

## THE JEWISHNESS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN PACIFISM

John Howard Yoder, chapter two in *Chapters in the History of Religiously Rooted NonViolence: A Series of Working Papers of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies*.

1) VARIETY OF REASONS for reading the life/thoughts of early Christianity:

A) As the launching pad from which Christianity (rightly) moved on to other positions in other ages;

B) As early witnesses to how the New Testament's guidance was understood by the earliest generations of its readers;

C) As an established norm from which Christianity later (wrongly) moved away;

D) As historical description, relatively independent of specific evaluative use we make of the facts;

NOTE how this variety of motivations may modify the content and/or the value of one's historical readings.

2) VARIETY OF REASONS Christians had for disavowing "Caesar": "Caesar" for them meant not just a man but a global/systemic reality.

A) the reality of "Caesar" in "pagan" religion:

- i) the practice of idolatry i.e., the worship of images, whether of traditional deities, newly imported deities, or (sometimes) blasphemous deification of Caesar himself. Idolatry is not only an abomination before God, it is also stupid. Not only Jews reject it; philosophers do too.
- ii) the cosmology of "polytheism" i.e., believing that more than one divine being exists and works, so that the entire historical process is a bewildering mix;
- iii) linkages of imperial cultic celebrations with sexuality, fertility, brutality, gratuitous killing;

iv) Celebration of pagan cult was formally a part of military service; specific military units were dedicated to specific deities, and all units were obliged to participate in cultic ceremonies. This dimension of the rejection of "Caesar" is quantitatively the most prominent factor in the anti-Caesar stance of the early Christians of Hornus 24.

In rejecting all of this, the Christians were simply and faithfully following Judaism. They were also agreeing with the more "enlightened" strands of pagan philosophy (cf. 5 below).

B) "Caesar" was persecuting Christians, intermittently;

- i) sometimes because of their specific moral positions or their refusal of pagan worship;
- ii) later, because Christian faith itself was declared an illicit religion;
- iii) the prospect of persecution of Christians by the Empire is in the New Testament (Jn 15, Apoc 13, or 2 Tim 2:12) even though real persecution was not yet very severe in NY times;
- iv) for this reason Christians were not trusted by the authorities and were not wanted in the army.

There is thus no parallel to the modern Western phenomenon of universal compulsory military service.

C) "Caesar" and his system were morally reprehensible:

- i) sexual irregularity and disorder in the imperial household, and in the army (professional military service being incompatible with family fidelity);
- ii) a generally dissolute life style in army and empire; brutality, pride, pomp, waste, gluttony, circuses, gladiators.

D) Even though it was based upon certain conceptions of justice and due process, and other empires have been worse, the Roman imperial system was oppressive toward most of its subjects. Many Christians were social outsiders whom the Roman imperial system did not integrate: Jews, slaves, resident aliens...

E) The soldier was bound by the initial and repeated performance of oaths of fidelity;

- i) The form of the oath was part of pagan cult; it involved invoking other gods;
- ii) In concept the oath means acceptance of an absolute "Lord," other than the true God, i.e., an abdication of moral accountability or a denial of monotheism;

iii) The swearing of oaths is forbidden by the word of Jesus (Mt 5:33-37) and the NT (Ja 5:12).

F) Yet despite the polarization Caesar is within God's world:

- i) The emperor is subordinate to God;
- ii) Christians pray for the well-being of the empire;
- iii) Christians obey legitimate laws and do not participate in rebellion.

3) VARIETY OF REASONS for the stance toward Caesar derived from Jesus and the NT

A) Jesus as a potential zealot liberator who rejected Jewish nationalism e.g. Mt 26:52, Jn 18:36; Jesus is our example if we like him face the challenge of using power for justice (more of this would be found with a close reading of the Gospel narrative, cf. The Politics of Jesus). Although present in the Gospels, this dimension of refusing zealot violence was not self-consciously accentuated in the minds of early post-apostolic Christians;

B) Jesus as Herald of the coming Kingdom. Itemize the difference that the imminence of the Kingdom makes:

- i) Being visible: City on a Hill;
- ii) Fulfilling the Torah Mt 5:17ff;
- iii) Radicalizing "do not kill" Mt 5:21ff;
- iv) Radicalizing "love your neighbor" Mt 5:43ff;
- v) Resembling the Father whose love is indiscriminate Lk 6:35f and Mt 5:45ff;
- vi) Expecting a visible difference Lk 6:31ff Mt 5:13-16, 46ff;
- vii) Enemy love as example of all of the above;
- viii) Trusting God for one's well-being, Mt. 6:25ff cf. below 4-A-ii.

