

Turn of the Times?

Christian Peace Ethics in the Face of the Ukraine War

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1. Introduction

Tonight we are dealing with a topic that probably moves us all - sometimes on a daily basis. And it is also good that we do not become numb in the face of the repeated images of cities and villages destroyed by Russian missiles and the people who fall victim to this destruction.

It is always important to realize that war is also being waged in many other places in the world. And that the suffering elsewhere also deserves our attention. At the same time, it is clear that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is shaking our decades-old sense of security to such an extent that the suffering associated with the war is taking on a very concrete face in the form of the many refugees from Ukraine. This war has been going on for well over a year now. And it is claiming more and more victims. The consequences for the world as a whole cannot even be estimated. In any case, the number of people dying of hunger is rising worldwide as a result of the shortage of essential goods caused by the war.

In view of the ever-increasing number of casualties, in view of the vast sums that are flowing into destruction through the financing of this war, whether in the reprehensible acts of aggression or in the legitimate defense efforts, it worries me greatly that almost only military solutions are being discussed. Those who speak aloud about any possible solutions beyond the military often have to justify their thoughtfulness alone. Yet thoughtfulness is the most important background attitude behind the concrete decisions that are then necessary.

2. Turn of the time?

In view of the massiveness of the global challenges, in view of the great disappointment of trust in diplomatic conflict resolution options as a means of preventing military force, but also in view of the fact that German tanks are now being deployed in the war against Russia as a consequence of the Russian attack, the term "turn of the times" is entirely appropriate for what we are currently experiencing. However, the very complexity of the reference to history also makes clear how wrong it would be to associate with this term the need for an absolute reversal of previous foreign policy principles or possibly even of the ethical values on which it is based.

In any case, the fact that German tanks are now fighting Russian troops again should not be read as an indication that Germany is now somehow relativizing its firm resolve never again to wage an immoral war of aggression against another country. On the contrary, we are witnessing two states fighting against each other, both of which have become victims of German nationalistic megalomania.

If the use of German Leopard tanks in the Ukrainian war can be justified at all, then the only justification for it can be that Germany is helping to protect the Ukrainians, who were victims of German aggression at the time, from renewed aggression this time, namely Russian aggression.

Thus, the term "turning point" can be used only as a marker for a fundamentally changed situation. Under no circumstances should it take anything away from the firm conviction that military force can only ever be a sad means of emergency to protect people and their freedom, but must never develop a momentum of its own.

So anyone who now mutates from the greatest pacifist to a passionate supporter of the largest possible arsenals of weapons under the term "turn of the times" is making a problematic use of this term. I would like to see much more thoughtfulness in our public discussion about the Ukraine war. The old insights into the power of dialogue as a means of countering mutual military buildup must not simply be thrown overboard, especially now. The many relations that have developed between Germany and other European countries and Russia must not be severed now. On the contrary, they are more important now than ever! I will explain in more detail that the churches in particular have a special task and opportunity here.

At any rate, the thoughtfulness I would like to see is currently prevalent in the Protestant peace ethic. There is a great awareness that a mere invocation of Jesus' non-violence is not sufficient, at least not if, from one's own secure position, it would demand grave sacrifices from others, perhaps the sacrifice of one's own life. The common desire to finally put an end to suffering unites all positions. No one advocates enthusiasm for war or even militarism. The insight is too clear that violence never creates peace, but can at best reopen spaces for it to develop.

Can the world - this is the very acute question - allow an autocrat who lives in his own world, misleads his people with all propagandistic means and on this basis wages an unscrupulous war of aggression in violation of international law, to get what he wants in the end? The likelihood, which presumably no one disputes at present, that a man who has hoodwinked the world for years can be stopped by nonviolent resistance alone is close to zero. This immediate question does not exempt us from analyzing the failures that led to such a situation arising in the first place and from drawing the consequences for preventing violence in the future. Nevertheless, the question of the acutely ethically responsible options for action must be asked.

The questions now facing Christian peace ethics are not new. But they now arise with a new urgency. The orientation towards "just peace" remains correct now. It also remains correct that we have thus said goodbye to the "doctrine of just war". For war is always a defeat. And military violence is never "just", but terrible. But there can also be situations where the renunciation of it is even more terrible.

Before I go into the current situation, I would like to draw you a kind of map of the discussion on peace ethics. What positions are there in peace ethics at all? On this basis, I would then like to trace the learning curve of the peace ethics discussion since the fall of the Berlin Wall, with a particular focus on the formation of church judgments.

