

The Conscience of a Christian Pacifist

Lawrence D. Hart

Presents the case for pacifism as a moral imperative and basic spiritual principle for Christians.

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“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him. If He didn’t then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.

. . . she sank back in the ditch with her legs twisted under her. . . His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.

from *A Good Man is Hard to Find* by Flannery O’Connor

“I’m not a pacifist”, he said quietly but firmly, “there are just too many violent people out there.” Knowing that he had once helped create a Zen meditation center I asked, “How about Buddhist compassion? Like Christian love doesn’t it inevitably lead to the pacifist life?” In the same quiet but certain voice he repeated his thought simply, “It’s wrong headed. There are too many violent people to do nothing -- too many people who will really hurt you.” Maybe it would have been better to have asked him about the Zen way of “non-action,” which, of course, does not mean doing nothing but rather with doing nothing that is forced, or coerced, or an attempt to control what is beyond our control – doing nothing that arises out of some neurotic compulsivity to act. In fact, it has

been said that the sage works without doing. That, of course, is not the conventional wisdom of our Western world. I can remember reading articles on management advising that it's better to take the wrong action than to do nothing at all. The argument being that if what you do turns out to be a mistake, then at least you know what doesn't work. In our culture it rarely occurs to anyone that it might be best to wait patiently for the right decision and the right moment of action to emerge or unfold naturally. Sometimes we are so determined and quick to make a decision and to take action that we make a choice that is so egregious, like the invasion of Iraq, that afterward there are no really good choices left us.

My point, however, is that pacifism does not mean doing nothing. Gandhi said during World War II that in the event the Japanese invaded India they should be met with nonviolent resistance since "it is no part of the people's duty to help anyone steal their country." One must be willing to die, he maintained, in the act of non-resistance. One must not, he said, yield his or her soul to a conqueror or oppressor, by which he meant you must refuse to do anything "which your conscience forbids you to do." For Gandhi non-violent resistance, far from doing nothing, was participation in something mysteriously powerful and vital. "Non-violence," he said, "is the greatest and most active force in the world. One cannot be passively non-violent. . . . One person who can express *ahimsa* in life (the avoidance of violence or injury to anyone) exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality." Consequently, he offered this clear and practical guidance:

The underlying belief in such non-violent resistance is that the aggressor will, in time, be mentally and physically tired of killing non-violent resisters. He will begin to search what this new (for him) force is which refuses cooperation without seeking to hurt, and will probably desist from further slaughter. But the resister

may find that the Japanese are utterly heartless and that they do not care how many they kill. The non-violent resisters will have won the day inasmuch as they will have preferred extermination to submission.

I am arguing neither for nor against Gandhi's specific advice. I am simply using it as one illustration of how pacifism may find expression in decisive and concrete action. The question is not so much whether to act, but how? It is fair, I think, to ask about the tremendous loss of life that might be incurred by following such a strategy, but if so it is also fair to ask about the massive number of deaths that might occur in mounting military resistance.

In the Acts of the Apostles (4:1ff), Peter and John are arrested and jailed for instructing the people in the implications of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The authorities interrogated and threatened Peter and John:

They called them back and warned them that they were on no account ever again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John spoke right back, "Whether it's right in God's eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. As for us there's no question – we can't keep quiet about what we've seen and heard."

Peter and John had heard Jesus say, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." For them there was no question but that they had to act – whatever the cost. And that they had to act in harmony with a conscience shaped by the teaching, love, and spiritual power of Christ the Lord.

Actually, the etymology of the words "pacifist" and "pacifism" speaks of someone who has a proactive approach to life with its problems of conflict and aggression. By definition "pacific" refers to a tendency to make peace. The French *pacifique* comes from the Latin *pacificus* – *pax* (gen *pacis*) plus the root of *facere*

meaning to make. We think immediately of the Beatitudes given by Jesus: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” This takes us far beyond pragmatism. *Werde was du bist*. “Become what you are.” Love, compassion, and truth are our spiritual genetics. Animosity, greed and violence are freakish, devilish, and alien to the life of the spirit. For people of faith, of ultimate concern and trust in God, the deciding question is not what is effective as the world counts effectiveness, but what makes me one with the Living God. The force moving through the Christian, like quickening sap through a tree, is the Spirit of Christ.

But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely (Galatians 5:22-25 *The Message*).

Why should we renounce violence? We renounce war and violence because it is not the way of the Spirit. As E. Stanley Jones once wrote: “There is the Way, and there is a way that is not-the-way.” Jesus called for his people to rethink everything, and offered a new paradigm for being Israel – “one characterized more by mercy than “holiness.” He urged them to follow a new way of being that required loving and forgiving enemies, relinquishing resentment, and overcoming evil with good. To follow this path arouses intense fear in that it is so foreign to everything we have been taught about the importance and the how of survival. Yet, every step of trust, compassion, and nonviolence we take along the way works a dramatic and radical change in the quality of our very being. “And so,” writes Paul, “Don’t not be pressed into this world’s mold, but

be spiritually transformed, metamorphosed, by the renewing of your mind.” The point of following Jesus is not just to go to a better place after we die, but to become one with him, and that requires becoming what the New Testament calls “a new creation.”