C) Jesus' suffering as model: pp. 115ff in The Politics of Jesus; see course miscellany sheet F: "The Sufferings of Christ in the Life of His Followers".

4) VARIETY OF REASONS for such an attitude to Caesar, many of them derived, more deeply than historians have recognized, from a specifically Jewish world view:

A) God is in charge of the world, all-wise, all-powerful:

- i) We are not in charge of our own survival, and should not want to be;
- ii) God can protect whom He will; we need not defend ourselves; if we seek to defend ourselves it is a lack of trust in God's care.
- iii) The Lord is the hidden Governor of history. This is especially pertinent if we remember that in Romans 13 the alternative to Paul's call to subordination would have been a justified revolution. If evil has its way, it is under His permission and not forever.
- iv) When God does one day triumph in history, this will not be our doing. It will not depend on our fighting for justice.
- v) God may be punishing us for our sins; if we defend ourselves against some particular oppression we might be avoiding his chastisement.
- vi) cf: Romans 12:17 quoting Deut. 32:35; leave vengeance to God.
- vii) God may want to use us as martyrs (the opposite of chastisement for our sins). Martyrdom "sanctifies the NAME."
- viii) The Pax Romana may be an expression of divine Providence, as the rule of Babylonia had been. When Jeremiah's prophecy called the Jews to "seek the peace of the city where JHWH has sent you," that implied a patient and compliant with any pagan empire that was successful in keeping life livable by holding the lid on disorder.

B) In early Israel's experience with "holy war" or "the wars of JHWH", the status of such a war had been dependent upon God's formally commanding a given war through a priest or Prophet. Now that there is no Moses, no prophet, there can be no such command.

C) Israel's experience with Kingship from Saul to Josiah ended in its rejection as not a good institution.

D) The Jewish revolts (Maccabees, Zealots 66-70, Bar Kochba 132-35) had been a mistake:

- i) they presumed upon Divine sovereignty (4/A above);
- ii) they tried to do what only Messiah can do;

iii) they failed; God did not bless them.

E) Since Jeremiah, the authentic Jewish self-understanding looked down on kingship and statehood. Christians recently have been misled by Christian antisemitism and (still more recently) by Zionism into failing to recognize the basic pacifism of Judaism from Jeremiah to Theodore Hertzl. God chose (as His will was enunciated by Jeremiah and Ezekiel) to do without (i.e. to implement His sovereignty without) a state and without ethnic homogeneity, sending or dispersing His people in a sort of "mission".

F) The prophetic hope (e.g. Isaiah 2, Micah 4) looks toward a time when swords will be transformed into plowshares; i.e. a culture of war will be placed by a culture of peace. This means:

- i) that until that time arrives, arms are considered a regrettable recourse, destined to be replaced;
- ii) that once in Jesus the messianic age is confessed as present, this liberation from the culture of arms logically becomes one of its characteristics.

G) The experience of being a wandering but often tolerated minority created a broad cosmopolitan consciousness; Jews were world citizens. (cf. A/viii above).

H) The theological world vision of the prophets proclaimed that their God was unique, creator, sovereign of the world. From this it had to follow that the other nations have a place in His plan, since the pagan notion of each kingdom having a different God has been replaced.

I) Despite this deep rejection of Caesar's bloodshed, and of his claims to rule the world, Jews and Christians prayed for the ruler and for the Peace of the realm. They were law-abiding citizens unless the laws called them to do wrong.

J) Christians should be dispensed from serving the state, as are the priests of other religions, on the grounds that their prayers serve the peace of the Realm.

K) God is "jealous"

- i) The worship of other "gods" is intolerable. Yet involvement in gentile wars usually meant participating in the worship of those nations' deities.
- ii) By the first Christian century, the Jewish criticism of idolatry had even supported by reasonable philosophers as well. It was natural for Christians to let their refusal of idolatry be the test of their faith.

L) God as moral legislator abhors bloodshed

- i) The first social sin in Genesis (Chap. 4) was a murder. God condemned the murderer but saved his life.
- ii) The only social demand of the covenant with Noah (Chap. 9) was the prohibition of taking human life, because it bears the "Image of God." Even to kill animals is a sacrificial act and the blood must not be consumed.
- iii) The Decalog forbids killing.

