

War as divine judgment and legitimate authority as divine establishment

Chong Ho Yu

chonghoyu@gmail.com

April 28, 2014

RUNNING HEAD: Divine judgment and establishment

Abstract

Since the 911 terrorist attack the relationship between war and religion has been receiving attention and even stirring up controversies. There are diverse perspectives regarding war and peace in the Judo-Christian heritage. Two commonly cited views are war as a form of divine judgment and legitimate authority as an establishment by the divine will. The former is usually invoked to justify an attack whereas the latter is utilized to delegitimize a rebellion. These doctrines can be found in Luther's and Calvin's responses to the conflicts in medieval Europe, and also modern commentaries of the 911 attack. However, these notions, which are built upon a theocratic worldview, are not found to be useful or functional in a pluralistic society. They are wide open to interpretation and as a result anyone can employ the same reasoning to argue for or against any warring party. Further, in the standpoint of counseling psychology, explaining why bad things happen to the victims is nothing more than adding salt to injury.

War as divine judgment and legitimate authority as divine establishment

Chong Ho Yu

Introduction

Since the 911 terrorist attack the relationship between war and religion has been receiving more and more attention and even stirring up more and more controversies. Do religious ideas cause, justify, or limit war? Can the Judo-Christian just war tradition provide people with ethical guidelines while facing conflicts? Paradoxically, different people utilizing the same Biblical sources could come to vastly different conclusions. To some extent this phenomenon is not surprising, because certain religious perspectives on war are so vague and self-contradictory that they are wide open for interpretation and application. It is impossible for this short article to resolve all these controversies once and for all, of course. In this article the author focuses on only two commonly cited views: war as divine judgment and legitimate authority as divine establishment.

War as Divine judgment

Old Testament: Wars between Israel and Gentiles

War as a form of divine punishment against evildoers is prevalent in the Old Testament Bible. Warfare against Canaanites and other gentiles is total, unsparing, in God's behalf, ordered by God for a divine cause (Bosanquet, 2007). Specifically, in ancient Israel war was viewed as a *judicial* activity, meaning that it manifested a *legal* judgment of God for settling disputes between Israel and other nations. Texts that indicate this notion include Amos 1: 3-5, 2 Chronicles 20: 6-12, Judges 11:15-27, Judges 5:9-11, 13, and Exodus 15 (Good, 1985). For example, Amorite is a group of people who occupied a large part of Mesopotamia beginning about 2400 BC. The Amorites refused the Israelites to pass through their land. In response to this rejection the Israelites attacked the Amorites. According to

Deuteronomy 2:33-34, this military action was ordained by God: "And the Lord our God delivered him over to us; and we defeated him with his sons and all his people. So we captured all his cities at that time, and utterly destroyed the men, women and children of every city. We left no survivor." In Augustine's view the Israelites had the right to pass the land and therefore this war was just (Corey & Charles, 2014). Actually the Bible justified the war because the Amorites were wicked. "It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Deut. 9:5).

In this perspective Israel was chosen as the instrument of God, but so were their rivals. Amos proclaimed a verdict against Israel's neighboring nations. When the Israelites joyfully witnessed the fall of other nations, Amos turned the bad news towards his own people. Around 750 BC Amos proclaimed that the Day of the Lord would be the Judgment Day for Israel, probably through an invasion (Amos 5–6). Later Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BC and then Babylon invaded Judah in 587 BC. The Babylonian Captivity was said to be a form of divine judgment upon Israel because King Hezekiah was so boastful that he displayed his wealth to the Babylonians. As a consequence, God sent Prophet Isaiah to King Hezekiah to announce the bad news that the treasure of Judah would be taken to Babylon and also his family members would be captured by the enemy (2 Kings 20:16-18).

In short, according to the ancient Hebrew worldview resolving international disputes by war was a kind of divine judgment. Nonetheless, in the ancient near east henotheism was the norm of many national religions. This doctrine maintained that one god existed for each nation, and each nation's god took care of his own people. When the neighboring counties of Israel also worshipped their own deities, how could conflicts be resolved when different judges represent different nations? The solution was to

deny the authority of all other deities and regarded Yahweh as the judge of judges (Psalm 82) (Good, 1985). However, how we can apply this ancient Hebrew cosmology into our pluralistic society is no longer straight-forward. This point will be further discussed in the conclusion.

