

# The Very Un-Christian Nagasaki Bomb

A bitter irony of the Nagasaki atomic bomb was that an all-Christian American crew used the steeple of Japan's most prominent Christian church as the target for an act of unspeakable barbarism, making a mockery of Christian teachings on non-violence, writes Gary G. Kohls.

By Gary G. Kohls

Sixty-nine years ago, an all-Christian bomber crew dropped "Fat Man," a plutonium bomb, on Nagasaki, Japan, instantly annihilating tens of thousands of innocent civilians, a disproportionate number of them Japanese Christians, and wounding uncountable numbers of others.

For targeting purposes, the bombing crew used St. Mary's Urakami Cathedral, the largest Christian church in East Asia. At 11:02 a.m., on Aug. 9, 1945, when the bomb was dropped over the cathedral, Nagasaki was the most Christian city in Japan.

At the time, the United States was arguably the most Christian nation in the world (that is, if you can label as Christian a nation whose churches overwhelmingly have failed to sincerely teach or adhere to the peaceful ethics of Jesus as taught in the Sermon on the Mount).

The baptized and confirmed Christian airmen, following their wartime orders to the letter, did their job efficiently, and they accomplished the mission with military pride, albeit with a number of near-fatal glitches. Most Americans in 1945 would have done exactly the same if they had been in the shoes of the Bock's Car crew, and there would have been very little mental anguish later if they had also been treated as heroes.

Nevertheless, the use of that monstrous weapon of mass destruction to destroy a mainly civilian city like Nagasaki was an international war crime and a crime against humanity as defined later by the Nuremberg Tribunal.

Of course, there was no way that the crew members could have known that at the time. Some of the crew did admit that they had had some doubts about what they had participated in when the bomb actually detonated. Of course, none of them actually saw the horrific suffering of the victims up close and personal.

"Orders are orders" and, in wartime, disobedience can be, and has been, legally punishable by summary execution of the soldier who might have had a conscience strong enough to convince him that killing another human, especially an unarmed one, was morally wrong.

## **Hard to Surrender**

When Nagasaki was destroyed, it had been only three days since another U.S. atomic bomb, nicknamed "Little Boy," had decimated Hiroshima. The Nagasaki bombing on Aug. 9 occurred amid chaos and confusion in Tokyo, where the fascist military government, which had known for months that it had lost the war, was searching for a way to honorably surrender.

The only obstacle to surrender had been the Allied insistence on unconditional surrender, which meant that the Emperor Hirohito, whom the Japanese regarded as a deity, would be removed from his figurehead position in Japan and possibly subjected to war crimes trials. That was a deal-breaker, an intolerable demand for the Japanese that prolonged the war and prevented Japan from giving up months earlier.

The Russian army had declared war against Japan on Aug. 8, hoping to regain territories lost to Japan in the humiliating (for Russia) Russo-Japanese war 40 years earlier, and Stalin's army was advancing across Manchuria. Russia's entry into the war represented a powerful incentive for Japan to end the war quickly since they much preferred surrendering to the U.S. than to Russia.

And, of course, the U.S. did not want to divide any of the spoils of war with Russia. By showing off the new nuclear weapons, Washington also sent an early Cold War message to Russia that the U.S. was the new planetary superpower.

Aiming at Aug. 1, 1945 as the earliest deployment date for the first bomb, the Target Committee in Washington, D.C. developed a list of relatively un-damaged Japanese cities that were to be excluded from the conventional U.S. aerial fire-bombing campaigns (that, during the first half of 1945, burned to the ground more than 60 mostly defenseless Japanese cities).

The list of protected cities included Hiroshima, Niigata, Kokura, Kyoto and Nagasaki. Those five relatively undamaged cities were to be off-limits to the terror bombings. They were to be preserved as potential targets for the new "gimmick" weapon that had been researched and developed all across America during the two years of the Manhattan Project.

Ironically, prior to Aug. 6 and 9, the residents of those cities considered themselves lucky for not having been bombed as much as other cities. Little did they know why they were being spared from the carnage.

