

JUST WAR THEORY: A NEW CHURCH PERSPECTIVE*

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Only the dead have seen the end of war. (Plato)

There are hundreds of proverbs, truisms, and aphorisms on the nature of war, but all have been outlasted by Plato's ancient, stark maxim. Still, many have chosen to deny it. It was the Romans who first thought they could end war.

When Caesar Augustus came to power in the first century BC, he brought an end to nearly a century of vicious civil war. The Romans were shocked by this devastation. They had bled themselves white in internecine wars that stretched over the entire Mediterranean. As Horace lamented in his Epodes, "What coast knows not our blood!" Faced with the results of an unlimited war, the Romans felt compelled to draw certain conclusions. Much like someone who has witnessed a particularly vicious crime, they struggled to find a meaning or lesson. One result of this search for meaning was a lasting horror of civil strife. The Pax Romana of the first and second century AD, during which there were several foreign wars, but no serious internal ones, owed a great deal to the memory of the bloody first century BC. But there was another, more radical conclusion some drew.

Like many other ancient cultures, the Romans saw war as a distinct and personified entity. The slaughter and chaos unleashed when war broke out was often attributed directly to the actions of the beast—or god—War. The common assumption had always been that war was just something that happened, like a natural disaster. It was considered to be either a divine punishment or perhaps an attack by the beast of War itself. But at the end of the Roman Civil War, after Augustus' ascension as

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emperor, a new image of war was born. Vergil wrote *The Aeneid*, an epic of Rome's mythical origins, at this time. It contains a retroactive prophecy of the rise of Augustus with the following image of War: "grim, iron-bound, closely welded, the gates of war shall be closed; the fiend of Discord a prisoner within . . ." (Book One of *The Aeneid*). It would appear that some among the Romans believed, however briefly, that war was finished entirely. And here begins a pattern that repeats itself again and again throughout the course of history.

Nearly two thousand years later we see this pattern once again, in nineteenth century Europe. The fury of the Napoleonic Wars left a lasting impression on the nations of Europe, which spent the next century on a delicate tightwire searching for a balance of power that would prevent similar conflicts. When the balance of power collapsed, Europe was plunged into the First World War. Fueled by massive conscript armies and the power of modern weaponry, it consumed over ten million young men before it finally ended. A shocked and horrified continent dubbed it "The Great War" and fervently believed that on the strength of its unmatched devastation alone, it was the last war. But within twenty years another World War, even more destructive than the last, had begun. Many others have since attempted to end war, none successfully. The desire to end war is nothing new, but its history would seem to indicate that this desire is doomed never to be fulfilled.

In its essence, war is an expansion of very common human crimes: murder, rape, and theft on a much larger scale. As with murder, theft, and rape, it is tempting to believe that the violence of war can be ended forever, but it can't. Instead, the best we can hope for is that it be recognized as a crime, and stopped as quickly as possible. Sometimes this requires the use of violence. Just as police officers are authorized to use deadly force if there is no chance of subduing a criminal before he kills again, sometimes the only recourse for nations threatened by a criminal state is to use violence themselves. This concept is also very old. Many of the greatest minds throughout history have occupied themselves with the question of when and how it is permissible for a nation to go to war. The collective body of their thoughts and conclusions is known as "Just War Theory."

Where do the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg fit into this picture? For the New Church they constitute revealed truth, directly from God. Their implications for how we ought to regard war are enormous. So what exactly do they say? From this author's study, it would seem that the Writings espouse a form of "Just War Theory." They indicate that if soldiers fight only to halt aggression, and to defend the innocent, they are fighting in the service of charity. In short, soldiers should wage war only to end war. Perhaps the ancient conception of war as a beast is the best one of all. The New Church soldier's true enemy is not the people of another country, but war itself.

THE HISTORY OF JUST WAR THEORY

Before we can properly discuss the stance of the Writings on war, we must examine how mankind has dealt in the past with the moral questions posed by war. To this end we will briefly examine the different theories on what constitutes a "just war" as they appeared in history. It is important to clarify that we will not be discussing pacifism—the opinion that no war is ever justified—or realism—the opinion that war need not be justified, since the Writings clearly state that war can and must be just. We are concerned with using the Writings to shed light on the complex moral questions that arise when "just war" is assumed to be possible and necessary.

