

SŁAWOMIR NOWOSAD
Wydział Teologii KUL

War – Just or Justifiable? A Christian Orthodox Perspective

Abstract

Being sent to the world Christianity had to determine its moral assessment of different worldly realities, war and peace among them. While the Western tradition rather early developed a just war doctrine, the East took a different path. War has constantly been perceived as evil though in some circumstances necessary and hence justifiable (but strictly speaking neither “just” nor “good”). Both the Greek Fathers and later Eastern authors and Church figures, like Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, would develop their understanding of warfare as “irrational” and an obstacle on every Christian’s path to *theosis*. The Russian Orthodox Bishops’ *The Basis of the Social Concept* is a rare example of a more elaborated theory of the justification of warfare.

Keywords: just war, Christian Orthodoxy.

Wojna sprawiedliwa z perspektywy prawosławnej

Streszczenie

Inaczej niż na Zachodzie, chrześcijański Wschód o wiele ostrożej formułował teorię wojny sprawiedliwej (*ius ad bellum*). Widział wojnę zawsze jako zło, jakkolwiek w pewnych okolicznościach uznawał jej konieczność. W centrum prawosławnej teologii i liturgii jest zawsze pokój jako wyjątkowy i zobowiązujący dar Boży. Angażowanie się w wojnę, nawet jeśli konieczne, staje się przeszkodą na drodze od *theosis*, która ma być celem dla każdego chrześcijanina. Uznając irracjonalność wojny i niemożliwość jej pogodzenia z wolą Bożą, teologia prawosławna odnotowała jednak próby określenia warunków jej podjęcia, jak i sposobów ograniczenia jej złych skutków (*ius in bello*). Wielokrotnie przeciwko niegodziwości wojny wypowiadał się Patriarcha Konstantynopola Bartłomiej, a względnie pełne opracowanie etycznych aspektów wojny dali prawosławni biskupi rosyjscy w 2000 r.

Slowa kluczowe: wojna sprawiedliwa, chrześcijaństwo prawosławne.

It is rather widely believed that the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition has not worked out the ethical criteria to justify or reject war to the same extent,

as it has been the case with the Western Christian traditions¹. While various historical circumstances had their impact on that fact, it also had its reasons in the fundamental presuppositions of the Orthodox theological tradition. This vision of Christianity is not about moral life as such, its norms and way of daily behaviour. Its goal is *theosis* – deification through participation in the life of Triune God. It is believed that all human beings are not so much called to lead a certain moral life but rather “become by grace all that God is by nature (...). All are called to embrace and be transformed by the holiness of God, to become saints”². In this perspective it is at least problematic to put too much emphasis on working out and following concrete norms in any sphere of life, including social relationships in the context of peace and war.

1. Early developments

It is nonetheless possible to deduce from Eastern theology some essential relevant principles and norms of moral acceptance or rejection of warfare. While the Western Christianity followed mainly St. Ambrose († 397) and St. Augustine († 430) who laid foundations for the successive conception of just war, the Eastern reflection looked to those Church Fathers – St. Basil the Great († 379) and St. John Chrysostom († 407) among them – who believed and stressed that the kingdom of Christ (“the empire of Christ”) has brought peace to the world that is to be promoted and not some ideas of justifying wars. In a typically Orthodox way it is above all peace that is stressed as a unique gift from God. St. John Chrysostom would teach that “the true peace is from God”, while in St. Basil’s words “he who seeks peace, seeks Christ, for He is the peace”. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th–6th c.) in his *Divine Names* would express his faith in God who is “the Fount of True Peace and of all Peace, both in general and in particular”. As coming from above this true “inner peace should express itself in outward behaviour and external relationships, as a function of the proper relationship with God, and the control of the passions, as well as love and forgiveness”³. All these premises allowed the characteristic pacifist option to develop in Orthodox Christianity. This would

¹ “Few, if any, Orthodox theologians have concerned themselves with the problems of pacifism, disarmament, nuclear war, just war theory, peace movements, etc.” S.S. HARAKAS, *Something Is Stirring in World Orthodoxy*, Minneapolis 1978, 65.

² P. LEMASTERS, *Orthodox Perspectives on Peace, War and Violence*, “The Ecumenical Review” 63 (2011) 1, 57.

