

Just war divide: One tradition, two views

by [David P. Gushee](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

Speaking at the U.S. Military Academy in June, President Bush offered an expansive statement articulating a doctrine of preemptive action against rogue states and terrorist groups. Iraq was not mentioned, but subsequent statements suggest the West Point speech laid the foundation for war against that nation. If the president moves ahead with these plans, Christians will once again face a decision about whether to support military action.

If that day comes, Christian thinkers undoubtedly will break out the just war theory. Every time U.S. leaders sound the alarm for war, this ancient tradition is put to work. The counterterrorist war in Afghanistan was the latest occasion. In the 1990s just war theory was applied to actions in Iraq, Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, Haiti and elsewhere.

But a chorus of dissatisfaction with just war theory is gaining strength in the U.S., and not just from pacifists and others who dissent from the tradition on principle. The tradition itself has been split apart. Politically conservative Christians tend to find in the just war theory grounds for support of nearly all U.S. military actions. Politically liberal Christians tend to find in the theory grounds for opposition to nearly all U.S. military actions.

The most pessimistic reading of this divide is that the just war theory has decayed into an ornament used by partisans to shroud their political loyalties under an illusion of “objective” confirmation. The deeper reality is that there are two different kinds of just war theories, rooted in theoretical differences and especially in different assessments of American behavior: there is “soft” just war theory and “hard” just war theory.

While I use the term “soft” for the more dovish stance and “hard” for the more hawkish perspective, I do not mean to prejudice the discussion by these terms. The labels could be reversed: the antiwar position could be called “hard” because it

tends to apply just war criteria stringently and thus rule out support for most wars. Yet it makes more intuitive sense to me to label them as I have.

The soft just war stance is assumed in “The Challenge of Peace” (1983), a key cold-war-era document by the U.S. Catholic bishops. The hard just war position is taken by a writer such as Keith Pavlischek, who serves at the Center for Public Justice in Washington.

Soft just war theory is characterized by seven key components: a strongly articulated horror of war; a strong presumption against war; a skepticism about government claims; the use of just war theory as a tool for citizen discernment and prophetic critique; a pattern of trusting the efficacy of international treaties, multilateral strategies and the perspectives of global peace and human rights groups and the international press; a quite stringent application of just war criteria; and a claim of common ground with Christian pacifists.

“The Challenge of Peace,” for example, presented a stark condemnation of the savagery and horror of war, especially modern warfare and an envisioned nuclear war. While governments have the right to defend their people, the bishops emphasized that conflict resolution and nonviolent means of national defense are most in keeping with the call of Jesus.

Only if “extraordinarily strong reasons” exist “for overriding the presumption in favor of peace and against war” may war be considered. Even then, just war theory’s primary function is to “restrict and reduce” war’s horrors. “The presumption that binds all Christians” is that “the possibility of taking even one human life is something we should consider in fear and trembling.”

The classic “entry into war” criteria were then reviewed—just cause, competent authority, right intention and so on. Christian citizens must apply these criteria carefully in analyzing any government’s call to war. The discussion of competent authority notes bitter divisions in American life over whether many U.S. military actions have met this test. The bishops’ reflection on comparative justice emphasized limiting both the ferocity of war and any kind of moral absolutism on our part. It also noted the role of propaganda and the danger of national self-righteousness.

The treatment of war as a last resort lamented the difficulty of applying this requirement given the lack of “sufficient internationally recognized authority” to

mediate disputes. The bishops called for support for the United Nations, the “last hope for peace” on earth. Discussion of proportionality emphasized the grave costs of war, recalling that this same body of bishops publicly rejected the Vietnam War in 1971 due to its failure to meet this test.

The section on just war theory closed with a warm affirmation of the value of a pacifist witness within the Catholic Church, claiming that it shares with just war theory “a common presumption against the use of force as a means of settling disputes.”

Hard just war theory reverses these emphases, replacing them with the following: a presumption against injustice and disorder rather than against war; an assumption that war is tragic but inevitable in a fallen world and that war is a necessary task of government; a tendency to trust the U.S. government and its claims of need for military action; an emphasis on just war theory as a tool to aid policymakers and military personnel in their decisions; an inclination to distrust the efficacy of international treaties and to downplay the value of international actors and perspectives; a less stringent or differently oriented application of some just war criteria; and no sense of common ground with Christian pacifists.

In an October 2001 lecture titled “Just War Theory and Terrorism,” later published by the Family Research Council, Keith Pavlischek lamented what he called the “blame America first” perspective of many religious leaders after September 11. In response, he called for rigorous retrieval of “classic” just war theory.

For Pavlischek, the foundational presumption of just war theory is the government’s mandate to pursue justice, order and peace. Government is ordained by God to prevent the victimization of the innocent, the violation of public order and the disruption of peace. It is granted a monopoly on coercive, even lethal, force in order to accomplish this mandate. In a fallen world, such force will be required both in domestic and international relations. This use of force is to be restrained and law-governed, but it is a necessary, good and proper exercise of “God’s governance in a fallen world.”

