

Peacemaking in a Violent World—A Christian Perspective

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The pursuit of peace has been a goal of the human community for millennia. And peace continues to elude us. At the core of this human problem is the stories we tell. Our religious traditions provide us with stories that enable us to identify approaches, strategies and actions that can guide us into the ways of peace. In this talk I want to outline some of the approaches to peacemaking that are implicit in the stories of the Gospels and early Christianity.

The heroic culture of the ancient near east.

The most widely circulated stories of the ancient near east were the heroic stories of the warriors in battle. Hundreds of thousands of men participated in the wars of the ancient world. The entire culture was a heroic culture that celebrated the victories of heroes in battle. The Homeric epic of the defeat of the Trojans in the ancient city of Troy by the Greeks led by Achilles was told throughout the Greco Roman world and has been the model for heroic epics in the celebration of the great victories of heroes in battle ever since. The function of these stories was on the one hand to glorify warfare. And they were also the most powerful advertising campaign for the recruitment of soldiers for the armies of the empires of the ancient near east. Millions of men were killed in these epic battles all over the world. And in every culture there were stories modeled on Homer's great tale celebrating the heroes of the country's battles against their enemies.

In a surprising way, the stories of these warriors and the empires associated with them did not emerge from ancient history as the dominant story. Instead the stories of Jesus of Nazareth were the most widely told and celebrated stories of the ancient world from sometime in the 3rd century until well into the modern period, the 17th-18th centuries, the stories of Jesus have been foundational. Yet ironically since the time of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, they have not been taken seriously as a source of governmental policy and action. Rather they have been treated as a source of theology in often highly abstract and abstruse doctrines about the Trinity, the human and divine natures of Christ, and the processes of human salvation and reconciliation with God. They have been a source for making peace with God but not between people and nations. That is, the human community and the Church have never taken Jesus seriously as a peacemaker in the world. Instead we have primarily taken the stories of the warriors and of faith in the power of redemptive violence and warfare as our model for peacemaking. That is, as a human community, we continue to seek peace by making war.

The question of this talk is then: are there approaches to peacemaking that can be identified in the stories of Jesus?

First the context of the Gospels: the four canonical Gospels announce that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

The Messiah traditions in Israel

Saul and David and the Messiahs of war on enemies. The Messiah is an anointed one who leads the warriors of Israel against the Philistines.

Saul is anointed by Samuel and immediately organizes an army and defeats the Philistines. His first great victory is the deliverance of the city of Jabesh Gilead that was being oppressed by Nahash, the king of the Ammonites, whose policy was to gouge out the right eye of every Israelite he could capture in order to humiliate Israel. And Saul had wars everywhere. This is a summary: "When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side—against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines; wherever he turned he routed them. He did valiantly, and struck down the Amalekites, and rescued Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them." (I Sam. 14.47-48). But Saul's Messiahship ended badly. Saul and his three sons were all killed on Mount Gilboa in a disastrous battle with the Philistines.

David was the next messiah of Israel. He too was anointed by Samuel and his first great victory was the defeat of the giant Goliath. David won battles against all the enemies of Israel on every side and expanded the kingdom, and established his capital in Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been the center of controversy, conflict, worship and warfare ever since to this day. The peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians was virtually complete when Bill Clinton was president. It collapsed because they could not agree about which streets in Jerusalem would be controlled by the Israeli government and the Palestinian authority. David's wars are summarized in II Samuel 8. He defeated the Philistines, the Moabites, King Hadadezer at the river Euphrates, 20,000 soldiers of the Arameans of Damascus who came to help King Hadadezer, King Toi of Hamath who became a vassal king and all of his people became servants of David, and the Edomites of whom he killed 18,000 in the Valley of Salt. This is what it meant to be a messiah in ancient Israel.

But the hope for a Messiah like David who would free Israel from its enemies continued for nearly 1000 years. The model of a Messiah was then an inspired general, a man of war who believed and trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel.

