

The glorious history of Gospel nonviolence

John Dear | May. 17, 2011 On the Road to Peace

There is no reason to continue this senseless war in Afghanistan. We should end it immediately. That's what many people across the country are now saying.

There are only 100 Al Qaeda members left in Afghanistan, Jim Wallis wrote this week, but we still have over 100,000 American soldiers there.

As the debate on the deficit heats up, Jim wrote, we need to say again and again that the more than \$100 billion a year that is spent on the war is no longer sustainable. Every American should know these numbers: 100 terrorists; 100,000 troops; \$100 billion -- it just isn't adding up anymore. There are no more excuses for delaying a withdrawal of U.S. troops.

He's right. Everyone should call or write their congressional representatives and the White House to demand an immediate end to this terrible war.

This is our Easter duty -- to work as best we can for the end of war and the transformation of the culture of death into a new culture of justice, nonviolence and peace.

This week, an extraordinary new anthology on Christian peacemaking was just published which will help us with this work. It chronicles two thousand years of the Christian witness of nonviolence. I urge everyone to get it, study it, teach it, and promote it in churches and schools everywhere. It will not only encourage our efforts to stop our senseless wars; it will inspire us to join the holy Christian lineage of peacemaking.

Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History, edited by Michael G. Long, may be the definitive anthology on Christian peacemaking and nonviolence. Reading it is a revelation.

With essays by 116 leading Christian voices over the centuries, this book reminds us that Christianity is all about nonviolence as a way of life. Thousands, millions, have gone before us living lives of peace in discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus. This is the norm.

What we see today -- from our Republican Party bishops who support war and nuclear weapons to the millions of Catholics who support our wars and weapons -- is an aberration.

The testimonies in this book are astonishing. From the confessors and martyrs of the early church, to the voices of medieval figures like St. Benedict and St. Francis, as well as Erasmus, the Lollards, Anabaptists, and Quaker abolitionists, up to Jane Addams, Muriel Lester, Howard Thurman, Dr. King, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and the Berrigans, we hear a clarion call to end war and make peace, and see an eye-popping new vision of Gospel nonviolence. This call, this vision and this history need to be reclaimed and renewed.

"You can kill us, but cannot do us any real harm," St. Justin (100-165 CE) wrote in his famous letter to the

Roman emperor before being killed.

We who once killed each other not only do not make war on each other, but in order not to lie or deceive our inquisitors, we gladly die for the confession of Christ. We who were filled with war and mutual slaughter and every wickedness have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons -- our swords into plowshares, and our spears into implements of tillage, and now we cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope which we have from God through the One who was crucified.

‘I am committed to serve my Lord,’ St. Maximilian told his judge in the year 295, according to the court record, just before being killed for refusing to enlist in the Roman military. ‘I cannot serve in an army of this world. I am a Christian.’

‘Our country is the world, our countrymen and women are all humankind,’ William Lloyd Garrison, the great abolitionist, wrote in 1838. ‘We can allow no appeal to patriotism, to revenge any national insult or injury. The Prince of Peace, under whose stainless banner we rally, came not to destroy, but to save, even the worst of enemies. He has left us an example, that we should follow his steps.’

‘I am opposed to war because I am a believer in Christianity,’ Frederick Douglass wrote in 1846.

I am opposed to war because I am a lover of my race. The first gleam of Christian truth that beamed upon my dark mind after having escaped the clutches of those who held me in slavery was accompanied by the spirit of love. I felt at that moment as if I were embracing the whole world in the arms of love and affection. I could not have injured one hair of the head of my worst enemy, although that enemy might have been at that very time imbruing his hands in the blood of a brother or a sister. I believe all who have experienced this love, who are living in the enjoyment of this love, feel this same spirit, this same abhorrence of injuring a single individual, no matter what his conduct happens to be.

‘It was of such resistance as this that our Savior was speaking,’ the brilliant Universalist minister Adin Ballou wrote in 1843.

His obvious doctrine is: Resist not personal injury with personal injury. It bears on all humankind in every social relation of life? It is [our] bounded duty, by all such benevolent resistance, to promote the safety and welfare, the holiness and happiness, of all human beings. A true Christian?cannot kill, maim, or otherwise absolutely injure any human being. He cannot participate in any lawless conspiracy, mob, riotous assembly?. He cannot be a member of any association which approves of war, capital punishment or any other absolute personal injury. He cannot be an officer, private, or chaplain in the army, navy or militia of any nation. He cannot be an officer, prosecutor, agent or elected official of any government?. Faith in the inherent superiority of good over evil, truth over error, right over wrong, love over hatred, is the immediate moral basis of our doctrine.

‘It seems to me that it should be the special duty of those who love and honor the name of Jesus to be opposed to war,’ Lucretia Mott, the great abolitionist and feminist, said in an 1869 speech. ‘If we can do away with the practice of taking life, it will be a great advance in the world.’

‘If war is right, then Christianity is false, a lie,’ John Haynes Holmes preached in New York City on the eve of World War I. ‘When there comes a call, I shall refuse to heed. When the system of conscription is adopted, I shall have to decline to serve. If this means imprisonment, I will serve my term. If this means persecution, I will carry my cross. No order of president or governor, no law of nation or state, no loss of reputation, freedom or life, will persuade me or force me to this business of killing.’

These extraordinary documents, which bear witness to the Christian commitment to peace across time, clarify that nonviolence is not a mere exception -- it is at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ, my friend Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University writes in his foreword. He continues:

In the early church, Christians did not even find it necessary to declare they were nonviolent -- exactly because the way of nonviolence could not be distinguished from what it meant for them to be Christian. To worship Jesus, to follow Jesus, was to assume a way of life that altogether precluded the question of whether one might need to kill; it simply did not come up.

Nonviolence was not some further implication that might be drawn from fundamental Christian convictions -- nonviolence was constitutive of the Christian conviction that Jesus is Lord.

Christians committed to nonviolence were, and are, anything but passive. Indeed, it was Christians committed to nonviolence who took the lead, for example, in challenging the presumption that Christians could own slaves.

The documents gathered in *Christian Peace and Nonviolence*, Hauerwas concludes, are the start of the kind of historiography we desperately need if we are to provide an alternative to the presumption that violence is inevitable.

I thank Michael Long for this great contribution to the growing literature on nonviolence, and I hope everyone will find new inspiration from *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History*, as I have, to carry on the Easter duty of ending war and making peace.

Please join John Dear at the upcoming Wildgoose Festival, June 23-26, in Durham, NC, the first annual U.S. ecumenical Christian justice and arts festival. Richard Rohr, Jim Wallis, Shane Claiborne, Joyce Hollyday, Vincent Harding and many others will also speak. See: www.wildgoosefestival.org [1]. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com [2]. John's teachings on Gospel nonviolence are featured in the DVD film *The Narrow Path*, available at www.sandamianofoundation.org [3]. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn> [4]. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org [5].

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