

Asking Christians about Tolerance of War

Many Americans are tuning out on politics and international affairs feeling they have no real say in what the government does but there is a danger from such passivity, particularly the license given to the powers-that-be to make war and more war, as Gary G. Kohls explains.

By Gary G. Kohls

“What Did You Do During The War, Daddy?” was the title of a wonderful but sobering book written by Sabine Reichel, who was born to Nazi collaborator parents in bombed-out Hamburg, Germany in 1946.

Her parents had been upper-class citizens prior to the war and they managed to maintain their respectability after the war. Her mother and father, like so many other obedient “good” Germans of the Nazi-era, never talked to their child about what they had done during the Hitler years. The unwelcome truth only came out much later, during Reichel’s early adult years.

The book details her experiences in trying to obtain the answers to the book’s title question. But “What did you do during the war, Daddy” has been a dreaded question for many soldier-fathers (as well as for some civilian parents) who collaborated (actively or passively) with warmongers in times of war and who then discovered, too late, that they had been on the ethically wrong side of what turned out to be an unjust war a war contrary to what they had been told, a war of aggression or corporate resource exploitation and thus a war that was an international war crime, a crime against humanity or a crime against the peace.

And whether or not they had been deceived by their corporate-controlled governments and media outlets about the realities of those wars, any parent will dread being asked probing questions such as these:

–“Did you profit from, or were you on the side of flag-waving, war-mongering politicians, the corporate war profiteers or the gun-runners of your country that beat the drums for war?”

–“Did you swallow whole the repeated nationalistic pro-war messages of the media’s propaganda machine that glorified war and obscured the inconvenient truths about the organized, indiscriminate mass slaughter that is modern war?”

–“Did you remain silent in the face of your nation’s war crimes when innocent, unarmed civilians on the ‘other side’ were being demonized, starved, bombed, poisoned, persecuted, imprisoned, ‘disappeared,’ made homeless, or becoming victims of ‘collateral damage’?”

Yet, some nonviolence-embracing fathers, if they had strong consciences and courage to match, refused to kill and die in an unjust war. Because of that, they could honorably and truthfully answer these questions and even welcome follow-ups:

–“Daddy, when you sensed that the war was an unjust one, did you refuse to sign up and support it? Did you speak out against your era’s war as well as other forms of violence? Did you join the resistance against the war-mongering majorities? Did you march in public anti-war actions and actively try to reverse your nation’s misbegotten involvement in war?”

Obedient Citizens

Multitudes of guilty World War II-era German parents, most of whom were baptized Christians, faced these questions when their children started reading between the lines of their censored school history books and realized that war crimes had been committed by their nation and therefore perhaps also by their patriotic parents.

The same could be said about American Protestant children whose fathers were of draft age during the Vietnam War or about average Catholic Christians whose leaders were in positions of authority and counsel during the Dirty Wars in Central and South America, wars that were often fomented and then aggressively supported by the United States’ military/industrial/congressional complex during the Reagan/Bush years.

In every nation, the history books have been written by the patriots, nationalists, militarists and assorted victors who feel compelled to preserve the myths of the “glory” of war. Since war crimes (at the very least, rape and pillage) have been committed by soldiers on all sides of all wars throughout the history of warfare, there is a tremendous amount of motivation to cover up the shameful deeds that are so easy to commit during the fog of war.

An example that comes to mind is the Catholic Joseph Ratzinger (now emeritus Pope Benedict XVI), who joined the Hitler Youth in his teens. Young, naive Joseph might be excused for his youthful act of German patriotism and nationalism. But later, as Archbishop of Munich, the historical hotbed of German fascism and a city that nurtured Adolf Hitler and spawned the Nazi Party during the 1920s, one wonders what the archbishop would have said if his parishioners had asked him what he had done during the war, since participation in the killing of friends or enemies was clearly contrary to the teachings and modeling of the pacifist Jesus.

Given the inglorious history of Europe’s church-endorsed Reformation Wars,

Counter-Reformation Wars, Thirty Years War and Hundred Year War, many Germans regarded Prussian militarism and universal conscription as somehow normal, even godly. But a future Pope should have had a reasonable explanation for why he was so willing to cast aside the teachings of Jesus.

In both World Wars I and II, baptized and confirmed Germans enthusiastically marched off to what they thought were justified wars, wars fought “defending” against the threats posed by various minority or outsider groups that were accused of endangering the Fatherland.

Conscription laws had to be progressively relaxed as the wars progressed to include children and older men up to the age of 60 because most of the ideal-age young adult men were dead, disabled or otherwise used up and cast aside. German men were told by their Catholic and Protestant bishops and pastors that it was their Christian duty to fight and kill, and the women were told to support the troops and the war mission. To make sure there would be future soldiers for Hitler’s Thousand Year Reich, the German women were expected to have lots of Aryan babies.

The soldier’s sacred oath of allegiance to Hitler and his killing machine trumped the Golden Rule of the gospels and the Christic ethical principles of love and friendship toward neighbor and enemy alike. Most German Christians saw no contradiction between the demands of Jesus’s gospel ethic of love, mercy and forgiveness and the ruthless and cruel “gods” of war and wealth and their pastors didn’t either. There wasn’t even a hint of a gospel nonviolence movement in Germany. The pacifist Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an aberration, and he came along way too late.

