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## *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace*

**An article for the *Cathedral Times*  
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral*  
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One of my seminary's esteemed professors was a critical historian named Roland Bainton, a delightful man who pedaled a bicycle up a steep hill to work each day. Known also for his drawings, he would often do quick sketches of his students (I have one of me, the epitome of a young and eager student!). He was raised a pacifist, and he wrote a famous small book titled *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace*.

I think of that book often, especially after violent attacks and the realities of war. This past week, the world was shocked, horrified, by the violent attack into Israel. We have been dealing with similar outrage by the attack upon Ukraine. Other military attacks are certainly occurring throughout the world, but these two capture our front-page American attention.

How do we respond to such atrocity and invasion? My own reaction is as a Christian first, and also as an American. For the record, I do not think being a Christian and being an American are the same thing. But, many of us are indeed both Christian and American. What have been our attitudes towards war and peace?

Many are comparing last week's invasion of Israel as a 9/11 experience; and it sure seems so. On the Sunday after September 11, 2001, the title of my sermon was, "Lord, have mercy." We were all asking the question, "Should we go to war?" I noted that we were already at war, but, that, in order for a war to be moral, it had to be waged morally.

Roland Bainton's book does a good job of outlining a historical development within Christianity from pacifism, to just war, to holy war. ("Holy war," as in the Crusades, has also been called "total war.") Most understand early Christianity to have been pacifist. "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer the other also," Jesus said. The early theologian Tertullian thought that being a soldier would require actions forbidden to Christians; Hippolytus thought that Christians in the military should disobey orders to kill. (Others note, however, that Roman soldiers who met Jesus, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul seem not to have been asked by any of them to abandon their roles.)

That changed, however, after Constantine, when Christianity became a legal and civilly permissible religion. Saints Ambrose and Augustine developed theories of what would constitute "just war." Ambrose spoke of the duty to use force in order to defend innocent third parties: a Christian refusing to prevent injury to another person would be as bad as the person inflicting the injury. Augustine set in order what would become conditions for just war: the war must be waged by a legitimate governmental authority; it must have the goal of peace; it must only be used as a last resort. They opposed reprisal killings and massacres.

To our horror, Christian attitudes towards war became totalitarian with the justification of the Crusades, including the instructions of Pope Urban II in 1095 to invade so-called non-Christian lands (Jerusalem at the time). "Deus vult," the assembly cried; "God wills it." Moral rules governing war were abandoned, and unlimited tactics were permitted. Most Christians agree today that the Crusades became a moral tragedy. Indeed, with such absolutist fervor, the Christians ended up fighting against themselves, and killing themselves, in Constantinople. Such was the result of "total war," or "holy war."

Though, sadly, much has remained the same since the Crusades, much has also changed. Jumping to the twentieth century, it took nations a while to join the military resistance to the totalitarian Hitler. Even the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an avowed pacifist, finally joined a secret plot to get rid of Hitler. Much of the world has rightly heard and joined the Jewish refrain, "Never again." This week, we hear those words again.

Today, many Christians and most American military teachers use an outline of “Just War Theory” that sets out the following conditions. For a war to be considered just,

1. It must have a just cause.
2. It must be declared by a legal authority.
3. It must have a just intention (to restore peace, not to wage revenge).
4. It must be a last resort.
5. It must have the probability of success.
6. It must have just conduct (no killing of civilians, only military combatants).
7. It must be enacted proportionately (the good must outweigh the evil).

It is one thing to think and plan theoretically; we must do that. It is another thing to have to act in the heat of invasion. “Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy,” is what I prayed after 9/11; and I pretty much pray that prayer every day. Have mercy upon people of good faith everywhere. Have mercy upon citizens everywhere who must make tragic decisions. Have mercy upon our duly elected officials and decision-makers. Have mercy upon men and women in the military. Have mercy upon Ukraine and Russia. Have mercy upon Israel and Palestine. Give us all wisdom. Give us all courage. Give us all peace.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip