Culture
Book Reviews



Fr. John Dear speaks Jan. 15, 2017, at St. Peter the Apostle Church in River Edge, New Jersey. Art Laffin calls Dear's book *The Gospel of Peace* the culmination of Dear's lifework. (CNS/Octavio Duran)



by Art Laffin

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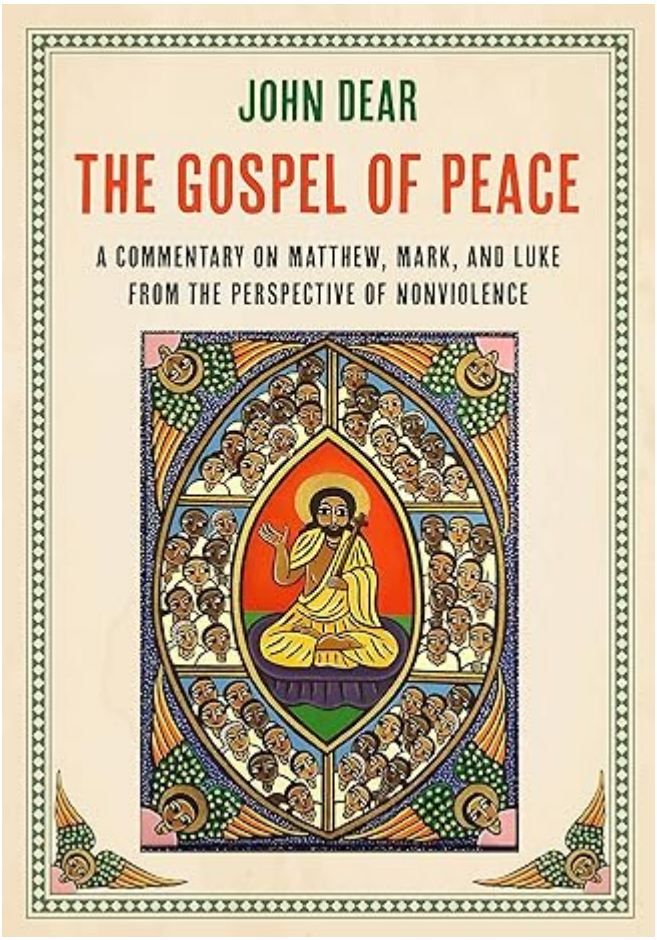
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Born from a four-decadeslong commitment to prayer, Eucharist, careful study of Scripture, Jesus, Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Gospel-based action and writing and speaking about Gospel nonviolence, *The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence* is the culmination of the lifework of John Dear.

Dear's new book is a landmark original commentary on the synoptic Gospels from the perspective of nonviolence. In this painstaking work, Dear reveals that nonviolence is at the heart of Jesus' teaching and action, and a primary requirement of Christian discipleship.

Tragically, as Dear noted to me upon the book's release, "We have so thoroughly rejected and buried this Gospel truth that it almost seems impossible to us, yet it's right there in every line of the Gospels, if you read it from the perspective of nonviolence." Throughout the book, he dispels the fallacy of redemptive violence, shows how all violence is antithetical to Jesus and highlights exemplary peacemakers and movements throughout history that have embodied Jesus' nonviolence.



The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence
John Dear
440 pages; Orbis Books
$20.00

Dear presents Jesus as a disarming, healing presence toward those in need, a nonviolent revolutionary and organizer and a threat to ruling authorities who order his execution. On the cross, Jesus exemplifies the ultimate transforming power of nonviolence as he forgives those who are killing him. Through his miraculous resurrection, Jesus breaks through the imperial seal of the tomb, his supreme act of civil resistance. He forever overcomes the powers and forces of death, thereby inaugurating a new nonviolent era for humanity.

What has helped Dear most clearly understand Jesus' nonviolence is reading the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke from the viewpoint of Gandhi and Dr. King. Gandhi described Jesus as nonviolence par excellence and declared nonviolence to be the greatest and most active force in the world, saying "the kingdom of God is

nonviolence." King asserts that Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus between individuals to a powerful, effective social force on a large scale. Dear writes:

> Indeed, I've come to the conclusion that the more we study Gandhi and King, the better we will understand Jesus and the Gospels. … Reading Jesus through Gandhi's and King's lens of nonviolence opens up new avenues of insight and depths of wisdom. Every word, teaching, and action of the nonviolent Jesus makes more sense.

This fresh new approach to understanding the Gospels is what makes this book a treasure, an invaluable gift to the people of God. The book is divided into three parts.



Civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. smiles during a talk with U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson, not pictured, in this undated photo. The federal holiday that celebrates the iconic civil rights leader is observed Jan. 18. (CNS/Yoichi Okamoto, courtesy of LBJ Library)

In Part 1, "Matthew – The Mountaintop Sermon on Nonviolence," Jesus is presented as the new Moses who fulfills the law and the prophets, offers the new commandments of nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount and proceeds to model those commandments. Dear writes:

> At the heart of Matthew's Gospel stands the clearest collection of Jesus's teachings on nonviolence in all four Gospels, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. This collection of teachings and sayings outlines the rules, boundaries, guidelines, and vision of nonviolence. It begins with Jesus's eight Beatitudes, then his six antitheses, then a collection of sayings that culminate in the command "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's justice and everything else will be provided for you."
>
> At the center of the sermon are the climactic commands: "Offer no [violent] resistance to one who does evil" and "Love your enemies," which I submit are the core of the Gospel, the fundamental centerpiece commandments of Jesus's life.* Without these foundational teachings on nonviolence, Jesus's whole argument, life, and death crumble. But because of them, his life stands as the most spectacular manifestation of nonviolence in history. Further, with his call to love our enemies — that is, those targeted by one's nation for death — comes the announcement that those who practice this universal, nonviolent love are truly sons and daughters of the God of universal nonviolent love.

In Part 2, "Mark – The Radical Discipleship of Nonviolent Resistance to Empire," Dear focuses on Jesus engaging in persistent nonviolent resistance to systemic injustice and empire. He writes:

> From the beginning of Mark, we note several key ingredients of the Jesus movement. The first thing he does is call everyone to turn away from the unjust dominant economic social order run by the religious authorities for the empire, and to turn toward the kingdom of God, a new realm of justice, compassion, and nonviolence. … Second, he calls disciples to follow him and join his campaign. …

> "This is the time of fulfillment." Mark's Jesus announces. "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." … He's saying in effect, "Today, the permanent revolution of Gospel nonviolence has begun!"

Regarding Jesus' condition for discipleship, Dear writes:

> Jesus summons the crowd and says to everyone, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." If you want to be a Christian, you have to deny yourself and follow the nonviolent Jesus on the path of peace and into universal redemptive suffering love, as you resist the structures of harm and oppression. Renounce your violence and comforts and join his campaign of nonviolent resistance to empire and steadfast allegiance to God's reign of peace.

Following Jesus, Dear forewarns, will lead to persecution and more.

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In Part 3, "Luke – The Grassroots Campaign of Peace, Nonviolence and Compassion," Dear underscores Jesus' call to service, compassion, solidarity with the poor and nonviolent action. He writes:

> Luke's Jesus resembles Gandhi and King as the ultimate movement leader, grassroots organizer and nonviolent resister. …
>
> Further, Luke's Jesus practices what Gandhi called "the constructive program" as he organizes and builds a movement of nonviolent resistance to the culture of violence and points us to God's reign of peace. He heals everyone who is sick, expels every demonic power of violence and nationalism that possesses people, and restores everyone into the Beloved Community of universal love. He does what Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day outlined as the mission of the Catholic Worker: "to build a new society within the shell of the old," to start the process of creating a new culture of justice, equality and nonviolence.

Additionally, Dear conveys that Luke's Jesus breaks through sexism and patriarchy and insists on the total equality of women with men. Women are referred to 45 times in Luke and play a central role in the discipleship community, following Jesus to his death and beyond. Dear relates how Mary, Jesus' mother, was Jesus' teacher of nonviolence.

> This book could not have come at a more critical time.
>
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For Luke, Dear writes, "Jesus's revolutionary nonviolence is a spiritual path, a way of life." He continues:

> As Luke's risen Jesus explains to the discouraged and hopeless disciples on the road to Emmaus, God works through human history from Moses to the prophets and now through the early community, and we are summoned to join that lineage and continue that movement as Gandhi and Dr. King did to end poverty, war, racism, killing, nuclear weapons, and environmental destruction and to welcome God's reign of nonviolence. ... That is our mission. We are witnesses of these things, and, like the Galilee 72, we are sent forth ... to call everyone to drop what they are doing, turn away from the culture of violence and war, and welcome God's reign of universal love and peace here on earth, right now.

This book could not have come at a more critical time. Systemic racism, oppression and a distorted Christian nationalism is pervasive — killing and war have become the norm — and the existential threats of nuclear war and climate change endanger all creation. The iconic Doomsday Clock is now at 90 seconds before midnight. Declaring that we must "abolish war, to erase it from human history before it erases human history," Pope Francis maintains we are living through a "third world war" — one that is being fought piecemeal. More than 110 armed conflicts are taking place worldwide. This includes a war engulfing the Holy Land. Since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack in Israel which claimed 1,200 lives, the U.S. government supported Israeli bombardment and a siege of Gaza that has resulted in over 24,000 deaths, including over 10,000 children, over 58,000 injured, the displacement of 1.9 million Gazans, a

catastrophic humanitarian crisis and widespread destruction of Gaza.



