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An Unchristian Dogma:

Just War Theory and the Views of Tolbert Fanning

Since it was first proposed by St. Augustine, just war theory has been commonly accepted in the Christian West. The idea that engaging in warfare can be acceptable or even morally required holds a strong attraction to both theologians and government leaders alike. But how compatible is it with Christian teachings and other Western notions of justice? Leaders of the Restoration Movement of the 19th century argued that not only was just war theory at odds with portions of Western thought but that alternative policies could actually yield better results. Tolbert Fanning was a leader in this movement and in 1847 published an essay in the Christian Review arguing that just war theory contradicted central tenants of Christian doctrine and Western morality. This paper explores Fanning’s arguments and compares them with traditional just war theory.

To begin with, we must look at what constitutes a just war. According to traditional just war theory, there are three parts of a war that determine its moral character: the reasons for going to war, how that war is conducted, and under what conditions the war is terminated. In order for a war to past muster as a moral endeavor it must meet certain requirements and follow various principles in all three sections.

The first category is the reason for war. There are two general actions that another country might do that would call for declaring war. They deal with issues of justice and fairness: will we bring more evil into the world by unleashing the horrors inherent in a war or will a

*All parenthetical citations of Fanning refer to his article “War” published in the third issue of the fourth volume of the Christian Review, 1847.*
limited dose of violence help stop a greater injustice? The first legitimized reason for engaging in warfare is to reclaim conquered territory. This argument had a different feel to it during feudal times when all territory was “owned” by the ruler in a sense and therefore bore some resemblance to personal property, but it is still resonates strongly in today’s modern nation-state with its appeal to a society’s sense of nationalism and patriotism. A war for the purposes of reclaiming territory is seen as simply restoring the natural and proper order of things.

The second common justification for war is to punish wrong doers. In this argument, rulers or governments are seen to be so immoral or cruel that is justified as a means to end their tyranny. It isn’t necessary for the offending country to have committed crimes against the nation considering war; acts of cruelty towards their own population will suffice. Examples would include Hitler’s extermination of the Jews or Saddam Hussein gassing Kurds in northern Iraq to test chemical weapons. The common theme running through both of these reasons is a sense of victimization. War is only allowed for defensive purposes, whether that defense is necessary for the nation debating a war or for others. A nation which acts as an aggressor can not be waging a just war.

For a nation to commit harm to its own citizens or those of another country does not mean that another nation is free to declare war though. Just war theorists recognize that by its very nature war is filled with horrors and therefore should be a last resort. All other avenues of diplomacy and negotiation must be tried before turning to the military option. Also, a war must be declared by a legitimate authority. In a dispute between Mexico and the United States, the job of waging war belongs solely to the federal government; a war declaration by the government of the state of Arizona would be viewed as illegitimate
The second part of a war is how that war is conducted. In order to meet the requirements of a just war a country must follow three principles while prosecuting the war. First, it must discriminate between innocents and combatants. Members of the opposing military and military structure are fair game but an army must make an effort to refrain from harming innocent civilians. It is understood that some civilians and non-military resources are going to be harmed but an effort should be made to limit collateral damage and they should never be the intended target of an attack. Some theorists would argue that this rule precludes the use of weapons of mass destruction as they are incapable of discriminating between combatants and non-combatants. The second principle is proportionality. This means the force used in response to an invasion or offense should be no greater than the force used in the commission of the invasion or offense. This rule determines the maximum limits of acceptable collateral damage. If the aggressor nation kills millions of people, the responding nation is allowed to have a cause higher level of collateral damage than if the invasion had only killed a couple thousand civilians. Thirdly, an army engaging in just war must use minimal force. Even though an army waging just war is allowed by proportionality to use a given level of force, if it can use less to achieve the same goals it should. This principle aims to eliminate unnecessary harm that would otherwise be justified.

A third category that has been more recently advocated by some just war theorists is how to end a just war. The first principle in this category is that a war should be brought to an end when the initial wrongs have been redressed. Once the territory has been reclaimed or the crime has been halted, there is no further need for warfare. The other principle for ending a war is that the surrender terms must be equitable and proportional. Peace treaties should only address any other issues not settled by the war and assure a fair resolution of these conflicts. We can see the
folly of an unjust treaty by looking at the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles and its role in leading to the Second World War.

Just war theory appeals to a sense of fairness and Western notions of right and wrong. By allowing countries to respond to violence with equal violence it invokes the spirit of eye-for-an-eye justice found in the Old Testament. But Tolbert Fanning didn’t believe that just war theory has a place in Western thought, much less Christian dogma. In an article published in the March 4, 1847 issue of *Christian Review* entitled “War” Fanning explains the basis for his opposition to warfare, whatever the reason.

Fanning first takes issue with claiming that a country is engaged in a “defensive” war. Claiming to act out of self-defense seems to give military actions some sense of moral rightness, but how often are these claims true? Fanning thought it was very rare, noting

“we have not read of a people who acknowledge themselves the offending party;--all plead justification, on the ground of aggressions from the enemy. Again:--There is scarcely, in all the annals of Time, an account of an important war, in which both parties did not operate, both offensively and defensively.” (74)

Historical experience since Fanning wrote those words seems to bear out his claim that every nation engaged in war will claim to be the victim. The Central Powers of World War I fought to avenge the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand while the Allied Powers fought to defend Serbia from Austrian aggression. More recently, Saddam claimed he needed weapons of mass destruction to act as a deterrent against invasion from the United States while the United States invaded Iraq to prevent the use of those same weapons. Even Hitler claimed to be defending against border incursion when he sent his troops into Poland. In a world where every nation claims to be the victim, what war is not justified? Once the idea of a defensive war can be
used to legitimize military action, every party involved in such action will proclaim themselves the victim of their opponent.

