

# **Feminism and the Challenges of War**

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A number of women have written recent articles on feminism and war in light of the war in Iraq. Their range of views suggests that there is no definitive feminist view of war. Like the general population, there are feminists who oppose war under any and all circumstances, feminists who hate war but recognize that there may be instances in which war might be necessary, and women who recognize war as a regrettable occurrence, but lack confidence in the success of other options.

Despite the absence of a definitive feminist position, there are several recurring themes in the discussion of the problem of war in the context of Christian feminism that are worth our consideration as debate continues over the war in Iraq. These themes are:

- (1) the supposed connection between feminism and peace;
- (2) the impact of war on women;
- (3) theological groundings for peace; and
- (4) the relevance of just war theory.

## **Feminism and Peace**

One recurring theme in Christian feminist discussions of war is the longstanding link between feminism and peace. This historical link was strengthened in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as many women's rights organizations incorporated world peace as part of their agenda in the fight against patriarchy and other social ills.<sup>1</sup> Although it was believed that men could be converted to the virtues of peace and love, women's groups upheld the cultural identification of these virtues with women's as mothers and natural nurturers.

With the new feminist movements of the late 1960s, this cultural link has been challenged; however, vestiges of this notion persist in our time. Included among the problems associated with this perceived connection, which contemporary feminists rightly challenge, are an implied biological determinism that fails to do justice to the complexity of woman *and* men as human beings and the hindrance such determinism does in eradicating patriarchal-inspired obstacles to the full participation of women in peacemaking and peace-building activities.<sup>2</sup>

As we move the conversation forward, it seems more fruitful to frame analyses of the problems of war and the hindrances to peace around the ways in which both women and men can and do contribute to the phenomenon of war and the struggle for peace, rather than emphasizing real and/or imagined differences between men and women that obfuscate instead of illumine the shared responsibility of both sexes in what transpires in the global community.

## **The Impact of War on Women**

A second recurring theme in feminist discussions of war is the impact of war on women in particular. Because the traditional understanding of war as a prerogative and domain of men, the

adverse impact of war on women has not received the kind of attention it deserves. Scholars are now seeking to rectify this omission by calling to our attention the various ways in which women play a role and are adversely affected by war and its aftermath.<sup>3</sup>

The range of difficulties that women experience in time of war include, but are not limited to: the loss of protection in the absence of a central state or other authoritative structure that is responsible for the security of its citizenry; increased medical and social responsibility as more attention is given to militarization than on health care, infrastructure, etc.; wartime prostitution, which can be a very lucrative business; and increased sexualized violence as women (and children) are targeted in conflict situations.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, feminist groups, such as the National Women's Studies Association, have found a connection between individual acts of violence directed against women and violence that women experience as the result of war.<sup>5</sup> This perceived connection challenges advocates and activists to explore the implications that lie therein. The results of such exploration so far clearly suggest that the differences of the adverse impact of war in relation to gender underscores the importance of ensuring that women have a role in the formulation of policies that impact war and peace-making.

### **Theological Groundings for Peace**

Another recurring theme is the notion of theological groundings for peace and opposition to war.<sup>6</sup> One theological foundation for peacemaking, which many Christian feminists affirm, is the basic biblical conception that God freely initiates a covenant relationship with humanity that reflects the steadfast love of God for human beings. On the basis of the love God has for us, we are fundamentally in kinship with each other. As such, as we recognize the irrevocable interconnectedness that binds us to one another, we find a moral imperative to support corporate activities that foster that connectedness and a corollary imperative to oppose activities that negate that connectedness.

Another theological foundation for peacemaking lies in the doctrine of creation, whereby, the whole world is God's creation and the world is our home. We are commanded to be good stewards of that creation.

Our covenant relationship with God and the doctrine of creation are but two theological entry points that stand in judgment against the harsh realities of war. Identification of the theological groundings for peace and opposition to war serve as guideposts to inform individual Christians and churches as men and women seek to exercise their civic duty responsibly in light of their faith commitments.

### **Feminism and just war theory**

A third theme in the discussion of feminism and war has been the doctrine of just war. Historically, the "just war" tradition has set forth conditions that should be met before Christians

could, in good faith, approve of or participate in war. Seven criteria have been identified which must be met in order to justify war:<sup>7</sup> 1) the cause must be just; 2) the war must be undertaken by a legitimate authority; 3) war must be a last resort, undertaken only after all other reasonable measures short of war are inadequate; 4) the expectation that the predictable consequences of war must be better than the consequences of not going to war; 5) there must be a reasonable expectation of victory; 6) the actual conduct of war must be maintained in “right intention;” and 7) there can be no directly intended injury to non-combatants.

