

Jesus, Religions, and Just War - CDC Panel Discussion by Paul Copan

Who of us hasn't heard the claim that "religion leads to warfare?" We're familiar with sweeping military campaigns in the Middle East and North Africa in the name of Islam. In the name of Christ, Crusaders marched to take land back that was previously under Christendom. In 16th and 17th century Europe (1550-1650), wars between Protestant and Catholic rulers brought much bloodshed. There have been czarist pogroms against the Jews—often with religious justification. Mohandas K. Gandhi was killed by a militant Hindu in 1948; Sri Lanka's prime minister was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 1959. [1] In our day, we've seen Catholics and Protestants clashing in Northern Ireland. In India, we've seen Hindus and Muslims fighting one another. Buddhists and Hindus have been fighting in Sri Lanka. We've seen the Ayatollah Khomeini calling for the death of Salman Rushdie because of his Satanic Verses.

Doesn't religion lead to violence?

Several observations are in order:

1) It's overly simplistic, against what Regina Schwartz has claimed, [2] to say that "monotheism" has brought "violent legacy" to Western societies and that non-Western religions have no association with violence.

2) Thus what we must look to is the essential teaching of what a religion says, not merely at its abuse, and judge it from that perspective. Is taking up the sword in the name of Jesus to promote Christianity consistent with what Jesus affirmed? We could ask the same of Islam or Hinduism.

3) Much of the blood shed in the 20th century was the result of atheist ideologues. It's ironic that religion gets the blame for violence, but critics of religion are silent when a secular or atheistic faith—such as that of Stalin or Mao Tse-tung—wreaks utter destruction on millions upon millions of lives.

4) Thus it is not religion per se that perpetrates violence, but a certain mindset that seeks to use an ideology or a religious justification to control people's thinking and restrain the most fundamental freedoms.

5) Where freedom of conscience or religious freedom or women's rights are being abused, all of us must reject this as wrong. Sometimes this may mean calling on the carpet those who claim the same religious affiliation as we do, but they utilize violent ends to promote their religious system. For example, where were the people to condemn the Ayatollah Khomeini's death wish (fatwah) upon Salman Rushdie for his Satanic Verses?

I'm so glad we have a Muslim represented here; it is precisely such persons of influence whose voice can contribute to bringing about necessary changes in

Islamic-based societies around the world so that it will fit into the global village in which we find ourselves. [3] For example, Muqtedar Khan (a Muslim from India, now living in Michigan) of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy boldly wrote after 9/11, decrying intolerance in the name of Islam:

The Israeli occupation of Palestine is perhaps central to Muslim grievance against the West. While acknowledging that, I must remind you that Israel treats its one million Arab citizens with greater respect and dignity than most Arab nations treat their citizens. Today Palestinian refugees can settle and become citizens of the United States but in spite of all the tall rhetoric of the Arab world and Quranic injunctions (24:22) no Muslim country except Jordan extends this support to them. While we loudly and consistently condemn Israel for its ill treatment of Palestinians we are silent when Muslim regimes abuse the rights of Muslims and slaughter thousands of them. Remember Saddam and his use of chemical weapons against Muslims (Kurds)?. Remember Pakistani army's excesses against Muslims (Bengalis)?. Remember the Mujahideen of Afghanistan and their mutual slaughter? Have we ever condemned them for their excesses? Have we demanded international intervention or retribution against them? Do you know how the Saudis treat their minority Shi'as? Have we protested the violation of their rights? But we all are eager to condemn Israel ; not because we care for rights and lives of the Palestinians, we don't. We condemn Israel because we hate "them."

These are bold words, but they are utterly necessary for changes within Islam to take place. The same sorts of measured and firm denunciations are in order when abuses against humanity take place in the name of any religious traditions—including my own .

6) Thus, truth-claims regarding religious uniqueness in themselves do not perpetuate violence—hence, a word about religious pluralism: [4] Although the Dalai Lama rejects the existence of a Creator God, I still appreciate what he does for promoting peace. He claims that Tibetan Buddhism is "the highest and complete form of Buddhism." [5] Furthermore, full salvation or even the practice of compassion is impossible to achieve unless you accept the doctrine of emptiness (sunyata)—the absence of inherent or independent existence. Everything is emptiness . In an interview in the early 1980s, he claimed that the state of liberation is one which "only Buddhists can accomplish." [6] I would disagree, but our differing views needn't perpetuate violence or militancy. They needn't keep us from fighting for human rights, religious freedom, the right to life and liberty for the most vulnerable of human beings.

