

## **We are failing our young People**

There are few New Testament scholars today who would claim that Jesus did not teach by word and deed, a way of non-violent love of friends and enemies. We can use the adjective 'non-violent' in this context to distinguish the love which Christ taught from forms of love that could include the use violence. For instance, love of one's nation might compel a person to engage in the violence of warfare. Clearly these are different forms of expressing love. Gospel passages such as "I have come not to bring peace but a sword", the cleansing of the temple, the faith of the centurion, or Jesus' admonition to the disciples to buy a sword, and others, cannot be cited as endorsements by Jesus for the use of lethal violence by his followers. Rather they are small pieces of an overall message that conveys love, mercy and compassion at its core. Such passages also have deeper meanings than that expressed by their face value. While violent love permits the use of lethal force, the love which Jesus teaches contains no violence at all.

This being the case, and in consideration of our cultural nurturing that evil can only be countered by violent force, it is understandable that Christians would be reluctant to take Jesus literally on this point. For if they did take him literally, it does not take a tremendous amount of imagination to see the possible outcomes which would result. Christians could quickly find themselves in a similar situation to the Christians in the early centuries of the Church who were treated quite harshly for precisely this reason. No one wants to return to a time of arrest, torture, imprisonment and execution for the faith. No one wants to see their loved ones endure such an ordeal. And it would be naive to think that worldly powers would not turn on Christians were they to take such a stance. Governments of the world would not hesitate to persecute Christians who would be seen as a threat to the narratives that uphold survival of their nation-states.

For any nation-state, its own survival is a primary value. When that value is seen as threatened, the normal legal prohibitions against killing are lifted and permission is given for citizens to engage in the lethality of warfare. Any person or group who opposes, is subject to persecution of various kinds.

In contrast, for the Christian, the primary value is not physical survival but the gospel teachings on love of God and neighbor even to the point of a nonviolent self-sacrificial death if necessary. This level of love (*agape*) is clearly on display by Jesus in the gospels and in the lives of the early martyrs. They laid down their lives for others without injuring anyone else in the process. They valued eternal life (eternal survival) above temporary physical survival.

Nevertheless, the fear of suffering and loss compels us to either ignore or find a way to avoid this difficult Gospel teaching. One major way of avoidance that has been devised is known as the 'Christian Just War Theory'. It carries the adjective Christian because its origin was formulated by Christian theologians in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. The purpose was to justify exceptions to Jesus' teachings on love of enemies. The theory was refined by many others over the centuries. Today it is usually referred to simply as 'just war theory'.

From a Christian perspective, the basic problem with Christian just war theory is that it is not based on anything found in the pages of the four gospels. It is not rooted in anything Jesus taught. Rather it is based on the writings of the pagan Roman orator and philosopher Cicero of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and possibly earlier philosophers. Since Christians have been given only the commission to teach "...all that I have commanded you", (Matt 28:20) not a commission to teach secular philosophy, the Christian East has *rejected* the just war theory as incompatible with the Gospel. The Christian East views all warfare, even wars considered to be for self-defense, to be manifestations of the evil which emanates from the 'fall'. For this reason, the Church requires repentance for anyone who participates in warfare.

This view can be seen clearly in St Basil's writings and by others, who require excommunication for several years for soldiers returning from warfare. On the one hand the Church teaches *theosis*, the process of becoming like God in thought and action, and on the other hand, it gives permission to participate in an activity that is anti-*theosis*. The requirement for repentance after war in times past is an acknowledgement of this truth. It is well known that soldiers, especially those on the front lines, often suffer deep spiritual and mental harm. This is evident in the statistics which document high levels of PTSD, suicide, substance abuse, homelessness and domestic violence among veterans. Anyone who has listened to the traumas of combat veterans can begin to understand the deep pain they suffer. The Church can offer reconciliation and healing through confession, prayer life and counsel after the fact. *However*, it offers little in the way of warning beforehand. Our young people are not given the information they need to understand the full implications of what they are entering. In this regard we can say that the Church is failing them.

