

The “War on Terrorism” – Myths and Reality

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On September 11, 2001, terrorists killed some 4000 people. They were people of at least 40 nationalities and at least 3 different religions. There is no doubt that these events were criminal acts according to international law. They were an abuse of human rights. They put in jeopardy international peace and security.

The question, however, is whether the so-called “war on terrorism” is an appropriate response. The US led coalition of nations claims the high moral ground. But is this something that Christians, or women, should be supporting? Or is this war itself a betrayal of human rights and international law?

I ask these questions from several perspectives – human rights, international law, what happens to women, and the Christian tradition.

The Christian tradition of peace-making

The Christian tradition is one of peace-making. Jesus Christ came to bring peace. Indeed, Jesus Christ embodies peace. In Colossians 1, we have the great hymn to the Cosmic Christ, who brings peace to everything in heaven and on earth. Many Christians remember the Sunday before Easter as Palm Sunday, and see the entry into Jerusalem on a donkey as the sign of a king who brings peace, not war. In Australia in the 1980s, nuclear disarmament marches were held on Palm Sunday and the churches actively supported these marches. They seemed an appropriate expression of our understanding of Christ. The birth of Christ was heralded with the message of peace on earth. When we pray for the Reign of God to come, we pray for peace on earth.

Christian belief therefore commits us to peace-making, to non-violent resolution of disputes, and to disarmament. This has been clearly stated by many churches – Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox. Churches have become very aware that it

is theologically questionable to support nations going to war. It is even more questionable to assert that God is on a particular side in war. God created and loves all human beings. Christ, as peace-maker, is on the side of peace, and against aggressors. Christ works in this world always for peace, never for war.

The Christian tradition of a just war

The politicians who are sending planes laden with bombs to Afghanistan claim they are fighting a just war. They claim that the only way to deal with the terrorists is military force. Some Christians say that no war is ever justified under any circumstances. They say that the proper response to violence is non-violence. Governments see this as unrealistic in the current situation. They say that the appropriate response is war, to destroy the terrorist networks, training camps and munitions.

There is a Christian tradition that accepts that sometimes the only way to stop violent attacks is to use military force. There is a Christian concept of a just war. The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council recently summarised the criteria that must be met if a war is to be just.

- It must be an act of self-defence against an unjust aggressor.
- The action must be initiated by a legitimate authority.
- It must be the last resort after all non-violent means have been exhausted.
- There must be a reasonable chance of success.
- The action must not cause greater evil than that which it sets out to address.
- The action must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants.

The United Nations Charter

The United Nations (UN) charter requires that member states do not attack other nations. It also requires member states to pursue non-violent means of resolving

disputes. It allows nations to take military action which is self-defence. They may only use force if nothing else will stop the attack. They must only use the minimum force necessary to stop an attack. They must report such action to the UN.

There seems to be considerable overlap between what is required by the UN Charter and the Christian concept of a just war.

The UN also has the responsibility to deal with threats to international peace and security. It must use non-violent means if possible, but may use military action if necessary. Action should be authorised by the UN Security Council, which is also the arbiter of whether nations are acting in self-defence or aggressively.

Since September 11, the UN Security Council has passed two significant resolutions. The first, on 28 September, requires all member states to take action individually and collectively against terrorism. This includes bringing those who are responsible for terrorism to justice according to international law; action to stop the funding of terrorist groups; refraining from offering any support for terrorist acts; undertaking criminal investigation and prosecution of those who are involved in terrorism; cooperating with other nations in these actions; and reporting to the United Nations on steps taken to implement the resolution.

The resolution does not authorise military action or a war against terrorism. Rather it calls for a policing action against terrorists as international criminals. The resolution passed on 12 November also does not authorise the military attacks on Afghanistan. The problem is, it also does not condemn those attacks.

The UN appears to be doing nothing to ensure international peace and security. The security council appears to be silent about the war in Afghanistan. It appears to be leaving it to powerful nations to do whatever they choose, to protect their own interests. This means that the international law is being ignored.

Evaluating the war against terrorism

Self-defence

The nations in the US-led coalition claim that they are acting in self-defence. They are seeking to stop future acts of terrorism. There is documented evidence that unless action were taken, other attacks would have occurred similar to those that happened on September 11.

The criminal acts of September 11 require some sort of response. The question is: what is required for self-defence? Are the attacks on Afghanistan necessary?

Self-defence is about stopping the aggressor from further attacks. The question then is: who is the aggressor?

The US-led coalition answers that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are the aggressors. Al-Qaeda is said to have organised the attacks. The Taliban has sheltered Al Qaeda and allowed them to get the finances they need, train terrorists and plan attacks.

