

Nuking Japan's Christian Center

American Christians are fond of appealing to Jesus and God to bless U.S. military missions, with little regard for the contradictions between Christ's peaceful teachings and Washington's war policies. Perhaps never was that hypocrisy clearer than in the decision to bomb Nagasaki, Japan, which was home to many of the island's Christians, as Gary G. Kohls explains.

By Gary G. Kohls

Sixty-six years ago, on Aug. 9, 1945, the second of the only two atomic bombs ever used on civilian targets was dropped on the defenseless city of Nagasaki, Japan, by an all-Christian bomb crew that had been training for the mission for months.

It had been only three days since the first bomb, a uranium bomb, had incinerated Hiroshima, spreading chaos and confusion everywhere, especially in Tokyo, where Japan's fascist military government leaders and the Emperor Hirohito had been searching for months for an honorable end to the war, a war which had exhausted Japan into a moribund defenseless and failed nation.

The only obstacle to surrender had been the Truman administration's insistence on unconditional surrender, which meant that the Emperor would be removed from his figurehead position an intolerable demand for the Japanese, who regarded Hirohito as a deity.

U.S. bomber command had spared Hiroshima, Kokura and Nagasaki from the conventional incendiary bombing that had burned to the ground over 60 major Japanese cities during the first half of 1945.

One of the reasons for not targeting these previously undamaged cities for the atomic bombs was scientific: to see what would happen to intact buildings and their living inhabitants when atomic weapons of mass destruction were exploded overhead.

Early in the morning of Aug. 9, 1945, a B-29 Superfortress called Bock's Car, took off from Tinian Island (code-named "Papacy"), with the prayers and blessings of its Lutheran and Catholic chaplains, and headed for Kokura, Japan, which was the primary target.

The plutonium bomb in its hold was code-named "Fat Man," after Winston Churchill.

The only field test of a nuclear weapon, blasphemously named "Trinity," had

occurred just three weeks earlier, on July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico. The lava-type rock that was generated from the intense heat – called “trinitite” – can still be found at the site today.

With instructions to drop the bomb only on visual sighting, Bock’s Car arrived at Kokura, but the city was clouded over. So after circling three times, looking for a break in the clouds, and using up a tremendous amount of valuable fuel in the process, it headed for its secondary target, Nagasaki.

History of Nagasaki Christianity

Nagasaki is famous in the history of Japanese Christianity. Not only was it the site of the largest Christian church in the Orient, St. Mary’s Cathedral, but it also had the largest concentration of baptized Christians in all of Japan.

Nagasaki was the city where the legendary Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier, had established a mission church in 1549. Over the next several generations, the Christian community grew rapidly and prospered.

However, as had happened in South America, Africa, Asia and other newly “discovered” countries, the Portuguese and Spanish commercial interests that had supported Xavier’s missionary activities, began their planned exploitation of Japan’s resources and people.

The European colonizers were accurately perceived as exploiters, and they were ordered out of Japan.

Soon, the Christian religion of the outsiders was likewise forbidden and the faithful Japanese who refused to recant of their beliefs became the target of brutal persecutions, including torture and crucifixion, similar to what happened in the Roman persecutions in the first few centuries of Christianity.

Within 60 years of the start of Xavier’s mission church, Christianity had become an outlaw religion – and professing the faith became a capital crime. Many Japanese Christians returned to their traditional Shintoism or Buddhism, but many became martyrs for the faith.

After the reign of terror was over, it appeared to all observers that Japanese Christianity had been wiped out.

However, 250 years later, in the 1850s, after the coercive gunboat diplomacy of Commodore Matthew Perry forced open an offshore island for American trade purposes, it was discovered that there were thousands of baptized Christians in Nagasaki, living their faith in a catacomb existence, completely unknown to the government which, when the community was discovered, immediately started another

purge.

But because of international pressure, the persecutions were soon stopped. Nagasaki Christianity came up from the underground, and by 1917, with no help from the government, St. Mary's Cathedral was built in the Urakami River district. It was the largest Christian cathedral in the Orient.

Now it turned out that the massive Urakami Cathedral was one of the few Nagasaki landmarks that could be seen at 31,000 feet, and so the Bock's Car bombardier, looking through his bomb site, positively identified the doomed city and ordered the drop.

So, at 11:02 am, Aug. 9, 1945, in the middle of morning mass, the Christians of Nagasaki were boiled, evaporated and carbonized in a scorching, radioactive fireball that was several times hotter than the sun. The vibrant center of Japanese Christianity was wiped out. It had become Ground Zero.

And what the Japanese Imperial government could not do in over 250 years of persecution, American Christians had done in nine seconds. Of Nagasaki's worshipping community of 12,000, a total of 8,500 perished that day. None of those who died were combatants.

The above true story should stimulate discussion among those who claim to be disciples of Jesus.

The Catholic chaplain for the 509th Composite Group (the secret 1,500 man Army Air Force group whose main function was to successfully deliver the atomic bombs to their targets) was Father George Zabelka.

Several decades after the war ended, he finally saw his grave theological error in religiously legitimizing the indiscriminate, organized mass slaughter that is modern air war. He had finally recognized that the enemies of America were not the enemies of God.

Rather, the fingered enemies were children of God whom God loved, and whom the followers of Jesus were also to love.

Father Zabelka's conversion to the practice of Christian nonviolence led him to devote the remaining decades of his life speaking out against violence in all its forms, especially the violence of militarism.

The Lutheran chaplain, William Downey, in his counseling of soldiers who had become haunted by their making murder for the state, later denounced all killing, whether by a single bullet or by weapons of mass destruction.

Buddhism vs. Institutional Christianity

In his important book, *Hell, Healing and Resistance*, author Daniel Hallock tells about a 1997 Buddhist retreat led by Thich Nhat Hanh that attempted to deal with the hellish, post-combat realities experienced by traumatized Vietnam War veterans.

The irony of what happened there prompted Hallock to write, "Clearly, Buddhism offers something that cannot be found in institutional Christianity. But then why should veterans (*who largely have abandoned the faiths of their childhoods as hypocritical*) embrace a religion that has blessed the wars that ruined their souls?

"It is no wonder they turn to a gentle Buddhist monk to hear what are, in large part, the truths of Christ."

As a lifelong Christian, that comment stung, but it was the sting of a sad and sobering truth that I felt morally obligated to act upon.

As a physician who dealt daily with psychologically traumatized patients, I know that it is violence, in all its forms, that bruises and breaks the human psyche and soul, and that that trauma is deadly and contagious, typically spreading through the families and will continue to spread until the military violence that fuels so much domestic violence is stopped.

One of the most difficult so-called "mental illnesses" to treat is combat-induced posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In its most virulent form PTSD is, in my considered opinion, incurable, although it might be partially treatable with intense therapy from a dedicated team of therapists and family members.

It is a fact that, whereas most Vietnam War veterans, prior to their conscription, had been raised in churches where they actively practiced their faith, if they came home with combat-induced PTSD, the percentage returning to the faith of their fathers approached zero.

This is a serious spiritual problem for any church that – either by its active support of its nation's "glorious" wars or by its silence on such issues – fails to teach its young people what Jesus taught about violence: that it is forbidden for those who wish to follow him.

If the church leadership does not thoroughly inform its young people about the gruesome, soul-destroying realities of the war zone *before* they register for potential conscription into the military, it invites the condemnation that Jesus warned about in Matthew 18:5-6:

"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be

better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Jesus, whose ministry was all about the relief of human suffering, taught the principles of nonviolent direct action that Gandhi and King perfected two millennia later: the unconditional nonviolent love of friend and enemy.

Since killing was clearly outside of the mind of Christ that should be should be a no-brainer for the church.

Just War Theory-believing American Christians clearly share responsibility for the satanic acts of military violence epitomized by Aug. 9, 1945.

Perhaps the next military atrocities like Nagasaki, Fallujah and My Lai *can* be prevented if a substantial number of Christian churches courageously and publicly start to resist the militaristic policies of their nations by actively refusing their government's call for the bodies and souls of their sons and daughters.

If the churches start to exercise their sacred duty to warn their parishioners about the soul-destroying nature of war, it may not be too late to save our dying, war-torn, morally and financially bankrupt planet.

Heeding the lessons of Nagasaki is a good way to start.

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