

Upholding the Moral Limits to War

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We are daily being exposed to the use of extreme violence as a mechanism for bringing about political change: making ‘deals’ as a substitute for the rule of international law; targeted assassinations of political leaders; bombing of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and the homes of non-combatant civilians; using sanctions to punish judges of the ICC for doing their job; closing humanitarian corridors; depriving civilians of food and medical supplies; and the cruel displacement of people from their homelands. These are just some examples of extreme violence, much of it motivated by economic agendas.

As noted by an advisor to Qatar’s prime minister: “we are living in an age of disgusting importunity that is taking us back hundreds of years. We are reduced to giving concession after concession, not to stop aggression but to ask those responsible to kill fewer people, destroy fewer neighbourhoods.”

Many of us are revulsed.

Barbarity goes back to the dawn of human history, as do questions regarding the use of violence to counter violence. Over time, theologians, philosophers, lawyers and politicians have clarified the conditions which undergird the right, and sometimes the duty, to oppose violence and injustice with military force: the threat of violent aggression has to be actual and imminent; all other means of countering it must have been exhausted; there has to be a credible hope of success; it is never permissible to directly target non-combatants; and the use of arms must not produce evil consequences greater than the evil needing to be overcome.

These conditions, usefully gathered together under the doctrine of ‘Just War’, are not obsolete even while they continue to be refined. After all, it is the last-mentioned condition that out-laws nuclear weapons and, therefore, any war that could lead to their use.

For Christians, the just use of force needs to be integrated with Jesus’ teaching on non-violence. That means commitment to non-violence must be the first principle. Therefore, any use of force has to be by way of exception and only when there are absolutely no other options.

The importunity with which violence is currently promoted is indicative of deeply ingrained cultural currents. Challenging these currents suggests the need for a significant cultural shift. Such a shift calls for a deeper respect for human dignity and human rights, as well as the well-being of the common home we share with all life. For people of religious persuasion, these ethical norms have their origin in God's vision for human beings and creation – a vision of peace and life in abundance.

To permeate society and its culture with a deeper sense of respect is to en-culturate our faith-based understanding of what it means to be authentically human. Since this is God's agenda, it needs to be ours.

Failure to permeate society with that sense of deeper respect is to ex-culturate our faith – separate it from ordinary life, leaving societies and their cultures to be formed by political ideologies that fail to respect human life, human dignity and the human environment – including some that claim religious warrant for what they are doing as a way of justifying actions that, in fact, go against key religious principles.

In this regard, a special responsibility lies with religious leaders – neither to pronounce on matters where there is room for legitimate differences nor to take partisan political stances, but to oppose real injustices and to defend human life and human rights. Their responsibility is to help ensure that public policies are ethically informed. While Jesus did indeed call on us to pray to be “delivered from evil,” it is not enough to call for prayer. Jesus never resiled from calling out evil conduct or those responsible for it.

Pope Leo has taken a courageous stance in opposing the distorted use of religion to justify the violence being unleashed in the current conflicts between Iran, Israel and the United States. It is disingenuous to claim, as some do, that his critique of the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of violence in this war equates to a denial of the real concerns related to the Iran regime. The Gospel message Pope Leo has reiterated is that the use of violence should never take priority over less violent ways of working for justice and peace.

Globally, there are limits to what the UN Security Council can do to prevent wars. It is the responsibility of member states to step up and, in coordinated ways, take counter measures, giving priority to interventions which are best able to create trust and dialogue, including, if necessary, non-violent means such as disinvestment, sanctions and boycotts.

And, in cases where individual governments that are prone to self-interested ‘neutrality’ remain silent and inactive, it is for their citizens to prompt their governments by all the means consistent with democracy. Whether by action or by default, we are all responsible for what happens. We are all participants in history. As Pádraig Ó Tuama has written: “... war thrives on the nonchalance of those who have the luxury of not feeling personally implicated.”

Moving to ways of living that are more authentically human takes us beyond a narrow focus on defence to the deeper requirements of peace-making. This calls for the far-reaching qualities of charity identified, for example, by Pope Benedict XVI:

“... charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the earthly city according to law and justice [and] ... to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion...” (Caritas in Veritate, 6.)

Pre-empting, in that way, the kind of situations that lead to conflict and violence is the ultimate form of defence.