

Eschatology and Ameliorism: On Theories of Just War

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For more than a thousand years, the Catholic Church has attempted to balance its eschatological and amelioristic interests. However, in the attempt to both be concerned with the next world and at the same time be concerned with this world, there is occasionally a danger of ending up with contradictory teachings. Such is apparently the case when one views the teachings of Jesus as contrasted with Church teachings which give a set of conditions under which a nation is considered justified in going to war, known as “the theory of the Just War.”

When one reads the words of Jesus Christ *qua* teacher, as found in the Holy Gospels, one becomes immediately aware of the overwhelming eschatological nature of significant portions of His message. Jesus was certainly a teacher who was rather concerned with the next world, as is reflected in numerous passages found in the Gospels. An important manifestation of this eschatological side of the message of Christ is His opposition to physical violence. He made it clear to His followers that they were not to commit acts of physical violence. These portions of Catholic teachings would lead one to conclude that a proper Catholic ought to be a pacifist.

On the other hand, prominent Catholic theologians, namely St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, are some of the best known and articulate supporters of the theory of the Just War. For amelioristic purposes, Augustine and Aquinas both agreed that under certain, specific conditions (namely, under the legitimate authority of the sovereign in command, because of the injustice of the aggressor / a just cause, and with the correct intention – doing good or avoiding evil) it is acceptable for a Christian nation to go to war. The official position of the modern Catholic Church, as found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2307-2317), also maintains this position. These portions of Catholic teachings would lead one to conclude that a proper Catholic need not, and in some cases ought not, be a pacifist.

It would seem that the two sets of teachings from within the Catholic tradition which have just been put forward are contradictory. On the one hand Catholics must not commit acts of violence and on the other hand Catholics may commit acts of violence under specific conditions. Since it is impossible for there to be an overt contradiction within the teachings of the Church if these teachings are from God, and since Catholics believe that these teachings are in fact from God, there must then be a way for Catholics to reconcile this contradiction.

Most of the teachings on this matter from within the Catholic tradition consistently support of the theory of the Just War. The only prominent teacher who supports the position of radical pacifism is Jesus. The problem is that Catholics don't believe that Jesus is merely a teacher, rather, Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is in fact God (Doctrine of the Trinity). If Jesus is indeed divine, it is obviously a serious mistake to ignore or reject what He taught. Since Catholics also do not want to reject the massive quantity of teachings which support the theory of the Just War it would have to be shown that within the teachings of Christ there are provisions for more than one standard.

In the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark (Mt. 19: 8-12, Mk. 10: 5-9) Jesus is asked a question concerning the Law of Moses -- a set of laws which the Jews of that time, who were asking the question, and Catholics both believe comes directly from God -- and divorce. The person asking the question believed that there was an inconsistency in the teaching of Christ that divorce is wrong and the Law of Moses which makes provisions for such an act. Jesus answered that it was due to human weakness, "the hardness of your hearts," that the Law of Moses made such a provision but that it is ultimately wrong to divorce one's wife. The significance of this is that Christ expresses that there is one standard which is ultimately proper and another which is lawfully acceptable but only due to deficiencies in the human character.

With this evidence, one can then make the following argument. The teachings of Jesus make it clear that His followers are not to commit acts of violence. However, due to man's fallen and sinful nature, we will find circumstances of egregious injustice and terrible aggression. Therefore, there is a provision of the conditions under which war to oppose these awful circumstances may be waged and seen as justified, namely the Theory of the Just War. In other words, the ideal and preferred Christian life will be one of pacifism but because Christians live in the world and seek to make it a better place, there are occasions when waging war is justified though contrary to the general teachings of Christ as found in the Gospels. Thus the Catholic Church attempts to balance its eschatological and its amelioristic positions.