



Does Christianity Really Work?



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1

Peace-Making: A Time to Resist

A RELIGION OF PEACE?

The garden behind the United Nations in New York features several statues and sculptures, gifts from different countries. One of the best known, a gift from the Soviet Union in 1959, features a man holding a hammer in one hand and a sword in the other, which he is making into a plow. The title, ‘Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares’, is taken from Isaiah 2:4. There is a certain irony here, in that the Soviet Union at that point was the bitter enemy of the American-led countries in the Cold War. Officially the Soviets were atheists, while America was at least culturally Christian.

Nearly all of mankind longs for peace. But how to obtain it? Surely, if the Christian faith is true, then there ought to be evidence that it is a religion that



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promotes peace. Certainly, bringing peace is what the Bible claims. Jesus praised the artisans of peace in his list of the beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God’ (Matt. 5:9). The terms translated ‘peace’ are used nearly 370 times throughout the Bible. ‘To set the mind on the flesh is death’, Paul tells us, ‘but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace’ (Rom. 8:6). ‘Strive for peace with everyone’, we are enjoined (Heb. 12:14). The Lord is often called ‘the God of peace’, a nomenclature made throughout the Scriptures (see Rom. 15:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Heb. 13:20).



Before we look at evidence for Christian peace-making in the world, a reminder is in order. Jesus is the ultimate peacemaker. He came first to establish peace where it was most needed, between people and God. As we mentioned earlier, the gospel is above all a message of peace with God, through his Son, Jesus Christ (Acts 10:36). If our deepest need is to be reconciled with our Maker, then the gospel gives us ultimate peace (Rom. 5:1).



This kind of peace is not first and foremost a feeling. Rather, it is a reality, the reality of freedom of access to God. God, our enemy, has made himself our friend. Through his pain and suffering on the cross, Jesus Christ opened the way to God the Father. Why did he have to pay such a price? Because our enmity is culpable, and there is only one way our guilt can be erased: the



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punishment required by justice. When Jesus hung on the cross and exclaimed: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’, he was feeling the full anger of God against the sin of humanity. The only just consequence of our guilt is death. And, marvelously, Jesus was willing to die for us, to become sin for us, so that we could become new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17, 21). Then he was raised up to life, ‘for our justification’ that is, for our acquittal (Rom. 4:25).

Here is the ‘already’ of the already-not-yet. Jesus can say to his followers: ‘I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). Quite a statement! Does this mean that any time someone comes to Christ he or she will know nothing but peace and quiet? Of course not. Christ’s overcoming the world was accomplished once-and-for-all on the cross, yet the full effects of that victory will not be felt until the very end. He himself predicted tribulation in history until the close of the age, as we have seen.

SO MANY WARS

Yet if that is the ‘already’, there should also be a ‘not-yet’; is that not so? One question immediately poses itself. If biblical religion is all about peace and peace-making, why,



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then, is there so much war in the Old and even in the New Testament? That is a fair question. The simple answer is that peace is not the only value in Christianity. Equally important is the value of justice. And there are times that violence may be necessary in order to ensure justice. For many, that is simply a contradiction: violence to the end of a just peace? The apostles identify rulers and magistrates as God's appointees for keeping justice, both to sanction evil-doers and to protect those who would do good (Rom. 13:3-4; 1 Pet. 2:13). Among their responsibilities may be the use of force. The magistrate 'does not bear the sword in vain', Paul tells his readers (Rom. 13:4). While the primary task of the civil magistrate is to keep internal peace, a secondary, related purpose is to protect from outside aggressors, which is why the Bible tells us to submit to them, and not resist them (Titus 3:1). It may appear contradictory to contend for peace by violent means, but in a world of fallen people that is sometimes what needs to happen. Most of us would believe that, faced with Nazi aggression and atrocities, there was no other recourse than to go to war against the advancing so-called Third Reich. Other wars are not necessarily so clear-cut. There can be legitimate debate about involvements in certain wars, and foreign policy issues need to be sorted out before deciding on an invasion.

