

Our God Is a God of Nonviolence:

Peacemaking Religion In a Warmaking World

“The God of peace is never glorified by human violence.” -- Thomas Merton

“In Jesus Christ, God disarmed himself. God surrendered himself without protection and without arms to those who keep crying for more and more protection and arms. In Jesus Christ, God renounced violence. And of course, he did this unilaterally, without waiting for us to lay down our weapons first.” -- Dorothee Solle

“When the practice of nonviolence becomes universal, God will reign on earth as God does in heaven.” -- Mohandas Gandhi

One of the simplest yet most profound images in the Hebrew scriptures comes from the prophet Isaiah. “Come, let us climb the Lord’s mountain,” the prophet invites, “to the house of the God of Jacob, that God may instruct us in God’s ways, and we may walk in God’s paths. For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.”(Isaiah 2:3-4)

This bold vision sums up the challenge of religion. We are a people who climb God’s mountain to be instructed by God. What happens when people of faith meet God and listen to God’s instructions? They immediately begin to disarm themselves. They beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks. They renounce war forever. They adopt nonviolence as a way of life. They walk in God's way of peace for the rest of their days.

In other words, their lives are turned upside down.

The heart of religious experience, I believe, is our ongoing conversion, personally and communally, to the way of nonviolence. When we are left to ourselves, we give in to the culture of violence, to injustice, to the domination system and its weapons. When we encounter God, our hearts are disarmed and we become instruments of God's disarming love. Peacemaking becomes our number one priority.

When we look at human history, and today's bloody headlines, we find, however, that the religions of the world, by and large, do not promote peace, disarmament or nonviolence. More often than not, they instigate war. They spur people to deep-rooted hatred. They provide the ideology for killing. In every war, we find religious factions on all sides invoking God's holy blessing for the upcoming slaughter. To my mind, the inability of religion--including and especially Christian denominations--to promote nonviolence and disarmament is our fundamental human failure.

I believe nonviolence is at the heart of every religion, because first and foremost, nonviolence is at the heart of God. In every major religion, we discover the root of nonviolence. We see this personified in Roman Catholicism by Dorothy Day; in Judaism by Abraham Heschel; in Hinduism by Mohandas Gandhi; in Islam by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Kahn; in Buddhism by Thich Nhat Hanh; in Baptist Protestantism by Martin Luther King, Jr.; not to mention the Jains, Sikhs, Bahai', Shinto, Society of Friends (Quakers), Native American, Native African, and Zoroastrian peace faiths.

To be a person of faith ultimately is to worship the God of nonviolence, to be disarmed, to be a disarming presence in the world. To be a people of faith is to be people in love with the God of

nonviolence. The violence of our world, the violence within us all, points to our widespread lack of faith. The time has come for us to go back to the drawing board, to the roots of our religions, and to examine the question of nonviolence. We can no longer sit around and speculate. Too many people are dying. We all have to practice the difficult teachings of nonviolence in our own lives among our own faiths.

Putting Gospel Nonviolence Into Action: A Personal Testimony

Over the years, as a Jesuit priest, I have pursued the question of violence and nonviolence as the primary religious question of our time. I have lived and worked among the homeless and poor in Washington, D.C., New York City, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Haiti. I have taught peacemaking, preached about it, lobbied government officials, and in general, urged Christians to pursue nonviolence. And while I have persisted, I worry that my peacemaking is, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, “cheap nonviolence,” not the “costly nonviolence” of the cross. Always lingering in the background, I hear the biblical commands of nonviolence summoning me to go deeper into the life of Gospel peacemaking, to take new risks as Jesus did, to accept the consequences, come what may.

I read the Gospels and discover that the scriptures could not be clearer: “Thou shalt not kill.” “Put away your sword.” “Seek justice.” “Forgive seventy times seven times.” “Be as compassionate as God.” And above all: “Love your enemies.”

In an effort to experiment with biblical nonviolence, to see if I could love my enemies by trying to stop my country's preparations to kill them, on December 7th, 1993, after months of prayer, I walked with three friends onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina, USA, right through the middle of full-scale wargames, and in the spirit of Isaiah's vision, hammered on an F15 fighter bomber. The F15s lead the US Air Force killing machine, bombed tens of

thousands of Iraqis during the Gulf war, stood on alert to bomb Bosnia, and can carry nuclear weapons.

