

Response to Nigel Biggar's key note speech In Defence of Just War: the Christian tradition, Controversies, and Current Cases

Göran Collste

Linköping University, Centre for Applied Ethics, Sweden

goran.collste@liu.se

Thank you for a well-argued and controversial key note lecture! In this way it mirrors your impressive book *In Defence of War* (OUP 2013).

My first point refers to – what you call – Christian thinking of just war. What is so Christian about it? The doctrine of just war contains ideas about just cause, just aim, proportionality etc, ideas and values that are shared by many; Christians as well as Muslims, liberals etc. Further, it accords with classical Catholic natural law doctrine which states that all human beings of good will, Christians or not, due to their rationality are able to argue in moral questions.

Secondly, you stated in the beginning of your speech that a distinctive Christian element is that it does not take national self-defence as its paradigm. But does that really hold? There are not only Christian versions of the Doctrine but also secular just war theories which is not based on nationalist premises.

You take the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as “a reassertion of the classic Christian paradigm of justified war”. However, the R2P is widely accepted but not punitive in character (which would be the unique Christian contribution according to your speech). Rather, its justification is based on protecting the weak and defenceless – surely a justification in line with Christian values - but also shared by many other value systems.

Thirdly, you take the just war doctrine as your reference point, both in today's lecture and in your book. But, is it not time to critically evaluate this doctrine? For example: Does not modern wars show that motivations and intentions often go out of hand? Take the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that you defend in your book, as example. There seems to be an obvious link between the American and British invasion and today's chaos and bloody civil war in Iraq – 11 years later. Wars tend to get out of hand because when a war has broken out it is no longer in control, and when not in control, no one is responsible for the outcome.

Furthermore, war tends to get out of control in another sense too. When a young man enters into the military system – and goes to war – civilized behaviour, meaning freedom, peacefulness and empathy - is threatened and other motivations takes over; discipline, violent instincts and the legitimacy to kill human beings – just like themselves - with loved ones back home.

So my question is if the way war mobilize our worst instincts is not another reason to look beyond the just war doctrine? Especially from a Christian perspective!

In the second part of your speech you make a distinction between international positive law and natural law. You argue that actions or (more often) inactions according to international positive law are not always morally justified and that there are instances when military interventions might be justified even if they are not decided by the just authority, in this case the United Nations. Of course you are right here, but on the other hand, what are the implications of this view for the international community? Given that all major powers reason in the same way, will it not lead to anarchy if treaties and agreements are violated on these grounds? And is not the present unstable world order an indication of this?

Finally, a comment on your applications of the just war doctrine to present wars. Of course, in a short speech like this there is no room for elaborated analysis. But nevertheless, the impression is that the doctrine is applied in a very rough way. Just one example relating to the application to the Israeli bombings of Gaza. You say that provided that Israel targets enemy combatants and that such targeting is necessary, there is no upper limit to the number of civilian casualties that may be incurred, tragically, as 'collateral damage'. What does "necessary" mean? And that there is no upper limit of civilian casualties? 10 000? 20 000? The whole population? So my final question is if this way of using the doctrine does not run the risk of simplifications rather than cautious and reflective judgements?