No one who reads the Bible even superficially can miss the numerous accounts of war. Is God on one



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side or another? What do we make of biblical authors claiming so? We find the psalmists making appeals against their enemies. ‘How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?’ asks Asaph, who goes on to plead with God for the destruction of his enemies (Ps. 74:10-11). It won’t do simply to say that from a more barbaric ancient time, things evolved into a higher consciousness, so that by the time of Jesus Christ peace, not war, was the ideal. The psalmists were godly people. The outbursts of anger found in several of the Psalms were not from any spirit of barbarity or revenge, as some have claimed, but from their sense of justice, rooted in their covenant relationship with God, the ultimate source of that justice.

An appeal to God for justice is found in the New Testament as well as in the Old. Although it is a parable, the story of the ‘persistent widow’ is a reminder that the cry for justice is not only an Old Testament one. The widow’s request of the judge was, ‘Give me justice against my enemy’ (Luke 18:3). Because of her persistence, the judge did; Jesus makes the point that God will not delay long over the cries for justice of his people (vv. 7-8; see Rev. 6:9-11). Paul complains of Alexander the coppersmith who had done him great harm, and is comforted by the thought that God will repay him according to his deeds (2 Tim. 4:14). The Book of the



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Revelation is full of wars and rumors of wars, many of them perpetrated by God the Judge.

Wars in the Bible are not just random violence. There is a carefully articulated understanding of justice which is required by the holiness of God, and which sometimes requires going to war. War in the Old Testament is not *Jihad*. The wars of conquest by Israel were unique. They were specifically commissioned by the Lord in order to provide the promised land, which was a foretaste of heaven. The land was to be a theocracy, based on the principles of divine law. The conquest of Palestine was thus limited and not meant to be repeated. What about the people who lived in that land? They were particularly degenerate according to the record. Israel was called upon to invade the land of Canaan only when the 'iniquity of the Amorites was full' (Gen. 15:16). And even then, Israel did so reluctantly, and never self-righteously. The Lord specified to them that their own virtues had nothing to do with his choice of them as instruments for his judgments (Deut. 7:7-8). The point is, in certain very delimited circumstances, God can and does directly authorize a given war.

JUST WAR

Wars today cannot and should not claim such a divine approval. The term *just war* may appear to be an oxymoron



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(a contradiction in terms). War brings death, destruction, carnage, and only rarely resolves the problems it set out to solve. After the close of biblical times, when we no longer have God directly telling his people when to conduct a war, is not the chief responsibility of Christians to broker peace? Is it ever right to engage in armed conflict? Have there been examples of just wars? Christians disagree on this question. Yet the position known as ‘just war’ has come down through the ages as one with authority.

The basic contours of just war are simple.¹ One set of guidelines covers the question, when to go to war. A second set covers just practices within war. When is it right to go to war? There must be a just cause, usually to protect life from unwarranted aggression. The war must be conducted by duly constituted authority, such as the state, and never vigilantes. The war must aim at correcting an injustice and not to provide an excuse for gain. Finally, and somewhat controversially, it must be the last resort. Other means must have been tried before going into war. This is controversial, because it is not always easy to determine how long is it possible to try various solutions before one puts oneself at a disadvantage. What is the just way to conduct an actual war?

1. There are a number of useful guides to just war theory. One of the best is James Turner Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).



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Acts of war should be directed against enemy combatants, not civilians. There must be proportionality, that is, for the purpose of military advantage, not revenge. Prisoners of war must be treated humanely.

The question now becomes, have there been just wars, and to what extent has that justice been nurtured by Christian principles? A few examples should suffice. While the American President Woodrow Wilson was contemplating a declaration of war against Germany, William Manning, the Rector of Trinity Parish, New York (who would later become the Episcopal Bishop of New York) published the following declaration:



Our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't stand for peace at any price ... Every true American would rather see his country involved in war, if so it must be, than see her flag dishonored or her name stained with disgrace. Every true American would rather see America take up the sword, if she must, than see her bowed down in fear before the infamous and monstrous doctrine that might makes right. Every true American would rather see her country face that issue than see the country untrue to the principles of righteousness and freedom and justice and humanity, for which our fathers fought, and on which our life is built.²

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2. 'Our Country: Address of the Rev. William T. Manning, D.D., Rector of Trinity Parish, New York, Delivered at a Meeting of the New York Local Assembly', *St Andrew's Cross*, vol. 31 no.1, (October, 1916) p. 31.