## **The Trinity Test**

The first and only field test of an atomic bomb had been blasphemously code-named "Trinity" (a distinctly Christian term). It had occurred three weeks

earlier at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. The results were impressive, but the blast had just killed off a few hapless coyotes, rabbits, snakes and some other desert varmints.

The Trinity test also unexpectedly produced huge amounts of a new mineral that was later called "Trinitite," a molten lava rock that had been created from the intense heat (twice the temperature of the sun) of the above ground bomb blast.

But the first full effects of an atomic bomb on a human population were not demonstrated until Aug. 6, with the obliteration of Hiroshima. But there was a second bomb, a different design from the first, that was ready for use.

So, at 3 a.m. on the morning of Aug. 9, 1945, a B-29 Superfortress (that had been "christened" Bock's Car) took off from Tinian Island in the South Pacific, with the prayers and blessings of its Lutheran and Catholic chaplains. Barely making it off the runway before the plane went into the drink (because of the 10,000 bomb in its hold), it headed north for Kokura, the primary target.

Bock's Car's plutonium bomb was code-named "Fat Man," after Winston Churchill. "Little Boy," first called "Thin Man" (after President Franklin Roosevelt) was the bomb that had incinerated Hiroshima three days earlier.

Yet, the reality of what had happened at Hiroshima was still sinking in among the members of Japan's Supreme War Council in Tokyo, complicating their ability to understand the need for an immediate surrender.

But it was already too late because by the time the War Council was meeting, Bock's Car flying under radio silence was already approaching the southern islands of Japan, hoping to beat the typhoons and clouds that would have caused the mission to be delayed for another week.

The Bock's Car crew had instructions to drop the bomb only with visual sighting. But Kokura was clouded over. So after making three failed bomb runs over the clouded-over city all the while running dangerously low on fuel, the plane headed for its secondary target, Nagasaki.

### **The History of Nagasaki Christianity**

Nagasaki is famous in the history of Japanese Christianity because the city had the largest concentration of Christians in all of Japan. The Urakami Cathedral was the megachurch of its time, with 12,000 baptized members.

Nagasaki was the community where the legendary Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier established a mission church in 1549. The Catholic community at Nagasaki grew and eventually prospered over the next several generations. However it

eventually became clear to the Japanese rulers that the Portuguese and Spanish commercial interests were exploiting Japan; and soon all Europeans and their foreign religion were expelled from the country.

From 1600 until 1850, being a Christian was a capital crime in Japan. In the early 1600s, those Japanese Christians who refused to recant of their new faith were subject to unspeakable tortures, including crucifixion. After the reign of terror was over, it appeared to all observers that Japanese Christianity was extinct.

However, by the mid-Nineteenth Century, after the 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.

With this humiliating revelation, the Japanese government started another purge; but because of international pressure, the persecutions were eventually stopped, and Nagasaki Christianity came up from the underground. By 1917, with no help from the government, the re-vitalized Christian community had built the massive St. Mary's Cathedral in the Urakami River district of Nagasaki.

So it was the height of irony that the massive Cathedral one of only two Nagasaki landmarks that could be positively identified from 31,000 feet up became Ground Zero for the atomic bomb. The Bock's Car bombardier identified the landmarks through a break in the clouds and ordered the drop.

At 11:02 a.m., during Thursday morning mass, hundreds of Nagasaki Christians were boiled, evaporated, carbonized or otherwise disappeared in a scorching, radioactive fireball that exploded 500 meters above the cathedral.

The black rain that soon came down from the mushroom cloud surely contained the comingled remains of many Nagasaki Shintoists, Buddhists and Christians. The theological implications of Nagasaki's Black Rain surely should boggle the minds of theologians of all denominations.

### **Nagasaki's Christian Death Count**

Most Nagasaki Christians did not survive the blast. Six thousand of them died instantly, including all who were at confession. Of the 12,000 church members, 8,500 of them eventually died as a result of the bomb. Many of the others were seriously sickened.

Three orders of nuns and a Christian girl's school disappeared into black smoke or became chunks of charcoal. Tens of thousands of other innocent non-combatants also died instantly, and many more were mortally or incurably wounded.