St. Augustine is generally regarded as the founder of "just war theory." That is not to say that a tradition of attempting to justify war did not exist before Augustine. The Greeks and the Romans almost always painted their wars as a necessary response to some egregious injury. This is not particularly surprising, as war is so horribly destructive that without good reason, hardly any society could consider it to be acceptable. But there were no formal guidelines for what made one war "just" and another "unjust." Wars were so ubiquitous and transparently rapacious that most of the time the debate over whether they were "just" was restricted to the victor declaring himself to be so.

Thus it was left to St. Augustine to make the first serious study of how to engage in war "justly." His writings on war were partly a response to

the widespread pacifism in the Christian world of his time. Pacifism was a natural outgrowth of Jesus' admonition to "turn the other cheek" and display mercy and kindness to one's enemies. Augustine, being in many ways the voice of the Christian establishment, saw this attitude as an impossible one for the Christian world to adopt if it hoped to survive. He argued that war in its proper place was an extension of Christian charity, a way in which wrongs might be righted and the innocent protected. A Christian state might wage war to protect the innocent or the church, or to punish an injury committed by another state. "For it is the injustice of the opposing side that lays on the wise man the duty of waging wars," Augustine says in his *City of God*. The Christian philosophers who followed in his footsteps no doubt felt this even more strongly, as a unified Islamic world conquered vast swathes of the Mediterranean under the doctrine of jihad.

It was important that the innocent be protected, since it was for their sake that war was fought. Thus the traditional wartime practices of rape, pillage, and indiscriminate murder were not to be engaged in by a Christian army. If Christian soldiers warred for a just cause and conducted themselves in a Christian manner, they were not violating the biblical precepts against aggression and killing. We read again in *City of God*: "With the true servants of God wars themselves are pacific, not being undertaken through cupidity or cruelty, but through the love of peace, with the object of repressing the wicked and encouraging the good."

St. Thomas of Aquinas elaborated on Augustine's ideas, and held that in order for a war to be just, three conditions must be met. First, it must be ordered by a legitimate authority, prince, king or pope. Second, the enemy must have committed some wrong, and thus deserved to be attacked. Third, the intentions of those initiating the war must be pure, since even those who fight for a just cause might have perverse intentions for doing so.

The theories propagated by Augustine and his followers became the publicly accepted guidelines by which future Christian sovereigns waged war, and the pope was often called upon to declare the justice of one side or another. Unsurprisingly, however, Augustine's rather loose definition of just cause as an injury committed by another state left the door open for

unscrupulous sovereigns to fabricate “injustices” to justify cynical aims. Medieval states typically snatched upon trifles as legitimate reasons for war when their true objectives were purely avaricious.

Augustine’s admonitions to behave morally in wartime, and to seek to protect the innocent, were disregarded almost entirely. In fact, the acceptance of his view of just war as a battle between the righteous and the wicked gave medieval warlords an excuse for savagery. It was commonly accepted that to slaughter “heathens” or “heretics” was to save their souls. The ruthless brutality of these religiously charged conflicts is illustrated by the bloody sack of Jerusalem during the Crusades and the massacre of Magdeburg in the Thirty Years War. In many ways the business of war went on just as it had before, but with an added savagery born of ideological fervor. It is worth noting, however, that the church’s ability to declare one party “just” and the other “unjust” had a significant effect on many wars of the period. Though just war theory was certainly not universally adhered to, it had become a significant factor in the waging of war.

With the erosion of papal authority and the rise of the secular nation state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came a correspondent reduction in the influence of just war theory. The rather pragmatic political thinkers of the time considered such notions to be quaint and outdated. Nation states existed to promote their own welfare and had every right to resort to violence to accomplish their goals. As Carl Von Clausewitz said in his definitive treatise *On War*, “War is the extension of politics by other means.” This did not mean that nations did not justify their wars; the tradition of justification started by Augustine did not simply disappear. However, the lack of papal authority to give the concept any real bite made its effects mostly irrelevant.

