

Christianity's Contradictions on War

Though based on the pacifist teachings of Jesus, Christianity has been an accomplice to more wars and genocides than any other religion, a paradox reflected in the contradictory views of 16th Century protestant reformer Martin Luther and 20th Century civil rights martyr Martin Luther King Jr., as Gary G. Kohls explains.

By Gary G. Kohls

Like the vast majority of Christian religious leaders of his era, Martin Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation, met the definition of a "Constantinian" Christian, that is a Christian who espoused theological teachings that were tolerant of violence and accepted non-democratic, authoritarian and male-dominant practices. Those teachings represented the theological framework of the Christian church that became the state religion starting with the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early Fourth Century.

Luther also was an Augustinian monk, an order named after Augustine of Hippo, who died in 430 and was later canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. St. Augustine regarded the nonviolent ethical teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as simply metaphorical and therefore irrelevant in times of crisis. Augustine epitomized Constantinian Christianity, and Luther was a good student of Augustine.

Indeed, most of the influential religious leaders of the 1500s (including Luther, John Calvin, Henry VIII and the various popes) seemed to have an unwritten ecumenical agreement that you could kill one another and still be following Jesus. A cursory reading of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation Wars that drenched Europe in the blood of Christian killing Christian in the 16th Century will attest to that statement.

Constantinian-type Christianity (in stark contrast to Sermon on the Mount Christianity, which was the original form of that religion and the norm during the first few generations of its existence) follows a number of aberrant, anti-gospel, violence-tolerant church teachings that had been blessed by the murderous Emperor Constantine. Many of those teachings were made doctrinal by Augustine.

Constantine, it should be pointed out, was a ruthless military dictator who had rivals and even had members of his family killed. He was never a Christian in his lifetime and only consented to being baptized when he was on his deathbed.

Augustine shaped his theology to be in conformity with the authoritarian, obedience-demanding, pro-violence, justified-war politics of the emperor; and Luther followed suit.

The Lutheran Church

Luther's reformation attempts created great schisms in Christianity when he tried to reform a corrupted Roman Catholic Church by endorsing violent means and therefore predictably failed to bring any peaceful Christ-like transformation to the "reformed" church. (See the horrific details of the massacres in the Peasant's War of 1525 that Luther endorsed and that ruthlessly put down a peasant's liberation movement.)

I was born and raised Lutheran but have always been uncomfortable with Lutheranism's tendencies towards conservative politics, conservative theologies, flag-waving patriotism and teachings that tend to justify (or be silent about) American war-making. (Those tendencies are also prevalent in other American Protestant churches.)

After considerable study of the history and theology of the earliest form of Christianity, I now know that the Protestant church's simplistic acceptance of their nation's wars is totally contrary to the ethical teachings of the nonviolent Jesus which was faithfully taught by the earliest communities of faith.

After being confronted with these truths about the early pacifist church, my theology and politics have both moved to the opposite end of the theological spectrum of the church of my birth, toward the left-wing, pacifist, anti-fascist, nonviolent teachings of Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr. and away from the traditional violence-justifying doctrines of Augustine and Martin Luther.

In Luther's defense however, he did make three insightful statements which resonate with me and which give me some hope that the Protestant churches might wake up some day and start teaching what Jesus taught.

As has been the experience of so many other non-violent (and therefore anti-war) Christian activists, King's commitment to the Sermon on the Mount ethics of Jesus has shaped my response to America's current Bush/Obama foreign policies of aggressive militarism and perpetual war (and the inevitable civilian deaths, refugeeism, starvation, pestilence and the spiritual and economic bankruptcy of the nations that participate in war).

Failing to Preach the Gospel

Here are three statements from the writings of Martin Luther, which Martin

Luther King would have approved:

–“The church that preaches the gospel in all of its fullness, except as it applies to the great social ills of the day, is failing to preach the gospel.”

–“War is the greatest plague that can afflict humanity; it destroys religions, it destroys states, it destroys families. Any scourge is preferable to it.”

–And then this profoundly important exchange, in which Luther taught one of his followers to trust the ethics of the gospel rather than the threats from his war-making government and courageously become a selective conscientious objector to war.

The questioner asked: “Suppose my lord was wrong in going to war?”

Luther: “If you know for sure that he is wrong, then you should fear God rather than men (Acts 5:29), and you should neither fight nor serve. For you cannot have a good conscience before God.”

Questioner: “Oh, no, you say, my lord would force me to do it; he would take away my fief and would not give me my money, pay and wages. Besides I would be despised and put to shame as a coward, even worse as a man who did not keep his word and deserted his lord in time of need.”

Luther: “I answer: You must take that risk and, with God’s help, let whatever happens, happen. He can restore you a hundred fold as he promises in the gospel”

I suspect that Luther’s wisdom in those statements developed in his later years, for surely a more spiritually mature Luther would have recognized the suffering of the impoverished and oppressed peasants (that ultimately led to the Peasant’s War of 1525) as one of the great social ills of his day.

In the years immediately prior to 1525, the peasants, inspired by Luther’s anti-church/anti-establishment revolutionary teachings, were finally rising up against their perennial oppressors: the ruling elite, the wealthy landowners and the authoritarian Catholic Church.