Luther: Resisting Ottoman is Resisting God

Following the doctrine of divine punishment, some people argue that fighting against the attacker, who has a holy mandate, is equated with opposing to God. This was how Martin Luther viewed the Ottoman wars and how modern critics interpreted the September 11 attack. The threat of Ottoman began with the fall of the East Roman Empire in the 13th century. The Ottoman Turks continued its eastward expansion in the Bulgarian–Ottoman Wars and the Serbian–Ottoman Wars in the 14th century. After taking over the Balkans, the Ottomans marched into Central Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. Due to the conviction that the end time is near, Martin Luther regarded the Ottoman Turks were the agent of God to actualize the apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation. Luther believed that the Ottomans would destroy the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, whom was considered the anti-Christ by Luther (Cunningham, 2000). In 1518 *Explanation of the Ninety-five Theses* Luther contended that “to fight against the Turk [was] the same as resisting God, who visits our sin upon us with this rod.” Luther cited Romans 13: 1–2 to denounce all resistance against the Turks: “Let every soul be subject to power and superiority. For there is no power but from God and the power that exists everywhere is ordained by God. And whoever resists the power, resists God's ordinance. But whosoever resists God's ordinance shall receive condemnation on himself” (Luther, 1523). Luther insisted that taking up the sword was not the right course of action; rather, the European rulers should repent and realign their hearts with God. They had to realize that God might have brought the war upon them, and therefore they deserved the consequence (Corey & Charles, 2014).

The hermeneutics of Romans 13 by Luther is problematic because this Scriptural passage was quoted out of context. First, the purpose of Paul might be to show to the Roman government that the Christian group was not a threat to the authority. There is historical evidence that different groups in Roman, including the Jews, were reluctant to pay taxes to the government at that time. In an attempt to ease this tension between the government and the Christians, Paul advised that the Roman Christians pay their taxes in order to fulfill their civil responsibility (Carson, France, Motyer & Wenham, 1998). Second, Paul was a Roman citizen and thus the authority mentioned in this passage was referred as to the Roman government. Luther's extending the scope of authority to a foreign government (Ottoman) invites controversy though one may argue that to the Jews the Roman regime was an occupying power. At Paul's time the Roman Empire was already an established authority, but in Luther's situation the Ottoman Turks were still fighting for establishing their authority in Europe. The argument of legitimacy and divine establishment will be discussed in the next section. Last, the Bible must be interpreted in a holistic fashion instead of being unpacked in isolation. It is important to point out that there are other passages in the Bible that seem to be contradicted with the literal meaning of Romans 13, such as Acts 4:19–20 and Revelation 17. In the Book of Revelation the Roman government was demonized as the Great Whore.

Robertson, Falwell, and Keillor: The 911 Attack Reflects God's Wrath upon America

Some modern commentary of the 911 attack echoes what Luther said about the Turkish invasion. On September 13, 2001, two days after the terrorist attacks in New York and the Pentagon, in the 700 Club program Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell declared that the attack resulted from divine judgment. God withdrew his protection from the US because the American people had sinned against God (Goodstein, 2001). Robertson and Falwell are not alone. Six years after the attack Keillor (2007) also presented divine judgment as an explanation of several disasters in the US soil. His examples

include the burning of Washington in 1814, the Civil War, and the 911 attack. According to Keillor, the US had done many sins, including many bad things that enrage the Muslims, and as a consequence God used bin Laden to punish America. To support this explanation he cited several passages from the Old Testament, such as Amos 3:6: "When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?"

This notion has been recurring many times in different articles, books and online forums since the 911 attack. For example, recently one of my friends (personal communication) wrote,

I actually believe that 9/11 was a judgment upon Imperialist America. Before America began to mettle in the Middle East, the U.S. had ZERO "terrorist" attacks by Jihadists on American soil. The Bible gives several examples of Yahweh punishing mass populations for the sins of the nation, with not necessarily every person being involved. The sin of Achan in Joshua would be one example, where his entire family (children included) were stoned to death for one man's sin. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, it was a terrible atrocity in which women and children (who did not necessarily contribute to Judah's sin) also suffered tremendously (as Lamentations points out). Both corporate blessings and judgments are experienced throughout the Bible. If anything, Romans 3 rules out the possibility of American Exceptionalism (which many "Christians" hold to) where citizens in America are given a higher value than citizens elsewhere; or even the U.S. Constitution elevated above the constitutions of other nations. America is closer to 1st Century Rome or ancient Egypt than anything else. Certainly one of the many "nations" comparable to those under the judgment of Yahweh throughout Scripture.

