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# **RELIGION - WAR AND PEACE**

By Harry Jivenmukta

All religions see war as a necessary evil. Peace is obviously preferable to war, but occasions arise when war is inevitable. We must make a distinction, however, between a just and unjust war. A just war is one which happens to correct an evil act or actions. The main problem is defining what evil is.

Evil can be said to be anything which goes against the principles of peace. For example, the Sikhs fought against and killed thousands of Moghul invaders over a period of about 100 years. They thought they were doing right because the Moghuls were invading, killing, looting, and taking away treasures which belonged to others. However, the Moghuls felt that they were also right because they were invading a non Muslim country and making people accept Islam 'for their own good'. In this same way we can look at the first and second world wars where all nations felt they were fighting for what was right. Even Hitler's Germany prayed to God for success on the battlefield.

One way to understand the just war is to separate religion from politics. If we disregard which nation we belong to, and put aside the material gains we think we are going to get, we can see more clearly which side is right.

Sometimes, people think that certain conditions determine which side is right. An example of this is to think that the attacking side is always wrong. However, The NATO alliance attacked Serbia in 1999 and most people thought it was right.

Right and wrong are subjective terms; this means they mean different things to different people. No-one goes to war without thinking that right is on their side.

## Questions

1. What does a 'just war' mean?
2. Can any war be described as 'just'?
3. What is evil?

**After 1948 Israel required both men and women to serve the new state's armed forces, as did the People's Republic of China after 1949. Germany, which was demilitarized after World War II, re-established conscription in 1956 on a selective basis. The Soviet Union retained an especially rigorous system of universal conscription, with a minimum of two years of service at age 18. Switzerland, with its citizen army, remained a notable example of universal conscription. In the United States, although peacetime conscription was ended in 1973 it was reinstated in 1980.**

Conscription means that citizens of a country are required by law to serve in the armed forces. For the members of some religions this causes no problems. Sikhs, for example, are well known for their military prowess. They make up only 2% of the Indian population but 10% of the armed forces. For other people conscription is absolutely against their religious principles.

Buddhists find it hard to fight in an army. In Tibet, when the Chinese invaded in the 1950s, it was with great regret that the Tibetans fought back. But they were so unused to fighting that they were easily defeated.

In Islam, the **Jihad**, or holy war is part of many people's religious duty. Islam teaches the spreading of its religious influence throughout the world, in some cases using force if necessary. The basis of this belief is that Mohammed who originally lived in Mecca was forced to leave because people laughed at his religious ideas. He went to live in Medina where his ideas were accepted. The Meccans believed in statue worship and could not agree with the idea of one God, Allah, which Mohammed taught. Mohammed eventually went to war with the Meccans. He was heavily outnumbered but won nevertheless and converted Mecca to Islam. This historical event forms the basis of modern Islamic thought on religious wars.

In every religion there are people who will not fight because they cannot take another life. Even in Islam, which is the most organised and clear religion regarding war, Sufis and other mystical groups will not fight in armies.

## Questions

1. What does conscription mean?
2. Should all people be prepared, in fact find it an honour, to fight for their country?
3. What are the arguments in favour of opposing conscription?

Civil disobedience means resisting laws by not cooperating with the authorities, but not necessarily going so far as to fight physically. This idea is usually more acceptable to many religious people than going to war because it means that opposition to something can be expressed without physically injuring others. The most famous case of civil disobedience was undertaken by Mahatma Gandhi. He was struggling for independence for India from British rule from the 1920s. He and his millions of supporters did many things to disrupt British rule including:

- z the resignations of titles,
- z the boycott of government educational institutions,
- z boycotting the law courts,
- z refusing to work in government service,
- z not buying foreign goods,
- z refusing to participate in elections,
- z the refusal to pay taxes.

To a person who is unwilling to fight physically, civil disobedience and non cooperation is often the only way left.

## Questions

1. What is civil disobedience?
2. Find out, and write about how civil disobedience has been used in the 20th century.

Many wars that have been fought in history have been religious wars, that is wars fought mainly for the reason that nations disagreed on which religion was best. Behind this religious disagreement were wider fears that other religions would take over and that the existing moral and legal processes would be replaced. People often feel that their religion is part of their whole being and feel threatened by people who believe in God in a different way. This is despite most religions which say that the God everyone prays to is the same one, it is just the methods which differ.