Displaced Palestinian children wait to receive food at a distribution center In Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip Jan. 16, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. (OSV News/Reuters/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa)

No matter who the perpetrator is, the sin and crime of military intervention, occupation, abduction, indiscriminate killing, the use of weapons of mass murder, displacement, ethnic cleansing and genocide must be condemned unreservedly. Those who are denied the status of persons, who are tortured, bombed and crushed under the rubble, cry out for peace, accountability and just reparations. Instead of heeding these cries and advocating for total demilitarization, the U.S. government — which vetoed a U.N. ceasefire resolution in the Israel-Hamas war — is the world's leading arms dealer; it proceeds with an over $1 trillion, several decadeslong nuclear modernization program while refusing (with other nuclear nations) to ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and will spend $886 billion on the 2024 military budget.

Dr. King's exhortation still rings true: "The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."

The Gospel of Peace, if prayerfully read with an open heart, can inspire the necessary personal and collective action required to help our world step back from the brink of annihilation and become a culture of nonviolence. It invites believers to become Jesus' nonviolent practitioners, to forever put away the sword and resist all systems of violence. This means refusing to be part of any military, or follow any government decree that sanctions killing, injustice and war, or make, use or sell any weapon. This means pursuing just peace and restorative justice initiatives, and converting the war economy to meet urgent human needs.

Dear writes in his conclusion:

> In our commitment to the nonviolent Jesus, we now receive new grace to go all the way … to take up the cross as permanent nonviolent resistance to the culture of violence and war, to live already in the eternal present moment of resurrection peace. We do our part to herald the coming of … a world without war, guns, weapons, nuclear weapons, corporate greed, racism, sexism, or environmental destruction.
>
> Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our hearts are burning within us. We are witnesses to the nonviolent Jesus … and the disarming action of God in history through people following Jesus's way. We willingly give our lives to God's ongoing movement of disarmament, justice, and nonviolent transformation for the coming of peace on earth. …
>
> Like the early community, we rejoice knowing that death does not get the last word; that the culture of violence, war, empire and death itself is falling away; that God's reign is coming through the steadfast grassroots movements of peace and nonviolence; that Jesus lives on among us as we build these contagious movements; and that one day, as we welcome a new culture of justice, disarmament, peace and nonviolence, he will reign among us here on earth as he does in heaven forever.

These compelling words reflect Dear's deeply held faith and long experience of seeking to live the Gospel of peace. I have personally seen John Dear practice what he writes: in a campaign he helped coordinate to expose the truth of the nuclear sin around the opening of the Smithsonian Enola Gay exhibit marking the 50th

anniversary of the U.S. nuclear atrocities against Japan; being arrested with him at the Pentagon, White House, and for protesting the Trident submarine; and offering support when he was tried and jailed for the Pax Christi-Spirit of Life plowshares action. I've observed campaigns he organized in New Mexico calling on Los Alamos and Sandia national nuclear labs to stop developing nuclear weapons, as well as his organizing efforts with Campaign Nonviolence.

Pope Francis cries as he prays for Ukraine in front of a Marian statue at the Spanish Steps in R

Pope Francis cries as he prays for Ukraine in front of a Marian statue at the Spanish Steps in Rome Dec. 8, 2022, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. (CNS/Paul Haring)

As Dear points out, God's reign of nonviolence is being proclaimed in powerful ways today. These include: historic pronouncements from Pope Francis encouraging Catholics to reclaim the nonviolence of Jesus and that the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral; international movements for racial, economic and climate justice; the Catholic Worker Movement, faith-based justice and peace communities and organizations, the Plowshares movement and global campaigns to abolish nuclear weapons and war; the collaboration of U.S. and Japanese Catholic bishops calling for nuclear abolition; and now appeals for a permanent cease-fire in Gaza from Pope Francis, numerous nations and religious and human rights organizations and over 2,800 U.S. activists — and counting — arrested for nonviolent actions.

It's not hard to imagine Gandhi and Dr. King giving their imprimatur to *The Gospel of Peace*. For followers of Jesus, it should be required reading, and particularly for all church leaders, clergy, religious congregations and religious educators.

This must-read book can help the Catholic Church and all churches to truly become "peace churches." I pray that all who read it will be filled with resurrection hope and, as Dear says, go forth as apostles of Gospel nonviolence and proclaim the Gospel of peace.

Editor's note: John Dear is currently on a book tour to over 50 U.S. cities through the end of May. See his schedule here to find a city near you.

**This story has been changed to fix an editing error and add a missing word to a sentence.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 16-29, 2024** print issue under the headline: ‘The Gospel of Peace’ makes a case for Christian nonviolence with precision, passion.