

A humanist discussion of... war

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we have. Human life is all the more valuable if you do not believe in an afterlife, and humanists (indeed any rational person) would think very carefully before supporting any war, because of the loss of life involved. Wars are hugely destructive, ruining lives, wasting resources, and degrading the environment. The horrors of war, for example the enormous and pointless destruction and loss of life in the First World War and the genocide against the Jews in the Second World War, have made many people question the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent deity.

Some people say that war is "natural" and that as tribal animals we are bound to want to protect our territory and tribe. Humanists would respond by saying that we should use our intelligence and ability to reason to overcome some natural instincts, and that, in the case of something as terrible as war, we should always seek non-violent solutions first. But to resort to violence in self-defence or for altruistic reasons - to protect the lives and rights of others - can sometimes be justified on a national level, just as it can on an individual level.

Peaceful solutions are not always easy to find or to enforce, as the history of the United Nations demonstrates, but humanists strongly support the work of the UN aimed at resolving conflicts between nations peacefully. Humanists helped to set up the UN, and were the first directors of several UN agencies. Some humanists, such as the famous philosopher Bertrand Russell, have campaigned against weapons of mass destruction and been conscientious objectors and pacifists, though Russell made an exception for the Second World War which he thought was morally justified.

Non-religious people are apt to point out the numerous wars that have been fought over the centuries over religious differences, and to think that these are absurd reasons for killing other people. They also criticise the part that organised religions occasionally play in encouraging and supporting wars. Humanists are also apt to point out that liberal democracies have a very good record for not starting wars.

"Just wars"?

Professor Richard Norman, who teaches philosophy at the University of Kent and has written extensively about ethics, is a member of the British Humanist Association, the Humanist Philosophers' Group, and East Kent Humanists. He writes:

"The early Christians refused to do military service, and some modern Christians, mindful of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" and of Jesus's injunction to "turn the other cheek" and not to resist evil, have also been pacifists. However, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, the Church changed its position and came to accept that there could be "just" wars. In this, it was drawing on the writings of earlier Greek philosophers and Roman lawyers. The underlying moral principle was not that it is always wrong to kill, but that it is always wrong to kill the innocent. This is generally taken to mean that it may be acceptable to kill the soldiers of an enemy state if it has committed an injustice, such as invading the territory of another state. A war to overturn such an injustice could be regarded as a "just war". But the principle also implies that it can never be right intentionally to kill civilians, because as non-combatants, they are "innocent".

This is the heart of what has come to be known as "just war " theory. It has outgrown its Greek, Roman, and Christian origins. It is the dominant way of thinking about war in the modern world and has become part of the modern system of international law. It provides a clear and plausible way of thinking about the rights and wrongs of war. The principles are often violated in practice, but that in itself shows that they are tough principles, demanding standards which we should be pressing states and governments to live up to.

However this way of thinking about the morality of war involves two big problems:

- If it's always wrong intentionally to kill the innocent, aren't all wars fought with modern weapons going to be wrong? Most modern conflicts, for example, involve the bombing of cities, in which innocent civilians are bound to be killed.
- More fundamentally, can we really make this distinction between those who are "innocent" and those who are not? Most soldiers have not chosen to go to war; they are forced to fight. Aren't their deaths just as terrible as those of most civilians (some of whom may have supported aggressive actions of their state)?

Although the distinction between the innocent and the less innocent can be a difficult one to make, many people would say that there is something especially wrong with the deliberate targetting of civilians in war. Modern weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear bombs and chemical and biological weapons, whose use would kill thousands, and maybe millions, of ordinary people, seem to be impossible to justify. Many people have campaigned for the elimination of such weapons, supporting organisations such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

But if all wars involve killing the innocent, aren't we back with the impossibility of justifying war at all? Shouldn't we all be pacifists? It is

difficult for humanists to lay down an absolute principle on this. A religious believer can say that if we are commanded by God never to kill, we simply have to obey that command, whatever the consequences. Humanists can't ignore the consequences. They have to accept that however terrible war may be, it's at least possible that sometimes a refusal to go to war may be even worse. For many humanists the Second World War was a case in point. It led to huge destruction and millions of deaths, but if Nazism had not been resisted there might have been an even worse outcome.

All too often wars achieve nothing except terrible suffering, leaving a legacy of bitterness which sows the seeds of future wars. Most humanists are likely to say that, because we should value every human life as something unique and precious, we should look sceptically at the reasons governments give for inflicting death and destruction in war. But most humanists would also say that we have to look hard at each individual case, for just occasionally war might be the lesser evil."

Questions to consider and discuss:

- How many countries are at war now, including civil war?
- How many wars in the 20th and 21st centuries involved religious differences?
- Can you find an example of a war begun by a liberal democracy?
- What can peace-keeping organisations such as the UN do to prevent war?
- What can wealthy and relatively peaceful countries such as ours do to prevent wars?
- What action should we take about wars in far away places? For example, should we send troops to keep the peace? Should we send help and weapons to the "better" side? Should we send food aid to the civilian population? Should we take in refugees from war-torn countries?
- Do you approve of the arms trade? (It provides a lot of jobs, many people have investments in it, through savings and pension funds as well as by deliberate choice, but sophisticated modern weaponry undoubtedly makes conflicts more destructive.)
- Is extensive media coverage of wars a good or a bad thing?
- Do films about war glorify violence?
- Is "turning the other cheek" always the right thing to do?
- How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?

How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

Appendix: From the UK Armed Forces Humanist Association Constitution

"In battle, and all other operations, high morale equates to the moral strength which gives true ascendancy over the enemy. The duty of bearing arms, of being prepared to fight, kill and if necessary die in carrying out orders, carries with it the responsibility only to do so in a just cause. All service personnel have direct and unique responsibility for life and death. Individually, all service personnel are subject to international and national law, and must discharge their duties not just according to orders and law, but consciously and clearly for the greater good. Commanders must ensure that all subordinates understand these responsibilities of their service, and that their cause is just. This entails proper understanding of the Laws of War, Humanitarian Law and Rules of Engagement; but it also means an underlying deep comprehension of the moral and ethical responsibility of bearing arms. British servicemen must obey their orders confident that the ends, ways and means are right morally as well as militarily."

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