# A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

## THE MORALITY OF INTERVENTION

*Ways that traditional views—that of the crusader, the pacifist, and the just war theorist—inform the emerging phenomenon of humanitarian intervention.*

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In recent years military force has been increasingly employed in so-called peace-related activities. Although the distinction is not always clear, such activities involve one of two kinds of intervention: peacekeeping and peacemaking.

In peacekeeping, armed forces are sent to enforce peace agreements worked out prior to, rather than subsequent to, victory in battle. The

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presence of armed forces is less an effort to bring about surrender through coercion than to be a stabilizing presence once parties have accepted the terms of a truce; less an effort to deter wrongdoing by fear than to reinforce law and order through the development of a confidence that peace agreements will hold. Instead of putting down aggression by violence or the threat of violence, peacekeepers seek to sustain structures of law and order, however feeble, that have been arranged by negotiation.

To be sure, the possibility of using coercion to counteract wrongdoing does not evaporate, but instead of thinking of violence as something to be maximized in order to win a victory, peacekeeping thinks of violence as something to be avoided if possible while increasing respect for agreed-to covenants. Whereas traditional military victory is seldom possible without shots being fired, in peacekeeping activities any need to fire shots is in some sense a failure.

The other form of intervention is usually described as peacemaking: the use of military intervention by third parties to bring about the settlement of an issue, not to enforce a settlement already worked out. Such intervention is deliberately limited, aimed at subduing troublemakers within a political jurisdiction rather than conquering the political jurisdiction as a whole. Intervention for peacemaking purposes often seeks to facilitate the efforts of a particular nation to deal with an internal controversy rather than to bring that nation to heel.

Both activities, although carried out by military personnel, differ from the traditional use of military forces, either to repel aggression or insurrection or to mount a threat of credibility sufficient to discourage such threats to the existing social order. Traditional military action is carried on by sovereign political units in combat with each other.

On several occasions in recent years the United States government has joined in—or, frequently, led—military operations undertaken by the world community to offer a constructive presence in the places where human rights are violated, civil order is shattered, and the ordinary social, economic, and political processes that sustain life have broken down. Most of these interventions, in places like Somalia and Bosnia, have been of the peacekeeping rather than the peacemaking type—although the distinction sometimes gets blurry.

These responses have arisen in large measure out of humanitarian impulses considered legitimate, even commendable, by many of our

people. We have done these things, not primarily as a means of countering some danger to our own immediate safety, but because we could not sit by and let the people of troubled jurisdictions be impoverished, crushed, and even destroyed by the breakdown of civic stabilities and/or the failure of existing regimes to sustain human life on even a minimal level. We have done these things without developing a highly abstract moral reasoning to legitimize them.

Our people have accepted and supported such interventions by the government because the activities seem to be compatible with a sense of ordinary decency, to embody humanitarian impulses, and (generally speaking) to avoid the more tragic and devastating aspects of war. We assume that loss of life from the conduct of such activities will be accidental rather than expected, occasional rather than routine. In peacekeeping activities the impulse to defend and protect life is more controlling than the effort to threaten life.

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Such an embrace of peacekeeping activity, however well intentioned, may not necessarily satisfy the requirement that we base our actions on sound reasoning rather than mere impulses. If we are to base our decisions on a well-thought-out sense of moral obligation and constructive social policymaking, we need to analyze these changing developments so they are grounded in carefully articulated reasoning rather than vague feelings or fuzzy legitimations. We will be wise to develop criteria for discerning when such interventions are legitimate and when and under what conditions they become morally problematic.

My purpose in this article is two-fold:

- to show that traditional Christian teaching about war, although never resulting in agreement among Christians about what is the correct moral attitude toward participation in international violence, nevertheless has shed much light upon war as a moral problem; and

- to show that the reasoning that has developed over the years

about Christian participation in traditional warfare can help us to think about the morality of humanitarian intervention.

We may be wrong to suppose we can achieve a fully correct consensus about the morality of intervention, but the effort may help us think about this matter more richly and profoundly than would be possible without reference to traditional views. Moreover, each of the traditional views—that of the crusader, that of the pacifist, that of the just war theorist—can make a contribution to the examination of ethical issues posed by the emerging phenomenon of humanitarian intervention.

## War Ethic of the Crusade

Of the three traditional attitudes, the war ethic of the crusade probably enjoys the least acceptance and is the most difficult to defend in the contemporary climate of opinion. The crusade ethic prompted Christians to set out for the Holy Land to conquer and subdue (even to search out and destroy) so-called infidels or enemies of the faith. This attitude has frequently prompted righteous upholders of the truth to act with contempt for those having other convictions and has occasioned much bloodshed and havoc in Western history.