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Manning added a condemnation of pure pacifism, the doctrine that says war is always wrong because violence is always wrong. Having Christian convictions does not preclude justifying a particular war; rather it may require it.

Various wars afford the opportunity to see how a Christian influence has worked a righteous cause. World War II, on the European front, is a clearer case than most, since the Nazi movement was bellicose, aggressive, and deceptive. The Nazi goal was pseudo-messianic, that is, an attempt both to purge the world of unfit people and to establish a millennial kingdom, the Third Reich. Much of the ideology was pagan, based on pan-Aryan race theory, a mixture of mythology and pseudo-science that claimed white people were from a purer race than any other group.³ Certainly, then, there was just cause for the Allies to enter the war. Although some attempts had been made to appease the Germans, that strategy turned out to be massively misguided. Nor was it particularly Christian. ‘This morning I had another talk with the German Chancellor, Herr Hitler, and here is the paper which bears his name upon it as well as mine’, said Neville Chamberlain, then the British Prime

3. Adolph Hitler was known to rely on so-called scientific theories, such as Lanz von Liebenfels’ doctrine of ‘Ariosophy’, and Joseph Reimer’s idea of a ‘Pan-German Germany’.



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Minister. He added: 'We regard the agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.' It turned out to be an agreement Hitler had no intention of honoring.

When it became clear that the Nazi movement would stop at nothing to gain control of the world, it also became clear that war was the only proper response. Many of the world's leaders, both clergy and political leaders, recognized the essentially pagan nature of the Nazi aggressors. Perhaps the most notable among them was Winston Churchill. His leadership inspired so many allies. We do not know a great deal about his personal faith. Yet his worldview was clearly Christian.

At first, standing nearly alone in the opposition to the Nazis, Churchill inspired engagement in the war for reasons of divine providence. He believed God had placed him on earth 'for such a time as this', in order to preserve not only democracy but Christian civilization. According to historian John Lukacs, in the darkest hours of 1940, when it looked as though the German forces could actually prevail, Churchill wrote Roosevelt to say that London was a 'strong City of Refuge which enshrines the title deeds of human progress and is of deep consequence to Christian civilization.'⁴ Later in

4. John Lukacs, *Churchill: Visionary, Statesman, Historian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002) p. 95.



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life, he would wistfully wonder what might become of the next generation, ‘if God wearied of mankind.’

When Churchill met Franklin D. Roosevelt on H.M.S. Prince of Wales, in order to sign the Atlantic Charter, Churchill proposed singing the hymn, ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ together. Although the theme ‘marching as to war’ is clearly a metaphor for the Christian life, Churchill saw these lines as an inspiration for the group that was gathered. His famous words of explanation were these:



We sang ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’ indeed, and I felt that this was no vain presumption, but that we had the right to feel that we were serving a cause for the sake of which a trumpet has sounded from on high. When I looked upon that densely packed congregation of fighting men of the same language, of the same faith, of the same fundamental laws, of the same ideals ... it swept across me that here was the only hope, but also the sure hope, of saving the world from measureless degradation.⁵



Surely several factors motivated the Allies to go to war against the Nazis. But the Christian influence, resting on just war theory, was one of the strongest. In compliance with the theory, as well, the post-war magnanimity of the Allies should be admired. Their generous participation

5. [<http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/timeline/410824awp.html>]



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in the reconstruction of Germany was not only right but worked out practically to be the very best policy in the end.

RESISTANCE



Thoughtful readers will of course recognize that the church was not uniformly opposed to the Nazi movement, as was already mentioned. The German churches, with some exceptions, were uncritical of the rising Nazi movement. In part this is because there was a certain exhaustion after the end of the First World War. In part, as well, there was an unhealthy relationship between church and state, altar and crown. Besides that, many Christians were tempted by anti-Semitism, often blaming the Jews for some of the failed economic policies of the 1920s. Some made the connection that Karl Marx, the philosopher who inspired communism, was partly Jewish. The same complacency could be found in other countries. France, within and without the church, for example, tended to blame the Jews for its economic woes. Throughout Europe there existed right-wing groups who believed that somehow the Nazis had a point. During the war itself, collaboration with the Germans was not uncommon. Even those who were repulsed by the pagan character of Nazism, such as Bishop Gerlier of Lyon, mentioned earlier, felt that cooperation with the Vichy government, the puppet regime of the Nazis, was best for the safety of France.