Initially the peasants protested nonviolently. They submitted written demands that they be granted their human rights. Tragically, as is still happening in these modern times, the protest movement was brutally put down by the establishment’s obedient soldiers and the peasants were compelled to resort to defensive violence, which ended badly for them (shades of the recent nonviolent protests in Egypt and Syria.)

Luther’s Betrayal of the Peasants

Luther shocked the peasants when he betrayed them and sided with the one percent ruling elite, whose well-armed soldiers slaughtered them in that brief war. Luther forever lost the support of the peasantry when he actually called for their annihilation. Luther wrote in a tract:

“These are strange times, when a prince can achieve heaven by killing peasants more assuredly than other men can with prayer.”

The reality that the briefly optimistic peasants hadn't comprehended was that their oppressors were the very ones that had protected Luther from being hunted down and killed by the soldiers of the pope.

Any thoughtful, fair-minded, ethical American must conclude that the Bush/Cheney administration's stated 2001 foreign policy of perpetual war and the continuation of unaffordable, bloated military budgets are two of the great social ills of our time. But war (despite the rape, pillage, starvation and destitution that inevitably goes along with it) seems to be a taboo subject in most of the churches of which I am familiar.

Modern wars can justifiably be described as organized mass slaughter that mostly kills and maims innocent civilians. It is a sobering reality that 80 to 90 percent of the casualties of modern warfare are unarmed non-combatant civilians, largely women and children.

The failure to protect non-combatants in war, according to the Christian Just War Theory, makes that war an unjust one and, in terms of the teachings of moral theology, that makes the killing in that war murder. And that, of course, makes the planners, perpetrators and participants in such wars murderers or accomplices to murder.

Martin Luther King Echoed Jesus

The heroic martyr Martin Luther King, whose prophetic work was modeled after the pacifist Jesus and the pacifist Gandhi (and not, despite his name, the war-justifying Luther), often commented on what was expected of faithful and ethical Christians in their response to injustice. King's views are best summarized by these profound but simple truths about silence in the face of evil:

—“It may well be that the greatest tragedy of this period of social change is not the glaring noisiness of the so-called bad people, but the silence of the so-called good people.”

—“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its

prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

–“Cowardice asks the question – is it safe? Expediency asks the question – is it politic? Vanity asks the question – is it popular? But conscience asks the question – is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right.”

Luther’s three insightful observations above are as clear as could be, as are the statements of King. The church of Jesus Christ should be paying attention to all of these ethical statements simply because they are corollaries to Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount commands to “love your enemies” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” If the follower of Jesus takes these statements seriously, violence against “the other” is impossible.

A few months before his assassination on April 4, 1968, King said he didn’t want all his achievements mentioned at his funeral. What he wanted said instead was this: “Say that Martin King tried to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and that he was right on the war question.”

The vast majority of American Christian churches are silent and therefore wrong on the war questions. Even Luther’s statements on war justifiably indict them for failing to preach the full gospel.

Most of the Lutheran, Catholic and Reformed churches of the Third Reich were equally silent and wrong about the wars of both Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler. And, of course both the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Christian Germany were silent and therefore wrong – on the Jewish question.

It seems to me that true peace churches should be modeling themselves after the primitive, pacifist church of the first two centuries by courageously speaking out against wars and the inevitable cruelty, torture and slaughter that always occurs in wartime.

True peace churches should be warning about the deadly spiritual consequences for both the warriors and their victims. True peace churches should be teaching what Jesus taught about violence (forbidden) and advise their members to refuse to participate in homicidal violence of any kind.

Idealistic peace churches, sadly, represent only a tiny fraction of the churches in America, and they have no choice but to be vocal. To be silent would make them complicit with evil.

When Silence Is Betrayal

Martin Luther King understood the consequences for whistle-blowers and prophets if and when they speak out for peace and justice. He said: "There comes a time when silence is betrayal but the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony."

King believed in the truth and practicality of the nonviolent teachings of Jesus, and, like Jesus, lived that way. And, contrary to the objectives of their assassins, neither their spirits nor their teachings died with them. Both are very much alive, and their spirits and inspiring words live on.

And for those who claim discipleship to the Jesus of the gospels, it should be ethically impossible to adopt the pro-violence stances of the multitude of non-peace churches, whose punitive politics and harsh theologies over the past 1,700 years have tragically dominated the Christian Church.

Jesus often taught about the coming of the Reign of God, which was all about the unconditional, nonviolent love of friends and enemies. He taught his disciples how they should live, how they should love and how they should respond when they were tempted to participate in or be silent about forms of violence such as militarism, racism, economic oppression, torture, cruelty, hunger and killing.

It is clear what Jesus taught. In so many words, he was saying that "violence is forbidden to those who wish to follow me." The planet and the creatures trying to survive on it are in peril if the church of Martin Luther, Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesus of Nazareth continues to fail in its sacred duty to actively and nonviolently resist – and courageously speak out against – war and violence.

Dr. Kohls was a founding member of Every Church A Peace Church, which has recently merged with the Church of the Brethren's Living Peace Church organization (<http://livingpeacechurch.tumblr.com/>). ECAPC is a 13-year-old international ecumenical movement to recover gospel nonviolence as a norm for all churches. Since its inception in 2000, ECAPC has been committed to the belief that "The church could lead the world toward peace if every church lived and taught as Jesus lived and taught."