³ All quotes see S.S. HARAKAS, *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*, vol. 1: *Patristic Ethics*, Brookline 1999, 144–146.

include several specific virtues that need to be underlined as necessary: mutual non-violence, non-resistance to evil, voluntary kenotic suffering and universal forgiveness⁴.

Beside Chrysostom's many statements on the central value of peace one may as well find other opinions proving the complexity of his position. In one of his homilies he said: "Never be afraid of the sword if thy conscience does not accuse thee: never be afraid in war if thy conscience is clear". This seems to be due to St. John's ongoing position to distinguish between the Church and the state and, consequently, one way of life for the clergy (for whom participating in war is clearly forbidden) and another way for the laity. In his *On the Priesthood* Chrysostom states that those who sin "must be made better not by force but by persuasion" while "secular judges indeed, when they have captured malefactors under the law, show their authority to be great, and prevent them even against their will from following their own devices"⁵. It is also true however that the Gospel proclaims God's mercy for all and there is only one goal for all to strive for which is salvation.

Another fact that both expressed and influenced the Eastern tendency toward a pacifistic attitude were canons that prohibited clergy and monks not only from entering the military service but also from the secular government service. Another aspect of the development of that vision was the perception of Christians warriors as martyrs who laid down their lives for Christ and Orthodoxy. Over the centuries mixed influences had their impact on the Eastern doctrine on war and peace, including the significant 13th Canon of St. Basil, the teaching of other Greek Fathers, or the complex situation of Eastern Christians in the times of the Crusades and their relations with Muslim and Turkish emirates⁶. One can find historical arguments both for confirming or denying the existence of an Eastern (Byzantine) version of the Christian justification of war. However, taking into account a particular historical mixture of secular (imperial) and religious ideology and politics of Eastern Orthodoxy, Byzantine wars were often perceived as "holy" and their goal was to "defend the integrity of God's empire on earth" and so "by extension they were fought for

⁴ Cf. A.F.C. WEBSTER, *The Pacifist Option: The Moral Argument Against War in Eastern Orthodox Moral Theology*, San Francisco – London – Bethesda 1998, 244–249.

⁵ The above quotes and a more detailed discussion of St. John Chrysostom's position on peace and war see D.K. GOODIN, *Just-War Theory and Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Theological Perspective on the Doctrinal Legacy of Chrysostom and Constantine-Cyril*, "The Greek Orthodox Theological Review" 48 (2004) 3–4, 254–261.

⁶ A lot of important historical and theological aspects of the development of the Christian Orthodox understanding of war and peace are presented by Yuri Stoyanov in his *Norms of War in Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, in: V. POPOVSKI, G.M. REICHBERG, N. TURNER (ed.), *World Religions and Norms of War*, Tokyo – New York – Paris 2009, 166–219. See also S.S. HARAKAS, *Patristic Ethics*, 155–156.

God and Orthodoxy”⁷. As early as the late Roman period the general rules of the justification of certain wars (*ius ad bellum*) were developed and also some *ius in bello* regulations. While it is not difficult to discern attempts to preserve the pro-peace strands, it is also obvious that particularly as early as the post-Constantinian Church that “an enhanced appreciation of those elements in the Christian tradition which affirmed the need for order, the punishment of evil-doers, defense of the innocent” gradually “permitted and even enjoined the involvement of Christians in the military”⁸. An analysis of those different sources allows to distinguish several ways of perceiving war as justifiable: “‘self-defense’, ‘recovery of lost territory’, ‘breach of agreement’, ‘averting a greater evil’ and ‘pursuit of peace’”⁹.

One of the most lucid accounts leading to a possible justification of warfare comes from St. Cyril († 869) which he expressed in his conversation with Caliph Mutawakkil in 851, quoted in the Russian Orthodox Bishops’ document *The Basis of the Social Concept*. Cyril’s manner of interpretation of John 15:13 may be problematic, yet in his exposition he offers “a surprisingly strong and unambiguous theological affirmation of the wars being fought to repel the armies of the caliph”¹⁰.