3. A Map of the Peace Ethics Discussion

In the debates on peace ethics surrounding current cases of the use of military force, opponents and supporters of the military deployment in question are usually pitted against each other. That the substantive substance of the debate is only reflected to a limited extent by such a rough juxtaposition becomes apparent when we take a closer look at the types of argumentation that arise in the process.

At one end of the spectrum is a form of principled pacifism that I call unconditional or deontological pacifism. "To deon" means "the necessary, the ought-to-be, the duty." Deontological reasoning assumes that there are unconditional laws that cannot be overridden by anything, whereas teleological reasoning is oriented toward a telos, a goal, to achieve which the appropriate means must then be employed. For deontological pacifism, the use of military force is ruled out from the outset because the unconditional duty of non-violence precludes it. The decisive factor for its proposed solution is therefore not the result of the analysis of the history and course of the conflict in question and the associated conflict of goals, but only the requirement that all active steps in dealing with this conflict must be characterized by non-violence. Insofar as deontological pacifism owes itself to Christian motivation, it often refers to biblical texts from which nonviolence is regarded as a binding orientation for life. In particular, the commandments of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount are often cited here.

I distinguish argumentative pacifism from this deontological pacifism. It, too, contains a strong deontological element. It too leads to the position of principled non-violence. However, it proceeds quite differently in its justification. In addition to biblical norms, it deliberately includes political analyses in its ethical justifications. Violence - so the summarizing result of such analyses - has never led to peace, because it always sows new violence. Therefore, the biblical position of non-violence is the only reasonable one. In any case, the position of argumentative pacifism leaves open the possibility of allowing exceptions to the prohibition of the use of force on the basis of new historical experience and convincing arguments.

A third position is responsibility pacifism. This designation already shows that it, too, claims to bring about peace. For this reason, it advocates a clear priority for non-violence. However, it assumes that the non-violence of one's own actions is not the only ethically binding principle. But since it has a special rank, the use of force is an "impossible possibility," that is, something that should not actually exist, but which cannot be ruled out in certain situations of acute need. According to this position, the use of violence is also never just violence, but always connected with guilt; therefore, it can be ethically permitted only in exceptional cases.

The fourth position I call the justice-ethical approach. For this approach, the goal of non-violence does not have a prominent position. Equally binding for it is, for example, the option for the weak, standing up for human dignity or protecting others from violence. If conflicts arise between these principles, the analysis of the situation must reveal whether the use of force is permissible or even required. This position differs from what I have called responsibility pacifism primarily in that it is not afraid to justify the use of force. According to this position, in certain situations even and especially those who refrain from providing assistance by military means can be guilty.

The four positions mentioned above form the framework of the debate on peace ethics. The last-mentioned position, oriented toward justice, must be seen as the limit of what can appear legitimate at all from the perspective of the Christian faith. Behind it stands a long Christian ethical tradition that has been effective far beyond the sphere of the church: the "doctrine of just war." How narrowly this line is drawn becomes clear when we take a closer look at the criteria of the doctrine of just war. First, however, a brief review:

4. Peace ethics since the fall of the Berlin Wall

In the conflicts after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a point of view increasingly came into view that had already become clearly visible when the concentration camps were liberated by soldiers in 1945: wars are always terrible. Weapons cause endless suffering. But weapons can also directly save lives.

In 1994, almost one million people were murdered with machetes in one hundred days in Rwanda. UN blue helmet soldiers stood by with weapons in hand and failed to save all those people because, as blue helmet soldiers, they were forbidden to use the weapons.

In the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of 8,000 Bosnian boys and men, the UN blue helmet soldiers present, just as they did earlier in Rwanda, stood idly by because they were not permitted to use their weapons. (Blue helmet soldiers are only allowed to use their weapons for self-protection).

In 2014, it was different. By pushing back the IS militias in Syria and Iraq through - also equipped with German rifles - Kurdish Peshmerga, probably tens of thousands of otherwise defenseless people were saved from cruel murder. For these reasons, I could not object at the time - despite all my inner doubts - to the arms deliveries that made this possible.

Of course, all this was also reflected in the further development of positions in the Church's peace ethics. The earlier discussions about nuclear deterrence were replaced by discussions about how to deal with "privatized violence" as it confronted us in increasing numbers and increasing brutality in the terrorist attacks by Islamist fundamentalists. September 11 became a symbol of this. The unimaginable atrocities of the so-called "Islamic State" underscored this change in the discussion of peace ethics. While criticism of the military use of force used to be the established baseline of church peace ethics, increasingly the question was on the table whether it is morally responsible not to effectively protect people threatened by genocide or, more generally, forms of the most brutal violence. The question moved to the center of how the "responsibility to protect", the human responsibility to protect, as affirmed by the UN, could be ensured and what role military means played in this.