German Christians couldn’t have been expected to understand the practicality of the ethical teachings of Jesus’ in his Sermon on the Mount because it hadn’t been taught in a meaningful way for 1,700 years. They didn’t make the connections between the stories of the early Christian martyrs (who knew Jesus best) and their total refusal to engage in homicidal violence, even against their enemies.

It’s likely that none of the religious books that Germans had studied in Sunday School or seminary had talked about the demonic nature of war. German Christian soldiers, as is the case of many other Christian soldiers in other nations, may have been fooled into thinking that the presence of Christian chaplains in the military was an endorsement of war and therefore war was somehow compatible with the teachings of Jesus.

“Gott Mit Uns” on Belt Buckles

German soldiers in both World Wars went into battle with the words "Gott Mit Uns" (God With Us) inscribed on their belt buckles. There also was a well-oiled military/industrial/political/media complex that consistently pumped out pro-war propaganda.

Perhaps these patriotic soldiers weren't aware that the anti-war, anti-fascist and socialist printing presses had been silenced well before either World War started. Indeed the liberal printing presses had been both silenced and smashed well before World War II and the liberal journalists, editors and publishers had been imprisoned.

Whatever the process, Germans were well-prepared to obediently follow their Fuhrer; and just as all soldiers everywhere solemnly take their oaths, pledge their allegiance to and salute the flag, obey orders (even illegal ones) and promise to fulfill their "duty to God and Country," so did German soldiers pledge their allegiance to Hitler and the swastika and to do their duty to ensure homeland security.

Religious leaders were no different. In Germany, Protestant and Catholic clergy were guilty of not resisting Hitler's Nazi Party early enough. In Italy, the Vatican must shoulder a lot of responsibility for the successful establishment and growth of Mussolini's Fascist Party.

But Christians in the Axis Powers were surely not alone in such pro-war behavior. Church leaders of all denominations (in nations that have been granted special tax privileges by their governments) have been dutifully denying the established facts about the murders and other atrocities committed against children and other non-combatants in wars.

After World War II, the Vatican also had a large role to play in the birth and growth of brutal, militaristic, "anti-communist" regimes, including the Dirty Wars in the predominantly Catholic nations of South and Central America during the 1970s and 1980s. The same tolerance of slaughter certainly seems to be true of American churches past, present and very likely future.

So to the Christian clerical or lay leaders of most denominations, the simplistic question should be asked: "What Would Jesus Have Done?" The clear answer that even secular humanists can easily answer: It's obvious. Jesus would have actively and nonviolently resisted all forms of violence, as he indeed did, even if it meant that he would have to suffer. Jesus taught his followers to refuse to participate in homicidal violence.

In my studies of early Christianity, I have lamented the fact that, in the early 300s, the murderous empire-builder Constantine was able to draw the Church away

from its pacifist beginnings. Similarly, I have lamented that now, 20 centuries after the birth of Christianity, the religion of my birth and upbringing has likewise been co-opted away from its first principles, so that apparently one can be a follower of the non-violent Jesus and still be willing to send vulnerable, easily brainwashed, historically- and theologically-illiterate youth off to kill and be killed, directly negating what Jesus said and did.

Sadly but predictably, the military and religious leaders of all militarized nations throughout history do not exercise their duty to warn their prospective soldiers about the high likelihood of becoming victims of the usually permanent, brain-altering, soul-destroying, neurological disease known as “shell shock” (in World War I), “battle fatigue” and “combat stress” (in World War II and the Korean War) or, finally and more accurately, combat-induced posttraumatic stress disorder (in Vietnam and beyond).

Dying Democracy

So, most of us sheeple vote for our representatives without knowing a thing about their susceptibility to intimidation by the Pentagon, the CIA, the FBI, the NRA and the NSA or whether or not they will accept bribes (aka campaign contributions) from antidemocratic billionaires or institutions such as right-wing think tanks and megacorporations (especially weapons manufacturers, Big Banks and Big Oil).

By our inability to directly question candidates for national office, we have already become dumbed-down enough to feel impotent and uncertain about the justifiability of our nation’s current or past wars. We therefore have become, just like average Good Germans in the Hitler era, pre-emptively unified in our willingness to make murder for the state when the next false flag is waved, the next war games are scheduled and the next aggressive war gets started.

Yet, if we want to avoid having to squirm or lie when our disappointed, justifiably angry, soon-to-be-impooverished, education-deprived, malnourished, jobless and debt-ridden children ask us questions about what we did during America’s current wars of economic and military imperialism (“full spectrum domination”), and the on-rushing destruction and depletion of the planet’s resources, we must at least refuse to be complacent about the slaughter of our fellow planetary inhabitants that is being perpetrated in our name.

Members of antiwar, anti-imperialist resistance groups that are supporting or participating in the nonviolent Occupy Wall Street and other justice movements won’t have to be evasive when their children and grandchildren ask them “what did you do during the war?”

Instead, they will be able to proudly tell them about their resistance efforts that might then give them hope and encourage them to follow in the footsteps of their altruistic mothers, fathers, grandmas and grandpas who did what they could do to stop the wealth-extractors, the polluters and the war-mongers before they could start the next war or poison the next river.

If it is not already too late.

Dr. Gary G. Kohls is a retired family physician from Duluth, Minnesota, who practiced holistic (non-drug) mental health care for the last decade of his career. He often dealt with the horrific psychological consequences of veterans (and civilians) who had suffered psychological, neurological and/or spiritual trauma. He is involved in peace, nonviolence and justice issues.