M) Jewish wisdom includes political realism

- i) Gentile oppressors are here to stay.
- ii) Within the Gentile realm there may be times of toleration, even privilege; e.g.:
  - a. Joseph
  - b. Esther
  - c. Daniel

In such circumstances it is in the interest of the people of God to prefer the "peace" of subjugation to the unlikely prospects of war in favor of a higher level of righteousness. Cf. 4/A/viii above.

N) The Sermon on the Mount radicalizes Jewish moral insight in a fully Jewish setting (3B above);

5) VARIETY OF REASONS against violence and war developing in dialog with philosophers:

A) The unity of all mankind; from the Stoics e.g. in Lactantius; the enemy is human like us;

B) The sacredness of life, as deepening/broadening of:

- i) the prohibition of bloodshed in the law:
- ii) creation of human beings in the divine image.

C) Anger and violence are vices.

6) Were Christians in the early centuries then PACIFISTS?

A) Clearly not, in the strongest modern sense of the word:

- i) They were not wanted in the army, so they were not conscientious objectors; soldier status was a privilege not a duty;
- ii) They did not as citizens take responsibility for the course of public events; such a notion of citizen responsibility was absent among Romans and Jews, therefore also among Christians;
- iii) They did not propose disarmament or international understanding as a policy for Caesar;
- iv) They did not reason (until phase (5) above) about how war was wrong for pagans;
- v) The wrongness of killing was not the only reason for the anti-Caesar stance; the considerations in (2) above also counted to move Christians to refuse to serve Caesar. Some scholars argue that this fact of multiple motivations means that war as such was not abhorred.

B) Clearly, they were "pacifist," in an historically fitting and authentic sense of the term. It is inappropriate to ask the question anachronistically:

- i) There were no known teachers or synodical actions, no documents of any kind, authorizing military service before 300. There were Christians serving in the military by the time of Tertullian, but the tone of Tertullian's condemnation gives no indication that other theologians or teachers taught otherwise than he;
- ii) "Although it would be an oversimplification to say that the early church was pacifist, it would be a much greater oversimplification to deny it." John Garvey, Commonweal, 9 Sept. 1983, p. 455;
- iii) The fact that Origen said "we pray for the peace of the Empire," or that Tertullian argued "we are good citizens whom you have no reason to persecute," would be denials of pacifism only if "pacifism" were conceived as a moral absolute independent of agent or setting. But moral thought in that time was not rationalist about generalizability as a test of consistency;
- iv) All bloodshed was still prohibited;
- v) There is no documented case of voluntary enlistment;
- vi) Much of what most soldiers did during the Pax Romana was not war. They may very well have understood their peacetime employment as a kind of civil service, not part of war-making (Bainton 77-81). Martin (later bishop of Tours, later sainted) served in

peacetime and decided to withdraw at the time of battle (account in Yoder When War is Unjust 86).

7) VARIETY OF WAYS we can bridge from there to here in the effort to understand:

A) If Caesar had not been idolatrous, persecutor, etc., but only violent, like modern governments, what would Tertullian and Origen have done? They would not have withdrawn from society. Tertullian had visions of judging, norming, and approving of some elements of Roman society from Christian perspectives. But there is no grounds for imagining that to de-paganize Roman violence would have made violence itself morally acceptable. But there is no grounds for arguing that they would have authorized participating in war.

B) Today there are many Catholics in North America who divorce and remarry, or who commit materialism or contraception, even abortion, counter to the teachings of their bishops. There are persons baptized as Catholics in Latin America who torture. A social body only records a norm if it has begun to be violated by some of its members. That is the confirmation that the norm is there, being taught by those whose business that is, being rendered visible by its being violated. That does not show that the norm is absent. This is the best analogy to the service of some Christians as soldiers around the time of Tertullian. That it happened with impunity that Christians stayed in the army, which is documented (though with no way for us to know how representative those cases were) does not mean that even those doing it thought it was legitimate. It likewise happened with impunity that many Quaker young men accepted military service in WWII; yet even those very young men did not claim that in so doing they were being good Quakers.

cf. sources: original readings in Holmes, Marrin;

Jean-Michel Hornus, It Is Not Lawful For Me To Fight, Scottsdale, Herald Press 1980 (they were pacifists)

John Helgeland (et al) Christians and the Military, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985 (they were not pacifist)