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These examples of partial or total collaboration on the part of Christians are lamentable. There is no excuse. However understandable are the pressures on the churches to put up little significant resistance, there can be no justification for it, only reparations. And we still have much to learn as we face the future.

Having said this, we should not ignore the many courageous people who did stand against the tide, and whose resistance made a great difference. What does the just war principle of a duly constituted authority mean in an occupied land? World War II presents a number of scenarios where Christian consciousness was active:



From the beginning of Hitler's regime, the ecumenical Christian movement (its central offices were located in Geneva, London and New York) strongly condemned developments in Nazi Germany that threatened the independence of Christian Churches and the safety of Jews. On May 26 and 29, 1933, twelve hundred American clergymen from 26 different Christian denominations sponsored an advertisement in *The New York Times* condemning anti-Jewish activities in Nazi Germany. Leaders of the Federal Council of Churches (a Protestant group), located in the United States, sent angry letters in 1933 to their colleagues in the German Churches, demanding public statements denouncing Nazi policies. Between 1933 and 1945, there were six major statements from the leaders of Churches in this country and in Europe (outside the Third Reich) that specifically condemned



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anti-Semitism and the Nazi persecution of Jews. (Among the officials involved were the Archbishop of Canterbury and Samuel Cavert and Henry Smith Leiper of the Federal Council of Churches in New York.) In November 1938, the three leading Protestant ecumenical organizations in Geneva, Switzerland, issued a statement castigating ‘antisemitism in all its forms’ and urging governments to permit more Jewish refugees to enter their countries. In the United States in December 1938, the Federal Council of Churches and the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a joint condemnation of Kristallnacht, which had occurred a month earlier. (It was the first Protestant/Catholic joint statement on a social issue in this country.) In December 1942, after reports of genocide began to reach the Allied countries, the Federal Council of Churches passed a resolution protesting the ‘virtual massacre’ of Europe’s Jews. This was followed by similar protests from the Anglican Church in England and a joint statement by Protestant ecumenical leaders and the World Jewish Congress in Geneva. In Great Britain, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, gave an impassioned speech in March 1943 in the House of Lords, demanding an immediate end to immigration quotas and an increase in Allied aid to countries that offered refuge to Jews.⁶

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6. Victoria J. Barnett, ‘The Role of the Churches: Compliance and Confrontation’, *Dimensions*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1998). Published by Braun Holocaust Institute, Anti-Defamation League. [http://archive.adl.org/braun/dim_14_1_role_church.html] For a fairly balanced approach to the churches’ attitudes during the war, see Victoria J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (New York: Praeger, 2000).



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Sadly, the Holocaust, the death camps, and the phony medical experiments went on. The actions and appeals of the churches were often not heard. Perhaps, too, they lacked a clearly articulated long-term plan. Sometimes the rank and file members of the churches were often slow to respond to the call of their leaders.

BONHOEFFER



There were courageous voices inside Germany as well. One of the most celebrated is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and author who participated in a failed plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. When the Nazis rose to power in January 1933, Bonhoeffer – despite a promising academic career – attacked Hitler and the cult of the *Führer* (leader) in a radio address in February. He was cut off in mid-sentence. In April, he asked the churches to resist the persecution of the Jews, making the famous statement: ‘The church must not simply bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam the spoke in the wheel itself.’⁷ In July Hitler (illegally) called a church synod and imposed



7. David F. Ford & Rachel Muers, eds, *The Modern Theologians: an Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005) p. 38. A number of biographies of Bonhoeffer exist. Among the best is Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times: A Biography* (rev. ed.), (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). See also Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Vintage, 2015).