Divine Intervention Invoked by the Other side

This author does not deny the possibility that a disastrous attack might be due to God's wrath. However, the problem is that no one could verify whether the attacker is really an agent of God. In addition, the other side could turn the table around by claiming that actually they are appointed by God

as the executor of divine will and their enemy deserves the judgment due to their sins. Take the conflict between Christian Europe and Islamic Turks as an example again. Crusade was justified on the ground that resisting the Turks and taking back the Holy Land was doing God's work. After the Turks captured Edessa in 1144, St. Bernard of Clairvaux urged the King of Christendom to deliver the Jews from the evil. In the eyes of the Crusaders, the Turks were equated with the devil. The term "Turks" not only applied to the Ottomans, but also symbolized all God's enemies. Reformers referred the Pope as to the Turks whereas Philip the Good labelled the rebels of Liege as Turks, too. During the medieval period some Christians went even further to use the term "inner Turk" as a representation of sins inside the heart. In their view all evils were embodied within the Turks and the defeat of the Ottomans was regarded as a form of divine judgment (Housley, 2002).

With regard to the conflicts between the US and the Muslim extremists, we can also see that the name of God was invoked by the other side. Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath reported that when he met with President Bush in June 2003, President Bush said, 'I'm driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, "George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan." And I did, and then God would tell me, "George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq." And I did' (British Broadcasting System, 2005). Although the authenticity of this report is questionable, divine intervention could potentially or actually be utilized as justification for war by Evangelicals. After the 911 attack, many Christian conservatives sided with President Bush in the war on terror and the Iraq war. For example, Southern Baptist leader Richard Land maintained that Bush's sense of divine vision made him a good wartime leader (Caldwell, 2003). To be fair to Land and other Evangelicals, they never said that the fall of Baghdad and the execution of Saddam Hussein are divine judgment. However, if the Iraq War is believed to be a just war, then its logical implication is that the US is the instrument of God, delivering the rightful judgment to the evil dictator.

Interestingly enough, war as divine judgment is not a license for Christians only. Once a while Buddhists also invoke this thesis to explain why a nation is attacked. For example, in March 2001, six months before the 911 attack, the Taliban dynamited the Buddhas of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan because it was considered an idol created by infidels. Some Buddhists known by the author regarded the occupation of Afghanistan by the US as a consequence of insulting Buddha and destroying the world cultural heritage.

Nonfunctioning Ethical Guideline

Taking the above conflicting applications of war as a form of divine judgment into account, this notion does not seem to be *useful or functional* as an ethical guideline for determining whether a war is just. It is important to point out that lacking useful applications does not necessarily imply that this principle is untrue. It is possible that the omnipotent God could use any means to pass His judgment against anyone. However, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to verify which military action is sanctioned by God. Advocates of divine judgment list the sins of the nation being attacked as evidence. However, one could easily find wrongdoings of virtually any country on earth (e.g. Russia, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, North Korea...etc.). Following this logic, all catastrophes, including natural disasters and wars, could be explained as a result of divine judgment. While Luther argued that fighting against the Ottoman Turks was equated with resisting God's will because the sins of Europe asked for divine punishment, Europeans also justified the Crusade as a form of divine punishment against the heretical and aggressive Muslims. While critics who protest against the US hegemony regard the 911 attack as a self-inflicting punishment, some Evangelicals turned the table around to rationalize the war on terror as a divine mission.

Further, in the standpoint of counseling psychology, explaining why a war happens in terms of divine punishment is nothing more than adding salt to injury. Consider this scenario: Right after World

War II, a Christian tells a Holocaust survivor that he lost his entire family to Nazi Germany because God was angry with the Jews; what the Nazi Party did to the Jews resembles what Assyria, Persia, Babylon, Greek, and Rome did to the Israelites in the past. I can imagine that the Holocaust survivor would yell on the face of the Christian.

To be fair, while some Christians conceive the victim of the attack is well-deserved, it doesn't necessary mean that they side with the attacker, assert that the invader has a just cause, or are not sympathetic to the victims. In their view, God could use anything or anyone to achieve His divine plan, even by using evildoers. For example, Luther never mentioned that the Ottoman Turks had the right to take lands from Europeans or the Turks were righteous. Rather, Luther believed that God's way to control bad people is to put bad people in control (Utley, 1988). Similarly, Robertson and Falwell did not condone terrorism or being totally insensitive to the victims. In a press release regarding the 911 terrorist attack, Pastor Robertson (2001) wrote, "Now, I am filled with compassion. It just tears my heart when I think of the families of these suffering." Nonetheless, in the perspective of the victim any insinuation that the attack is ordered by God or his suffering is somehow deserved is disturbing.

