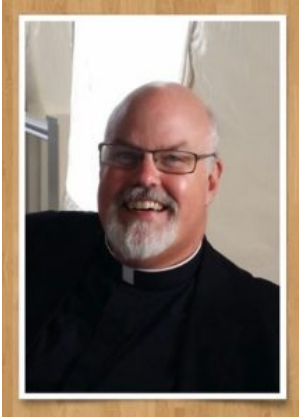




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Teaching Just War Theory through the Lens of Covid-19

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As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded, I was wrestling with how to teach a rather unpopular class on “just war theory.” For so many of my students, who have lived through unending conflicts, the reasons to go into battle are unclear. A good number of them reject the distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable wars; for them, all wars are unjust. Many believe that political grandstanding and neo-colonial campaigns have been the cause of military interventions, and that peaceful negotiations could have resolved international conflicts.

In the classroom, with its dynamic back-and-forth of questions and answers, discussion of just war theory was engaging. Tension could be thick at times, and the lack of any clear resolution problematic for some, but that is the energy of active learning! The pivot to online asynchronous teaching and learning has made engagement more of a challenge. Yet the pandemic provides a context on which to build a rich discussion of this ancient concept.

The “War” Against the Coronavirus

Political and health leaders throughout the world have used the metaphor of “war” to describe the global village’s fight against the novel coronavirus. It seemed appropriate then to ask

students to consider how the criteria of just war theory illuminate the reality in which we find ourselves.

Jus in Bellum

The architects of the just war theory imagined that both sides would engage in reasonable behavior and proposed standards for activity *in* war. For its part, the virus does not abide by any standards. This reality, however, should not preclude us from acting justly. To get at this, students examined two *jus in bellum* criteria: “distinction” and “proportionality.”

Distinction involves a clear focus on the enemy combatant. In this case, as students noted, all efforts should target the virus. The war on the novel coronavirus was not a time for playing politics among civic or religious leaders, or promoting personal or party agendas. Distinction obligates citizens to play their part and stay at home, wear protective personal equipment when necessary, and abide by social distancing rules.

The principle of proportionality focuses on ensuring that combatants are respectful of the other side’s citizens and their property. No unwarranted destruction should accompany military action. Students observed that the virus violates this principle, but that should not preclude the human community’s commitment. Some questioned whether the economic shutdown, closing of nation-state borders, migration of schools to remote learning, and enforced lockdowns were evidence of a violation of this principle. These defensive measures have resulted in a rate of unemployment not seen since the Great Depression, disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, particularly communities of color, the hoarding of an array of products, and increased incidences of mental health issues and domestic abuse, to name a few. I was struck that a handful of students also pointed to price gouging and rise in the number of scams associated with Covid-19. They saw these criminal actions as evidence of “internally” violating proportionality.

Jus Post Bellum

In their assessment of *jus post bellum*, students considered measures that would need to be implemented as we moved out of “shelter in place.” As I imagined, students’ responses were filled with frustration about how long they would have to be on lockdown in their homes. For graduating students, anxiety about their futures was palpable.

According to *jus post bellum*, legitimate authorities must be the ones to set the conditions of peace. Students recognized the legitimate power of authority to safeguard its citizenry, but also realized the frustration of waiting. Out of abundant caution, political leadership had to exercise “just cause for the termination” of this campaign against the virus. As they see the number of infections decrease, a plan can be put in place to open gradually.

“Proportionality” must also inform during this post-war period. While there exists impatience to learn the origins of this virus and whether persons bear responsibility, the dictates of just war theory hold that there can be no revenge. Efforts post-war should be concerned with

reconstruction, remediation, and reparations. This aspect of *jus post bello* did not sit well with my exasperated and exhausted students. Answers and accountability were fine, I let them know, but retribution was not.

In the past, most of my students would dismiss my teaching on just war theory as irrelevant. But, making a link to our present-day war on Covid-19 helped them understand and appreciate the theory.

<https://wabash.center/2020/06/teaching-just-war-theory-through-the-lens-of-covid-19/>