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elections. Bonhoeffer fought vigorously for nominees from more independent, non-Nazi representatives. The elections were rigged, and thus a large majority went to Nazi sympathizers. Soon non-Aryans were barred from taking pastoral positions. Bonhoeffer then urged the cessation of pastoral services such as baptisms, weddings, etc., but his colleagues thought it unwise.



In 1934, Bonhoeffer and his minority colleagues formed the *Confessing Church*, and eventually signed the *Barmen Declaration*, penned largely by Karl Barth, then the best-known Protestant theologian in Europe. The heart of the declaration was to reject any submission of the church to the state, and to confess that the church may only submit to the Word of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Bonhoeffer spent some time ministering in London and in the United States. He held a position at the University of Berlin. He created a new theological seminary for the training of the *Confessing Church* ministers in Finkenwalde. Time forbids us exploring the extraordinary discipline and style of life in the seminary. Karl Barth himself was sent back to Switzerland in 1935. Bonhoeffer was disbarred from teaching in Berlin because he was called a ‘pacifist and an enemy of the state’ by Theodore Heckle, a leader in the so-called German Evangelical Church. Then, Bonhoeffer’s close friend and colleague Martin Niemöller was arrested.



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Bonhoeffer was not simply motivated by a general altruism, nor even a Lutheran cultural tradition. Though he was not a fundamentalist in the strictest sense he had a high view of Scripture and of the relation of sound theology to social action. Perhaps the clearest place where this is apparent is in *Life Together*.⁸ Here he affirms the centrality of Christ's person and work in no uncertain terms: 'First, Christians are persons who no longer seek their salvation, their deliverance, their justification in themselves, but in Jesus Christ alone.' He also firmly argued that the Christian community must act in the world, even when that action will mean defying the world's systems.⁹

After being prohibited from publishing his thoughts or even speaking them publicly, Bonhoeffer joined an anti-Hitler military intelligence organization known as the *Abwehr*. He was brought into the organization by his friend Dohnanyi, on the grounds that his contacts could be of great value to Germany, which was meant to protect him from the draft. In fact he made a good many clandestine visits abroad in order to garner support against Hitler. When he learned of the widespread persecution

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, in *Works*, vol. 5, Gerhard Ludwig & Albrecht Schönherr, trans. & eds, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) pp. 25-118.

9. *ibid.*, 27-31.



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of the Jews, he became increasingly convinced that action was needed, not just words. He made the famous remark: ‘The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live.’¹⁰ He engaged in numerous operations to help Jews escape into Switzerland, which was officially neutral.

On April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested, along with Dohnanyi, because of the rivalry between the *Abwehr* and the *SS*, the *Schutzstaffel*, a Nazi pro-Hitler intelligence agency. When, subsequently, the Gestapo discovered several intrigues involving helping Jews escape, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned at the *Tegel* military detention center, awaiting his trial. There he wrote what became *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which were smuggled out of the center. Sympathetic guards even offered him a way to escape, but Bonhoeffer refused, on the grounds that the Nazi reprisals would victimize his family.

A plot by some members of the *Abwehr* on Hitler’s life on July 20, 1944, failed. When it was discovered that Bonhoeffer was connected to the conspirators, he was

10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘After Ten Years’, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1953) p. 21-2.



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sent to a high security prison camp run by the Gestapo, and then to Buchenwald, and finally to Flossenbürg concentration camp. Hitler ordered the conspirators executed. After a trial without witnesses or documents or any defense, he was condemned and sent to the gallows on April 9, 1945, where he died along with several other conspirators. This was two weeks before the American Army came to liberate the camps. Several in his family were executed as well.

Bonhoeffer accomplished a great deal in his short life. While his group was unsuccessful in the plot to assassinate Hitler, he and his colleagues were nevertheless able to inform a great many people around Europe of the evils of Nazism, which presumably helped to shorten the war. But he has also inspired generations not only by his life's story but by his numerous writings, including classics such as *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*.

RESISTANCE IN HOLLAND

Resistance occurred outside of Germany as well. The Scandinavians and the Dutch were particularly active in protecting the Jews, and resisting various Nazi occupation policies. The Germans invaded Holland in 1940. The Queen of the Netherlands fled with her family to Great Britain. A puppet government was set up of Dutch Nazis. During the occupation a number