

Nonviolence, Not Just War

(From "THE GOD OF PEACE: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF NONVIOLENCE")

Though Jesus commanded his followers to love their enemies and though the early Christians went to their deaths rather than fight in battle, Christians over the centuries moved away from nonviolence and to the ways of war. Ironically, when the Roman empire legitimated Christianity, Christians put aside Gospel nonviolence and took up the sword in direct contradiction to Christ's teaching. Christians were then obliged under penalty of excommunication to render military service; with the law of December 7, 415, pagans were not allowed to belong to the Roman imperial army. The Roman military forces were made up only of Christians. To explain this imperial cooptation of Christians into the work of mass murder, Augustine outlined a theory justifying war as a last resort which was later refined as the just war theory by Aquinas.

For the last 1500 years, this just war theory has been used to justify the murder of millions and millions of people. To become a community of nonviolence, a peacemaking church, we need to re-examine and ultimately renounce the just war theory which has long been the guideline for the church's attitude toward war.

A theology of nonviolence submits that there is no such thing as a just war, that there has never been a just war, and that all wars are unjust. Nonviolence maintains that God does not justify warfare; that for God, there is no victory in war; that for God, war itself is the enemy. Nonviolence calls Christians to disavow the practice of war and return to the nonviolent Jesus.

The Just War Theory

Interestingly enough, the just war theory begins with a preference for peace and a presumption against war. From Augustine to Aquinas to recent moral theology, a so-called "just war" would require all of these conditions to be met before a decision to go to war is considered justified (jus ad bellum):

1. The war must be a "just cause."
2. It must be waged by "a legitimate authority."
3. It must be "formally declared."
4. It must be fought with "a peaceful intention."
5. It must be "a last resort."
6. There must be reasonable "hope of success."
7. The "damage" inflicted and the "costs" incurred by war must be "proportionate" to the good expected by taking up arms.

Three additional conditions must be met regarding the conditions for the permissible conduct of war (jus in bello):

1. Noncombatants must be given immunity.
2. Prisoners must be treated humanely.
3. International treaties and conventions must be honored.(1)

As Walter Wink notes, "these general rules can be extremely difficult to apply in concrete situations" and their use depends on "one's starting assumptions."(2)

Christian nonviolence, on the other hand, holds that killing is never "just." Nonviolence suggests that no cause, competent authority, comparative justice, right intention, success, or proportionality can ever justify the taking of human life. In their 1983 pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace, the US Catholic bishops reflected extensively on the just war theory and to a lesser degree on nonviolence. They traced the history of Christian nonviolence to Jesus himself and those first three centuries of church history, when Christians refused to kill. "The vision of Christian nonviolence is not passive about injustice and the defense of the rights of others," they wrote. "It rather affirms and exemplifies what it means to resist injustice through nonviolent means."(3) "While the just war teaching has clearly been in possession for the past 1500 years of Catholic thought," they suggested, "the 'new moment' [recognized in the Second Vatican Council] in which we find ourselves sees the just war teaching and nonviolence as distinct but interdependent methods of evaluating warfare."(4)

With the rapid changes in the world, including the failure of communism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Persian Gulf war, more and more Christians are beginning to reject the just war theory as the aberration of the Gospel that it is. Many are concluding that war is never just and the just war theory is, in any case, obsolete with the weapons of mass destruction that the world now has. More to the point, people are beginning to recognize that the just war theory does not enable us to be faithful to the nonviolent Christ, who refused to kill anyone and who called us beyond deterrence and war to the love of enemies. The Catholic bishops hinted at this new understanding of the Gospel and the rejection of the just war theory when they condemned the use of nuclear weapons "for the purpose of destroying population centers or other predominantly civilian targets."(5) They declared that no situation "in which the deliberate initiation of nuclear warfare, on however restricted a scale, can be morally justified."(6) They dismissed the possibility of a "limited nuclear war."(7) Though the bishops still accepted the just war theory, the door was opened for a future day when nonviolence will ground all church positions.