At best, conventional war has occurred in situations where the standards posed by just war doctrine have not been met. At worst, in light of the threat of thermonuclear war presented in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is the likelihood that no nation with nuclear capability could ever meet the exacting test of just war doctrine. A policy of mutual deterrence has helped to diffuse some of the tension surrounding the possibility of nuclear war in the recent past, but the ever possible threat of nuclear war or the calamity of other weapons of mass destruction highlight the precarious security that the just war doctrine holds in modern times. Some feminists now speak of this doctrine as an “outmoded ethical approach [that] leaves too many bodies and souls in its wake.”<sup>8</sup>

The changing landscape of global combat demands a reassessment of the validity of the ethical approach of just war theory in our time. However, as feminists and other peace activists work hard to push for an alternative to war, we must never forget the reality that the human condition is such that there may be times when violence, as a last resort, may be the only way to avoid greater violence to others in the long run because some are non-responsive to non-violent means of ending a conflict.

If just war theory has outlived its usefulness, then other responsible ethical approaches should be substituted. These other approaches must reflect awareness of the complexity of the international arena (and human nature, for that matter) and they need to eschew the positing of an easy dichotomy between “war” and “peace.”

### **Concreteness and Collaboration**

As helpful as analysis is, the discussion of the problems of war must be taken beyond theoretical considerations. In the end, the issue is not about opposing war in the abstract, but hating war in all its ugly concreteness. The immorality of war, complicated these days by the specter of terrorism, lies in the blood, in the body parts; in the destruction of buildings and the waste of land. The need for peace lies in the cries of the bereaved and disconsolate; in the sight of children with guns and the elderly, infirm, and very young who fill mass graves. The need for wisdom is felt as those who appreciate the meaning of peace take stock of the diversion of resources from programs that sustain and support life to a militarism that leads to death. The call for peace is contemplated by those who are mindful of the fact that too many are being scarred by the chronic anxiety that accompanies life under a constant state of siege in many parts of our world.

War in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has been marked by increasingly more

brutal forms of dehumanization, including mass rape, starvation as a weapon of war, genocide by machete, and widespread torture. In the end, militarism works toward our collective insecurity, not our security. Moreover, the cost of militarism globally, that extends beyond actual seasons of combat, is one of the great tragedies of our time that should distress feminists and others alike. Women and men who know the complexities of war grapple with the realization that the policy of militarism does not break the vicious cycle of violence. Because of this realization, the imperative for us to work harder for peacemaking and peace-building is more pressing in these troubling times.

The road to peace demands bold initiatives and new strategies that recognize our interdependence and *common* security issues.<sup>9</sup> This recognition of interdependence and common security must inform feminist discussions of the problem of war. Genuine dialogue and collaborative efforts between women and men should be the focus as we wrestle with the challenges of global interaction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Those of us who rightly clamor for peace must engage earnestly in pressing for concrete, effective strategies to meet the special challenges that terrorism, genocide, “ethnic cleansing,” and tyrannical rule present in the global arena. This more concerted engagement may well be the most pressing issue in future discussions of war in the context of Christian feminism.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminism and Peace,” *The Christian Century*, vol. 100, no. 25, 771-776, August 31- September 7, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> See Lynne Roper, “Feminism is NOT Pacifism: A Personal View of the Politics of War,” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 149-151, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Azza Karam, “Women in War and Peace-building, The Roads Traversed, The Challenges Ahead,” in *The International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2-25, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Colette Morrow, “Feminists Protest War with Iraq,” in *The National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2, 99-100, Summer 2003. See also Azza Karam, “Women in War and Peace-building, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Churches’ Center for Theology and Public Policy, *Christians and War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Theological Analysis*, (Washington, DC, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Mary E. Hunt, “Speaking Out, War: A Feminist Religious View,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 18, no. 1, 52, Spring 2002.

<sup>9</sup> White, C. Dale, *Making a Just Peace, Human Rights & Domination Systems*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 75.

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This article is part of a project on "The Theology of Peace and War". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofpeaceandwar.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at [mupwj87 \[at\] mupwj.org](mailto:mupwj87@mupwj.org).