But the ethic of the crusade has required its adherents to be concerned about what happens in other places and to other persons, to do more than merely wait until a problem threatens closely and immediately. The defense of a distant neighbor or of a moral ideal may be ethically more commendable than mere self-defense. Like participation in crusades, intervention involves paying attention to what is happening in other places. It suggests that taking the initiative to resolve a dispute or to lower the tension in a place of conflict may be morally superior to waiting until a problem grows beyond bounds or becomes an immediate threat to one's own self-defined national interest.

This impulse to pay attention to conditions in distant places, transformed from the desire for conquest and subjugation into an effort to be helpful and a stabilizing presence, may make a small but significant contribution to thinking about the morality of intervention. Intervention is the opposite of isolation, of paying attention only to one's own safety and security and letting the world go amuck. Intervention may also be most promising and fruitful if the desired action is undertaken at an early moment and a problem is not left to grow and fester into a major crisis before it is addressed.

## Pacifist Position

The pacifist position stands in distinct contrast to the ethic of the crusade. The pacifist holds that violence itself is an evil, that the use of violence to counteract violence is self-defeating, agreeing with the biblical premise that Satan cannot cast out Satan. Some pacifists feel any cooperation with the military is incompatible with the gospel ethic of love. Others are more open to the possibility that certain kinds of service, even within the military, are morally legitimate. Many pacifists have difficulty accepting the legitimacy of peacekeeping activities when done by military organizations and might prefer instead some kind of nonmilitary means of enforcing civility and order. Others, however, wanting to defend and applaud the idea of keeping peace, may look favorably upon the idea that a military presence, moderating conflict between parties, may be morally legitimate.

If two or more parties to a conflict agree to some kind of truce and can be helped to live up to their agreement because agents of the international community are present to keep at bay those who might disturb the peace, why object to this arrangement? Moreover, many pacifists have long extolled the value of international cooperation, and think organizations like the United Nations offer hope for transcending an ethic of purely autonomous nationalism and a politics of mere power. Peace-related intervention done by international agencies begins to take on the aura of policing rather than fighting.

Pacifism is helpful in pointing out that the restraint of force requires enormous moral self-control, not only by individuals but by nations. Pacifism thinks in terms of making sacrifices rather than achieving triumphs, of soberly facing obligations rather than being swayed by the excitement of adventure. Peacekeepers must have the self-restraint required of those who, for instance, are involved in nonviolent civil disobedience for the sake of justice, who resolve never to resort to violence, even under severe provocation. Such self-control is difficult to maintain and can only come from a distinct vocation. Extensive peacekeeping operations will require public support for the professionalism involved—support that sees this activity as an important public service, not merely a means of earning a livelihood. Moreover, military professionalism will accept the limits and difficulties inherent in peacekeeping and will not seek some "quick fix" for a world trouble spot.

Moral reasoning about the legitimate use of military force reaches its most sophisticated form, not in a crusade ethic that enthusiastically

embraces conflict as a holy calling, nor in a pacifism that categorically repudiates the use of violence as incompatible with Christian faithfulness, but in just war theory that seeks to spell out principles for judging when the use of military action is justified and when it is not.

## Just War Teaching

Just war teaching is not necessarily a more faithful expression of allegiance to the gospel than the other positions; the Christian community has never decided that to be the case. Rather, just war teaching seeks to bring war under moral scrutiny and to make judgments about its legitimacy in relationship to particular circumstances. An ethic of just peace action may also help determine when humanitarian intervention is, and when it is not, legitimate. Just peace theory may help determine what kinds of actions are morally warranted in the conduct of peacekeeping.

*An ethic of just peace action may help determine when humanitarian intervention is and is not legitimate.*

Just war teaching is divided into two sets of principles. One set of principles (in Latin designated by the phrase *jus in bellum*) offers criteria considering whether or not it is morally legitimate to enter into armed conflict. Theologians have argued that military action is legitimate only if the cause is just, if instigated by the right authority, if undertaken with the right intentions, and if it has a reasonable chance of success. Each of these principles can be used to develop norms for thinking carefully about the morality of intervention.

Is an intervention undertaken primarily for the benefit of the people affected? Is the intervention undertaken merely to bolster the fortunes of a clique or elite whose support serves the interests of the intervening parties rather than the good of the people most directly affected? Humanitarian intervention bears a special burden of proof to demonstrate it is not mere meddling, not a means of serving the special interest of those who do the intervening. There is no warrant in just intervention for using military force merely and solely to create an international situation favorable to the intervening party's self-interest and ought not to be used to legitimize the creation of allies by military means. While intervention for such reasons might be defended accord-

ing to a hard-nosed realism that eclipses considerations of justice in favor of political success, that is a quite different kind of reasoning and has no warrant within the just war tradition.

