Legitimate defence and the ideal of nonviolence

War is not a solution for conflicts. Within Christianity there is a constant discussion about the area of tension between justified defences versus just peace. There remains an area of tension between the evangelical call to nonviolent resistance – to only return evil with good – and the daily reality of violence, terror and wars worldwide.

In this short reflection, I will discuss more in-depth the relation between legitimate defence, geopolitics and nonviolence as a political style. The considerations must be understood in the light of the ideal of evangelical nonviolence and thus in the light of a world without wars.

The nature of war has changed. The Romans were convinced that nearly all of their wars were justifiable. What is warfare like in our contemporary world? Wars are still being waged. Just as slavery some time before, war should be abolished. Billions of dollars are spent every year on troops, firearms, missiles, bombs, frigates, tanks, submarines and all other preparations for and "remedies" against a conflict. We must continue believing in a world without war. "Answer violence with violence" is not what the Bible tell us Christians to do.

War is of all time. However, the number of interstate wars has decreased in the last four centuries. Whereas in the 16th century about 22 wars took place between what were then the great powers, this number decreased to 11 in the 17th, 8 in the 18th, 5 in the 19th and 6 in the 20th century.

<u>Different ways to fight war</u>

A common definition of war is: (1) a situation of armed conflict between states or nations, (2) and/or between identified and organized groups within a state, in other words a civil war. Civil war is more common than interstate war.

A total war is a situation in which all means are present and are being used uninhibitedly in order to beat the enemy. International laws are then often violated, with enormous consequences for the civil population. Asymmetrical warfare usually takes place between unequal parties or combatants, such as between a conventional army and a guerrilla group, as was the case in Vietnam and more recently in Afghanistan.

More than ever wars are being fought out in the midst of the civil population, which is often used as a human shield. Civilians thus are a key part of modern warfare. Military actions take place in the presence of civilians, in order to protect the civilians or even against parts of the civil population that have joined an opponent.

Modern warfare is best characterized as *war amongst the people*. A scenario of the kind has been happening for decenniums in Afghanistan. Whoever wants to win that kind of war must gain control over the local population among which the conflict is taking place.

There is a significant ethical difference between aggressive warfare and warfare that is about self-defence. Here, one often has to make the difficult consideration whether or not military interventions are aggressive, whether one can speak of self-defence, or whether it is to protect a "third party" – often innocent people.

Occupying a territory is not an act of legitimate defence. The Russians have occupied – or rather annexed – the Crimea in 2014 and continue stirring up trouble in the eastern part of the Ukraine. The disturbances have become

part of a "frozen conflict". In Europe, the Ukraine is spoken about as "the mother of all frozen conflicts at the front door". Some observers speak of a "warm war".

Does something good come out of a war? Even after the shooting has ended, the consequences are dramatic. After the Second World War, there were about 40 million refugees in Europe. The war in Syria, which started in 2011, has resulted in more than 12 million people on the run. More than 330.000 people[1] died. The human dramas and traumas are often indescribable. Insecurity is very high, both during and after an armed conflict. War and violence are never a solution.

Legitimate defence as a right and an obligation

With legitimate defence, there can be two reasons to deploy violence or to wage a war when all nonviolent means have really been exhausted: (1) self-defence against aggression, and (2) defence of those that cannot defend themselves against aggression by a third party.

Before one switches to violence, all peaceful means must be used to protect the civilians. Diplomacy and mediation take preference thereby. To this day, those peaceful means are too little developed. Moreover, too little money is spent in order to develop "workable nonviolent actions or initiatives" that can prevent or resolve armed conflicts.

Governments have the responsibility to protect their citizens, if necessary by specific military means, but always under clear criteria and conditions. If governments are incapable or unwilling to protect their citizens, the international community – usually the United Nations or the Security Council – must take measures in order to discourage the (escalation of) violence. That too, happens according to strict principals.

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[1] http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/855934/syrias-war-in-numbers-310000-dead-4-8-million-refugees

There exists a strong need for alternatives to prevent armed conflicts and to settle them without violence. "A war is always a defeat for humanity", pope John Paul II once said[2]. The beginning of shooting signifies that talking is done! To repeatedly answer violence with violence only leads to the destruction of humanity, especially when we are speaking about all destructing weapon systems.