The mood of the period can best be summed up by the words of Emmerich Vattel in his *Law of Nations*: “Since nations are equal and independent and cannot claim a right of judgment over each other, it follows that in every case susceptible of doubt, the arms of the two parties at war are to be accounted equally lawful.” Though this approach does not discount that wars may be just or unjust, it refrains from judging one way or the other, since it would only create unnecessary complications.

This attitude may on the surface appear cynical and morally reprehensible, and an examination of the causes given for wars from the late seventeenth century through the nineteenth century would seem to uphold that judgment. Wars of conquest, wars of dynastic succession, and wars fought simply in order to maintain the balance of power were the norm. But if we look a bit more closely, we find some very real advantages to this philosophy. Wars of the period may have been fought for cynical and self-interested reasons, but they were fought a great deal more humanely. One of the reasons that scholars of international law rejected just war theory was because they understood how it could lead to savagery. If both parties were considered “equally lawful,” then both could be forced to abide by certain rules.

It seems very clear that in this respect they were correct; soldiers of the period understood that they were fighting for the objectives of their respective nations, not for some grand and righteous “cause.” Therefore they were far better at abiding by the “rules.” The order of the day was for the opposing armies to march out upon an open field, fight a decisive battle, and settle the issue quickly. Prisoners were treated relatively well—they were after all, only fellow professionals—and there was never cause for civilians to be involved at all. Thus the warfare of this ostensibly cynical period was, in some sense, more just. Nations fought for the same reasons that nations always fight, but without bothering to give lip service to “justice” first, and managed to fight in a much more humane and less brutal manner than that of previous “just” conflicts. It is understandable that many scholars of the period thought that only by rejecting the cause given for war as something which ought to conform to moral standards could they enforce moral standards during the conduct of the war itself.

But eventually, this pragmatic and rather cynical philosophy caught up with Europe. Though the amoral concept of war might remain static, the weapons with which it was fought did not. The First World War began the same way that its eighteenth and nineteenth century counterparts did, with rival nations competing for power and choosing to use war as an instrument of politics. But this time all the deadly devices of modern industrial nations were at their command. Seeking merely to use war to practice power, they opened Pandora’s Box. Gas, machine guns and heavy

artillery were used for the first time on the battlefield with unimaginable effects. An entire generation of European manhood fell before the rattling machine guns and bursting artillery shells, vanishing into the smoke-obscuring no-man's land. Europe recoiled in horror. In behaving just as their ancestors had before them, using war as a method to achieve national goals, the Europeans had slaughtered ten million of their young men.

The result was a collective drive to eliminate war entirely, or at least to prevent it from occurring on such a horrifying scale. The League of Nations was formed in large part for this purpose, as a kind of secular replacement for papal authority. The old notion of war as an instrument of political policy was utterly rejected. Seeing what terrible power they now had, most nations sought to contain it and, if possible, to get rid of it. This largely explains the policy of appeasement they practiced with Nazi Germany as it came to power. The greater part of Europe was so horrified by the effects of World War I that it had become, in effect, pacific.

Yet this, too, proved to be a destructive way of approaching war. By their failure to threaten the use of military force, the nations of Europe gave a militaristic Germany, Italy, and Japan the boldness to pursue their megalomaniacal aims and unleash the Second World War. This even greater cataclysm not only consumed still more young soldiers but also witnessed the resurgent scourge of civilian massacre. Fanatical ideologies on both sides of the war led to unimaginable slaughter, finding its worst expression in the Holocaust. This was accompanied by the awful new phenomenon of "strategic bombing" which led to the cold and impersonal incineration, crushing, and suffocation of millions of innocents by bombs dropped from ten thousand feet above.