Immediately we were surrounded by hundreds of US soldiers with machine guns aimed at us. "We are unarmed, peaceful people," I said. "We mean you no harm; we are here simply to disarm this weapon of death." We were arrested and jailed for eight months. We faced up to ten years in prison for our confrontative nonviolence. Throughout those long months, my friends and I never went outside. We endured the monotony of time by studying the scriptures for hours each day, and sharing prayer and Eucharist together (from leftover bread and grape juice). Though the jails were oppressive, we found ourselves deeply blessed. God did not abandon us. Indeed, God never seemed to be more with us.

This action, the trials and jail were difficult and painful for me. My life was turned completely upside down. But the action and its consequences were also a great grace. For me, this was a sacramental experience, an act of faith. We were not acting violently, but peacefully and prayerfully in order to spark nuclear disarmament. When my friends ask, "What difference did it make?," I respond that like every sacramental experience, it can not be measured for results. We were simply trying to put our religion into practice, to follow the lead of the Spirit, to refuse our culture's worship of the gods of war. We were, in other words, trying to be obedient to the God of peace.

Starting from a Context of Violence

Religion must begin its search for God from the basic context of the entire world: violence. Our world is addicted to violence and death. We have armed our world beyond imagination, and despite the end of the Cold War, continue to maintain nuclear weapons that can destroy billions of

people, and the planet itself. Meanwhile, over thirty-five wars are currently being waged, and over 40,000 children die around the world each day from starvation. While the superpowers--beginning with my own imperial nation--spend billions annually to maintain its arsenal of death, billions of people languish in poverty and death throughout the Third World.

Rather than a complete dedication to the abolition of war and domination, religion has, more often than not, contributed to the slaughter. We are so brainwashed by thousands of years of war committed in the name of God and blessed by every religious authority around, that most people, including many theologians and religious leaders, continue to justify the mass killing of war and the oppressive economic injustice of global poverty in God's name. Religion has so inculturated the violence of the world that it has more often than not become *the* legitimizing factor in systemic violence. In fact, as theologian Walter Wink writes in his brilliant study, *Engaging the Powers*, violence has become humanity's underlying religion:

Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience to death. Its followers are not aware, however, that the devotion they pay to violence is a form of religious piety. Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last, and often, the first resort to conflicts. It is embraced with equal alacrity by people on the left and on the right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives. The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors. It secured us forty-five years of a balance of terror. We learned to trust the Bomb to grant us peace. (Walter Wink, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 26, 13).

As people of faith around the world grapple with the questions of violence, we need to confess right at the start that religion has spurred on the blood-letting. If we are ever to renounce our violence and adopt the way of nonviolence, the religions of the world need to repent of their complicity in war and injustice and reject every connection, approval and legitimation of violence. From the crusades of the Middle Ages to the invocations for protection by religious leaders on all sides in every nation during the 1991 Gulf war, promoting violence has been an integral part of religious life. We need to recognize our addiction to violence, and the heresy and blasphemy of such complicity, and make a complete about face. Such a conversion will cost not only millions in contributions and dramatic declines in attendance of religious services, but possibly even some lives. But it will be the beginning of an authenticity that we all long for deep down. The recognition and rejection of our religious violence will, more than anything, bring all the religions of the world back to new and greater life.

Reimagining God as a God of Peace

As we break through the world's mad violence and examine our religious participation in violence, sooner or later we must come to grips with the ultimate religious question: What does God make of human violence? If God is a god of violence who creates people so that they will kill one another, then religion offers no hope, no salvation, no way out for humanity's addiction to violence. If our God, our religion's faith in God, does not offer a way to transform this global slaughterhouse, then our God, our religion, has nothing to offer. It is dead.

If, on the other hand, our God is a God of nonviolence who vehemently opposes violence in all its forms and created all of us to live peacefully in the Spirit of nonviolence, then the religions of

the world have strayed far from their task but they nonetheless hold the potential of leading humanity away from its violence and toward a new world of nonviolence. If the religions of the world teach and share God's way of nonviolence, they could convert humanity to an undreamed of world of peace, justice and dignity for all--heaven on earth, here and now.