Nevertheless war would constantly be seen as an evil, which only in some circumstances could appear a necessary evil with an obligation to limit its tragic consequences. Obviously warfare has to do with killing that the Orthodox tradition understands as the so-called involuntary sin. It is an action that damages the soul even if done out of necessity. Taking one’s life is undoubtedly such an action and as such it creates serious obstacles in – in this case – the soldier’s path to ho-

⁷ “In this providential framework Byzantine military defeats and setbacks were interpreted as God’s punishment for Byzantine sins – or, in the later history of Byzantium, as crucial stages in the unfolding of the God-guided eschatological drama determining the fortunes of the universal empire”. Y. STOYANOV, *Norms of War in Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 180.

⁸ S.S. HARAKAS, *Patristic Ethics*, 152. According to some researchers the concept of holy war and accompanying practices were generally rejected by Byzantium, which “never knew a real ‘holy war’, and the Church refrained from blessing any killing as a ‘laudable act’, from granting remission of sins to Orthodox warriors for their military service, or from recognizing fallen warriors *ipso facto* as martyrs”. A.F.C. WEBSTER, *The Pacifist Option: The Moral Argument Against War in Eastern Orthodox Moral Theology*, 86. For a broader analysis see T.S. MILLER, J. NESBITT (ed.), *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis*, Washington, D.C 1995.

⁹ Y. STOYANOV, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, in: G.M. REICHBERG, H. SYSE, N.M. HARTWELL (ed.), *Religion, War and Ethics: A Sourcebook of Textual Traditions*, New York 2014, 167.

¹⁰ D.K. GOODIN, *Just-War Theory and Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 252. In his conversation with the Caliph St. Cyril stated: “(...) in company we defend one another and give our lives in battle for our neighbours (...). Our Christ-loving soldiers protect our Holy Church with arms in their hands. They safeguard the sovereign in whose sacred person they respect the image of the rule of the Heavenly King. They safeguard their land because with its fall the home authority will inevitably fall too and the evangelical faith will be shaken. These are precious pledges for which soldiers should fight to the last”. *The Basis of the Social Concept* VIII.2, www.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concept (20.09.2016).

liness¹¹. Hence the Eastern tradition of Christianity did not apprehend warfare as just or good and continued to stick to its emphasis on peace, which remained central both in its theology and liturgy. One must always remember that there exists a continuous tension between one's behaviour amid warfare and one's growing in life with God toward *theosis*¹².

New transformations of Orthodox thinking about the morality of war took place in the post-Byzantine/Ottoman and modern periods when the political and religious context of the Eastern world had changed. A growing importance of the Russian Orthodoxy was accompanied by the development of their secular and religious concept of just war. It was combined with the belief in war as a “judgment of God” and a religiously strengthened obligation to protect one's country. St. Filaret of Moscow († 1867) preached that “those who die for the faith and fatherland will be awarded with life and a crown in heaven”¹³. Different opinions and teaching on the morality of warfare that have been formulated over the centuries have in many ways depended on the political situations of the local Churches and governments, very often mutually dependent on one another. Consequently, various versions of the just or holy war doctrine might be found in individual autocephalous Orthodox communities. Their teaching may both vary in some aspects and be more or less developed when related to *ius ad bellum* or *ius in bello*.

2. Recent opinions

It is also true however that even most recently some Orthodox voices have stressed again the theme of peace as central and crucial to their vision of faith and life. It was Patriarch Pavle († 2009) of the Serbian Orthodox Church, whatever problematic his political behaviour, who during the civil war in Bosnia reminded all those involved that “the Church must condemn all atrocities that are committed, no matter what the faith or origin of the person committing them may be. No

¹¹ Cf. P. LEMASTERS, *Orthodox Perspectives on Peace, War and Violence*, 57. “Orthodoxy does not require nonviolence or pacifism as essential characteristics of the Christian life; neither, however, does it sacralize war. Instead, the church merely tolerates war as a sometimes tragically necessary or unavoidable endeavour for which repentance for ‘involuntary sin’ is appropriate”. *Ibid.*, 59. Cf. BARTHOLOMEW, [Address] *In the Emirate of Bahrain* (25.09.2000), in: J. CHRYSSAVIS (ed.), *In the World Yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, New York 2010, 227.

¹² Origen and Eusebius could be regarded as two exceptions in this unequivocal leaning toward peace according to Stanley S. Harakas. The first one appears to accept a possibility that people may be “doing battle in a just cause and on behalf of an emperor”. Eusebius writes about some who could be “serving in the army, according to justice”. Cf. *Patristic Ethics*, 154.

