

Just war, holy war and the crisis of language: What is lost when we lose a moral framework for conflict?

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War is fought not only with weapons but with words. The language used to describe conflict shapes how it is understood, justified and judged. Within the Christian intellectual tradition, a crucial distinction developed between just war and holy war. The former sought to limit violence by insisting that ethical criteria apply even in war. The latter sacralised violence, presenting it as divinely sanctioned and morally certain.

From late antiquity through the Middle Ages, thinkers tried to restrain warfare through just war reasoning. This tradition offered a framework for judging when and how force might be used. Yet in modern political and media discourse, these distinctions are often blurred or ignored. Conflicts are framed inconsistently — sometimes as acts of defence, other times using the language of “crusade” or “existential struggle”. Such shifts are both confusing and encourage moral simplification. In an age of rapid reporting and heated rhetoric, clarity matters. A historically grounded framework is needed not only to assess war itself, but also the language used to describe it.

The language we use about war matters.

Just war thinking begins with Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), writing in a Roman Empire marked by violence and instability. For Augustine, war was never good. It was a tragic result of human sin, yet sometimes necessary to restore order. His aim was not to legitimise violence but to restrain it. War should be fought only to correct a wrong, under proper authority, and to secure peace rather than vengeance or domination.

Thomas Aquinas (circa 1225–1274 CE) later set out the framework more clearly in his *Summa Theologiae*. He identified three criteria: legitimate authority, just cause and right intention. Later writers would add proportionality, requiring that harm not exceed the good sought, and discrimination, requiring protection of non-combatants.

The strength of this tradition lies in its restraint. Just war theory does not justify war. It limits it. It provides a grammar for judging violence and insists that ethical reasoning must not be abandoned, even in conflict.

Holy war offers a different framework. Where just war limits violence, holy war sacralises it. War is no longer a tragic necessity, but an act aligned with divine will. Moral ambiguity disappears. The Crusades provide the clearest example. Preached as wars sanctioned by God, they were framed in the language of divine command, captured in the phrase “God wills it”. Participation could be presented as spiritually meritorious. The enemy was cast as absolute evil, beyond ordinary moral concern. The consequences were profound. If war is divinely mandated, restraint becomes secondary. The distinctions central to just war thinking fall away. Violence is no longer judged but affirmed. Holy war collapses ethical judgement into theological certainty. It replaces deliberation with conviction and removes the framework needed for critical assessment.

In the early modern period, efforts to restrain war shifted from theology to natural law. Hugo Grotius played a central role. Writing amid confessional conflict, he sought rules that applied across religious divisions. His law of nations aimed to regulate states through shared norms rather than shared faith. This shift coincided with the rise of state sovereignty after the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and replaced earlier models in which authority might be shared or contested between emperors, popes and overlapping jurisdictions. Authority became territorial and exclusive. War came to be seen as an activity of states within a recognised order. Over time, this order was formalised in legal frameworks that sought to limit war and regulate its conduct.

In the twentieth century, institutions such as the United Nations codified the prohibition of aggressive war. Though secular, these frameworks retained elements of just war thinking, especially the focus on legitimate authority and justified force. Yet tension remains. Moral and legal norms compete with power and interest. Just war thinking survives in secular form, often strained by the gap between principle and practice.

Recent conflicts in the Middle East, particularly those involving Iran, the United States and Israel, show how these issues persist. Though fought within legal and strategic frameworks, they are increasingly described in religious terms. Some actors frame the

conflict as part of a divine plan or an apocalyptic struggle. Reports suggest troops have been told the war could contribute to the fulfilment of end-times prophecy. Public statements also invoke religious language that casts the conflict in moral and civilisational terms. This rhetoric matters. It echoes earlier patterns of holy war, where conflict is presented as divinely sanctioned and morally certain. Even when the causes are political or strategic, such language reshapes how war is understood.

The effect is clear. When war is framed in sacred terms, the space for judgement narrows. Conflict appears less open to evaluation and more inevitable. Holy war language returns within secular conflict, altering both its meaning and its moral stakes.

Maintaining a space for reflection and evaluation.

Modern media reporting lacks a stable moral framework. It provides speed and access but often lacks consistency. Language shifts according to context, politics or audience. Terms such as “defence”, “aggression” and “crusade” are used unevenly. Similar actions are described differently depending on who acts. At times commentators warn that religious language risks turning conflict into a holy war. Yet reporting often slips into that same language. Media narratives also shift between competing frames. Legal analysis sits alongside emotional outrage and civilisational claims about good and evil. Each has value, but their unstructured use creates confusion. Public discourse reflects this instability. Without clear criteria, judgement fragments. Audiences face competing narratives without a basis for evaluation. The discipline just war theory once imposed is lost. A structured framework is needed. The criteria of just war remain useful: just cause, proportionality and discrimination. They allow us to assess both actions and arguments. These are not relics. They have shaped modern legal and ethical thinking. Their value lies in imposing discipline on judgement. Without them, debate drifts between extremes. Absolutism turns conflict into moral certainty. Relativism denies the possibility of judgement. A framework does not remove disagreement, but it makes serious evaluation possible. In this context, the intervention of Pope Leo XIV recalls a different moral voice. He has argued that peace cannot be secured through force or threat, but through dialogue and restraint. His appeal continues a long tradition in which the papacy seeks to set moral limits in war. Such interventions rarely shape policy. Their importance lies elsewhere. They preserve a space for moral reflection in a world dominated by strategy

and rhetoric. They also recall the intellectual tradition behind just war thinking, even as they warn against its distortion. History shows the danger of treating war as sacred and certain. Modern discourse risks doing the same. The recovery of disciplined moral reasoning is, therefore, essential. The task is not only to judge wars, but to resist the language that makes them seem inevitable or right.

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