I am convinced that all the major religions are rooted in nonviolent love and peace. Christianity, in particular, insists that God is a God of nonviolence. In Jesus, we Christians believe, God is revealed as a God who loves God's enemies, who loves all humanity unconditionally, who allows the sun to shine on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust, a God who would rather die than inflict suffering and death on anyone. In Jesus, the Gospels proclaim, God offers humanity a way out of its predicament, the way of active nonviolence. Jesus taught and modeled the way of nonviolence. Over and over again, he calls us to practice nonviolence as a way of life. Though we Christians have rejected that call for hundreds of years, the call still stands. The door remains open.

In the face of global violence, the story of Jesus asks us: What is our image of God? We have fashioned God into our own image: mean, violent, cruel, vengeful, angry, warlike, all-powerful, imperial. We believe God is a god of war and injustice; that god wants people to suffer; that god blesses poverty and systemic injustice. Instead, Jesus reveals the God is a God of peace, love, compassion; that God actively opposes wars and injustice and is trying to transform the world and humanity, nonviolently. Jesus breaks the false images of god as violent, warmaking, wrathful, angry, vengeful, destructive, mean; a god of nuclear weapons, a god who looks to destroy us. Jesus reveals God as the God of nonviolence.

As more and more people begin to re-examine our understanding of God and practice nonviolence in the tradition of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dorothy Day of the

Catholic Worker movement, we experience God not as a god of domination, but vulnerability; not a god of power but powerlessness; not a god of empire but the cross; not a god of oppression but liberation; not a god of fear, but love; not a god of vengeance who longs to throw us into hell, but compassion who longs to welcome us into her reign of mercy; not a god of death, but of life; not a god of war but peace.

Active Nonviolence: the Religious Response to Violence

On the evening before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told a packed Memphis church that “the choice is no longer violence or nonviolence; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence.” For King, nonviolence is the only way out of humanity’s suicidal addiction to violence, as he explained when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1963:

Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time--the need for people to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence...Nonviolence is not sterile passivity but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later, all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace...If this is to be achieved, people must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation for such a method is love. (James Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1986, pp. 224-225.)

Dr. King taught that nonviolence is not just a practical tactic (though indeed it does work!): it is a religious duty. God commands us to be people of unconditional love. Religious people are

people who strive to obey God. If people of faith want to worship God and seek God's ways, they must renounce every trace of violence and complicity in systemic injustice, and overcome violence with active love and truth. Nonviolence breaks the spiral of violence by inserting the spiritual presence of love and truth, by insisting on justice and peace, and yet refusing to retaliate with further violence. It is neither passive or quiet but active and provocative.

For myself, nonviolence means simply remembering who we are--all brothers and sisters; all of us equal; all of us sons and daughters of the God of peace; all of us created to love and serve our God and one another in that spirit of justice, peace and compassion. It maintains that all life is sacred; that everyone is redeemable; and the world has been created according to the law of nonviolence. From this basic truth about the interconnectedness of human life flows our lifelong service to the poor, dedication to justice, resistance to evil, compassion for all, and worship of God. We could never hurt or kill another human being, much less remain silent in the face of nuclear weapons or widespread starvation. We love one another.

For Christians, Jesus is the incarnation of the God of nonviolence. He serves the needy, heals the sick and lives a contemplative nonviolence that pushes him to resist every form of violence. Like Gandhi marching to the sea, Jesus walks to Jerusalem on a campaign of revolutionary nonviolence where he turns over the tables of the money changers in the Temple in an act of peaceful civil disobedience, only to be arrested, jailed, tried, tortured and executed. But the community testifies that God raised him up and that he invited his followers to take up that same journey of nonviolent resistance, even to the point of death and resurrection.

As the late theologian John McKenzie declared, "If Jesus taught us anything, he taught us how to die, not how to kill."

To be a Christian living in a world of violence means accompanying the nonviolent Jesus on

his campaign for justice and peace to the cross. It means allowing God to continually disarm our hearts and our lives and to use us as instruments for God's disarmament of the world. The good news is that Jesus offers us all a way out of our addiction to violence. Though we will lose our lives in his nonviolent struggle for justice and peace, we will know from now on the fullness of God's own peace in our hearts and communities.