My own peace ethics thinking over the past 30 years has been based on the integration of the ethical orientation knowledge of the doctrine of just war, abandoned with good reason, into the evolving "doctrine of just peace." Five criteria in particular can be identified in the various elaborations of the doctrine of just war in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, Martin Luther, and Francisco Suarez.

- Legitima potestas ("legitimate power"): War must be declared by a legitimate authority (formerly the prince or sovereign of a state).
- Causa iusta ("just cause"): There must be a just and grave cause, e.g., disturbance of the peace by external breach of law and foreign violence.
- Ultima Ratio ("last resort"): War may be used only as a last resort. No war can be just while there is still any realistic chance of resolving the conflict through negotiations or other non-military means.
- Recta Intentio ("right intention"): War must be waged with a just intention. Its honest purpose must be to restore peace and justice. Here, then, is where the real motivation for the war comes into play.
- Debitus Modus ("the manner owed"): War must be waged according to the principle of proportionality. The good to be achieved must clearly outweigh the bad that must be used to bring about the good.

I applied the just war criteria in essays to each of the first Gulf War in 1990¹, the Balkan War², and the Afghanistan War³, and in each case concluded that the use of military force in those wars did not meet the criteria. This meant, however, that the position of unconditional pacifism, for which the use of military force is ruled out from the outset, and the view of a responsibility pacifism, which advocates a clear priority of nonviolence but assumes that the nonviolence of one's own actions is not the only ethically binding principle and therefore the use of force as an "impossible possibility" cannot be ruled out in certain situations of acute need, were close to each other in the end. Both take an extremely restrictive approach - albeit to varying degrees - to the possibility of using military force.

¹ The Doctrine of Just War and the War in the Gulf, in Junge Kirche 52 (1991), 75-80.

² God's Reconciliation and Military Violence. Zur Friedensethik nach dem Kosovo-Krieg, in: Rudolf Weth (ed.): Das Kreuz Jesu. Gewalt - Opfer - Sühne, Neukirchen 2001, 209-227.

³ Just War in Afghanistan? On the Current Discussion on the Ethics of Peace, in: evangelische aspekte 3/2002, 23-26

At the same time, it also became clear that the new forms of conflict, in which the protection of people from directly exercised brutal violence has a high ethical quality, made a strictly pacifist position seem increasingly problematic, or at least raised weighty questions about it.

It was remarkable that even the World Council of Churches, in which traditionally pacifist positions carry great weight, increasingly took into account situations in which military means may also be legitimate or even morally required for the protection of threatened people.

I have experienced the discussions myself at various conferences. At a conference in Kigali/Rwanda in 2004, for example, I was responsible at the end for the wording of the part in the final document that dealt with military interventions under the aegis of the UN to protect people from genocide if necessary. I encountered great skepticism about any form of military coercion.

The Uruguayan pastor in my group opposed all militarism in light of her experience with military dictatorship in her country; the Quaker from the U.S. acknowledged the dilemma, but could not bring herself to sign anything that included military coercion if necessary. The representative from Rwanda himself did not want the UN to play a leading role because he had seen UN blue helmet soldiers escorting the genocides out of the country in 1994.

It was then all the less self-evident that two years later, in the declaration on the "Duty to Protect Vulnerable Populations" of the WCC assembly in Porto Alegre in 2006, the possibility of humanitarian intervention was explicitly declared to be ethically legitimate.

When the duty to protect populations is "gravely violated, whether through inaction, lack of capacity, or direct attacks on populations, the international community has a duty to come to the aid of peoples and states and, in extreme cases, to intervene in the internal affairs of the state in the interest and for the safety of the population beyond sovereignty..."⁴

In their ethical appreciation of the need to come to the aid of distressed people, even militarily, these statements are remarkable. However, these words can certainly not serve as a general legitimization of military approaches.

The same can be said for the EKD's peace memorandum,⁵. It pleads for a just peace between states, characterized by the rule of law. The memorandum also takes a stand on the importance of the doctrine of just war:

"Modern international law has abolished the concept of just war. Within the framework of the concept of just peace, the doctrine of bellum iustum no longer has a place. However, it does not follow from this that the moral test criteria which were contained in the bellum iustum doctrines must or may also be abandoned. For they are based on standards that are not only valid in the case of war, but can also be applied to police law, the domestic exercise of the right of resistance, and a legitimate struggle for liberation (based on the fundamental idea of individual self-defense or emergency aid). They are based on general criteria of an ethics of law-preserving violence, which - independent of the respective context of application - can be formulated as follows..."