Some examples of religious wars:

- z **The crusades** - a series of European military expeditions, often counted at eight although numbering many more than that, which were directed against Muslim control of Jerusalem and the Christian shrine of the Holy Sepulchre and that took place from 1095 to 1270.
- z **Israeli - Arab conflicts** - Since 1948 Israel and several Muslim Arab nations have fought many times. Israel claims the land as the promised land described by Moses.
- z **India and Pakistan** - have gone to war three times fighting over disputed Kashmir, a region in predominantly Hindu India, but with a mainly Muslim population.
- z **Northern Ireland** - Predominantly Protestant but the minority Catholic population want to unite with Eire, a Roman Catholic country.

There is a difference between a small minority of more mystical religious believers in every religion, and the majority of believers who are more 'politically' religious. The more mystically minded see all people and all religions as essentially the same; 'we are going on different paths to the same destination'. The majority of believers in any religion think that their religion is different and must be protected from the influences of other religions. They see religion almost in the same way as people see political parties; 'I am Labour and always will be' or 'Better dead than red (Conservative)'.

## Questions

1. What are the differences between wars and religious wars?
2. How can religious wars be justified?

Conflicts between two or more parties include:

- z brothers and sisters,
- z other relatives,
- z neighbours (a huge problem; neighbours from hell etc.),
- z within communities (sectarianism),
- z within a nation (civil war),
- z between nations.

Major wars are not the only type of conflict which religion concerns itself with. Conflict of any sort is considered undesirable by all religions because it upsets the balance of a person. Consider, when you are very angry; you lose your reason and allow emotion and baser instincts to take over your actions. You will do things then that you otherwise wouldn't do, and although you might regret it later and even apologise, the words or actions cannot be reversed.

A common example that Buddhism gives is the 'who is in control of your anger?' one. Every time you get angry, think about what made you angry. If, for example, another person said something to you to make you angry, then surely it is the other person and not you who is controlling your anger.

**A Buddhist monk and a novice were walking down the main street when another person came out and blocked their way. The person said some words which neither of them understood and then he hit the monk and knocked him to the floor. The person then went on his way. The monk got up, dusted himself down and carried on walking as if nothing had happened. The novice was shocked and wanted to know why he had not responded, and why, with two of them, they didn't give that person a good beating. The monk told the novice that if the person was angry that was his problem and if the monk responded all that would happen would be to pass the anger from the person to the monk. The monk told the novice that he didn't want to be burdened with the other person's anger.**

## Questions

1. Why do religions encourage people to avoid conflict?
2. Is the story about the Buddhist monk a practical way to respond to violence? Explain why.

# THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT EXERCISE

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## Exercise

Taking the list of types of conflict below, give examples of how these conflicts might occur, and think of ways of how that potential conflict could be avoided.

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS**

**OTHER RELATIVES**

**NEIGHBOURS**

**WITHIN COMMUNITIES**

**WITHIN A NATION**

**BETWEEN NATIONS**

There comes a point even with people who say they will never fight, when they can resist it no longer. There are many examples in religions of this:

- z In the **Hindu** Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna does not want to go to war with his relatives, but Krishna convinces him that it is the right thing to do.
- z In **Sikhism**, when the Muslim invaders kept returning to India, kept looting, raping and destroying the area of northern India, the Sikhs took up arms to defend the poor and the victims. Even to this day every Sikh carries a ceremonial short sword to indicate that he or she is prepared to fight to defend the weak.
- z **Jesus** smashed up the Synagogue where the moneylenders had set up their stalls because he said such things should not be going on in the house of God.
- z **Mohammed** went to war with the Meccans to show them that their idol worship was false.
- z The **Jews** are still fighting to defend their 'promised land' of Israel from their neighbours.
- z The **Buddhists** of Tibet reluctantly went to war to defend their nation against the Chinese invasion in the 1950s.

There seems to be agreement about when war or conflict is justified:

- z to defend the weak,
- z to defend a religious belief,
- z to stop aggressors.