La Civiltà Cattolica's Stand Against the Just War

Perhaps the clearest sign of the reappraisal of the just war theory came after the Persian Gulf war, on July 6, 1991, when La Civiltà Cattolica, the Italian journal which usually reflects Vatican positions on significant issues, came out strongly against the just war theory and for a deeper commitment to peace. Its editorial, "Christian Conscience and Modern Warfare," declared that the destructive force of conventional and nuclear weapons makes the just war theory "outdated" and that from now on, Christianity will stress that "modern war is always immoral." All war, including "holy wars," are condemned as immoral. This editorial points to a new understanding of peace in church teaching, to the day when the just war is officially abandoned and the Gospel's way of peace is officially embraced.

The 4,000 word editorial cites the Persian Gulf war as an example of the destructive power of modern weapons and how wars are "irrational," creating more problems than they solve. "Modern warfare is radically different from wars of the past," the editors write, "and therefore the theoretical categories and moral judgements which applied to past wars no longer seem applicable to modern warfare."(8) "War is always an evil. But its wickedness becomes so much more evident when one looks at modern warfare," La Civiltà Cattolica noted. "If wars of the past, because of the relatively limited losses involved, could be justified--by some--as the lesser evil, this can no longer be said of modern warfare."

Modern warfare is always "total." The Gulf war is a clear example. In that war, thermonuclear weapons were not used, though at times the employment of tactical nuclear weapons was being considered and it was feared that the Iraqis might have recourse to chemical weapons. But the weapons used were so terribly destructive and lethal that--according to reliable sources--175,000 soldiers [indeed, well over 200,000] and 30,000 [actually, more than 100,000] Iraqi civilians were killed. There was also the almost total destruction of the civilian infrastructure (roads, bridges, irrigation systems) as well as the economic and industrial complex of Iraq...Iraq has been pushed back into a

pre-industrial era. Unquestionably, a dramatic change--indeed a radical reversal--in the very nature of war is taking place. "Modern warfare" is radically different from war in the past.(9)

"Today, Christian conscience must deal with the problem of war in a manner radically different from the past," La Civiltà Cattolica continues. "A war cannot really be conducted according to the criteria required for a just war." The conditions are unattainable because modern war by its very nature, they point out, is "waged with brutality." "It always produces harm that far exceeds any advantages that may accrue in terms of justice and right, and it tends to inflict on the enemy damages much more serious than the good which is being sought and which would otherwise make the war a just war."(10)

In reality war has its own proper logic, which is to inflict on the enemy very serious damages so much greater than what is probably necessary to achieve the end for which the war is being waged. The motive of this cruelty, peculiar to war, is the unwillingness to be satisfied with simply achieving the end for which the war was declared; instead there is a desire to destroy the adversary in such a way that the adversary will be unable to recover and thus will no longer constitute a danger for the future.(11)

The just war theory is "indefensible and needs to be abandoned," La Civiltà Cattolica declares. "Modern warfare unleashes a violence on which given the use of modern weapons, it is impossible to place limits...Besides being immoral, warfare today is useless and harmful. On the one hand, it does not solve, even apparently and momentarily, the problems which it unleashes...On the other hand, not only does it not solve problems, it aggravates them, rendering a solution practically impossible and in fact creating yet more grievous problems. Thus it sows the seeds of future conflicts and wars."(12)

War almost never ends with a true peace: it always leaves behind a remnant of hatred and a thirst for revenge, which will explode as soon as the opportunity offers itself. That is why the human story has been a series of unending wars. War initiates a spiral of hatred and violence, which is extremely difficult to stop. War is therefore useless, since it solves no problems, and damaging because it aggravates problems and makes them insoluble.(13)

Besides condemning war, the church is called now to promote peace in the world, La Civiltà Cattolica concludes. The church "must announce the Gospel, which is a Gospel of peace."