Legitimate Authority as Divine Establishment

Calvin: All Powers are from God

Divine judgment and divine establishment are two sides of the same coin, and it is not surprising to see that both are frequently invoked to support a so-called just war or to oppose an alleged unjust war. While an attack could be rationalized by the argument of divine judgment or a counterattack could be denounced as going against God's will, the legitimacy of the parties involved in the conflict could also be argued on the ground of the divine mind. For example, according to Calvin all governments in power must be established by God, no matter the regime is good or brutal. Calvin argued that it is hard to understand why God allows a tyranny, but God's actions often transcend our ability to comprehend. Our

responsibility as Christians is not to question rulers but to obey them. To a large extent Calvin inherited the idea of St. Augustine that all just military actions must be waged by a legitimate authority. But unlike St. Augustine that distinguished the City of God from the city of man, Calvin synthesized the sphere of God and the sphere of man into one single theocracy. Calvin did not like the idea that governments should be changed at will or citizens should have the right of evaluating the merits and demerits of different political forms. After the government has been established by God, especially a theocracy, this is finalized and all discussions are ended (Corey & Charles, 2014).

If we follow this line of reasoning, then any revolutionary war started by freedom fighters should be considered unjust, including the American Revolution in 1776 and the Chinese Revolution in 1911, even though both aimed to establish a democratic government. In some sense the argument of divine establishment is one step further than the notion of divine judgment in terms of legitimizing power. As mentioned before, supporters of the idea of divine judgment do not necessarily endorse the cause of the attacker, but when the doctrine of divine establishment is adopted as the criterion of evaluating morality of warring parties, then the perpetrator, as long as it is a legitimate authority, must always be right, and the anti-government force must always be on the wrong side of history.

However, what Calvin preached and what he did are incoherent. Catholic supporters could apply the same reasoning to say that the Catholic rulers are ordained by God and therefore any opposition to them is ungodly. When a Catholic ruler ordered his troops to suppress the reformation movement, the logical response, based on Calvin's view, should be to obey it; Calvin and other reformers should maintain the status quo. In fact, when Catholic princes outlawed Protestantism, Calvin fled to Switzerland to start his theocratic government instead of accepting the doctrine of divine establishment. His action is understandable because the failure of the first Reformation resulted from submission to authority. Yoder (2009) regarded the Czech Reformation started by Jan Hus as the first Reformation. Jan

Hus, a preacher in Prague, was critical of Catholicism. Hus was invited to a council meeting at Constance to defend his position, and his safety was guaranteed. But the council condemned him as a heretic and he was burnt alive in 1415. The second reformation would have ended up in the same fate had Calvin and his followers obeyed the established authority.

Luther Condemned German Peasant Revolts

Calvin is not alone. In the 16th century many peasants in Central Europe called for abandoning serfdom. When their demand was ignored, they took up arms to fight against their masters and princes. To express his disapproval of this kind of violent rebellion, in 1525 Luther published a pamphlet entitled *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, urging the German princes to put down the revolt with an iron fist. He condemned the peasants in a harsh tone: "Let everyone who can, smite, slay and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you" (Luther, 1525). Luther's position, which is similar to Calvin's, is self-contradictory. The act of posting 95 Theses on the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg was a bold and open challenge to the established authority. Although Luther did not directly lead an army to fight against the Catholic Church and the Catholic princes, the success of the Protestant Reformation, to a large degree, relied on the military support of princes who were sympathetic toward Luther's movement. Without the rebellious armed force, the second Reformation would end up like the first one. But in the perspective of the Catholics, the Catholic Church and the Catholic rulers were divinely established; in contrast Luther and his followers were ungodly rebels.

Besides inconsistency of Calvin and Luther, the criterion of legitimate authority is another Achilles' heel of the argument of divine establishment. After insurgents overthrow the existing government and become the legitimate authority, the new government can claim itself as the authentic

authority sanctioned by God. At the end it seems that might makes right; the winner manifests divine ordination. Further, the French Revolution and the Communist revolts are inevitable when the oppressed class in Europe was brutally crushed by the German princes. The cofounder of Communism Friedrich Engels (1850/1978) looked at the German peasant war as an uprising of the emerging proletariat class, leading to the subsequent revolutions in Europe. Had Luther, Calvin, and the Christian Church served as a moderator between the rulers and the peasants instead of taking sides with the so-called legitimate authority, the course of history would have been vastly different.