The category of right authority has traditionally meant warfare must be entered only by the decision of the political sovereign. This has ruled out private insurrection, even for plausibly legitimate grievances. In the case of intervention the ideal authority should be the international community. By requiring intervention to be internationally sanctioned, by a body like the United Nations, intervention can be safeguarded from being a unilateral move by a single nation-state undertaken for overly self-serving reasons. If the community of nations deems intervention to be legitimate, the probability is greatly increased that the action will be undertaken for morally commendable objectives, serving the cause of a more just world order.

By requiring military action to be undertaken with the right intentions, just war teaching has tried to safeguard warfare from being an instrument of vindictive hostility. Just war teaching has never considered revenge a ground for military action. Military action must be undertaken soberly in the effort to advance the cause of justice, not vindictively in an effort to settle a grudge. Surely little needs to be changed about this measure of legitimacy to move from thinking about just war to thinking about just intervention.

The categories of *jus in bellum* also include the curious stipulation that the activity must have a reasonable chance of success. This is more than a merely pragmatic caution. It is a recognition that just war must serve the cause of justice. Military activity should not be employed to vent anger—something already ruled out by the principle of right intention—nor a means of demonstrating bravado. Peacekeeping can be a legitimate undertaking, but it is to be done with sobriety and humility, not as an opportunity to come off as a hero. Moreover, the pragmatic element is important. Peacekeeping that is foredoomed to political failure would not be warranted.

Still another principle in the *jus in bellum* group needs to be considered separately from the others because here a reversal rather than an extension of the principle is involved. This is the requirement that war be begun only as a last resort. According to this principle, a nation is morally entitled to commence the use of military action only after all other means of adjudicating a controversy have been exhausted. In peacekeeping, however, the earlier a conflict is identified, efforts to

resolve the conflict are undertaken, and the stabilizing presence of military power is in place, the better. Peacekeeping should be considered as what Professor Glen Stassen has designated a "transforming initiative" rather than a last resort.

There is a second group of principles designated by the rubric *jus ad bello* that furnishes criteria for judging the actions that are legitimate in the pursuit of military action. This group offers standards to apply in assessing the procedures and strategies entailed in the use of force. Two criteria are especially important. One insists that a just war must be so conducted as to respect the immunity of noncombatants. The other requires that the destructiveness of a military action must be proportional to the benefit obtained.

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Noncombatant immunity was quite significant when war was fought by foot soldiers in hand-to-hand encounters, but today it has come to be the least honored and the least functional of the traditional criteria for judging whether or not the conduct of war is just. If taken seriously, it would lead to the conclusion that no war since the introduction of the bombing of civilian cities has been a just war. The process by which bombing (culminating in the use of nuclear weapons) has come to be accepted has constituted the erosion, if not indeed the negation, of just war teaching as an effective moral restraint on military policy.

This has caused many persons to become "just war pacifists," that is, people who believe war under the conditions war is now likely to be fought can no longer be an instrument of justice and therefore must be repudiated. Military intervention in relationship to peace action will require strategies and tactics that deal with populations in ways that draw clear distinctions between combatants and noncombatants. That means this criteria for the just conduct of military operation can become very important again. In this respect peacekeeping may by more like policing than like mass combat—and will probably be both legitimate and successful to the extent it is successful in respecting the rights of noncombatants.

The idea of proportionality is likewise significant for peacekeeping. The less the intervening forces need to take action, the better; the more specific, localized, and limited the actions, the better the peacekeeping process will work. Massive interdictions, wholesale destruction, unlimited obliterations simply do not fit. For example, an ethic of just peace thinking will seriously question the common assumption that blockades are morally more legitimate than combat operations aimed at specific targets.

All of the foregoing moral considerations can help us think about the morality of intervention, but we must be sober and humble about the extent to which they will serve as a foundation for public policymaking. The public is not waiting to hear from the Christian community what is, or what is not, the right and proper thing to do. The nation is most likely to use Christian thinking when such thinking provides support and warrant for the policies it pursues and to ignore Christian thinking when such thinking would challenge the legitimacy of what a state wishes to do. That has been the case with all three major types of Christian teaching about war ever since the church ceased to arbitrate public morality. Indeed, in the case of military action, it is doubtful the church has ever been able to determine that a particular course of action should not be pursued and thus bring it to a halt.

Developing a sense of just intervention will not immediately plummet the Christian community into a position to exercise a decisive role in the formation of policy, and Christians are not thereby obligated to tailor the contours of their thinking to what the public will be likely to adopt instead of what Christian sensitivity requires. But these cautions do not mean that the effort to develop such thinking is fruitless. To the extent that it is clearly articulated, widely discussed, and faithfully embraced by members of the Christian community, thinking about the conditions of just intervention can have an important, if indirect, function in the public arena and will not be without significant consequences, albeit not controlling ones, in the conduct of civic affairs.