

# Right or Wrong? A Just War

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**Especially since the escalation of violence in Libya, I keep hearing about a “just war.” It sounds like an oxymoron to me. What is a “just war”?**

The concept of just war strengthens and wanes in society based on the condition and participation in conflict. Although the term is new to you, the concept is quite old. Dating at least back to Plato, the idea of a just war developed as a doctrine under the teachings of Augustine. The concept grew in structure from Thomas Aquinas more than 700 years ago and has continued as a strong Catholic doctrine.

The idea of a just war began with the recognition that, in a sinful world, war is inevitable. Just war is a doctrinal response that tries to establish rules that regulate when war should occur and how it should be enacted. The just war concept tries to establish universally acceptable guidelines to make war morally tolerable. Just war theory typically is divided into three categories—just procedures for entering into a war, just actions during a war and just consequences of a war:

- Entering into a just war requires six considerations. The first is that the war must be fought for a just cause. Second is that the war must be the last resort to achieving this cause. Third, the war must be declared by a proper authority. Fourth, the war must be fought with the right intention—solely for the correction of the suffered wrong. The fifth consideration is that there must be a reasonable chance of success. The sixth consideration is that the end effect must be proportional to the means of the war.
- The rules of conduct during a just war are generally divided into

two principles—discrimination and proportionality. The discrimination principle maintains there is a distinct difference between those who are actively participating in the war, the combatants, and those who are innocent civilians, the noncombatants. War should be waged only against combatants, and every effort must be made to protect noncombatants from harm. The principle of proportionality asserts the actions of the war should be no greater than the anticipated advantage or achieved result.

- The just consequences of war generally are divided along the principles of discrimination and proportionality. Noncombatants should be protected from the punishments of war, and claims of victory should be no greater than intended purposes of the war.

Critics of just war theory believe the structure is too general and does not provide enough definition to demand justice. Some believe humanity cannot determine what is just. Other critics hold that accepting war as inevitable neglects the purpose of Christ as the Prince of Peace.

The just war theory provides one avenue for dealing with the conflict that has plagued humanity since Cain and Abel. At its best, just war can be seen as an attempt to regulate the worst of possible circumstances.

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