Some commentators have stated that since some of the canonized saints participated in warfare, this gives permission for others to do so as well. But this would imply that it is the saints whose actions measure the teachings of Jesus rather than the other way around. It is safe to conclude that no one was ever canonized for killing, rather despite killing, for other good deeds they may have done.

Others have used the concept of *economia* to make the case for Christian participation in warfare. *Economia* allows exceptions to Gospel teachings and Church canons under certain conditions. Although *economia* may be used to relax certain rules, the principle itself cannot be used to contradict or override the express teachings of Christ. For instance, second marriages are sometimes allowed in the Church even though Jesus teaches that those who re-marry commit adultery except in cases of infidelity. (Matt 5:32). Yet out of consideration for the clear Gospel teaching on mercy, the Church exercises *economia* in allowing second marriages. In this case, mercy modifies the teaching against divorce and re-marriage because mercy is a primary Gospel value.

However, in exercising *economia* in the case of allowing Christians to participate in warfare, there is no overriding Gospel teaching, like mercy to which to appeal. If self-defense is cited as a reason, self-defense is *not* a Gospel value. The other common reason given, defense of the innocent, is an illusion, since statistics show that most casualties in modern warfare are of non-combatants, not to mention that the enemies' innocents are not given the same regard as one's own innocents.

If one is supposed to operate based on *economia* regarding the decision to participate in any given war, how is a person to know when *economia* is appropriate. As is the case in the historical use of the just war theory, the invocation of *economia* has not been given any official platform or way of dissemination. No one has been appointed to decide when the conditions have been adequately met, either before, during or after a conflict. This role would seemingly belong to the bishops. But what instances can anyone cite in which an Orthodox bishop or synod has declared that all the conditions necessary for a just war or for *economia* to be exercised have been met, and that therefore Christians can participate? In practice it is left up to the individual to decide.

But how can an individual decide when the information needed to make such a decision is far beyond the capacity of any individual to obtain? The individual depends on the governing authorities. It is well known that in the lead up to war and once war has commenced, all governments engage in obfuscation. "Truth is the first casualty of war" (Aeschylus). Christians are forced into a situation of blindly accepting whatever justifications are put forth. This means that both just war theory and *economia* amount to the same thing: a hopeless maze of smoke and mirrors, making it impossible to navigate or discern the truth.

Still, one can understand why just war theory and *economia* are invoked when it comes to an individual's tribe or nation. People find the alternative, love of enemies as taught by Christ, too terrible to contemplate or put into practice. The consequences are not hard to imagine.

So, what is the solution to this seemingly intractable problem, when the iron grip of fear that compels Christians to engage in activity that contradicts clear Gospel teachings? If fear of the consequences of being faithful to Christ's commandments is the problem, then the New Testament writings and the witness of the martyrs provide the solution: **simply a deepening of faith in the One who makes such demands on us.** Although this may seem obvious, sometimes we fail to fully realize who the One giving us this difficult commandment is.

Our faith teaches us that Jesus Christ is the pre-eternal Son of the Unoriginate Father. This being a basic truth, it would mean that all Christ's teachings are God's teachings, God's Word, and are therefore totally trustworthy. But trust requires faith. Faith that the One who comes from God knows of that which He speaks. It requires trust in the One through whom the universe was created, in that He understands the mysteries of that creation far better than our meager understanding. And although He doesn't explain those mysteries, He offers a way to safely traverse the mystery of existence that insures eternal life. By loving our enemies, returning good for evil, we participate with Christ in his work of redeeming all of humanity.

When viewed from this perspective, we find we can act, not in absence of fear, but despite fear. Despite any evidence to the contrary, we find that we can fully trust that God is bringing about the salvation of His beloved humanity in ways that don't fit into common human logic. By teaching our young people these truths, we can help them avoid the terrible spiritual and mental damage which involvement in warfare inevitably wreaks on them. And instead equip them to make the choices that lead to their own salvation and the salvation of God's beloved humanity.

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