The proclamation and promotion of peace among people is part of the church's religious mission. Therefore when the church speaks of the necessity of involving herself in the cause of peace and declares herself against war, she is not invading the field of politics, but is staying within the sphere of her own proper religious and moral mission... Through Jesus, men and women are brothers and sisters of one another, because they are children of God. This means that they must rid themselves of the categories of "stranger" and "enemy," categories so basic to the ideology of war. The church has only one intent, which is to strengthen the Gospel call to brotherhood and sisterhood among God's people.(14)

The church "opposes war" and "wills peace," La Civiltà Cattolica insists. This new understanding of the Christian mission places new concrete priorities in our day and age upon us as followers of Jesus, they note:

In practical terms, it means opposing the idea that war is able to resolve the problems which are at the root of conflicts. It means opposing the idea of war as the last resort, because in practice there is no last resort, because it is impossible to prove that all the means to avoid war were considered and put into action. More than that, the one who decides that there is no alternative but war is the very person who really wants to wage

war and is simply waiting for an opportune time to begin. Being against war and for peace also means opposing the idea that war is "necessary" or "inevitable" and that peace is not possible. Finally, it means opposing the idea that wars are waged for noble motives: to restore a universal order of justice and peace or simply to make amends for injustices. These noble motives--which may be present in a few people--in most cases serve as a juridical and moral cover-up for the true motives of war, which are motives of political domination and economic interests. In other words, to oppose the "ideology of war" is to do what is needed to unmask war by showing it as it really is: to uncover its motives and its results. It means to show that it is always the poor and the weak who pay for war, whether they wear a military uniform or belong to the civilian population.(15)

The peace that the church "wills" is a peace "founded on justice, solidarity and mutual trust."

The church maintains that there can be no peace, where situations of grave injustice persist and where the just aspirations of people--for freedom, for self-determination, for a homeland of their own, for the right to live a life worthy of human dignity--are frustrated by force and violence. There can be no peace where feelings of frustration and hatred and vengeance are fostered among peoples and nations and continents. There can be no peace where mutual trust is lacking and peace is based on "an equilibrium of terror" and is sustained by an on-going arms race, whether conventional arms or nuclear ones. That is why the church--decisively proclaiming herself for peace and against any war--asks that remedies be found for situations of injustice which exists in today's world and which otherwise will be the forerunners of new wars. Above all, solutions must be found for the radical injustice which has created dramatic conditions of growing poverty in the Southern half of the planet.(16)

Applying Nonviolence to International Conflict

Following the advice of La Civiltà Cattolica, Christians are called to renounce war and to apply nonviolence in national and international conflicts. This means that we take seriously Jesus' mandate of universal love, even love of enemies. If we genuinely love our enemies, we will not kill them, nor will we even threaten or prepare to kill them.

Nonviolence on an international scale has rarely been attempted but holds enormous possibilities. It requires a distinctly different way of organizing international relations, with greater reliance on the nonviolent intervention of the United Nations, nonviolent peacekeeping teams, and international solidarity campaigns such as embargoes aimed at transforming repressive or warmaking governments. Such a commitment to nonviolence on national and international levels will seek to root out the causes of war by addressing the world's injustice and poverty, by relieving hunger and misery, and by creating nonviolent structures which serve humanity and promote life. Such nonviolent conflict resolution will learn from the massive movements of nonviolence which forced the nonviolent departure of imperial Britain from India in 1947; resisted Hitler in Norway and Denmark; and brought down the Berlin wall and totalitarian communism in the Soviet Union.(17)

To the charge that nonviolence does not work, theologian John Howard Yoder responds in his book, When War Is Unjust, that the time has come to apply the same serious effort, talent, money and energy that we have used to wage war for thousands of years to nonviolent alternatives. We need to commit ourselves as nations and cultures to the way of nonviolence and to the justice that nonviolence presumes. Yoder writes:

Those who move, either immediately or less rapidly, to the claim that in a given situation of injustice there are no nonviolent options available, generally do so in a way that avoids responsibility for an intensive search for other options....The military option for which they reach so soon involves a very long lead time; it demands the preparation of leadership people by special training, educational institutions, and experiences; it

demands financial and technical resources dependent on extensive government funding in a situation of defense; and it demands broad alliances. It includes the willingness to lose lives and to take lives, the willingness to sacrifice other cultural values for a generation or longer, the willingness of families to be divided. Yet the decision that "nonviolence will not work" for analogous ends is made without any comparable investment of time or creativity, without comparable readiness to sacrifice, without serious projection of comparative costs. The American army could not "work" if we did not invest billions of dollars in equipping it and in preparing for its effective use. Why should it be fair to measure the moral claims of an alternative moral strategy by setting up the debate in such a way that that other strategy must produce comparable results at incomparably less cost?(18)

Rejecting War and Pursuing a Nonviolent Peace

To illustrate the irrationality of the just war theory, theologian and peace activist Richard McSorley proposes a corresponding "just adultery theory," responding respectively to God's commandments, "Thou shall not kill," and "Thou shall not commit adultery." "A Christian minister or priest who openly preaches the just adultery theory would be run out of church, but not so with the just war theory."(19) Applying the conditions of last resort, good intention, protection of the innocent and proportionality, McSorley concludes that a just adultery theory would be "absurd." The just war theory, he writes, is equally absurd. It gives license to the killing of millions of people. "Why is it," McSorley asks, "that most Christians understand the weaknesses of the just adultery theory, but are blind to the weaknesses of the just war theory?...Do we put the authority of the government above that of God? If a president, king, dictator or general says an action is necessary for the defense of a country, do we say a Christian may do it and not be guilty of sin?...If the leaders says, "rape," the Christian rapes. If the leaders says "kill," the Christian kills...Can we serve both God and government when the government orders what God forbids?"(20)

McSorley's question gets at the heart of the matter: do Christians serve governments and their military forces or God and God's mandate of nonviolence? If the answer is that Christians are called to be faithful to God and thus to live according to the moral imperative of nonviolence, then Christians can never justify war. They will refuse to bless war, refuse to fight in war, and disobey governments which wage war.

A theology of nonviolence based on the Gospel necessarily rejects killing, warfare and the very existence of nuclear weapons. It calls us to reject the just war theory once and for always and to embrace Gospel nonviolence in all areas of life, including international conflict resolution. It responds to the call of the US Catholic bishops for "a moral about-face." "The whole world must summon the moral courage and technical means," they write, "to say 'no' to nuclear conflict; 'no' to weapons of mass destruction; 'no' to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and 'no' to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus."(21)

Given this new assessment of the just war theory and the Christian imperative to live nonviolence, the time has come, as Carroll Dozier, the late bishop of Memphis, once said, to discard the just war theory in the same file as the flat earth theory. The time for nonviolence has clearly arrived.

Notes

(1) Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers (Minn.: Fortress Press 1992), 214-215; See also, The Challenge of Peace. (The US Catholic Bishops Peace Pastoral, Washington, D.C., May, 1983), #80-110; John Howard Yoder, When War Is Unjust. (Minn.: Augsburg Pub., 1984).

- (2) Wink, Engaging the Powers, 215, 385.
- (3) The Challenge of Peace, #116.
- (4) Ibid., #120.
- (5) Ibid., #147.
- (6) Ibid., #150.
- (7) Ibid., #160.
- (8) "Christian Conscience and Modern Warfare," La Civiltà Cattolica, (Rome, Italy, July 6, 1991).
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Ibid.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) For further information, see Gene Sharp, The Politics of Nonviolent Action. (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973); Richard Taylor and Ronald Sider, Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1982); and Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers, 243-257.
- (18) Yoder, When War Is Unjust, 81-82.
- (19) John Dear (Editor), It's a Sin to Build a Nuclear Weapon: The Collected Writings on War and Peace of Richard McSorley. (Baltimore: Fortkamp Pub.Co., 1991), 66-67.
- (20) Ibid., 68.
- (21) The Challenge of Peace, #333.