Alexander and Augustus Caesar were great generals. They established peace in the world by conquest of most of the known world, Alexander from 320-332 B.C. conquered Greece and then the whole of the Persian empire. Augustus Caesar became Emperor of Rome in 44 B.C. first as part of the triumvirate with Antony and Lepidus and later as Emperor from 27 B.C until his death in 14 A.D., a total of 58 years. He sought to establish universal peace and justice after nearly a hundred years of civil war and largely succeeded by destroying his enemies and then establishing more secure borders by ongoing warfare with the tribes and states on the boundaries of the Empire. He was worshipped as a god, represented in statues as Zeus and Apollo, and laid the foundations for the continuation of the Roman empire for the next nearly 400 years.

In relation to our topic then, what do we know about Jesus of Nazareth? In contrast to Achilles, Agamemnon, Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar, in contrast to Saul and David, the previous Messiahs of Israel, Jesus never led an army into battle. He never

won a victory in war. He never killed anyone. There are no stories of his taking a sword in his hand. Against the background of the Messiahs of Israel and the Saviors of the Hellenistic world, Jesus stands out by contrast. He was not a man of war. As far as we know, Jesus never hurt anyone. There is no historical evidence of his leadership or participation in war. The New Testament celebrates a Messiah, the one whom God has sent to save the world, who is wholly non-violent. That is his name, Jesus Christ. And Christ, the anointed one, from which we get the words “christen to baptize, chrism consecrated oil used in baptism,” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew title, Messiah.

According to the New Testament and the early Church community, the Messiah God sent to save the world was wholly non-violent. However, Jesus was not passive. He was extremely active and created conflict that eventually resulted in his death. Jesus resolutely pursued setting people free from sickness, paralysis, blindness, demon possession, and death and refused to be bound by the legal constraints of his time and community such as Sabbath laws and purity laws. He taught his followers to suffer rather than to inflict suffering on others. He healed people and never hurt anyone. He taught his disciples to heal the sick and to cast out evil spirits from people. This included his enemies, the Gentiles, who were oppressing his country. He healed the servants of members of the occupying army of the Romans. He traveled to the countries of his enemies and healed children, people who were mentally ill, and people afflicted with a range of crippling diseases. He carried out a protest against the transformation of the Temple and the religion into a place that excluded Gentiles. This was a protest against the forces within Judaism that advocated separation from the Gentiles. He was crucified by his enemies, the Gentiles. His strategy was to defeat the powers of evil by the practice of active love.

Can we be more specific? In the Sermon on the Mount, there are two distinctive teachings of Jesus that have been given a much clearer interpretation by Walter Wink in his book, *Engaging the Powers*.

The first is Jesus’ teaching about retaliation: the *lex talionis* set limits on the degree of retribution. “You have heard that it was said: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This was in contrast to ancient practice of retaliating for the loss of an eye by killing the opponent or burning down a village for an insult or injury by one warrior. But Jesus’ teaching is not to mirror evil with evil but to confront the wrong without violence. “But I say to you do not resist with force an evil one. But if someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other; 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. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

This saying has usually been translated as: “do not resist one who is evil.” But the meaning of the verb is usually used as meaning “counteractive aggression,” or violent resistance. So the meaning is “do not resist with violence one who is evil” but find a third way or neither passive acceptance or of violent resistance. The examples Jesus gives are such third way responses.

The cheek: “if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” is a counsel to refuse humiliation and subjugation by forcing the other to experience the shame of what he is doing.”

The garment: The context was the hated extension of indebtedness of the poor by the rich. If you give the suitor your undergarment, you would be naked. This is to bring shame on the suitor. The rules in Exodus and Deuteronomy forbid anyone from taking the last piece of clothing of a poor person. It was strictly required by Jewish law that this garment be returned at night. The stripping to give the rich seeking to settle the debt your last garment is to bring shame on your suitor. This is a non-violent highly aggressive action.