All religions teach the 'turn the other cheek' point of view but all seem to contradict themselves when they also use force. One commentator explains:

**Religion is a process of love, but cannot be practiced in fear. If someone is afraid, they cannot be total in their religious effort. Sometimes a person has to hold a sword in one hand in order to be able to pray.**

## Questions

1. If peace has its limits, does this mean that conflict is always inevitable?
2. When is conflict justified?
3. Are religions contradictory in that they preach peace but also often end up involved in conflict?

# CAN CONFLICT EVER BE JUSTIFIED?

## CASE STUDY

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Since the early 1990s Serbia had been showing aggression towards the neighbouring states within Yugoslavia. The nation eventually split up into quite distinct sections. The majority population were Serbs living in Serbia, but they also made up minorities in all the other states including Montenegro, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

In 1999 Serbian troops entered Kosovo and started to systematically intimidate Kosovans who were not Serbs. They used all types of methods including;

- z intimidation,
- z rape,
- z burning houses,
- z shooting people.

The Kosovans ran for their lives. This was ethnic cleansing at its worst.

The international community decided to act after peace negotiation attempts failed. They sent in wave after wave of aircraft and bombed Serbia. They blew up armament factories, bridges, electricity stations, and other facilities which supported the Serbian army. The aim was to kill as few civilians as possible. This strategy was successful after two months of bombardment, and the Serb Army agreed to withdraw from Kosovo. The international community replaced the Serb army with its own in Kosovo.

When it was safe to do so, the Kosovars returned home. Despite the presence of international troops, the Serbian civilians who lived in Kosovo felt threatened and began to flee to Serbia. Many Serb civilians were killed by angry Kosovars returning to their destroyed homes.

After the conflict ended the international forces felt that they would have to be in Kosovo for many years and they set up semi permanent camps. The Kosovars started rebuilding their lives, and Serb civilians tried to make a new start in Serbia. It seem that no-one won in this conflict and everyone lost:

- z The Serbian infrastructure was almost destroyed,
- z Kosovans were killed, driven out, and returned to desolation,
- z Serbs in Kosovo were victorious and then had to flee, leaving everything they owned behind,
- z The international community spent millions which it would rather not have done and had to place thousands of troops in Kosovo for years to come.

## Questions

1. In the case study above, what do you think the following hoped to gain:

- z The Serbs,
- z The international community?

This is a key question which tells us about the threshold level of each person. Religions tell us to love our neighbours and to avoid conflict if possible. One way to do this is to see the world as one community. After all, most major conflicts come about because we see something as ours, and think in terms of 'them' and 'us'.

Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism tell us that nothing is ours. We are attached to things; my house, my family, my job, etc. In fact everything is only borrowed. When we die someone else will be living in our house, and before we lived there, someone else thought of that same house as theirs. In this way, we should see everything as everyone's. The biggest reasons for conflict are:

- z My country,
- z My family,
- z My money.

**Country:** Would you be prepared to die for your country? This is the number one reason for the vast majority of deaths in conflict. The problem with having a 'one country' mentality is that it clouds the judgement when it comes to simple things. If someone takes an inch of your garden, (let alone mess with your country), when they erect a new fence that is reason enough for solicitors, court cases, lifelong hostility. If we see the whole world as one opportunity, then we might be losing our small nation but we gain the world.

**Family:** All religions tell us that we are essentially alone. When we die, when we are judged, when we go to heaven or hell, we do so alone. Families are temporary. Everyone eventually goes their own way. Attachment to family is problematic; if you see your family as special then you cannot see other people in the same way. When there is a report in the local newspaper that a child has been run over, we look for the name, and sigh in relief because it is not our child or anyone we know. But it was someone's child. We should see the whole world as our family and show equal love and concern for all.

**Money:** This is easily the most dangerous drug. When someone starts pursuing money he or she is prepared to rip off anyone, cheat, lie and be nasty. All religions tell us to remain balanced yet many people are prepared to kill for money.

## Questions

1. Does the private ownership of things make conflict inevitable?
2. Do you agree that 'nothing is ours' and that we should see things in terms of 'everything belongs to everyone'?

## Exercise

Write about three things you would be prepared to risk dying for. Explain why this is the case, what the risks are, and why you would be prepared to take them.

### Situation 1

### Situation 2

### Situation 3