The twin horrors of the First and Second World Wars led to a radical rethinking of how nations waged war. New weapons and volatile ideologies had rendered war itself the primary evil. No nation could in good conscience intentionally unleash the horrors of war. This philosophy was reinforced by the dawn of the nuclear era. How could any country intentionally begin war, when it might lead to the annihilation of the planet? This led to a return of sorts to the just war theory of the past, but instead of framing war in terms of right and wrong, it was seen in terms of the aggressor and the defender. With war having such terrible effects, clearly

it must be the party that started war that was in the wrong, no matter what its reasons for doing so. The intentional release of the beast of War was itself the primary sin. The United Nations was created to enforce this policy, by mediating between nations that might go to war, and punishing those who initiated it. Just war was seen as a war waged to halt unjust war. In other words, the role of just war was to deter those who might start war, itself an inherently unjust activity, and if necessary to bring a speedy end to unjust war.

This is, for the most part, the attitude that most carry today. It seems to have kept the countries of the First World from each others' throats with remarkably effectiveness. The European nations that once battled each other for supremacy now coexist in relative peace. But war has by no means disappeared; ancient rivalries and ideological fanaticism still lead to unprecedented bloodshed in the Third World, which tends to draw in the more developed nations as well. The murky motives and uncertain outcomes in these conflicts, combined with a reduction of fear over the passage of time since the world and cold wars, have led to a return of sorts to Augustinian just war theory.

It has recently begun to be accepted that war can be initiated justly to punish other nations for their crimes, usually consisting of those committed against their own citizens, or even for perceived injuries to the attacking nation. Because this trend is in its infancy, it is difficult to properly evaluate, but it may lead to wars being initiated on the strength of all kinds of perceived injuries and injustices, in the same fashion as they were during the medieval period.

Thus in some sense, humanity has come full circle, and the world is once again faced with the difficult task of discerning which reasons for war are just, and how the wars themselves ought to be conducted.

A NEW CHURCH JUST WAR

How then are we in the New Church to navigate this complex and terrible part of the human condition? People have agonized over questions of war since the beginning of time; can the Writings finally resolve them? Most of what the Writings say about war concerns warfare as a spiritual

struggle. The wars that seem to rage endlessly in the Bible correspond at a deeper level to spiritual wars, battles of truth against falsity, good against evil. The Writings speak of our own regeneration as a kind of war, in which debasing animal urges conflict with our higher spiritual qualities. It does not seem to be a very great stretch to conclude that if spiritual warfare can be not only just but necessary for salvation, earthly warfare can sometimes be necessary as well. But the passages in the Writings that directly address warfare in the natural world are surprisingly few, and require a good deal of reflection and interpretation.

Before we discuss these in detail, it is worth noting the correspondence of a country to an individual. The Writings constantly reinforce the idea that all levels of society correspond to the human form and to the individual. A community is a group of people who collectively form a "community individual"; a state or province is a collection of communities that form a "state individual;" and a country is a collection of states that collectively form a "national individual." Every "national individual" or country has a distinctive kind of personality and correspondence, just as the nations that the Israelites encountered in the Bible did. We read in *Divine Providence* 251: "It is not known in this world which kingdoms in Christendom represent the Moabites and the Ammonites, which the Syrians and the Philistines, and which the Chaldeans and the Assyrians, and the others with whom the Children of Israel waged war; and yet there are peoples who represent them."

This opens up an intriguing way of viewing international relations. The assumption that nations ought to conduct themselves in the same way as individuals is not new. Many advocates of moral relations between different states have expressed their views in terms that evoke this comparison, either intentionally or unintentionally. If one assumes individual people to be capable of dealing ethically with each other, then it hardly seems logical to consider associations of people incapable of doing so. Therefore for the purposes of this paper, we will use the moral use of violence by an individual as a template for the moral use of violence by a nation.

JUST CAUSE

The Writings seem to be very specific on the point of just cause. The clearest statements are made in the series of passages on charity in the different professions. These discuss charity in government officials and judges, and then the charity of the military commander, the officer, and the common soldier. The passage concerning the commander of an army contains the most compelling statements on just cause. We read in the *Doctrine of Charity* 164: “He does not go to war except for the protection of his country, and thus is not an aggressor, but a defender.”