Although I think non-violence is more effective than violence that is not really the issue, the real issue involves the deeper and more mysterious questions of Christian spirituality. Much of what the world insists is pragmatic and effective is nothing short of delusional. To argue, for instance, that war is a way to peace is nonsense. A poster I once saw at a peace rally put it boldly and succinctly:

WAGING WAR FOR PEACE
IS LIKE FUCKING FOR CHASITY

This is a rather obscene way to put matters, but then war is obscene, and violence is the antithesis to the “Way.” We might contrast the Way and not-the-way like this:

The Way of Christ Says

“Love God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39-40).

“If you love those who love you what reward do you have” (Matt. 5:46)?

“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be the children of your Heavenly Father” (Matt. 5:44-45). . .

Our Human Nature Says

If you have some sort of a religious faith or spiritual practice and you are generally good to people you are doing everything you need to do. “Don’t sweat it.”

It’s a *quid pro quo* world. That’s just how things are. We do favors for people who do us favors, we loan to those who can pay us back, we love those who love us, we are good to those who are good to us.

It’s fine to love our enemies and those who persecute us, but we have to protect ourselves, our families, and our country. We have to be cautious and measured in our love or we will get hurt.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Roman 12:2)

Sometime we have to use unsavory means to achieve a good end. I will do whatever is necessary to protect my interests and the interests of those around me.

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Getting what you want, realizing your personal dreams, is happiness. “The one with the most toys in the end wins.”

“Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life. . . But strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:24-34). . . “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). . .

You have to be tough just to survive in this life. The way to wrest satisfaction and happiness from life is to manage things well.

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

I am a good person and enjoy my life. Given the grace of God and all I believe I will go to heaven when I die – what more could I ask. The great saints were admirable, but like Mother Teresa a bit excessive.

If the goodness of God does not taste sweeter than life itself, if nonviolence is not a spiritual principle that speaks to the depths of our hearts, if love is not the basic law of our spiritual existence, if the mystery of God’s presence is not the reality in which “we live, move and have our being,” then, of course, my whole case collapses and is rightly rejected.

Gandhi said, and there are plenty of Scriptures like 1 Peter 3:7 to bear this out, “The alphabet of *ahimsa* is best learned in the domestic school.” He said that if we are successful there we will secure success everywhere else, for the simple reason that for the non-violent person the whole world is one family. He or she will fear none, nor will he or

she be feared. But what if rather than being the aggressor we are faced with violence that is individual, domestic, or personal? Depending on the situation there may be any number of options available to us – hide, run, scream, talk, negotiate, or sacrifice our own life. If it is a family member that person might have to be removed from the home, or we might have to leave. My consistent advice to battered women is, “Get out!”

In *Love is Letting Go of Fear*, Dr. Gerald Jampolsky tells a story I like as a simple example of what I am trying to say: Jampolsky was called at 2:00 A.M. one Sunday morning to see a patient on a locked psychiatric unit who had suddenly gone berserk. The patient who had been diagnosed just the previous afternoon with acute schizophrenia had torn off the wood molding from around the door to his room. The patient was running around the room naked, brandishing a large piece of wood with nails sticking out, and talking gibberish. As Jampolsky looked through the window he began to see how scared this patient was. He also began to realize how frightened he was himself of this six foot four 280 pound madman armed with a weapon of wood and nails. Jampolsky started to yell through the thick door, “My name is Dr. Jampolsky and I want to come in to help you, but I’m scared. I’m scared that I might get hurt, and I’m scared you might get hurt, and I can’t help wondering if you’re scared too.” With this the man stopped his gibberish, turned around and shouted, “You’re goddamn right, I’m scared.” They continued to yell back and forth for a while about how scared they were. Finally, the fear dissipated and the patient allowed Jampolsky to come in alone, talk to him, give him some oral medication, and leave. I like this story because it shows how Jampolsky was able to use his own presence creatively to bring calm to the situation.

But frequently the question is posed in this more complicated way: If an armed madman was attacking someone in your family and you had a gun what would you do? I have dealt with that question extensively in the last chapter of my book *Hell's Abyss, Heaven's Grace: War and Christian Spirituality*. Right now I will just briefly say that in that situation I would probably fire a warning shot to scare the aggressor away. The reality, however, is that I don't really know what I would do in the kind of situation narrowly described by the questioner, but like John Howard Yoder in his *What Would You Do? A Serious Answer to a Standard Question*, I do know how I would like to respond. "I do not know what I would do," says Yoder, "if some insane criminal were to attack my wife, or child or mother. But I know that what I should do would be illuminated by what God my father did when his 'only begotten Son' was being threatened." I know that if my mind is already made up that a violent response is the only answer I will probably lack the creativity and imagination to find a nonviolent solution in the critical moment. If, however, I have renounced violence I am far more likely to find a gentler and saner way of responding to a volatile situation

In the case of the grandmother and her family of five in Flannery O'Connor's short story, there was probably, given the circumstances, nothing effective to be done – no way out but to die at the hands of Hiram, Bobby Lee, and Misfit. But even in that situation there remains the enormous possibility of dying an enlightened death. It takes courage, love, and trust to renounce violence and embrace peace. Everyday our dedication to the Way and our consecration to Christ is called into question. "Jesus has indeed thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him."