But perhaps just war theory can be salvaged if it is limited to instances of punishing wrong doers. Surely in such cases aggressive action is permissible, perhaps even required. Not so, says Fanning. He points to the biblical injunction to love even our enemies and claims “no people have engaged in bloody deeds, without transgressing this precept” (83). He then asks his fellow Christians “who think it is right, and obedience to the cause of God, for them to take the life of their fellows, to say if such things are done in love to their enemies” (83). The point raised by Fanning is a troubling one for just war theory. Most people agree when states begin killing their own citizens (such as in the Armenian genocide or the Holocaust) it justifies military action on the part of outside powers to defend the weak. But war inherently involves killing. How can you justify killing by claiming that killing is wrong? The argument implodes in contradiction.

Aside from these arguments though, Fanning questions whether war can be justified by any argument. Fanning believes that lust for material gain lies at the heart of the desire to go to war. In Fanning’s view, “the love of territory, and plunder, has always had a most powerful bearing on the minds of men” (75) and has been the inspiration for wars from time immemorial. Given that these material lusts are the root of war, Fanning denies the possibility of any kind of theory of just war as “the idea of ‘holy wars,’ is utterly inadmissible” (75). Even if a war does have some positive outcomes, the fact that it is initially motivated by material gain destroys any claims of legitimacy.
Having dealt with the idea of a just reason for war we now turn to the possibility of just conduct in war. Fanning would certainly agree that innocent civilians should not be targeted and that the loss of life should be minimized. But he would not agree that a proportional response is legitimate. For Fanning the loss of one life is too much. To support this notion he points to nature, noting that

“Even the brute creation make mournful lamentations over the slain of their species, and thereby give undeniable evidence of the love of live in all the animal race, and the extreme pain experienced when it is taken away.” (74)

The notion that life is incredibly precious is so basic an idea that even animals realize it and react to its’ violation.

Even if the legitimacy of a proportional response is accepted there is the practical problem of not crossing the boundaries that it establishes. Fanning recognizes this issue when he says,

“the doctrine of attack, advantage taking, and punishing to gratify feelings of revenge, is adopted by all parties engaged in war; and it is universally the case, that so soon as war is declared, the technicalities—of offensive and defensive war—are forgotten.” (74)

Theoretical line drawing to limit violence is all good and fine in the context of an academic debate far from the front lines but keeping one’s head in the heat of battle is quite a different matter. The best way to deal with overzealous revenge is to avoid being put in a position of temptation to begin with.

There is little chance that Fanning would disagree with the notion of ending a war in a just manner (other than to say the sooner the better) but the issue that remains how should individuals and communities deal with war? After all, there are few things in life that are more constant than a state of war. To address this question Fanning turns to historical examples.
Being a leader in the Restoration Movement, Fanning naturally turned initially to the first century church, where he finds that “they did not feel themselves at liberty to fight and destroy the Almighty’s creatures” (84). Christians of this era simply did not engage in war, either for the state or against it, and they held this stance at great personal cost. Several Christians were martyred for refusing to bear arms on the grounds that such actions were not allowed by their faith. During the Jewish uprising of 70 AD Christians faced several rights violations and yet historians of the day make no mention any resistance on their part. And how did this policy of pacifism treat the church when faced with the threat of militaristic violence? Very well, actually. Fanning notes that “there were some forty thousand Christians, at Jerusalem, when the siege was commenced by Titus; but they took no apparent interest in the war; and yet, marvelous to relate, they perished not” (84). Because they did not take up arms Christians were not seen as a real threat and so there was no need to use force on them. They were certainly viewed as a weakness by some (Even as early as the first century Celsus feared that the empire would soon be overrun by barbarians if more people adopted the Christian view) but not as a threat.

Fanning also points to an example from 13th century France. The Waldensians were a Catholic sect that was deemed heretical by Pope Lucius III in 1184. This led to a period of intense persecution where the Waldensians “often forsook their homes to escape the sword of the bloodthirsty Roman Catholics” (86). Had they stayed and fought they likely would have been eradicated. It was only by peacefully moving out of harm’s way that the Waldensian tradition was able to survive to this day.

Fanning’s final historical example comes from the Quakers’ experience in North America. A common objection to the pacifism advanced by the Restoration Movement and others is that it leaves one defenseless to attack from less civilized societies. In response to this
charge Fanning pointed to colonial Pennsylvania where “the nation of innocent Quakers, that settled Pennsylvania, with William Penn at their head, did more to tame the wild man of the forest, than all the Puritans and Romanists that crossed the waters” (87). While other colonies had trouble with Indian attacks, the peaceful Quakers were able to live in harmony with their Native American neighbors because they did not pose a threat to each other. It wasn’t until Philadelphia was seized by the British during the American Revolution that the Indian “had his deadly enmity excited” (87).

The idea of a just war has held a prominent place in Western thought for centuries. It is often viewed as a basic Christian doctrine and this image has only been bolstered by the Religious Right’s support for recent military excursions. For most people the act of waging war can be justified under the right circumstances. Tolbert Fanning vehemently disagreed with this notion. He thought war is always rooted in base material desires and is never justifiable. Since war necessarily involves killing other humans it will always violate the command to love one another. Fanning combines these objections with the observation that conflict avoidance is often a better policy choice than war anyway to make a powerful argument against the idea of a just war. While his conclusions are not mainstream, it’s hard to imagine that wider acceptance of Fanning’s ideas would not lead to better results than the current acceptance of just war theory.