The carrying of soldiers’ baggage. The armies of the ancient near east traveled by foot and one of their most hated practices was to require people of the land they were passing through to carry their 75-85 pound packs. In order to limit this practice and the resentment of subject people the Roman government had strict sanctions for soldiers. They were only allowed to demand that someone carry their pack one mile.

The word about giving to everyone who begs and refusing loans to no one. Giving alms to the poor and loans to everybody is a way of coping with the debt crisis for the poor. But as you may hear, it is a radical solution. Everybody share with everyone. And apparently the church in Jerusalem after Pentecost followed Jesus’ suggestion.

Jesus’ listeners would have laughed or at least smiled at this new way of thinking about the reversals of logic in Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus’ next saying

You have heard that it was said, 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.”

Jesus then acted on his own teaching. One could summarize Jesus’ strategy with the saying, “Heal your enemy.”

The announcement in his first sermon in Luke at his home synagogue. The sermon is an announcement of Jesus’ understanding that his mission will follow the pattern of Elijah and Elisha in the feeding of the widow in Zarepath and the healing of Naaman, the general of the Syrian army.

Then a series of healing stories about Jesus’ actions:

Centurion and his slave: Matthew 8’ another version in Luke 7. After the Sermon on the Mount, the healing of the leper and then the centurion.

Gerasene demoniac

Syro-Phoenician woman, deaf and dumb man, feeding of 4000 Gentiles.

The principle for peacemaking: heal your enemies; feed your enemies.

Another principle is to find every way possible to break the cycle of revenge and retribution. This is the principle of forgiveness. It is the subject of a central part of the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Many parables deal with this: the parable of the unforgiving servant.

The parable of the prodigal son: at the end of the parable, the father appeals to the elder son to forgive his brother. But at the end of the parable his choice hangs in the balance and is essentially left to the audience: either kill him like Cain or forgive him as his father begged him to do.

Jesus' teaching to his disciples

Take up your cross and follow me. In the Gospel of Mark, Simon Peter answers Jesus' question, "Who do people say that I am?" with the statement, "You are the Christ, the Messiah." Jesus tells them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and on the third day rise again." Peter rebukes him. Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan!" and calls the disciples to him and says, "Whoever would come after me let them take up their cross and follow me. For whoever saves their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and lose their life? What can anyone give in exchange for their life? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this sinful and adulterous generation of that one will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in glory with his holy angels..."

What does this mean? All those who followed him would take up their own cross and follow him on the way of the cross.

This too is in contrast to the normal expectation of a Messiah who would say, "Take up your sword and follow me."

The cleansing of the Temple: the probable significance of this action was a protest against the filling of the court of the Gentiles with commerce for Jews. Mark's version of this story is particularly graphic:

The question of Jesus' protest: is he violent? And the answer is No. No one was hurt. After his demonstration, the money changers and sellers of animals probably moved back in. This was a non-violent demonstration like crossing the bridge in Selma. Angry – yes. Demonstrative – yes. Against the law? Borderline: no and yes. The people thought No. The priests were certainly angry but the people rejoiced and were enthusiastic about his teaching.

Jesus' trial before Pilate: the people's choice. In the end, the people chose the myth of redemptive violence and rejected Jesus' way of non-violence.

The Gospels were written in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish war in which other Jews carried out a violent campaign to expel the Romans. The war was a disaster for the

Jewish nation and the Jewish people. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed or enslaved. The Gospels clearly portray the choice of Barabbas rather than Jesus as a symbol of the nation's choice of the Zealot movement and the strategy of war rather than Jesus' movement of peaceful reconciliation. The story of the trial before Pilate.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the story of the trial clearly implied that the people had chosen Barabbas, a leader of the revolution, instead of Jesus. Thus, the story reflects the choice of the people. The telling of the story then invites the listeners to reconsider their decision. In the story, this decision defines human sin. What is sin? In the Gospels, it is the choice of Barabbas rather than Jesus, of war rather than peace. Throughout the Bible, beginning with the story of the flood, God defines human sin as its commitment to violence.