Some of the victim's progeny are still suffering from the trans-generational malignancies and immune deficiencies caused by the deadly plutonium and other radioactive isotopes produced by the bomb.

And here is another ironic point of this tragic chapter of history: What the Japanese Imperial government could not do in 250 years of persecution (destroy Japanese Christianity) American Christians did in nine seconds.

Even after a slow revival of Christianity over the decades since World War II, membership in Japanese churches still represents a small fraction of 1 percent of the general population, and the average attendance at Christian worship services has been reported to be only 30. Surely the decimation of Nagasaki at the end of the war crippled what once was a vibrant church.

### **A Chaplain's Conversion**

Father George Zabelka was the Catholic chaplain for the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group (the 1,500-man United States Army Air Force group whose only mission was to successfully deliver the atomic bombs to their targets). Zabelka was one of the few Christian leaders who eventually came to recognize the contradictions between what his modern church had taught him about war and what the early pacifist church had taught about homicidal violence.

Several decades after being discharged from the military chaplaincy, Zabelka finally concluded that both he and his church had made serious ethical and theological errors in religiously legitimating the organized mass slaughter that is modern war. He had come to understand that, as he articulated it, the enemies of his nation were not, according to New Testament ethics, the enemies of God, but were rather fellow children of God who were loved by God and who therefore were not to be killed by God's followers.

Father Zabelka's conversion away from the standardized violence-tolerant Christianity turned his Detroit, Michigan ministry around 180 degrees. His absolute commitment to the truth of gospel nonviolence just like Martin Luther King Jr. inspired him to devote the remaining decades of his life to speaking out against violence in all its forms, including the violence of militarism, racism and economic exploitation.

Zabelka even travelled to Nagasaki on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing, tearfully repenting and asking for forgiveness for the part he had played in the crime.

Likewise, the Lutheran chaplain for the 509th, Pastor William Downey (formerly of Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota), in his counseling of soldiers who had become troubled by their participation in making

murder for the state, later denounced all killing, whether by a single bullet or by weapons of mass destruction.

## **Ruined Souls**

In Daniel Hallock's book, *Hell, Healing and Resistance*, the author talks about a 1997 Buddhist retreat led by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. That retreat attempted to deal with the hellish post-war existence of combat-traumatized Vietnam War veterans.

Hallock wrote, "Clearly, Buddhism offers something that cannot be found in institutional Christianity. But then why should veterans 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."

The truth of Hallock's comment should be a sobering wake-up call to Christian leaders who seem to regard as equally important both the recruitment of new members and the retention of old ones. The fact that the U.S. is a highly militarized nation makes the truths of gospel nonviolence difficult to teach and preach.

I am a retired physician who has dealt with hundreds of psychologically traumatized patients (especially combat-traumatized war veterans), and I know that violence, in all its forms, can irretrievably damage the mind, body, brain and spirit; but the fact that the combat-traumatized type is totally preventable as well as, for the most serious cases, virtually impossible to cure makes prevention work so important.

And that is where Christian churches should and could be instrumental. An ounce of prevention is indeed worth a pound of cure.

These traumas are deadly and sometimes even contagious. I have seen violence, neglect, abuse and the resultant traumatic illnesses spread through families even involving the third and fourth generations after the initial victimization or perpetration.

It is important to know the hidden history of Nagasaki Christianity and the virtual annihilation of it by American Christians. The Bock's Car bomber crew members, like most grunts in any war, were at the bottom of a long complex anonymous chain of command. They only "pulled the trigger" of the weapon which was manufactured by some other entity and put in their hands by still others. As in all wars, the WWII soldier trigger-pullers usually didn't know exactly who they were trying to kill or even why.

The early church leaders, who knew the teachings and actions of Jesus best,

rejected the nationalist, racist and militarist agendas of the national security agencies of the day. They also repudiated the pre-Christian eye-for-an-eye retaliation doctrines that have, over the past 1,700 years, regained dominance and led Christians to willingly kill both Christians and non-Christians in the name of Christ.

**Dr. Gary G. Kohls is a retired physician who is involved in peace, nonviolence and justice issues and therefore resists fascism, corporatism, militarism, racism and all other movements that are violent and anti-democratic.**

---