Walter Wink sums up the question of religion and war for Christians as follows:

The God whom Jesus reveals refrains from all forms of reprisal and demands no victims. God does not endorse holy wars or just wars or religions of violence. Only by being driven out by violence could God signal to humanity that the divine is nonviolent and is antithetical to the Kingdom of Violence...Jesus' message reveals that those who believe in divine violence are still mired in Satan's universe. To be this God's offspring requires the unconditional and unilateral renunciation of violence. The reign of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of violence between individuals and nations. (*Engaging the Powers*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 149)

For the first three centuries, Christians were martyred for their active nonviolence. But as the empire coopted Christianity, Christians put away their nonviolence and took up the sword. They began to join the military and justify war. For the last seventeen hundred years, we have killed in every form possible, often in holy crusades to defend Jesus' name. The development of nuclear weapons and the possible destruction of the planet has forced us for the first time to take another look at our roots. For the first time in centuries, Christians around the world are renouncing the justification of war, naming nuclear weapons as idolatrous, seeking justice for the poor and embracing Jesus' way of nonviolent love for all. On the fringes of all the world's religions, people are turning to the way of nonviolence. This indeed is good news for humanity. Violence does not

have the last word. The God of nonviolence reigns. There is a way out.

A Theology of Nonviolence

As Christians begin to reject violence, renounce war, and pursue peacemaking as a religious obligation--as the heart of religion--we are beginning to reread scripture and traditional theology from the perspective of nonviolence and develop a new theology of nonviolence. The Trinity is understood now as a community of peace and nonviolence, the model for human community. We speak of sin in terms of violence, as social, systemic, or institutionalized injustice. The covenant weds God and people of faith through the bonds of nonviolence. Grace refers not just to personal healing and transformation by the touch of God, but God's nonviolent transformation of communities, nations and humanity, ending wars, tearing down the walls of injustice, opening up new possibilities. Theodicy examines the voluntary acceptance of human suffering as a way to transform evil and God's active nonviolent resistance to suffering and oppression. In this light, God practices nonviolence to confront injustice, but never forces or coerces us or uses violence. God is not "all-powerful" in the traditional sense of domination. God is understood as the ultimate nonviolent resister who suffers and dies because of human violence, but who still calls us into a nonviolent reign of peace.

To be saved according to such a theology, is to renounce the world's ways of violence and domination, to embrace the way of nonviolence, and thus to enter the nonviolent reign of God, here and now, in the struggle for justice and peace. Instead of a catastrophic nuclear apocalypse, an eschatology of nonviolence looks at the end of the world as a peaceful transformation, where all humanity renounces violence and embraces one another in love. God's coming is nonviolent and joyful because humanity has learned to see God in the face of every other human being, especially in

their enemies, and been reconciled. A new anthropology teaches that being human means being nonviolent, created to resemble God our nonviolent Parent. All of this leads, in other words, to a completely new understanding of what it means to be a human being.

Perhaps the most important breakthrough in such a new theology will be our understanding of church. An ecclesiology of nonviolence invites the church to be a church of nonviolence, a community of peacemakers. The church now rejects the just war theory, and refuses to bless or support war or any kind of injustice or the governments which legalize violence. We become then a peace church, a community of love that reaches out beyond all borders and boundaries to love God in the poor and marginalized, and in the face of the enemy and the stranger.

A church of nonviolence insists on the equality of women and men and the inclusion of everyone and thus practices justice and nonviolence within its community as well. It sides with the oppressed in a peaceful struggle for liberation, undertaking a preferential option for the poor, but as Jesus did, through active nonviolence. It teaches the consistent ethic of nonviolence, the “seamless garment,” and thus rejects every form of violence. Its spirituality reflects life lived in a spirit of peace, through contemplative prayer, solitude, community, and forgiveness. People of faith contemplate the God of nonviolence and find themselves personally disarmed and together transformed into disarming, peacemaking, reconciling communities.

From the perspective of nonviolence, the sacraments take on a whole new socio-political life. Baptism begins a perpetual commitment to the nonviolent Jesus and the way of nonviolence. Confirmation recommits ourselves to the way of nonviolence. Reconciliation heals the brokenness between us and God through God’s forgiving, nonviolent love and helps us to become more compassionate with one another. Eucharist welcomes the entire human family around God’s table to hear the Word of nonviolent love, share a reconciling meal of bread and wine, and celebrate our life

together in the nonviolent Christ. Marriage celebrates the commitment of lifelong nonviolence in relationship, friendship and family life. Anointing offers the healing love of the God of nonviolence and leads us to peace. Orders missions public servants and ministers who help teach, promote and lead the peacemaking community along the way of nonviolence.

