

“Religious ethics could not be used to support war.” Discuss.

In order to get an idea of religious views on war, one can look at responses on the issue from ethical theories, the Church and the Bible.

Firstly one can consider virtue ethics; Aristotle and Aquinas were both proponents of this theory, as well as Natural Law, and the virtues themselves have been added to by Christianity (e.g. faith, hope and love). In the context of war, a virtue ethicist may be concerned with the character of the soldiers involved. The aim of a eudaimon society requires us to develop our character through becoming virtuous. Since the development of moral virtues, such as temperance and courage, is refined through habit, one may question what kind of character soldiers are establishing. Despite the fact that soldiers may have some desirable traits (as they ought to be just and courageous), they are of course trained in violent acts. A virtue ethicist may think that this is wrong, as we should seek to gain virtues and that in training soldiers to hate and kill, we may be conditioning them to continue behaving in that way. In the example of Abu Ghraib in Iraq, a prison where U.S. soldiers are known to have committed acts of abuse on the prisoners ranging from torture to sodomy, one could claim that the soldiers training caused habitual violence. Here one is provided with a view which suggests that virtue ethics may not want soldiers to be trained in this way and could therefore be seen as incapable of supporting war. This seems a satisfactory response but some may argue that soldiers can get out of this mindset if they choose to and can fit back in naturally with usual civilian life, though perhaps the problem virtue ethics has here is that people should not be trained in this way at all. One could also ask if there is any other way to prepare soldiers for war situations, or if this is necessary and results such as habitual violence must be expected.

Situation ethics provides another religious perspective on the issue of war. This theory offers a relativist approach, with Agape as one of the main concerns. One of Fletcher's six fundamental principles is that love is the only norm; love is the law and the law should only be obeyed in the interests of love. Fletcher said: 'Jesus summarized the entire law by saying 'Love God' and 'Love your neighbour''. One could use the example of the most recent Iraq war: with the claim that an invasion of Iraq would somehow suppress terrorism and thereby help both people suffering under Saddam Hussein in Iraq and people under threat in the West, one would arguably have been helping people in the most loving way. It would be in the interests of most people and again, this suggests it is a highly loving option. Situation ethics, therefore, could be used to support the war in some cases. This is a good example of how anyone can use this norm to claim to be acting in the most loving way, as there are no rules to say that someone has done the wrong thing. This problem with the theory seems to indicate that there is a need for rules and guidelines when making ethical decisions about war.

Natural Law presents itself here then, as its absolutism may be more fitting for the matter in hand. Natural Law holds a dominant position within Catholic theology and when it comes to official church teaching, the vast majority of statements are strongly in-line with Natural Law. Though Natural Law provides us with some teleological guidelines in the form of the Primary

Precepts, from these we can derive absolute rules called Secondary Precepts such as 'Do not kill'. With regards to an issue such as the use of child soldiers, this Natural Law system provides us with a clear outlook. From the Primary Precept 'Protect and preserve the innocent', one can determine the Secondary Precept 'Do not use children as soldiers'. This is a good, clear rule to work with and exemplifies a link between Natural Law and the lawmaking system in the UN: Child soldiers are a breach of international law. Here, it seems fair to say that in this case, and in general, Natural Law theory is against war because of absolutes (Secondary Precepts) such as 'Do not kill' and so on. The only conditions under which a Natural Law theorist may consider going to war the only option would be when the Just War Criteria are fulfilled or when every other possible solution has been sought.

The Just War Criteria seek to determine whether or not it is just and reasonable to go to war based on several principles. These rules were born under heavy religious influences; St Augustine created these criteria for circumstances under which war can be declared when the Roman Empire became Christian and thus employed pacifism too. Just War Theory was later developed by Aquinas, which explains many of the similarities between Just War and Natural Law. The criteria have been adopted and generally accepted by many countries. It is clear that here a religious influence in ethics is not condemning war but rather allowing it in certain situations and provided things are conducted reasonably.

One can also include pacifism when considering religious opinions on war. Certain passages in the Old Testament are sometimes interpreted to support a pacifist viewpoint: "seek peace and pursue it" Psalm 34v14, "You shall not murder" Exodus 10:13. Christians could use these verses to show that violence is never acceptable. Early Catholics were also pacifist; the principles behind Natural Law place a lot of importance on the sanctity of life and emphasise how sacred each life is. This religious viewpoint clearly does not support war.

In conclusion, there are a variety of responses from religious ethical theories and perspectives, though overall it seems fair to say that religious ethics is against war. The Just War Criteria and situation ethics would allow war in extreme circumstances, though naturally the former seems to present clearer guidelines that would be useful and require rational thought. Situation ethics, one may assume, would generally conclude that the most loving act would be to not go to war but in situations such as intervention during genocide the relativism of the theory would require separate consideration for the case. The absolutism behind Natural Law and virtue ethics poses the opposite problem; though both seem to be against war, the theories could both be seen to sometimes lack the relativism needed in certain cases.