Breaking up the spiral of violence

Christianity is a nonviolent and pacifistic religion. Justice desires a stop to the chain reaction of violence. Christianity is a religion of forgiveness and reconciliation. We shall love our enemies. Pray for our enemies. Love your enemies – and turn them the other cheek (Luke 6:27 and Matthew 5:44). Matthew's Sermon on the Mountain in chapter 5 is an ode to pacifism. In fact, each form of violence (and thus not only war) shall be prohibited by Christianity; yes, even self-defence is not allowed (Romans 12:19; "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath"). Matthew 26:52 says: "Put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword".

Christians will also reference "You shall not kill" from the book Exodus (The Decalogue). God's 'words' are also 'boundaries' that want to honour love. Like: "You shall not kill". What it actually says: "You shall not murder". The Bible does not prescribe that we should let extermination take place. There is, however, a biblical commandment that calls for us to protect the weak.

Since Augustine in the 5th century after Christ and up until today, Christianity has developed a Christian ethical social doctrine. This has reflected the evangelical call for nonviolence in responding to the necessity for legitimate defence. The doctrine of justified war was

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[2] http://forum.politics.be/showthread.php?t=1544

developed.[3] Reason was at the centre of the thoughts of great minds like Thomas Aquinas (13th century). There are clear criteria along which to decide whether or not to go to war and there are clear criteria along which the battle should be held. Political philosophers like Vitoria, Franscisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius, Hobbes and Kant have all concerned themselves with the study of the criteria of waging war and, if unavoidable, the way in which to wage it.

Up until today, popes have plead for diplomacy and peaceful politics – most expressively with Pope Benedict XV (1915)[4], who called the First World War a useless massacre. Many church documents, mostly since the Second Vatican Council, speak plainly about first and foremost abolishing war and to use limited violence only under strict conditions, out of self-defence or to protect the lives of civilians.

Christian militias

What will you do when you have to stand your ground in the midst of a lawless environment? What will you do when your wife, children and other members of local communities run the risk of being murdered? What will you do when there is no longer a decisive protective force?

A recent example is the way in which Christians in Iraq and Syria, among others, have responded to the murderous activities of Islamic State (IS). Christians tried to defend themselves: in Syria, the Christian militia *Syriac Military Council* was grounded. The organisation expanded from a couple of hundred men to the largest force of Christian self-defence. In this case, these were Assyrian Christians that successfully defended themselves against IS alongside Kurds and Arabs.

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[3] http://www.army-chaplaincy.be/benl/2013/02/02/het-rechtvaardige-oorlog-denken-de-geschiedenis-evolutie-en-evaluatie-van-een-paradoxale-traditie/
[4] https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paus_Benedictus_XV

Another group is the *Nineveh Plain Forces* in Iraq. From its base in Tellskof, it protects the IS-free zone of the Nineveh plain (*Bible Belt)* and prepares itself for the liberation of the entire area. These people and many Christians have let the outside world know that they are perplexed by the fact that they receive so little concrete help from the West. Is this not purely about self-defence? They have asked and still ask the West for weapons and military equipment. Can we deny these victims their right to self-defence? Their choices are often limited: fight or be murdered. It is not fitting for us to judge or condemn.

Responsibility for prevention

Individual states, and subsequently the international community too, should do anything to prevent genocides. Timely detection of possible scenarios in which violence breaks out, and escalates as far as massacres, is a must. To prevent these with diplomatic and other nonviolent means is also a must: responsibility for prevention.[5] When necessary, military interventions should take place. However, this can only happen after careful considerations and with ratification by the UN's Security Council.

Modern warfare has undergone drastic change, mostly technological and thus also in nature. In many aspects, however, war is still the same: people kill other people, in more and more advanced ways. This has raised new and pressing ethical questions. The development of technology will continue and cannot be halted. The central question remains: how do we keep civil and military use apart? In other words, which position do we take on dual use of that technology. We are witnessing the deployment of unmanned armed machines and there is the prospect that such machines will not only be unmanned but autonomous as well. There are robot weapons. There are drones that kill, like "the Predator" and "the Reaper", which have been used in Afghanistan and in the border zones of Pakistan and Iraq.