No one seems to question this. There is said to be good evidence that these allegations are true.

Since Al Qaeda is armed and violent, it may be appropriate to use force to stop them. The problem is that this war is not simply attacking Al Qaeda and the Taliban. It is harming the people of Afghanistan who have no say in what the Taliban or Al Qaeda are doing. Indeed, most Afghan people have no access to information about what the Taliban are doing, or what is happening in the outside world. Even if they did know, they could not influence the Taliban. Afghanistan is not a democracy. Afghanistan is already suffering from previous wars and invasions.

So these acts of self-defence are also acts of aggression against people who are already victims of war and oppression. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan have also made this point.

Legitimate authority

To be a just war, the war needs to be authorised by a legitimate authority. In this case, that authority would be the United Nations. An individual nation which is the victim of terrorism, such as the USA, has a very biased view of what constitutes self-defence. The point of the United Nations is to provide a more objective authority to decide what action is necessary. So far, the United Nations has not specifically authorised the attacks on Afghanistan.

The problem is that the UN Security Council also has not condemned these attacks. Its resolution of 12 November seems to assume that member states are acting to stop terrorism, without going into details of how they are doing this.

As I am writing this, the USA is talking about extending the war from Afghanistan to Iraq. They say that Iraq has accumulated illegal weapons – nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. They say that Saddam Hussain does not respect international law and if he is not stopped, will act as a terrorist.

This is evidence that the USA, if not checked by the United Nations, will use the war on terrorism as an excuse to pursue much wider political agenda.

Some people argue that the UN Security Council should authorise the military action. They see this as a way of making the US led coalition accountable to the UN. If the UN approved action, the UN could also withdraw approval if nations went beyond what is allowed by the UN Charter.

Other people argue that the UN is too corrupt, and that we should not rely on the UN. The problem with this approach is that it removes any mechanism for accountability. At the present time, the USA unilaterally decides what is appropriate. No one is setting limits to what the USA does. There are no “checks and balances”.

The United Nation should intervene, and set clear limits as to what military action is allowable under international law.

Last resort

This war is not a “last resort”. Nations did not allow time to implement all the actions required by the United Nations resolution of 28 September. They certainly did not allow enough time to see whether those actions would work.

Chance of success

This raises the question of what constitutes “success”.

It is not clear that the war in Afghanistan will prevent future terrorist attacks. Indeed, it may even inspire additional attacks.

I write this article on 10 December 2001. Today, there was an article in the daily newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, arguing that the war had been successful and the critics of the war were wrong. Yet Osama bin Laden has not yet been captured. Even on that very limited criterion, the war is not yet successful.

From a Christian viewpoint, the war cannot be successful. Success would be the ending of antagonism. It would be restoration of relationships between Western nations and those who see Western nations as violating the sovereignty of Islamic states. It would be interfaith and intercultural understanding. Not only can the war not bring about these results, it actually makes them more difficult.

Proportionality

In a just war, the harm caused by the military action must be less than the harm that it is intended to prevent. The USA led coalition argues that the harm it is preventing is a repeat of the attacks of September 11.

The problem is, how can harm be compared?

This is not a war against equals. Afghanistan is one of the poorest nations in the world. Its people were already facing famine, before this war began. Its GDP per capita was about \$280 per year, whereas that of the USA is about \$32000. So this is a war of the rich on the poor.

The USA is probably the most highly armed nation in the world. It has access to a wide range of weapons, and the ability to buy whatever further weapons it wants. It has highly trained military personnel, backed up by highly sophisticated technology. The NATO nations are also highly armed with sophisticated weapons.

The war has targeted not only terrorist camps and hideouts, but public infrastructure. Communications, electricity, water and so on have been damaged. Many buildings have been destroyed – houses, schools, hospitals. Much land will be unusable for farming, because of “unexploded ordinance”, that is, bombs that have not yet exploded, but would explode if someone touched them.

Afghanistan was already experiencing famine, and millions were dependent on food aid. The war has made it almost impossible to distribute food. It has also increased the number of people who have no means of growing food or buying it, and therefore need food aid.

This means that what may appear to the USA and its partners to be a restrained use of force, is likely to be experienced by Afghans as extreme force and as relentless destruction that further destroys the national fabric.

The people of the USA elect their government. They enjoy freedom of speech, and access to information about government policies. They therefore share responsibility for what their government does. The people of Afghanistan live under an authoritarian regime that was not elected and that gives them no access to information. The Taliban won't even let girls go to school to learn to read.

This is a war of the powerful on the powerless.