¹³ Y. STOYANOV, *Norms of War in Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 194.

sin committed by one person justifies a sin committed by another". On another occasion he called on his fellow Christians to pray so that "God would help us to understand that we are human beings and we must live as human beings so that peace would come into our country and bring an end to the killing". True peace, being a basic good to which all are entitled, can be achieved only by good means: "evil never brings good"¹⁴.

In the year 2000 the Sacred Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church issued *The Basis of the Social Concept*, which is a rare example of the Orthodox systematic treatment of Christian social teaching. In the VIII chapter of their document entitled *War and Peace* the Bishops first speak of war as evil being "caused by the sinful abuse of the God-given freedom" (VIII.1). Nevertheless, they admit that it can be "considered to be necessary" in cases when "the security (...) and the restoration of trampled justice" are at stake (VIII.2). Using the notion of "just war" they follow their classical criteria of *ius ad bellum* and similarly of *ius in bello* norms, particularly the treatment of the wounded and war prisoners that should be based on what St. Paul expressed in his Letter to the Romans (12:21-22): "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (VIII.3)¹⁵. *The Basis of the Social Concept* is to be regarded as an important endeavour to determine the Orthodox perception of the morality of warfare in an organized way. It does lack, however, a more detailed interpretation of some terms or criteria, for instance of the term "trampled justice".

Even if Orthodox Christians consider war an evil, they admit it may turn out necessary due to certain circumstances and goals that are not to be neglected. In order to better understand that "necessity" of war the American Orthodox theologian Stanley Harakas (b. 1932) would distinguish between a "justification of war" and "just war". These two terms should not be taken interchangeably because a certain war may be justified but that does not make it a "just war": "a justification for war does not constitute a moral good in or of itself"¹⁶. Consequently, strictly speaking, he argues against any Orthodox just war theory (*ius ad bellum*) while there may be and in fact have been attempts to formulate *ius in bello* norms (like those found in *Strategikon* of Emperor Maurice who died in 602). Being a "necessary evil" war can never become a "good" war. In his other statement

¹⁴ All quotes see J. FOREST, *Not What We Have Been Led to Believe*, www.incommunion.org (17.09.2016).

¹⁵ Cf. www.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concept (30.08.2016).

¹⁶ D.K. GOODIN, *Just-War Theory and Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 253. Cf. S.S. HARAKAS, *The Morality of War*, in: J.J. ALLEN (ed.), *Orthodox Synthesis: The Unity of Theological Thought*, Crestwood 1981, 67–96. The text of *Strategikon* see Maurice's *Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans. G.T. Dennis, Philadelphia 1984.

Harakas is even more categorical when he argues that “the East did not seek to answer questions concerning the correct conditions for entering war and the correct conduct of war on the basis of the possibility of a ‘just war’ (...). In short, no case can be made for the existence of an Orthodox just-war-theory”¹⁷.

In the course of the tragic war in Kosovo in the early 2000s a group of influential Orthodox bishops and metropolitans from North America turned to the United Nations and Western governments to “intervene swiftly and forcefully to restore a safe and secure environment in Kosovo, to protect the rights and property of minorities, and to preserve the remaining centuries-old religious sites throughout the region”¹⁸. It is characteristic in such cases that an appeal like that would be followed by a petition for prayer and spiritual efforts so that God grant peace all those involved. In an appeal to their Orthodox faithful the Serbian Holy Synod of Bishops called upon “all of our people that they in these extremely difficult times double their fasting and prayer for their salvation and redemption, for peace among us and all over the world”¹⁹.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople (b. 1940) has not just once expressed his opposition to war calling it “irrational”. War can in no way find solutions to human problems and conflicts and it is evident that the deadly effects of war extend not just to those directly involved but also to many others who are treated unjustly. It is only peaceful solutions that are to be sought and implemented where conflicts between peoples and countries arise. It is not difficult to discern Bartholomew’s criticism toward those holding public offices in their ways of fulfilling public duties: “The choice of military violence as the sole method for resolving or imposing issues betrays a lack of satisfactory imagination and reveals intellectual laziness as well as confidence in the erroneous notion that evil can be corrected by evil”. The “dark consequences” of war on “humanity and on the natural environment” prove its irrationality being a “paranoid act”²⁰. When pointing to all kinds of warfare, including terrorism or atomic warfare, Bartholomew calls war not just a “crime against humanity” but also a “mortal sin against God”²¹.