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[5] http://www.elac.ox.ac.uk/downloads/elac%20operationalising%20the%20responsibility%20to%20prevent.pdf

To delegate decisions over life and death to armed machines that are unmanned, is not in line with humanitarian law, especially not where it concerns endangering innocent civilians that are not involved in the conflict. Will a code of conduct concerning new weapon technology put a check on what is acceptable and what is not? There is a risk that new – immoral – weaponry will be used with the argument of being ahead of the other, the enemy.

Security calls for more than going along in military logic. Many politicians and experts believe that one needs to have and use enough military material in order to counter the threat to security. And adequate military means are indeed necessary to guarantee a population's safety, also in situations of self-defence and civil protection. Military collaboration is then understandable. But "security" is a complex matter that has much to do with the quality of our society and the lives of its citizens. This demands not just military, but socio-economic measures too. A population's standard of living and morale can also play a significant part.

War should be "de-institutionalised"

Throughout the years, war has become an institution. "De-institutionalising" war could be a first step towards disarmament. The supply, the training of personnel and the provision of military means is a given in almost all states.

Governments' defence contracts play an important role in the economy. Military personnel are respected, honoured, often applauded as well: and deservedly in those cases where a nation and her population's defence is safeguarded by their courage and effort. But it can also be witnessed how the whole matter of military means, the budget, the relations between arms industry and economy in general represent an encouragement for those who regard warfare as a form of entrepreneurship. In a word:

business. All this leads to the institutionalisation of the idea of warfare: it becomes embedded in the DNA of our society and the economy.

One of the causes for war is the fact that the war machine exists and is oriented towards warfare. When President Dwight Eisenhower left the White house in 1961, he warned against the military industrial complex.[6] That was a period of significant tension between the NATO and the Warsaw-Pact. He warned against the militarisation of society, economy and culture. Indeed, after the Second World War there developed in the US, more so than in other countries, a *national security state*: a mighty complex of companies, institutions and political lobbies, which derive their position, financial means and other privileges mainly from a permanent atmosphere of crisis and insecurity. It is a gigantic system that converts tax money into commissions, company profits, election contributions and votes. Countless think tanks, publications, TV-stations and lobbies (not in the least the influential arms industry) further feed this monster by continuously observing new threats – and by subsequently coming up with a military solution. It keeps growing! Eisenhower feared the political, even spiritual influence of the military industrial complex, which made itself more and more apparent in each city, in each statehouse, in each office of the federal government.

Instead of war being regarded as an incidental dire necessity, the idea of warfare has become too much of a self-evidence. Warfare is ingrained in the budgets, decisions and relations of states. De-institutionalising the idea of warfare would mean: thinking differently, out of the box, and developing other means to prevent or confine armed conflicts.

Disarmament should be central pillar for diplomacy

Meanwhile, we must continue living with the possibility of war. It is therefore very important to prevent it, or in case it does break out, to restrict it where possible. Much more could be achieved with diplomatic

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[6] Presidential farewell speech Dwight Eisenhower, 17 January 1961.

means than with military efforts. A war always has more than one cause. Each armed conflict is characterised by its own history and context **and** will get its own solution. There are hardly any parallel examples with the same causes of war.

The underlying question will, however, always remain: why do people go to war once all other efforts at a solution have failed? And why do these efforts fail? Maybe the cause can be found in the fact that the system of interstate relations does not function adequately. In other words, that the system itself is wrong?

Some wars have developed out of fear, desperation, threats and real hardships and injustices. A special problem today, is the risk of conflicts that grow worse through extreme poverty and inequality, ongoing marginalisation and social exclusion, and the alarming tempo of environmental change. Seen in this light climate change can be regarded as a silent war on the planet and the Paris Climate Agreement as an "agreements agreement". Other wars are motivated by the search for profit, territory, resources, glory, revenge, income or geopolitical advantages.

States remain the most prominent actors within the international political world system. Disarmament, human rights and development should be the central pillar of international diplomacy. States are supposed to work together in a world government like the United Nations, as already advocated by Pope John XIII in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.[7] A possible contribution could be to stronger educate civilians as world citizens. Such a disposition could lead to a universal attitude of hospitality and solidarity, as well as freedom of speech and free movement of people and mutual acknowledgment of rights. In other words, the global aspiration for solidarity, for exchange, for economic and political collaboration, etc.

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[7] http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html

The solution for war resides mostly in integration and mutual connections and in the elimination of conflicting interests.

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