RHODE ISLAND STATE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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Responding to War

The book of Revelation, the first example of Christian-Jewish apocalypticism, critiqued the violence of Imperial Rome while noting the challenge of a proper Christian response. The experience of persecution in the early church shaped its first theological commitments, that judgment is left to God and, paradoxically, that God's salvation and mercy disrupt the kind of judgment that we think our enemies deserve.

Christian teaching after Ambrose focused on just causes (jus ad bellum) and responsibilities related to one's conduct in war (jus in bello). There was a general sense that only a legitimate authority, guided by divine will or law, had the power to declare war, and that any such declaration had to be in response to a real threat. Such thinking reflects the shift of a church persecuted by Imperial authority to a church organized around Imperial authority.

Thomistic and Reformed views continued to shape various theological trajectories during and after the Middle Ages. Contemporary Roman Catholic thought expresses the view that "all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war" and that strict conditions for "legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration." In brief, those strict conditions are:
(1) The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain.
(2) All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.
(3) There must be serious prospects of success.
(4) The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.

In 2009, the Episcopal Church passed resolution 2009-A042 which condemned "in any nation the first use of armed force in the form of a preventive or pre-emptive strike that is aimed at disrupting a non-imminent, uncertain military threat." This resolution was a clear response to the disastrous foreign policy and moral consequences of our government's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The innovation of our democracy, the shifting of the power to declare war from the executive to the legislative branch, was meant to dismantle the historic intertwining of religious and secular authority. The current action taken against Iran, a government which itself has no moral defense, reveals the multifaceted problem we face. In light of Christian teaching and in the spirit of our secular constitutional order, our government's actions are suspect and destabilizing.

I've compiled a list of resources for further reading – many of the Council's partners have offered their own statements from their own traditions, and they are worth reading.
We are far afield from both our spiritual and democratic principles. As a Christian, I live into the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We are co-creators with God's divine love even when we cannot see the way out.

Jeremy Langill
Executive Minister
RISCC