Discussion and Conclusion

Widespread religious wars in Europe could be partially attributed to the notions of divine judgment and divine establishment. On one hand any consequence of war could be legitimized as an act of God. On the other hand, any challenge to the authority could be viewed as a violation of divine establishment. One of the principal characteristics of religious wars in the 16th century was infusing *divine causality* into warfare. God was perceived as the active agent in historical events and the Biblical passages were selectively interpreted to support one's own position. As a result the enemy was demonized and the leaders of one's own party was messianized (Housley, 2002). The author by no means downplays the rich tradition of the Christian just war theory developed by Tertillian, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, Gratian, Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suarez, and many others (Corey & Charles, 2014). No doubt the ideas of just cause, right intent, proportional punishment, reasonable chance of success, and so on can be well-applied as ethical guidelines. But during European religious wars the idea of divine causality, including divine judgment and divine establishment, was doing a disservice.

Put it bluntly, these notions are not *functional* constructs, because they do not offer any moral guidelines for war and peace. Their limitation is congruent to that in Euthyphro dilemma. This paradox

is found in Plato's dialogue entitled *Euthyphro*. According to Plato, once Socrates asked Euthyphro, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious because it is loved by the gods?" Later the question is modified as: "Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is good, or is it good because it is commanded by God?" There are different interpretations of this paradox and one of them is concerned with the ultimate foundation of morality: Is there an objective ethical standard that is independent of God? (Mawson, 2008). To atheists and skeptics the danger of theocentric morality is its subjectivity and non-communicability. Specifically, in a pluralistic society how could a non-believer accept the divine command as the sole and ultimate moral standard? Paraphrasing Socrates's words, is the war considered divine judgment because it is just, or is the war considered just because it is divinely commanded? Is the authority legitimate because it is established by God, or is the government sanctioned by God because it is legitimate? One can easily see the circularity of any argument that invokes divine command. This author by no means denies the reality of divine command. However, at most the belief of divine judgment and divine establishment might be accepted as a personal conviction. But in a public discourse these ideas could not create any platform for a meaningful dialog, because the opposite camps in any conflict could conveniently claim that God is on their side by citing the same texts in the Bible. In addition, while secularists regard the United Nations or a representative government as the legitimate authority, appealing to divine establishment is a nonstarter in a dialog.

References

Bosanquet, C. (2007). *Redefining just war theory*. Unpublished Master Thesis. Boston College, Boston, MA (UMI Number: 1447089).

British Broadcasting Corporation. (2005). God told me to invade Iraq, Bush tells Palestinian ministers.

Retrieved from

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10_october/06/bush.shtml

Caldwell, D. (2003, February 21). George Bush's theology. *National Catholic Reporter*, 39(16), 3.

Carson, D. A., France, R. T., Motyer, J. A., & Wenham, G. I. (Eds.). (1994). *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

Corey, D. (2011). Luther and the just war tradition. *Political Theology*, 12, 305-328.

Corey, D. & Charles, J. (2014). *The Just war tradition: An introduction*. Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

Cunningham, A. (2000). *The four horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, war, famine and death in Reformation Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Good, R. (1985). The just war in ancient Israel. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104(3), 385-400.

Goodstein, L. (2001, September 19). Falwell: blame abortionists, feminists and gays. *The Guardian*.

Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/19/september11.usa9>

Friedrich, E. (1950/1978). *The peasant war in Germany*. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Housley, N. (2002). *Religious warfare in Europe, 1400-1536*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Keillor, S. J. (2007). *God's judgments: Interpreting history and the Christian faith*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic.

Luther, M. (1523). On secular authority: How far does the obedience owed to it extend? Retrieved from <http://www.yorku.ca/comninel/courses/3020pdf/Luther.pdf>

Luther, M. (1525). Against the robbing and murdering hordes of peasants. Retrieved from http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~mariterel/against_the_robbing_and_murderin.htm

Mawson, T. (2008). The Euthyphro dilemma. *Think*, 7, 25-33.

Robertson, P. (2001). Robertson's statement regarding terrorist attack on America. *The official Site of Pat Robertson*. Retrieved from <http://www.patroberson.com/pressreleases/terroristattack.asp>

Utley, R. J. (1998). *The Gospel according to Paul: Romans*. Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International.

Yoder, J. H. (2009). *Christian attitudes to war, peace, and revolution*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.