”. Nevertheless, there are certain rights (though surprisingly few when it comes to the point) which may be said to be truly inalienable or absolute. One of these is the right not to be tortured. Most legal systems in the world explicitly repudiate judicial or investigative torture. Does this mean that we can now say that all torture is totally wrong?

Unfortunately, it is not so simple. It is certainly true that one tradition of moral, and indeed Christian, thought has always worked with certain absolute principles. According to this, some acts are inherently wrong and there can be no circumstances in which they can be committed by a Christian or, indeed, by any person with a developed moral conscience.⁵ But another, and perhaps more realistic, view allows that the rightness or wrongness of an act may depend at least in part on circumstances. In terms of torture, take the following case. A person is arrested who is believed to be part of a terrorist organisation that is known to be plotting a major attack on the civilian population. If he can be persuaded to yield information, many lives may be saved. Torture is officially excluded, but can some pressure be put on him to give some information? If questioning is prolonged and he gets tired, he may drop his guard. If he is held in an uncomfortable position, he may be willing to shorten the interview by saying something useful to the enquiry, and so on, on an increasing scale of severity. When do these expedients

NOTES

1. As a Christian writer expressed it in the second century, “Our God is a God, not of coercion, but of persuasion.” *Letter of Diognetus*, 7.4.
2. In the case of the UK this was one of the first acts of the Labour Government after the 1997 general election.
3. First explicitly commended in Pope John XXIII’s Encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (1963).
4. As, for example, the UK did for some time in Northern Ireland in order to detain suspects without charge.
5. This view is particularly characteristic of the Roman Catholic tradition, and was strongly insisted upon by the late Pope John Paul II.

► cease to be “interrogation” and become “torture”? How does one balance a slight increase in physical or psychological pressure against the possible loss of many human lives?

The dilemma is no more than one example of a form of moral reasoning that many find more realistic than the enunciation of absolute principles. We continually find ourselves in a situation, not of having to decide whether or not to do something that is either right or wrong, but of having to set rights against each other – in this case the right of innocent civilians to be protected over against the right of the individual not to be tortured. Our moral choices are seldom a straightforward matter of good and bad. We have to consider what, under the circumstances, will cause least harm or do most good. Rights conflict with one another. Moral principles may point to a different course of action in different circumstances. It may not even be possible to say that all forms of physical duress are always wrong. If we did, we should probably have to put many of our police investigators in the dock!

All this bears on our original question, is ever right for a Christian to use force or bear arms? To infer from the sayings and example of Jesus that it is always wrong to do so is to introduce an absolute principle that appears to allow no exceptions into moral discourse. Such principles certainly have their importance. They represent an ideal towards which all Christians should strive and they keep alive a vision of a world in which they can be observed by all. In this sense, the witness of those with this view has been of immeasurable importance in the history of Christianity, but the majority are still likely to respond by insisting that we live in a world where moral choices are seldom black and white. Often we have no alternative but to follow the least bad course if we want to do any good.

In recent years the human race has made some progress in establishing at least the framework, if not yet the reality, of international consensus on the necessity to avoid war except as a very last resort in the face of exceptional evil. At the same time, there is a movement towards ending some of the worst injustices created by the uneven distribution of wealth in the world. For many, and it is likely always to be the majority, supporting these initiatives in every way possible, even if at times they may involve the use of force, will continue to take higher priority than seeking to give literal application to Jesus’ challenging command “not to resist evil” (Mt 5.39). ■