In fact, people who call themselves religious pluralists believe they have a virtue that the Dalai Lama or I do not have—they believe that their viewpoint is the correct one, and that our views are erroneous. So try as we might, we can't escape truth-claims in religion. But the question is: how will we treat people who disagree with us—with dignity and respect or as enemies? Disagreement can co-exist with respect. I myself attended a Muslim mosque for two years, and I was blessed to meet many wonderful Muslims and to eat

in their homes. Tolerance doesn't mean accepting all views as true (which is impossible, since we don't truly "tolerate" those who don't agree with our pluralism); it means putting up with what we take to be erroneous or false in another person's thinking but respecting the person's right to think and choose differently since he has been made in the image of God too.

7) Let me say something about Jesus and war: The Christian church is not a theocratic nation (Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world; otherwise, my servants would fight"), but Christians ideally should live within national boundaries to seek the well-being of that nation. Sometimes, they may be called upon to defend that nation's existence (or that of another vulnerable nation) against an aggressor's attack.

Contrary to what many believe, Jesus' words about "turning the other cheek" after someone hits you on the right cheek are dealing with personal insults, not with acts of violence or force. Rather, Jesus said, "When insulted, be willing to take another insult." Assuming that persons in Jesus' time were generally right-handed, a hit on the right cheek is a back-handed slap, which even today in the Middle East expresses a gross insult. This idea of a slap as an insult is seen in Lamentations 3:30: "Let him give his cheek to the smiter and be filled with insults." This slap would be roughly equivalent to spitting in someone's face in our society.

Jesus is not saying, "Don't defend yourself when you are attacked" or "Don't help a woman who is being raped" or "Don't defend your country when it is being attacked." He is not negating the judicial principle of an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"; he speaks against the abuse of that judicial principle to justify personal retaliation or vengeance. [7]

Although there are some pacifistic Christian groups which I respect, I believe good biblical reasons can be given for advocating a just war as a last resort to bring about lasting peace: Governments, when operating as they should, must bring order and punish evildoers. God approves of this arrangement, as Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Pet. 2:14 indicate. Even though war is never neat and innocent civilians will be killed, the Judeo-Christian tradition is realistic in recognizing human self-centeredness and sinfulness which may necessitate force to keep evil from spreading its tentacles further, to restrain violence.

If a war is ever to be fought, its principles should be just, keeping in mind both human beings as made in God's image and the reality of human sinfulness :[8]

1) JUST CAUSE: The only morally legitimate reason to go to war is for self-defense (or for defending a nation in moral need of defense)— or if there is very strong reason for a pre-emptive strike (e.g., a "rogue nation" with "dirty bombs"): "If this rule were universally followed there would be no aggressors and no wars."

2) JUST INTENT: The only morally legitimate goal in war is the restoration of peace, with justice for both friend and foe : "Vengeance, subjugation, and

conquest are unjustifiable purposes." Sometimes there may be "unintentional effects" (killing civilians) which accompany the intended effect of restraining violence.

3) LAST RESORT: "war should be entered upon only when negotiation, arbitration, and compromise, and all other paths fail; for as a rational being man should, if at all possible, settle his disputes by reason and law, not by force."

4) LAWFUL DECLARATION: Only a lawful government has the right to initiate war. Only the state—not individuals or parties within the state—can legitimately exercise this authority.

5) IMMUNITY OF NON-COMBATANTS: "those not officially serving as agents of the government in its use of force, including POW's and medical personnel and services, should not be permitted to fight and are not to be subject to violence."

6) LIMITED OBJECTIVES: Since the goal of war is peace –not the destruction of the enemy nation's economy or the destruction of its political institutions.

