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Sanctity of Life Series

THE ETHICS OF WAR

Introduction

In light of our concern over abortion and the sanctity of life, can we rightly hold any other position on the ethics of war than pacifism ?

To answer this, need to answer some basic questions:

1. Where does sanctity of life come from?
2. Does God place any bounds on this sanctity?
3. Has God delegated such authority to humans?
4. Is this authority restricted to OT Israel?
5. Does this God-given authority extend beyond the bounds of police action within one's country?
6. Does this authority extend to offensive warfare?
7. What is the responsibility of Christian individuals to their government in regard to warfare?
8. What is a "just war"?

1. Where does sanctity of life come from?

Problem of value of life in societies where man merely advanced animal:

Nazi, Marxist obvious

Hindu tends to put all life on same plane

Secular Humanism:

snail darter vs human unborn

Sagan, *Dragons of Eden*, p 42

Suggest value comes from mankind being created in image of God; apart from Him, hard to justify such sanctity.

2. Does God place any bounds on this sanctity?

Infinite value of human soul?

Maybe, but what happens when one human kills another?

6th commandment: "thou shalt not kill"

not prohibition on all killing of humans

inconsistent even with near context

Hebrew word better translated "commit murder"

recognized by most modern English versions:

Moffatt, Smith-Goodspeed, NEB, TEV, NASB, Berkeley, Ampl, Living,
NIV plus OAB of RSV and NSRB of KJV

God certainly reserves right to put people to death
e.g., Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 6:23

Ezek 18:4 (NASU) [God speaking] *Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.*

Rom 6:23 (NASU) *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

3. Has God delegated such authority to humans?

Yes, earliest indication: Genesis 9:5-6

Gen 9:5 (NASU) *Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from [every] man, from every man's brother I will require the life of man. 6 "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man.*

God to demand accounting for human life from humans
Shed blood of those who shed blood of others
Ambiguity: does God appoint men to kill murderers
or does He say He will use men to kill them?
Mosaic Law solves this by clearly indicating men commanded to carry out death penalty.

Exodus 21:12: intentional killing has death penalty
Note v 14: "take him from my altar & put him to death"

Other grounds for death penalty in context:

attack on parents (15)

kidnapping (16)

cursing parents (17)

Other grounds elsewhere:

cursing God (Lev 24:16)

idolatry (Ex 22:20)

sorcery (Ex 22:18)

spiritism (Lev 20:27)

adultery (Lev 20:10)

incest (Lev 20:11)

homosexuality (Lev 20:13)

bestiality (Ex 22:19)

Not a blank check

Bounds involve wicked behavior

Death penalty restricted to more heinous crimes

4. Is this authority restricted to OT Israel?

Not apparently given to church per se, in spite of some actions undertaken now & then in church history.

But note divine authority delegated to governments:

Romans 13:1-7:

Everyone must submit to governing authorities

No authority exists except established by God

Rebellion against authority is rebellion against God's institution

Govt. is God's servant, agent of wrath to punish wrongdoing

Govt. does not bear sword for nothing

1 Peter 2:13-14:

Submit for Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men:

e.g., king, governors

They are sent to punish those who do wrong,

commend those who do right

Authority to put to death goes with government authority, whether established directly by God (OT Israel) or providentially by God (Gentile govts.).

This authority is not absolute, and may be misused by govt.

Believers are right to resist govt. when it commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands; e.g., Acts 4:19-20; 5:29

5. Does this God-given authority extend beyond the bounds of police action within one's country?

No biblical reason to distinguish between invaders killing innocent people and rebels or thieves doing same.

e.g., activities of David, Gideon fighting invaders at God's express command

Therefore this authority certainly extends to defensive war.

6. Does this authority extend to offensive warfare?

Not as much information here in Scripture

Deuteronomy 20 pictures warfare both inside and outside Canaan, including siege warfare against enemies, which is certainly offensive; but nothing here re/ causes of such a war.

2 Samuel 10 pictures external warfare to redress insult to ambassadors.

Deut 17 discourages king from multiplying horses, a major feature of military might.

Amos 1-2 pictures God's response to various Gentile nations' activities in waging war:

1:3 - "threshing" Gilead (app atrocities)

1:6 - taking captive & selling whole communities (into slavery)

1:9 - selling communities & disregarding treaty

1:11 - pursuing brother with sword, stifling compassion

1:13 - ripping open pregnant women to extend territory

2:1 - burning bones to lime (desecrating bodies?)

For these sins, God will bring destruction on them.

Naturally it is no more right for a government to steal, murder or oppress than it is for individuals to do so.

7. What is the responsibility of Christian individuals to their government in regard to warfare?

See Rom 13:1-7 and 1 Pet 2:13-14 (above)

Submission to government (so long as it is not asking you to disobey God).

There are no statements in Scripture that speak against service in military:

e.g., Jesus, John B., Luke speak favorably of various soldiers

(e.g., Lk 3:14, Mt 8:5-13, Ac 10:1-4)

Jesus' remark about dying by sword (Mt 26:52) seems to be about resisting authorities by force (note remark about legions of angels).

The nonresistance remarks in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:38-47) seem to be dealing with personal revenge rather than limits of governmental authority.

As partial rulers in our particular form of government, we should naturally try to see that our government does the right thing, if possible.

8. What is a "just war"?

Term developed over centuries of study of Bible by Christians to try and work out under what conditions warfare is justifiable; common guidelines (see Payne & Payne, *A Just Defense*, p 42):

1. Just cause
2. Just intent
3. Last resort
4. A formal declaration
5. Limited objectives
6. Proportionate means
7. Noncombatant immunity
8. Reasonable hope for success

Summary

Haven't solved all problems, but all problems will not be solved until our Lord returns!

If all countries believed in and practiced defensive warfare only, there would be no wars.

God has given governments the responsibility to protect the righteous from the wicked, and this may sometimes involve warfare.

To advocate that our government practice pacifism either internally or externally would be to hand over millions of (relatively) innocent people to oppression and death. For unsaved people, such death would be ultimate disaster.