The resurrection is told as a vindication of Jesus' way. And notice the first words that Jesus says to his followers when he appears to them. In both Luke and John, Jesus' first word to the disciples after the resurrection is: "Peace be with you." This was in part an encouragement for them to forgive those who killed him and to renounce retaliation.

Finally, pay attention to the character of the early Church. There is no evidence that any Christians practiced or carried out any acts of violence for the first three hundred years of the church. The Church of the first three centuries of its existence was wholly non-violent. They practiced non-violent resistance to the Roman Empire whenever the emperors demanded that they be worshipped. Thousands of Christians were martyred during these centuries as a part of these non-violent protests and public demonstrations against Rome.

This character of the early Christian movement is reflected in the dilemma of soldiers in the Roman army who had become secretly Christian. This was a complex development with many different facets. But in a number of instances, the choice between service in the Roman army and being Christian was a life and death decision. The following story is representative.

Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book VII, Chapter 15. This took place during the reign of Gallienus who reversed the persecution of the Church under Valerian in 260 C.E.

The Martyrdom of Marinus at Caesarea.

1. At this time, when the peace of the churches had been everywhere restored, Marinus in Caesarea in Palestine, who was honored for his military deeds, and illustrious by virtue of family and wealth, was beheaded for his testimony to Christ, on the following account.
2. The vine-branch is a certain mark of honor among the Romans, and those who obtain it become, they say, centurions. A place being vacated, the order of succession called Marinus to this position. But when he was about to receive the honor, another person came before the tribunal and claimed that it was not legal, according to the ancient laws,

for him to receive the Roman dignity, as he was a Christian and did not sacrifice to the emperors; but that the office belonged rather to him.

3. Thereupon the judge, whose name was Achaeus, being disturbed, first asked what opinion Marinus held. And when he perceived that he continually confessed himself a Christian, he gave him three hours for reflection.

4. When he came out from the tribunal, Theotecnus, the bishop there, took him aside and conversed with him, and taking his hand led him into the church. And standing with him within, in the sanctuary, he raised his cloak a little, and pointed to the sword that hung by his side; and at the same time he placed before him the Scripture of the divine Gospels, and told him to choose which of the two he wished. And without hesitation he reached forth his right hand, and took the divine Scripture. "Hold fast then," says Theotecnus to him, "hold fast to God, and strengthened by him may thou obtain what you have chosen, and go in peace."

5. Immediately on his return the herald cried out calling him to the tribunal, for the appointed time was already completed. And standing before the tribunal, and manifesting greater zeal for the faith, immediately, as he was, he was led away and finished his course by death.

It happened that a senator, a Christian by the name of Asterius, was present at the proceedings. As soon as Marinus was executed, Asterius removed his expensive cloak, wrapped in it the martyr's bloodied body and severed head, and took them home in order to give them worthy burial. He, too, was seized and executed.

In the conflict between the Church and Rome, the Church finally became the official religion of the Rome Empire and Rome continues the center of the Roman Catholic church and the most visible center of the Christian religion.

The three religions and their history in relation to peacemaking: the ranking: Judaism least involved in violence; Islam next. Christianity the worst.

The 20th century has witnessed an unprecedented discovery in relation to the viability of Jesus' teaching about peacemaking.

The non-violent campaign of independence in India: Mahatma Gandhi.

The non-violent campaign against apartheid in South Africa: Nelson Mandela

The non-violent campaign for the civil rights of black Americans in the United States:

Martin Luther King Jr.

And these are only the most visible.

Jesus' strategy of peacemaking has far more viability as a policy for human communities and nation states than has even begun to be explored. It is important for everyone to take the Gospels more seriously. It may be that the traditions of Jesus of Nazareth could be a resource for saving the world from the threat of human violence.

It is possible that the three Abrahamic religions could lead an increasingly violent world in the serious pursuit and practice of making peace.