The Writings clearly support the contention that violence can be justified only in response to violence. This was the attitude taken by the international community following the First and Second World Wars, in large part because no generation of men knew better than they the horror and carnage of war. Perhaps humanity is most clearheaded about war when it has had its nose rubbed in it, and experienced the full force of its terrible effects. Another excerpt from the same passage clarifies this further: “In his inner self he does not exult in the overthrow of his enemy, and in the honor of victory; but in the deliverance of his country and his people from the invasion of an enemy, and the destruction and ruin they would inflict.”

Here is added a denunciation of the militaristic ethic, very common in Swedenborg’s own time, by which nations fought for reasons of “glory” or “honor.” It is not for national glory but the “deliverance of his country” for which the commander fights; in a sense he fights against war itself, and the death and destruction wrought by it. Thus it can be said that the only just objective for war is peace, which appears also in the same passage; “He [the commander] does not love war, but peace; even in war he continually loves peace. “

The notion of countries as individuals can help us to clarify this. When can a person be justified in doing violence against another? He is not justified in doing violence because he perceives the other person to be evil and thus deserving of violence; he is not justified in doing so to “correct” another’s flaws; nor is he justified if he seeks to accumulate glory. The only time someone is justified in doing violence is when his enemy attacks him or another first. Then he must resort to violence in order to subdue the

attacker before someone is hurt or killed. He should do so not out of animosity, but out of a desire to keep harm from coming to him or another.

But here we have a peculiar paradox. If a man witnesses someone threatened with robbery or murder by a gang of criminals, is he to simply stand aside and allow events to take their course, since the criminals have not attacked him? Likewise can a nation stand aside in neutrality while an aggressive and violent country seeks to pillage and dominate its neighbors, or while an oppressive government slaughters an ethnic minority within its own borders? This hardly seems right, and yet the Writings make no mention of these as legitimate reasons for war.

There are I think, two explanations for why this might be. The first concerns the issue of context. In Swedenborg's own time, the concept of war waged for the protection of another country's interests with no thought of personal gain was utterly foreign. Likewise, the modern conception of genocide did not yet even exist. Such things would never have even occurred to people of that time.

Self defense on the other hand, was widely understood and accepted. Revelation must occur within the framework of a specific time in history, and in Swedenborg's time, self defense was the only commonly understood and practiced cause for just war. The other explanation concerns semantics and scale. What is a man's country? Who are a man's people? The simplest explanation is of course to equate his country and his people to the nation in which he lives and its citizens. But the Writings continually urge us to broaden and expand our concepts of such things. In a sense, the world is a kind of "country" and every sentient on the planet one of its "people." I think that God would wish us to include more and more people into our associations as our maturity and tolerance as a species grow. Thus we ought to take upon ourselves the responsibility of protecting everyone afflicted by violence, no matter what the circumstance.

In conclusion, a nation cannot resort to violence for any reason but to halt the violence of another. It is best that the enemy be seen as war itself. Warring against an aggressive nation is merely a means to bring war to a close. It is only by this fundamentally peaceful approach that a just war can be waged.

JUST CONDUCT IN WAR

We read in the *Doctrine of Charity* 166:

He is averse to unjust depredation; he abominates the wrongful effusion of blood. In battle it is another thing. There he is not averse to it, for he does not think of it, but of the enemy as an enemy, who desires his blood. When he hears the sound of the drum calling him to desist from the slaughter, his fury ceases. He looks upon his captives after victory as neighbors, according to the quality of their good.

This is from the passage on charity in the common soldier, and illustrates well how a New Church individual ought to approach the conduct of war. The Writings do not fail to acknowledge the nature of battle. War is a bloody, brutal affair and there is no escaping that reality. In order to secure victory a soldier must engage in actions that would be considered utterly unacceptable in peacetime. But when he is not engaged in battle, he acts in accordance with the morality of peacetime. Noncombatants must not be harmed. This includes both civilians and enemy soldiers who have surrendered. If the soldier fights against war itself, then only the direct agents of war can be harmed justly. If a former enemy is disarmed and surrenders, he ceases to be an agent of war, and thus cannot justly be attacked. Likewise no innocent civilians can ever be intentionally harmed, since they themselves are not agents of war. Only these codes of conduct separate a soldier from a murderer, and allow a war to be just.

