

CHRISTIANITY AND NONVIOLENCE

Conference on Nonviolence

Friday, December 30, 2005

Bethlehem

It would have been easier if my topic were about Christ and nonviolence. I would have been proud to make such a presentation. However, when the topic is Christianity and nonviolence it is much more difficult and more embarrassing. In short, the faith Jesus lived and promoted distilled the best in the Hebrew prophetic tradition of the Old Testament which basically had to do with nonviolence. This is the way he practiced and taught and this is the way the early church believed and followed. The shift started to take place after Constantine when political power and the church became aligned. Since then the church marched through history as many others had done before it waging wars and killing people. Consequently, Christianity, especially in the West, became one of, if not the most violent religion in history. The basic problem is that we abandoned the life and teaching of the founder, Jesus Christ.

FIRST: Jesus and nonviolence

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus chose a new way that differed from the various religious and political organizations of his day. He rejected the way of violence and told his disciples that, "all who take the sword will perish by the sword"(Matthew 26:52). It is true that there are a few passages in the gospels that critics of the Christian Faith have used to show that Jesus was not totally committed to nonviolence. Texts like the cleansing of the temple and driving people out (John 2:13-17). Interpretation of such texts needs to take into consideration the context in which it was written as well as the overall message of Jesus and the contribution of modern scholarship regarding those texts.

Christians, even the most simple, when reading the gospels discover a Jesus who lived a nonviolent life and taught nonviolence to all the people around him. Most of them would quote you the verse from Matthew when Jesus said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also." Such a verse is quoted usually to prove Jesus' way of nonviolence. Other times it is quoted by some people to imply passivity and cowardice which Jesus advocated and which they wholeheartedly reject. Yet at a deeper study of these texts, they reflect an active nonviolent involvement that is at the heart of Jesus' teaching.

I would like to quote a few verses from the Gospels that express the new way of Jesus:

You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5:38-41)

Commenting on Jesus' way, one scholar put it this way, "These three examples amplify what Jesus means in his thesis statement: 'Don't react violently against the one who is evil.' Instead of the two options ingrained in us by millions of years of unreflective, brute response to biological threats from the environment – flight or fight – Jesus offers a third way. This new way marks a historic mutation in human development: the revolt against the principle of natural selection. With Jesus a way emerges by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored (Wink: 2003 p. 27).

Jesus is advocating a different way that seizes the moral initiative, find a creative alternative to violence, breaks the cycle of humiliation, refuses to submit or to accept the inferior position, exposes the injustice of the system, recognize one's own power, and willingness to suffer rather than to retaliate.

Let me quote another short passage from the Gospels that emphasize a new spirit of relationship with others,

You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)

One cannot read those words and surmise that Jesus was a violent person or that he promoted violence.

It is clear that the teachings of Jesus, his relationships with people, as well as his own life reflected a genuine nonviolent approach. Even his last words on the cross he expressed forgiveness for those who killed him.

SECOND: The early church

If one has doubts about the interpretation of certain texts regarding the nonviolence of Jesus, such doubts would vanish when one considers the faith and behavior of early Christians. One way to check Jesus' words is to check them against the writings of the early followers of Jesus. As one example, and there are many in the New Testament, Paul echoed Jesus' words in his letter to the church in Rome (12:14, 17-21)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Repay no one evil for evil...so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Moreover, It has been substantiated through church and secular history that the early believers lived their lives with an understanding of the nonviolent paradigm which Jesus left them. Their willingness to submit to death rather than commit violence indicates the way they understood the sacrifice and teachings of Jesus. In fact, "from the close of the

New Testament period until about A.D. 170 ... no firm evidence has surfaced that show Christians serving in the army...(Driver: 1988 p. 19). For the first three centuries after Christ, with some exceptions, Christians did not enlist into the army, refused to go to war, refused to pay evil for evil. They were willing to suffer rather than to inflict suffering on others. During this period, the main church fathers believed that they can perform their ministry in the society through nonviolence.

Ignatius of Antioch in A.D.110 advised Christians under persecution saying, "Do not avenge yourselves on those who injure you...let us imitate the Lord, who when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he was crucified, he answered not, when he suffered, he threatened not, but prayed for his enemies" (Driver p. 23). Origen, an early church father (second/third century) wrote, "For we no longer take up 'sword against nation,' nor do we 'learn war anymore,' having become children of peace for the sake of Jesus" (Driver p. 21). If we had more time one can quote Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, as well as many others. They all talk of peace and nonviolence because they were followers of Jesus Christ. They all rejected the killing of one human being by another. They believed that violence contradicted the foundations of their Christian faith.

THIRD: Constantinian Christianity

All this started changing after Constantine became emperor and legitimized the Christian Faith. In 313 Constantine tolerated the Christian faith and declared religious freedom. Empire and church became reconciled. Christians began more readily to accept civil office and to participate in the military forces. Such was the beginnings but it took approximately a hundred years before shift took place. By the 5th century, the empire required all its soldiers to be Christian and excluded non-Christians from its ranks.