Liturgy celebrates the life of Gospel nonviolence. In the center stands the peacemaking Jesus, reconciling us, disarming us, leading us to God. Because Christian liturgy reflects the nonviolence of God and the community, it denounces the culture's ongoing violence, its wars and injustices, its nuclear weapons and consumerism. Liturgy becomes itself a form of resistance to war and injustice and a celebration of peace and justice!

The Praxis of Nonviolence

To know, worship, love, embrace and follow the God of nonviolence is to become a people of nonviolence. In a world of violence, religion is about praxis, living a concrete peacemaking way of life. A theology of nonviolence must be lived. It is a theology of action. It requires focusing on the God of peace, accompanying (for Christians) the nonviolent Jesus, and taking public risks of love to end war and disarm the planet.

Gandhi once said: "We are constantly being astonished at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence. Nonviolence is the greatest and most active force in the world. One person who can express nonviolence in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality. My optimism rests on my belief in the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop nonviolence. The more you develop it in your own being, the more infectious it becomes till it overwhelms your surroundings and by and by might oversweep the world."

Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, summed up the struggle of life in these words: "As you come to know the seriousness of our situation--the wars, the racism, the poverty in the world, the weapons of mass destruction--you come to realize it is not going to be changed by words or demonstrations. It's a question of risking one's life. It's a question of living one's life in drastically different ways."

Faith in the God of peace requires making a personal and communal commitment to peace. It means sowing seeds of nonviolence for the rest of our lives, come what may, even in the face of persecution. Though such faith is demanding and controversial, it offers great hope. We have seen such examples in recent decades. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and church leaders in South Africa took to the streets in the late 1980s in illegal acts of nonviolent civil disobedience to protest apartheid and helped pave the way for their country's dramatic change. Daniel and Philip Berrigan and the Catonsville Nine burned draft files in 1968 to protest the U.S. war in Southeast Asia and spurred public opposition to the war. Dr. King and the African-American churches filled the jails throughout the Southern states in the USA to challenge segregation and open the door to racial justice. In the late 1950s, Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker friends sat on public benches in a New York City park in opposition to nuclear war air raid drills, which required that people go to nearby fallout shelters. Her faith witness challenged the public acceptance of nuclear weapons and put an end to such charades. Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Jesuits of El Salvador, and countless Central American Christians spoke out against injustice and repression throughout the 1980s, giving their lives in a nonviolent witness for justice. In the Philippines, Catholic nuns along with millions of the faithful, blocked tanks to protest a dictatorship and gave birth to greater democracy. As people of faith begin to practice nonviolence, their lives will reflect the presence of the God of peace working in the world to end violence and restore reconciliation and justice. Indeed, people of faith can truly

lead the way to new justice and peace whenever they take new risks of nonviolence.

The Vision of Peace

Our violence has so blinded the human family that we no longer can dream of a world without war or injustice. We accept destruction and killing as the norm. Despair has seeped in and taken hold of our hearts. As we reject violence and embrace faith in the God of nonviolence, however, we are sent forth into the world to proclaim a new vision of God's nonviolent reign on earth. Together, we uphold a new vision of a nonviolent world, where there is: no more war; no more injustice; no more bombs; no more handguns; no more torture; no more racism; no more sexism; no more patriarchy; no more domination; no more exclusion; no more consumerism; no more poverty; no more hunger; no more homelessness; no more executions; no more abortions; no more terrorism; no more Pentagons; no more fear; no more hatred; no more vengeance; no more retaliation; no more division; no more nuclear weapons; no more incinerations or concentration camps or Hiroshimas or Nagasakis; no more killings; or as the book of Revelation concludes, “no more tears, no more death.”

To be a person of faith in these times is to be a person of peace and nonviolence. Now more than ever, the great religions of the world need to address the violence of the world with all their energy and talent and prayer and proclaim this new vision. We need to send out into the world apostles of nonviolence, prophets of nonviolence, teachers of nonviolence, pioneers of nonviolence, martyrs of nonviolence and saints of nonviolence. Together, we need to begin anew that journey to the mountain of the God of peace, to be instructed in her ways, to beat our swords into plowshares and vow never again to study war. As we undertake that journey of nonviolence, we will discover who our God is and what it means to be faithful. Together, we will be blessed. Together, we will

become sons and daughters of the God of peace--peacemakers.

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