It can be argued that the imperative to attack only “agents of war” is more complex than this. In a way the whole military-industrial apparatus of a nation, and thus its entire citizenry is an “agent of war.” This was the rationale given for the terribly destructive strategic bombing campaigns of the Second World War. One way that we can avoid this moral precipice is to rigorously affirm that only “direct” agents of war may be attacked. By this logic, pinpoint strikes against arms factories (preferably with the civilian operators absent) may be just, but carpet bombing of enemy cities may not.

The analogy of nations as individuals applies again in this case. When a man is forced to use violence against an aggressor, his objective is

primarily to subdue his opponent before he can harm others, but it is also to ensure that the smallest possible damage is done to the opponent himself. Though violent intervention might be justified in the case of an innocent man being assaulted by thugs, it would not be justifiable to kill every one of the attackers when the mere threat of the firearm would be sufficient to put an end to the violence. The objective of just violence is to neutralize the threat an individual poses, not intentionally to cause great harm to the individual. Likewise, a soldier must always remember that war itself is his enemy, and that his objective is to end it with the smallest amount of violence possible.

JUST CONDUCT IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

While just cause for going to war, and just conduct while fighting a war have been widely studied, the topic of just conduct in the aftermath of war has long been neglected. Yet it is perhaps the most important aspect of all. A nation's behavior in the aftermath of war gives the war its real purpose. If a nation behaves itself morally and mercifully here, the sacrifices that its soldiers and citizens made count for something.

The treaty of Versailles that ended the First World War was not conducted justly. The Allies indulged themselves in their bitter sentiments. They extracted a harsh and unforgiving peace from Germany, sending it into a deep depression, and causing terrible suffering for its citizens. And what was the end result? Instead of being chastened and cowed, Germany was bitter and angry, and proved susceptible to the ugly rhetoric of the Nazi party. By behaving immorally and without mercy in the aftermath of the First World War, the allied nations brought an even greater cataclysm upon themselves, reaping what they had sown at the end of the last war.

The peace that ended the Second World War however, was far more merciful, and did not seek to punish but to rehabilitate. After the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan, the United States did not demand reparations or extract resources from already stricken countries, but instead poured millions of dollars into them, and directed the full force of its vast economy into their rehabilitation. It also put a great deal of time and

money into supervising the creation of stable democratic governments by which these nations could govern themselves justly.

And the result of this form of peace? Germany and Japan remain among the United States' closest allies, and rank among the most stable, democratic, and prosperous nations on earth. In addition, the immediate postwar vitality of West Germany and other western European nations that the United States aided in the wake of the Second World War was a crucial factor in winning the Cold War. Whereas the Soviet Union ripped every last resource from the already stricken countries in its zone of influence, the United States gave vast amounts of money and aid to those in the Allied sphere of influence. The resulting economic and political disparity between the two halves of Europe was a major factor in the eastern European revolts that toppled the Soviet Union and ended the Cold War.

The metaphor of the nation as an individual is very appropriate here. Once a man has subdued a criminal violently, he should not further harm and punish him while he is helpless. Now that the immediate threat posed by the criminal is eliminated, the man who subdued him ought to be concerned with the welfare of the aggressor as well as his victims. In civil society the criminal would be punished with jail time as a deterrent, but if the system works correctly it should help him to rehabilitate and learn how to behave justly himself. The man who subdued him should wish him well, and hope that he finds a better path for his life.

Likewise when a nation has been forced to violently subdue another nation, it should not punish that nation unjustly and indulge in hatred. Rather it should regard the true enemy it fought, which was war itself, as past, and seek to help rather than punish the nation which had been its enemy.

War remains an awful and reprehensible activity, and it ought never to be engaged in unless all other measures have failed. But if a nation can act in accordance with the principles set forth in the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg—war only in the defense of itself or others—and act with morality and mercy during the war itself and in its aftermath, it can be said in truth that it fought a just war. □