Yet even then, the church prohibited the shedding of blood and did not give communion to soldiers who killed others in battle and imposed penance on them. Gradually, however, all these rules were relaxed. Only clergy were forbidden to shed blood while ordinary Christians were required to maintain such a high Christian standard. Athanasius of Alexandria (end of 4th century) wrote, "It is not right to kill, yet in war it is lawful and praiseworthy to destroy the enemy..."(Driver p. 77). Such words would never have been uttered a hundred years before.

It was Augustine who developed the just-war theory and justified theologically the participation of Christians in war. Such a theory justified the empire's wars. Christians started to kill people and sanctioned it by the Bible. Many Old Testament passages were more helpful to the emperor than the words of Jesus. The way of nonviolence of the early church and that of Jesus were left behind.

This was the beginning of the decline of Christianity. Empire and Church walked together waging wars and killing people and many times in the name of God. Moreover, wars were waged against fellow Christians because of doctrinal or other differences.

Amazingly, the Faith that started on a nonviolent basis became the most violent in the history of the world.

FOURTH: The peace churches

Yet throughout history, there were certain Christian individuals and groups who could see that the church had deviated from the intention and spirit of its founder, Jesus Christ. They were aware of the fallacy of those biblical interpretations that were concocted in order to justify and rationalize wars and war crimes against others. These were found within the churches as well as outside of it everywhere. These minorities continued to promote Jesus' nonviolent vision of love toward enemies. They exercised their prophetic ministry within the church and outside of it. We know some of them today as peace churches like the Quakers, the Brethren, and the Mennonites. They tried to remain faithful to the teachings of Jesus – the teaching of nonviolence. These churches continue to remind Christians of the roots and origins of their faith and the need to reclaim its power of nonviolence.

FIFTH: Palestinian Liberation Theology

Although Christian voices have always been raised against violence, most Christians, like others, accept the growing violence of our world. However, here in Palestine, many Palestinian Christians practice nonviolent resistance against the Israeli occupation. A case in point is the Christian town of Beit Sahour, next to Bethlehem. During the first intifada, the people of the town refused to pay taxes to the Israeli occupation government. In the summer of 1988 Israeli troops imposed a siege on the town and placed the 12,000 residents under house arrest. For 42 days, Beit Sahour was under curfew, the first two weeks for 24 hours a day. Israeli soldiers, police and tax officers invaded homes of the residents and confiscated furniture and money, goods from stores, machines from factories and the cars of those registered in their files as alleged tax resisters. Over 100 people of various professions were arrested. Early on, neither the letters sent to the United Nations and human rights organizations nor the intervention of consulate representatives halted Israel's campaign to destroy the infrastructure of Beit Sahour. Since the town was cut off from the outside world with no food or medical supplies, outside support was not strong enough to force the Israelis to lift the siege. People's lives deteriorated. When the Israeli collective punishment ended Beit Sahour had been depleted of around five million U.S. dollars. The nonviolent witness and resistance of the Christian community in Beit Sahour continues to be proverbial.

In the 1990's with the emergence of Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT), it was clear that some Palestinian Christians went back to their faith's original source and lifted up the theme of nonviolence. We took a large leap into the far past and connected again with the spring of our faith, Jesus Christ. We felt that we cannot call ourselves Christians and believe in the legitimacy of violence. We critiqued the bloody history of the church during the last 1700 years. At the same time, we praised the courage of people who have committed themselves to nonviolence and had been ready to pay the cost.

At the same time, this PLT witnesses today in the midst of much violence within the Palestinian community. As the resistance to the occupation of Palestine continues, PLT clearly and unashamedly lifts up a voice of nonviolence to resist the illegal occupation of Palestine and calls on their fellow Palestinians to abandon the path of violent resistance and to choose the path of nonviolence.

SIX: The present challenge

In summary, the church started in Jerusalem by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the footsteps of Jesus Christ as a nonviolent movement. However, after Constantine, when the church and empire became aligned together and Christians began to enjoy power, wealth, and prestige, they slowly discarded the teachings of Jesus and their theology was brought into line with their everyday practice. They became increasingly involved in warfare and violence and they reinterpreted the Bible to justify their wars and violence. It is essential for us as Palestinian Christians to be aware of this and re-establish and re-emphasize the authentic foundations of our faith.

1. The test of true religion is its teaching and commitment to nonviolence.
2. God cannot be a god of war or violence. We must reject any view of God that presents God as standing on the side of injustice, violence, or terror.
3. We must critique and condemn any actions carried out in the name of Christ that has to do with violence. We must support and praise everything that is done nonviolently.
4. The challenge today is to dare to resist the occupation without using violent methods – To resist without mirroring the violence of the Israeli army or the violence of Palestinian extremist groups.
5. To claim or reclaim Jesus Christ today is to reclaim his way of nonviolence and to hear his words, “Blessed are the peacemakers for shall be called children of God.”

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