¹⁷ S.S. HARAKAS, *No Just War in the Fathers* (2005), www.incommunion.org (23.09.2016). “The absence of a ‘just war theory’ in the East (...) is a continuing witness to the Church’s strong bias for peace as a central Christian value”. S.S. HARAKAS, *Peace in a Nuclear Context*, “The Greek Orthodox Theological Review” 38 (1993) 1–4, 86.

¹⁸ SCOA Hierarchs Call upon UN and NATO to Restore Peace and Order in Kosovo (23.03.2004), www.assemblyofbishops.org (15.09.2016).

¹⁹ Appeal from the Extraordinary Session of the Expanded Convocation of the Holy Synod of Bishops (18.03.2004), www.incommunion.org (15.09.2016).

²⁰ BARTHOLOMEW, *Address to the Bankers Association* (Athens, 24.05.1999), in: J. CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, New York 2012, 264.

²¹ BARTHOLOMEW, *Address to the Sixth World Conference on Religion and Peace* (Riva del Garda, Italy, 4.11.1994), in: J. CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *In the World Yet Not of the World*, 148.

In his critical approach to war the Patriarch in a particular way rejects situations when war is being fought “in the name of religion”. In such instances religion is undoubtedly abused and it is in fact “war against religion” because God is “benevolent and merciful and does not delight in bloodshed”²². In the contemporary world it is especially tragic that religious violence or even warfare carried out with a religious motivation seems to be ever more present. Bartholomew categorically condemns such actions so that “there should not be any space for those who are using religion as their excuse to commit horrible crimes”²³. The *Bosphorus Declaration* of 1994 signed by Patriarch Bartholomew together with other participants of the International Peace and Tolerance Conference in the context of the war in former Yugoslavia contained a definite assertion rejecting the “concept that it is possible to justify one’s actions in any armed conflict in the name of God”²⁴. Similarly uncompromising was the Patriarch’s statement of 2003 in which he referred to God Himself for whom “war and violence are never means used (...) in order to achieve a result”. He stressed that only “in a few specific cases the Orthodox Church forgives an armed defence against oppression and violence. However, as a rule, peaceful resolution of differences and peaceful cooperation are more pleasing to God and more beneficial to humankind”²⁵.

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The fundamental way of life for all Christians should be peace-making. It has been the constant tradition of Christianity to call upon all Christ’s disciples to reject violence and war and to embrace peace as both God’s gift and task. It is also very much included in the Orthodox Divine liturgy and prayers with their frequent and unequivocal stress on peace and “peaceful life in all reverence and godliness” (1 Tm 2:2) for all. In order to avoid a false idealism Orthodox theology admits the world both Christians and others live in is imperfect and in many ways infected with sin. Therefore also those who believe in Christ and follow His Gospel may come to face and get involved in violent inevitable behaviour

²² BARTHOLOMEW, [Address] *In the Emirate of Bahrain*, in: J. CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *In the World Yet Not of the World*, 227. “We have always declared that war in the name of religion is war against religion and that we must separate political from religious activism, so that what is done by political dictates is not confused with what is taught by our three monotheistic religions”. BARTHOLOMEW, *Inaugural Address at the World Conference* (Brussels, 19.12.2001), in: J. CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *In the World Yet Not of the World*, 280.

²³ *Address at the Second Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions* (Astana, Kazakhstan, 12.09.2006), in: J. CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *In the World Yet Not of the World*, 95.

²⁴ *The Bosphorus Declaration* (Istanbul, 9.02.1994), in: J. CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *In the World Yet Not of the World*, 300.

²⁵ J. CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, Grand Rapids – Cambridge 2009, 231.

aiming at the protection of those who are innocent and suffer from injustice. Both soldiers and all involved in warfare, perceived as a necessary evil, are not left to themselves but are always offered by the Church spiritual healing through repentance and sacramental grace²⁶. Whether leading a peaceful life or finding it necessary to go to war and use deadly weapon all are called to follow the Lord and grow in holiness.

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²⁶ Cf. P. LEMASTERS, *Orthodox Perspectives on Peace, War and Violence*, 60–61.

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