And then follow criteria that correspond precisely to the criteria of just war: Reason for Permission, Authorization, Right Intent, Extreme Means, Proportionality of Consequences, Proportionality of Means, Principle of Distinction (i.e., persons and entities not directly involved in the exercise of primary force are to be spared).

⁴ <https://www.oikoumene.org/de/resources/documents/2-vulnerable-populations-at-risk-statement-on-the-responsibility-to-protect>

⁵ Aus: Gottes Frieden leben - Providing for Just Peace. A Memorandum of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Gütersloh 2007.

The EKD Synod's 2019 statement on peace ethics also affirms that the 2007 peace memorandum considers the use of military means to be legitimate under narrow criteria as "law-preserving force" that may be considered as the ultimate means (*ultima ratio*).⁶ However, the fact that it did not delve into this aspect of Protestant peace ethics is a shortcoming of this declaration.

Minimizing military force was and is the clear goal of evangelical judgment in peace ethics. Its reflection on how to deal with *de facto* military aggression, however, needs further development.

It is obvious that the keyword of "right-preserving violence" from the peace memorandum is of particular importance for the question of the reaction to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. And also the program word of the Christian peace ethics of the last decades, "Just Peace", must of course be taken very seriously here in its two parts.

For it is clear that the Russian attack is a blatant breach of international law. The fact that there is a comparatively high consensus on this among the states of the world was demonstrated by the eagerly awaited vote on a corresponding resolution in the UN General Assembly on Feb. 24, 2023, one year after the Russian attack. Once again, the Assembly called for a withdrawal of Russian troops by a large majority. 141 of the 193 member states voted in favor of the resolution. Only seven countries voted against.

This great worldwide consensus has become all the more evident among the churches, even if the Russian Orthodox Church itself is playing a braking role that is difficult to assess. In my function as moderator of the World Council of Churches, however, I do not only hear the war-legitimizing tones that we regularly read about in our newspapers, but I clearly sense more thoughtfulness. Much of this is not publicly evident.

5. The position of the World Council of Churches

The declaration of the WCC assembly in Karlsruhe in the first week of September 2022, which was adopted without dissenting votes and which the Russian Orthodox delegates also supported, condemns the Russian invasion as "illegal and unjustifiable and deplores the appalling level of death, destruction and displacement. of destroyed relationships and the deeper than ever entrenched enmity between people in the region, the escalating conflicts around the world, the increased risk of famine in regions of the world already experiencing food insecurity, the economic hardship and increased social and political instability in many countries.

"As Christians from different parts of the world" - the Assembly said - "we renew the call for an immediate ceasefire to stop the death and destruction, and for dialogue and negotiations to achieve sustainable peace."

Also notable in the statement is the clear criticism of the misuse of religion to justify war:

"We also strongly affirm the Central Committee's statement that war is incompatible with God's nature and will for humanity and is contrary to our fundamental Christian and ecumenical principles, and reject any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed attacks and hatred."

This clarity from the Assembly was important and gave the lie to all those who had raised concerns in advance that Karlsruhe would become a venue for the dissemination of Putin propaganda. None of this happened.

⁶ https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/Kundgebung-Kirche-auf-dem-Weg-der-Gerechtigkeit-und-des-Friedens.pdf

6. The peace initiative of the World Council of Churches

After many background discussions between the churches, we wanted not only to pray, but to do our part to overcome the violence. That is why the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Jerry Pillay, and I, as chairman, took an initiative that is now taking more concrete shape.

I went to Ukraine with General Secretary Jerry Pillay and a small delegation of the World Council of Churches to engage in dialogue with the churches there, which are in a difficult situation marked by internal tensions. The general secretary then also went to Russia to talk with church leaders there. The goal is a three-day round table on neutral territory, preferably Geneva, envisaged for early October, with the participation of both the Ukrainian churches and the Russian Orthodox Church. On the first day we want to talk with the Ukrainian churches, on the second day with the Russian Orthodox Church, and on the third day we want to get everyone talking to each other.

Why ways to peace are so important, we have been brought very drastically close. The war crimes of Butscha are probably the worst expression of all the suffering that the war of aggression against Ukraine, which is contrary to international law, has caused and continues to cause. In the first weeks of the war, as the Russian army advanced just outside Kiev, over 400 people were brutally killed in Butscha, a suburb of Kiev, most of them civilians.

It was hard to endure the images of the dead that could be seen in the church. But it is the reality. I will never forget the stories the local priest told us about those days in March 2022. They still resonate to this day. And they make it so understandable why the people of Ukraine are so desperate for support in defending their country.

At the memorial site of the former mass grave next to the church, WCC general secretary Jerry Pillay and I offered a prayer. Afterwards, we celebrated a prayer liturgy in the church together with all the churches united in the Ukrainian Council of Churches in memory of the victims.

But we were also shown in a very sensual way why we, together with most of the countries of the world, speak of a Russian war of aggression. Russian missiles are fired at Ukrainian cities, not vice versa! Several times, even at night, the air alarm app went off with a loud sound, in Kiev, but also on the way there. The fact that people are now calm about it has only to do with the fact that the protective screen of air defense now works so well that the danger is kept within limits.

The main purpose of our trip was to hold talks with the Ukrainian churches, in particular to prepare the envisaged round table. An important prerequisite for this is first of all to bring the two conflicting Orthodox Churches of Ukraine, the "Ukrainian Orthodox Church" and the "Orthodox Church of Ukraine", to the same table.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church used to be subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. Immediately after the Russian attack, it condemned the war. We also heard clear words of condemnation of the war in our talks with its leadership. Nevertheless, it faces accusations of still being too close to Russia and even having collaborators in its ranks. That is why it has come under pressure from the government.

The "Orthodox Church of Ukraine," with its head Metropolitan Epiphany of Kyiv and all of Ukraine, was founded in 2018 and recognized as independent ("autocephalous") in 2019 by the honorary head of world Orthodoxy, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Former Ukrainian President Poroshenko also played a special role in its founding. One point of conflict between the two churches, apart from theological differences, is the question of how to deal with the transfer of monasteries and congregations from one church to the other and what role the government or the security forces play in this. There is also the question of who owns the buildings and assets.

At present, the government has taken measures to make them leave their spiritual and administrative headquarters in the Kiev Cave Monastery, which were previously rented by the state. In our conversation, Minister of Culture Oleksandr Tkachenko underlined that they would not remove the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Cave Monastery by force. This was an important assurance.

We do not know whether our initiative can contribute to opening new doors for overcoming violence from the churches. But we must try and put success in God's hands.

7. Further development of peace ethics after the Russian attack on Ukraine

Three insights emerge from my reflections as tasks for the future.

First, in the face of a brutal attack, it is morally legitimate to defend ourselves. And that, if it is the only effective option, even with weapons. But then - as much as this involves a moral dilemma - it is also legitimate to support an attacked people in its defense, in compliance with the principle of proportionality, if there is no other effective way, including by supplying appropriate weapons.

Second, however, the new attention to military policy components of peacekeeping does not take anything away from the importance of disarmament policy strategies. For all NATO member states combined, SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) calculated in its new report that defense spending in 2022 will be \$1.232 trillion, or 55 percent of global spending. The U.S. accounted for the lion's share at \$877 billion. Russia's spending grew to \$86.4 billion. Even if this figure were multiplied several times, Russia's spending is far below the budgets of the countries that are members of NATO.

This suggests that the West's response to the attack on Ukraine must not be about more money for armaments, but about more peace and security intelligence.

The dubiousness of the large sums spent on military assets is further underscored by my third conclusion: even after the Russian attack on Ukraine, the drastic underfunding of civilian options to save human life remains a moral scandal. Around 20,000 people around the world still die every day because they do not have enough food or medicine. It can already be observed that the number is even growing again after the pandemic and the Ukraine war.

On the occasion of the UN Summit on World Food Security the year before last, the agricultural scientist and Vice President of Welthungerhilfe Prof. Dr. Joachim von Braun, who also chaired the scientific advisory board for the UN Summit, quantified the global expenditures that would make it possible to largely overcome hunger by 2030. Over the next decade - he noted - that would cost about \$39 billion to \$50 billion a year in additional investment. And, he added, "No finance minister can duck out and say it's prohibitively expensive to fight hunger. No, it's not."

If only to prevent future violent conflicts, the absurdity of allocating resources between expenditures for armaments and expenditures for human development must be addressed again and again by the churches.

Especially with regard to the churches' peace witness, Jesus' promise applies:

"You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world".

Listening to this promise and living from it means understanding that the "peace that is higher than all reason" also has clear worldly consequences.