In the USA, every death is a tragedy. The terrorist attacks of September 11 have also caused psychological and economic harm. But the USA began September 11 in full health, with a strong economy and with its population intact. Each death is a severe blow, but it does not build on previous harm. The USA will only have to recover from this war, not from decades of war.

Afghanistan has already suffered death and destruction from war over recent decades. That is, in Afghanistan, every harm caused by this war is magnified because it builds on previous harms. Every harm caused by this war makes it more difficult for Afghanistan to recover from the decades of war that it has experienced.

Non-combatants

To be a just war, it has to be targeted to those who have initiated the aggression, aims to stop that aggression, and is effective in doing so.

We do not know the numbers directly killed by bombs, but it is clear that many civilians have been killed. Bombs have fallen on civilian areas. The unexploded cannisters from cluster bombs are lethal to whoever disturbs them. Because they are colourful, the cannisters may be picked up by children. They are also the same colour as food parcels, confusing women, men and children, with lethal consequences.

If the house next door to mine was used by a bikie gang armed with weapons, that had threatened to blow up a building in Sydney, I would expect the police to take action. For safety reasons they might evacuate me from my house. But if they destroyed my house, and if they were willing to kill me to get to the bikie gang, there would be a public outcry. It would not be an acceptable form of policing. So why does the US led coalition think that killing non-combatants in Afghanistan is acceptable?

A just war or an illegal act of aggression?

There is no evidence that the main effect of the military action has been against the alleged terrorists. Rather the main effects appear to have been against the civilian population. It has killed non-combatants. It has damaged the infrastructure on which people depend for their existence and well-being.

This war does not satisfy the Christian criteria for a just war. It also fails the criteria for self-defensive action allowed by the United Nations charter. It should stop now. And every nation that contributed to

the war effort should be required to contribute to funds for rebuilding Afghanistan. They should have to spend as much on rebuilding Afghanistan as they have spent on the war. We cannot restore the lives of women, children and men killed in this war. But we can restore national infrastructure – water, electricity, communications, roads, schools, hospitals and housing. We can make life liveable for those who have survived.

What about the women?

Afghanistan has been the victim of other nations for several decades. The Soviets invaded it and fought it. The USA encouraged resistance against the Soviets as part of the Cold War. Pakistan, apparently, set up the Taliban. And now the USA led coalition has waged war on the land and its people. In all this, the needs of women have been ignored by the men who hold military and political power both within the nation and in those nations seeking to control Afghanistan.

The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan has circulated around the world a number of statements in recent years. They call for peace, and human rights. They give another perspective on terror, and therefore on terrorism. Afghan women have been living with terror for decades. They have lived with the terror of war, and the rape and other forms of persecution that women experience during war. They have lived with the terror of persecution that told them they could not be educated, or go outside the home, or work, or choose what clothes to wear. Their human rights have been denied. Some have been violated because they are Afghans in a time of war. But some human rights have been violated because they are women.

International law is very weak when it comes to the human rights of women and the protections offered to women. The international instruments are written in male language that is intended to be gender neutral, but is gender blind. These instruments were largely written from the viewpoint of men, and ignore the experience of women. They give women the same rights as men, but ignore the reality that women are treated differently and have special vulnerabilities. So

nations give little thought to problems women face in war, such as rape, or at home, such as domestic violence.

The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan has circulated a statement that says that they do not want the Northern Alliance to take power, because its past behaviour with women has been violent. The Northern Alliance has, in the past, been guilty of rape and other human rights violations.

The war in Afghanistan cannot be a just war, if it takes away one regime that violates the rights of women only to put in its place another regime that violates the rights of women. Far from being a war on terrorism, this is a war of terrorism, a war that serves terrorism, a war that causes more terror for women.

Women were not included in the recent meetings in Bonn, Germany to discuss who would form the next government of Afghanistan. When the United Nations allows this to happen, it is itself violating the human rights that it exists to protect.

What can women do?

Many churches and women's groups have circulated statements about the war and ideas for action. It is important to lobbying one's own government, and the United Nations, calling for an immediate end to the war, the involvement of Afghani women in all decisions about the future of the nation, and restitution in the form of rebuilding the infrastructure of the nation. We can support the many NGOs which provide humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Some of these are church agencies. We can educate other people about these issues, through pamphlets, articles and public demonstrations.

And we can pray. We can pray for peace. We can call for the Holy Spirit to do her work of convincing men (and I use that word advisedly) of what is right and wrong. We can pray for our national governments to say and do the right thing. We can draw on the Bible for hope, and we can open our lives to the God who works always for peace and healing.