Do U.S. Christians Not Know Limits of Just War Tradition?

In my previous [article](#), I suggested (and I have developed this at length in my book "[Who Is My Enemy?](#)") that certain parallels exist between the Christian "Justifiable War Tradition" and the classical teachings in Islam regarding the justifiable exercise of warfare.

For example, in both, warfare should not target noncombatants, and the opponent should be allowed space to appeal for a cessation of hostilities.

Moreover, I observed that the early church insisted that warfare was not a legitimate exercise by disciples of Jesus. The so-called "just war tradition" (JWT) entered the history of the church in the fourth century A.D., not the first century.

Thus, we are left with the troubling possibility that the ethic regarding war of the mainstream of U.S. Christians is more like Muhammad than Jesus.

But today I want to suggest another often overlooked observation: that, in fact, most U.S. Christians are altogether ignorant of the limits of the JWT.

In the absence of a rigorous moral system to help the church think through its participation in war, other less-worthy motives and moral justifications are at work.

In place of a rigorous engagement with the best of the Christian tradition on the limits of war, we fall prey to a "love it or leave it" nationalism, an unthinking flag-waving patriotism or a non-reflective (and non-Christian) "realism" that grants us a certain moral "normativity" to the practice of war.

For years, in teaching my ethics courses, I have asked my students how many of them have been taught the limits or criteria of the JWT in sermons or Sunday school classes.

Fourteen years now of teaching undergraduates has yielded virtually no affirmative responses.

If we are not teaching the criteria, how can we possibly think we have the moral formation to ward off the amorous advances of the war-makers, flag-wavers and

those who would have us hate and kill our enemies?

In fact, the history of war-making in the last 150 years has entailed the increasing demise of many limits in war.

There are, we should note, important exceptions and admirable efforts on the part of some to limit death and destruction to civilians.

But, at the same time, there is an appalling lack of discussion in our churches regarding the imperialist and terror-wielding exercise of war among those we deem the "good guys."

Consider even "the good war." World War II is a war that most all interpreters would count as having begun with a "justifiable cause." And when the Germans began bombing civilians in the Blitzkrieg, their actions were deemed immoral and reprehensible – as indeed the best of the Christian (and the best of the Islamic) tradition would insist.

But, before long, Churchill and the British insisted that firebombing German cities – intentionally targeting civilians sleeping in their homes – was a morally legitimate exercise.

The policy was intended, said a government document, "to destroy the morale of the enemy civilian population and, in particular, of the industrial workers."

The Royal Air Force would drop bombs on 131 cities according to the account in W.G. Sebald's "On the Natural History of Destruction." Many of these cities were, Sebald reports, "almost entirely flattened," killing around 600,000 civilians and destroying 3.5 million homes.

This is, of course, the very language, logic and practice of terrorism.

Of course, a very similar setting aside of the restraints of the JWT occurred in the U.S. fire-bombing of Japanese cities, and that before we even get to the horror of the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Some may begin to fear that I am somehow advocating some pernicious form of "moral equivalency."

One way a "moral equivalency" argument might proceed is as follows: "Yes, our

enemy did this horrific thing, but so did we and, thus, we should not condemn our enemy's horror because we are just as guilty."

In fact, I am suggesting that warring often proceeds upon a "moral equivalency" basis, but in an upside-down fashion.

That is, we point out the horrors our enemies commit, and then thereby justify our own horrors based upon the prior horror.

This is, in fact, one way Osama bin Laden justified his own targeting of civilians in the United States – he pointed to the fact (a little disputed fact, of which I would guess the vast majority of U.S. citizens are altogether unaware) that following the first Gulf War, the economic sanctions leveled against Iraq led to the death of some half-million children age 5 and younger.

Since U.S. citizens put up with the gross atrocities of its government, they thereby became legitimate targets.

But U.S. culture does not, by and large, tell those tales when we are sorting through whether we should engage in war-making. It does not tell the tale of the deaths of children in Iraq or remember the:

â—   Widespread killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians by our bombs in World War II

â—   Senseless slaughter of Filipinos in a war that was deemed an advancement of Christianity westward throughout the Pacific region

â—   Genocide of Native Americans

Instead, we tell the tales that justify our own aggression and our own terrorism, our own killing of civilians and our own warring with "God on our side."

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Editor's note: Cliff Vaughn recently spoke with Camp about the "Tokens" show in a Skype interview, which can be viewed [here](#). Camp's previous column on

Christian-Muslim relationships is available [here](.).