7) LIMITED MEANS: "only sufficient force should be used to resist violence and restore peace." "Sufficient" does not necessarily mean decisive victory

C.S. Lewis, writing during WWII, said that "war is very disagreeable." [9] Be that as it may, evil and aggression are a reality, and we may be doing more harm by ignoring or not stopping evil. He said that a society of pacifists won't remain pacifistic long!

Only liberal societies tolerate Pacifists. In the liberal society, the number of Pacifists will either be large enough to cripple the state as a belligerent, or not. If not, you have done nothing. If it is large enough, then you have handed over the state which does tolerate Pacifists to its totalitarian neighbor who does not. Pacifism of this kind is taking the straight road to a world in which there will be no Pacifists. [10]

Jesus said that those who are peacemakers are blessed—not just peacekeepers, but those who actively seek to unite parties at odds with one another. In the Christian faith, this is best exemplified by Jesus, in whose death we see, in the words of St. Paul, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself."

[1] Even as recently as today, there was a Buddhist monk, Pramaha Sayanjerasutho, who was arrested after firing his AK-47 into the air in Thailand's parliament building to protest police harassment ("Monk Threatens Thai Parliament," BBC News ,22 May 2002; found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid_2001000/2001557.stm).

[2] The Curse of Canaan : The Violent Legacy of Monotheism)Chicago :University of Chicago Press, 1997.

[3] It must be acknowledged by Muslims that their religion has not simply sought to defend itself, but has been aggressive and ruthless and expansive. For meticulous documentation of the influence of Islam and the not-always-positive relationships of ruling Muslims with Jews and Christians (which Muslim apologists tend to paper over as "tolerant"), see the writings of the Egyptian Jewish author Bat Ye'or: The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam and Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide (both published by Dickinson Farleigh University Press).

[4] For criticisms of religious pluralism, see Paul Copan, "True for You, But Not for Me" (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998); Harold Netland, Encountering Religious Pluralism (Downers Grove ,Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 2001); Gavin D'Costa, The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity (Maryknoll ,N.Y. : Orbis, 2000).

[5] Kindness, Clarity and Insight (New York: Snow Lion, 1984), 45.

[6] José Ignacio Cabezón, ed. The Bodhgaya Interviews (New York: Snow Lion, 1988), 22.

[7] Some observations on Jesus' comments in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not resist an evil person": The OT advocates self-defense (even killing to save one's own life). Police and law enforcement are necessary to preserve order in society. Rom. 13:4 makes clear that evildoers are to be resisted. Jesus forcefully resisted the money-changers in the temple in Jn. 2. What Jesus is saying here does not apply to how the state should operate but how disciples of Christ should operate in their interpersonal relationships. (The state, for example, must bring evildoers to justice. "Forgive your enemies" would not be appropriate for a justice system, letting off criminals without punishment.)

"Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also": This text does not mean that your child cannot defend himself as a last resort when being beat up by the school bully. This does not imply that we stand by while a woman is being raped. Even Jesus, when slapped by order of the priest, didn't literally "turn the other cheek." Rather, he said, "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike me?" (Jn. 18:23).

"And if someone wants to sue and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well": The cloak (outer garment) was considered the inalienable right or possession under the law of Moses (Ex. 22:26). Jesus is here saying, "Gladly part with what is legally yours." The Christian surrenders his "inalienable rights" for the good of others.

"If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles": In Christ's time, a Roman soldier could force a Jew to carry a burden one mile (1,000 paces) and no more. This action was meant to infuriate the Jews since the Jews despised the Romans. Can you imagine the shock if a follower of Christ would

offer to carry the load another mile? This displays a supernatural disposition. Christ here says, "Go beyond expectations forced upon you." Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you": This passage does not justify indiscriminate giving, but rather cheerful, sacrificial generosity—even to those who are evil We should not give money to the person with alcohol on his breath. God certainly doesn't give us everything WE ask for because he knows our requests may not always be good (Jas. 4:2ff.). Nor is Christ advocating a government welfare system which gives handouts to all who ask. Paul wrote that a person should work if he is to eat.

[8] Taken from Arthur Holmes' essay ("Just War") in *Four Views on War*, ed., Robert Clouse (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 4-5.

[9] *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (New York : Macmillan), 39.

[10] *Ibid.*, 44.