

Feature Article: JAF4373

## YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?

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*Just War Theory* (JWT) has been criticized for being so flexible that it can be used to rationalize almost any motivation for initiating war and is therefore of little use in actually preventing war. Because it was originally developed as a means of evaluating the moral considerations of war between nation-states, the applicability of JWT becomes more complicated and difficult to assess when potential combatants reside within the same borders. In this special case, even what would seem to be a straightforward application of the principles used to evaluate state versus nonstate combatants is inadequate because Scripture has more to say about the unique moral imperatives involved in the case of revolution.

### DUTIES, ROLES, AND RIGHTS

As with any issue, a biblically defensible analysis of JWT with respect to revolution must take all relevant Scripture into account. Romans 12:17–21 instructs individual Christians not to take revenge against evildoers but assures them that God’s punishment will be delivered against those who perpetrate evil. Just a few verses later, Romans 13:1–5 makes it clear *how* God will deliver His punishment on the earth—through the actions of civil government. This truth concerning the legitimate role of government lies at the core of JWT and undermines any notion that Christianity demands pacifism. But it doesn’t end there. In the case of revolution, we cannot overlook the equally clear demand *in the same passage* that citizens are to submit to governmental authority, an idea that is reiterated in 1 Peter 2:13–14. At the same time, “kings and all those in authority” may not ignore the corresponding exhortation in 1 Timothy 2:1–2 to promote “peaceful and quiet lives” for their citizenry.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a biblical view for justifying revolution must take three things into account: (1) a proper understanding of the duties of citizens toward governmental authority; (2) a godly view of the proper role of government itself; and (3) the basis for human worth and rights. With each of these in mind, it is difficult, but not impossible, to justify an armed uprising against legitimate governmental authority.

First, consider that the Christians to whom the New Testament epistles were written experienced systematic and brutal subjugation, torture, and even death, yet we have no record of any attempt by The Way to retaliate against its tormentors. Certainly

the church's physical impotence precluded a coordinated, armed response, but there can be no doubt that its refusal to retaliate was also borne of its faithful devotion to the gospel. Ironically, its attempt to avoid tyranny and conflict in Jerusalem also resulted in the wide and rapid spread of the gospel message. It is easy for us to see God's sovereign hand at work in this scenario, but for those who were living inside the oppression without the benefit of hindsight, their obedience demonstrates that if the first-century Christians are our model, rebellion against a government is an action that must be considered very carefully, even amid the most extreme and repressive circumstances.

When it comes to the role of government itself, some have interpreted passages such as Romans 13:1–7 to exclude any challenge to a government based on the obligation of its citizens to submit to authority. However, the premise of Paul's teaching here is not that all governing authorities are morally legitimate in the eyes of God, but that the existence of the *institution* of government has been established by God and is therefore worthy of our respect. Anarchy is unacceptable. The government's role is to distribute God's wrath on evildoers, but that role does not give the government license to become an evildoer itself and at the expense of its own law-abiding citizens. In other words, the biblical command to submit to the civil government God has ordained does not entail that *any* form of resistance to that government is ungodly. Our command to be obedient to God's moral law can supersede the directive to submit to an immoral governmental authority.

Scripture is also clear and repetitive about the obligation to care for the poor and oppressed. A government that is abusive or tyrannical is no more exempt from justice for violating that principle than an individual who acts in the same way. All human beings are made in the *image of God* and derive their basic human value directly from Him, so it follows that a government that harms or kills its own citizens may legitimately face resistance. But the method and extent of that resistance must be deployed in a morally defensible way that would allow for armed conflict only as a *last resort*.

The real difficulty in the case of revolution comes not in assessing the actions of combatants within a conflict (*jus in bellum*)—those remain the same as with any kind of warfare—but with the decision for revolutionaries to *initiate* armed engagement (*jus ad bellum*). Have they honored the requirement to submit to authority, or have their actions instigated violence? Has the government violated its obligation to protect its citizens' God-given right to life? Finally, what are the obligations of outsiders to intervene and prevent wider and more strategically problematic fallout from what might have begun as an internal domestic conflict?

## INSIDE THE REVOLUTION

Here there is a distinction to be made between three different forms of expressing dissatisfaction with governmental authority: civil protest, active rebellion, and the actual armed conflict that is associated with the term "revolution." In his Romans 13 discourse, Paul does not seem to be addressing cases where there is a peaceful political means of voicing dissent such as in a modern democratic or republican form of

government. There is nothing anti-biblical about expressing contrary views through voting, public meetings, or even marches or picketing—especially if the contentious issue is a matter of moral consequence. However, Scripture does warn that in its more vigorous forms, he “who rebels against the [governing] authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.”<sup>2</sup> While protests or even more adamant forms of rebellion do not necessarily constitute “revolution,” this does highlight the fact that acts of civil disobedience that may eventually lead to revolution can be biblically unjustifiable in and of themselves if the resistance moves from passive protestation to active aggression. History shows us how this has usually played out.

The push for revolution begins with some form of internal political conflict that is later elevated to armed rebellion either as a result of a government’s overreaching response to a challenge to its authority or due to the biblically unjustifiable actions of the rebels themselves. We saw the former when, in the American Revolution, the colonists’ nonviolent defiance of unjust taxation and impediments to self-government led Britain to send troops to solidify its rule. It was British troops who aggravated the conflict at the Boston Massacre. But in a letter penned by Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson in 1775, it is clear that those who called for the ensuing revolution in America did so believing their cause was just and defending a case consistent with JWT.

*Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal resources are great, and, if necessary, foreign assistance is undoubtedly attainable—We gratefully acknowledge, as signal instances of the Divine favour towards us, that his Providence would not permit us to be called into this severe controversy, until we were grown up to our present strength, had been previously exercised in warlike operation, and possessed of the means of defending ourselves...We have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great Britain, and establishing independent states. We fight not for glory or for conquest. We exhibit to mankind the remarkable spectacle of a people attacked by unprovoked enemies, without any imputation or even suspicion of offence.*<sup>3</sup>

Though JWT is not named directly in Jefferson and Dickinson’s letter, their thinking reflects the JWT tenets of *just cause, right intention, proportionality, and even reasonability of success*. This is not to say that everyone agreed with this assessment, however. Some students of theology have written much about the view that the American Revolution was not biblically justified. John Wesley, for instance, denounced the American Revolution as a sinful attack on the God-given social order.<sup>4</sup>

If a revolution is the attempted violent overthrow of a ruling political system by those who have been subjected to its perceived injustice, it seems that, in principle, revolutionary aggressors who elevate conflict beyond lower intensity acts of protest *believe* they have met the first criterion for war: a *just cause*. But the justifiability of revolution depends not just on whether resisters have acted in accordance with biblical principles but also on the moral quality of the governing authority’s response. If the injustice that prompts the revolution includes a violent crackdown on the population,

the need to revolt may indeed be a *last resort* meant to avoid the further massacre of innocent civilians.

In contemporary Syria, we have an example of this that began with the nonviolent March 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings there. The situation became further complicated when several external groups, including al Qaeda sympathizers, joined the “resistance” for political reasons and succeeded in confusing and enflaming the conflict.<sup>5</sup> The Syrian regime responded with armed troops whose vicious attacks eventually led to the transformation of rebellious protesters into armed militia. Under this scenario, we see an immoral government prompting biblically justified protests by its mistreated citizens. However, once infiltrators joined the fray, the rebellion turned illegitimate, ignited an equally immoral response, and led to an all-out war that earns no cover from any reasonable reading of JWT. The far-reaching consequences of that scenario are yet to be realized, but they will not be good.

It is difficult to assess the *right intentions* of opposition leaders who may well be adding fuel to the revolutionary fire for their own self-aggrandizement or to establish their eventual basis for power. Given the psychological and emotional bent of those who would carry out a revolution, it is doubtful that the *proportional* use of force against an authority that has already viciously abused them would be held up for serious consideration. But when it comes to a JWT criterion such as *proper authority*, the case seems clearer. A violently oppressive government relinquishes its claim to proper authority by abusing its moral legitimacy, while an act of revolution may indeed rest on the properly held authority of a morally justified group of citizens protecting their God-given right to life. In light of Paul’s warning in Romans 13, however, the presumption of proper authority would have to go with a sitting government unless it had obviously and willfully abused it.

Finally, the JWT criterion of *reasonability of success* almost always works against the lesser power and resources of a rebellious citizenry that is taking on an entrenched governmental power structure. Considering each of these, it is extremely difficult to justify the case for a rebellious militia engaging itself in all-out revolutionary war.

## OUTSIDE INTERVENTION

Unfortunately, with the increasingly entangled international relationships that exist in the contemporary world, the difficulty of applying JWT to revolution does not stop at the geographical borders of the nation in question. Ongoing conflict around the world gives us good cause to consider another aspect of JWT and revolution that may entail even greater ramifications than the revolution itself. Today’s Ukraine is a prime example of the reality that interested states also have an obligation to consider how they view revolutions and react to them in light of JWT and the impact those events may have on the world community.

As this article goes to press, we are watching what some believe could be the early stages of a revolutionary war in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> This situation is the result of a chain of events that began with the peaceful protests of students who were provoked by their leaders’ refusal to allow a democratic solution about whether Ukraine would align with

the West or with Russia, their previous ruler under the Soviet system. The government engaged in unwarranted and violent crackdowns on the protests, passions escalated on both sides, and the Russian-backed president fled the country. Russian president Vladimir Putin reacted by overtaking the Ukrainian region of Crimea in an obvious breach of international law, and he is now massing troops on the eastern Ukrainian border. Some fear this could lead to a Russian invasion of Ukraine and eventually to a major international crisis and war. If it comes to that, JWT will be wholly applicable not only to the decisions made by the Russian leadership but also to the reactions they prompt from the world community. The fact that this could culminate in full-scale war in the region does nothing but illuminate the extreme care that should be taken toward even the most justifiable decision to challenge our biblical mandate to submit to the governmental authority God has instituted in our world.

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## NOTES

- 1 James Abernathy, *By Any Other Name* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 305–7.
- 2 Romans 13:2 NIV.
- 3 Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson, “A Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North-America, Now Met in Congress at Philadelphia, Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking Up Arms,” *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, available at [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/arms.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/arms.asp).
- 4 Mark Noll, *Turning Points* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 222.
- 5 “Syria Crisis: Guide to Armed and Political Opposition,” available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.
- 6 Michael Barone, “Is There a Danger of Warfare in Ukraine?” *The Washington Examiner*, available at: [http://washingtonexaminer.com/is-there-a-danger-of-warfare-in-ukraine/article/2544478?custom\\_click=rss](http://washingtonexaminer.com/is-there-a-danger-of-warfare-in-ukraine/article/2544478?custom_click=rss).