This argument is not intended as a “realist” embrace of a stance implying that no moral considerations apply to governmental conduct. Governments must be held to stringent moral criteria. Nonetheless, in a tendency apparent in hard just war theory, at no point in Pavlischek’s essay does he indicate a concern about the overall

trustworthiness of the U.S. government in its use of force.

Pavliscek's hard just war theory reflects no yearning for the establishment of an international governing authority. The normative "political community" for Pavliscek is the relatively just individual nation-state. "The Challenge of Peace" emphasized the limited ability of states to resolve conflicts peaceably; indeed, Vatican II documents called for the formation of some kind of world government. Pavliscek will have none of this.

Pavliscek offered some strikingly different interpretations of just war criteria. Under just cause, for example, he included retributive justice; that is, punishment for evil. The bishops rejected this as a just cause for modern war. Pavliscek disagrees. This debate was played out many times in the days after September 11.

Whereas "The Challenge of Peace" offered an extensive discussion of conscientious citizen objection to unjust uses of government power, Pavliscek instead emphasized the role of just war theory in statecraft and military planning.

Finally, Pavliscek has no use for pacifism and what he considers a "crypto-pacifist" corruption of just war theory. Pavliscek argued that pacifists and "crypto-pacifists" are profoundly unbiblical when they claim that governments should not use force or threaten to use it, or when they argue that the use of force is evil. He claimed that their stance threatens to weaken our national resolve to fight terrorism as it needs to be fought currently.

Complex issues in Christian ethics, international relations and political theory lie at the heart of this dispute. I will focus on three essential interpretive questions.

First, which approach to just war theory is more in keeping with its historic proponents? Pavliscek and others view their version of just war theory as the classic tradition and treat a soft just war position as an unfortunate corruption. Yet the soft just war theory of the Catholic bishops and others lays claim to the same intellectual inheritance.

After rereading the classic Christian voices it is clear to me that hard just war theorists have the tradition right. The 20th-century development of just war theory is clearly an evolution of the historic tradition in response to the carnage of the era. Events from 1914 to 1989 scalded the international Christian consciousness. Many Christian leaders became convinced that the world was rushing to incineration and

that historically Christian nations were largely responsible. Pacifism nearly converged with a chastened just war approach to yield soft just war theory.

Those revising the tradition have not always been fully transparent about what they were doing. Honest exposition of its sources would enable us to understand the classic theory for what it is, and to see the limits imposed by its premodern composition. Just war theory was crafted in nondemocratic, quasi-theocratic contexts, with far less destructive military technology. If the theory needs to be democratized and updated to account for modern technology, so be it. Genealogy does not settle the argument, though it is important to get the history right.

Second, which approach to just war theory is more likely to bear fruit of justice, peace and order today? How we construe just war theory must bear good fruit or that construal must be altered or the theory abandoned.

Hard just war theory can make American Christians too likely to support marginal or unjust wars and in general to be unreflective about our nation's activities in the world. Yet soft just war theory can weaken our moral clarity on those occasions when we must have sufficient resolve to fight truly just wars. Which is the greater problem today? A struggle against groups that fly jetliners into buildings requires the steely resolve that hard just war theory contributes. But if this occurs at the expense of peacemaking efforts mandated by Jesus that can get at the roots of global terrorism, or costs us the ability to think critically, we will go badly astray.

Third, which approach to just war theory is more likely to help American Christians discern our particular responsibilities? The gravest flaw of recent discussions of just war theory has been their ahistorical and acontextual quality. When we Americans talk about war and its justice, we're not Swedes or Malaysians, we're Americans; we're the most powerful nation on earth, with the largest military, the single nation in the world today most likely to threaten and use military force. Which version of just war theory best helps us to remember both the opportunities and the dangers of our extraordinary international power?

It is no coincidence that the origins of American soft just war theory can be traced to the nuclear arms race and the turn against the Vietnam War. The American Christian debate about just war theory is in a sense nothing other than a debate about America's role in the world, a debate little changed since, say, 1968. In the end, competing perceptions of our national moral virtue lie at the heart of the division

between soft and hard just war theory.

What is America, after all? Are we the leading international force for “human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state . . . private property, free speech, equal justice, and religious tolerance,” as the president said at West Point? Or are we instead the global hegemon—the Rome of the modern world—throwing our military weight around, pursuing economic excess while parsimonious in our generosity, demonstrating indifference to how our actions negatively affect other nations and consuming far more of the world’s resources than we should?

The U.S. is, in fact, both. And the split in just war theory partly reflects the tension between our cherished ideals and our power-distorted selfishness, both of which reflect who we are as a nation.