

Using violence against violence?

Statement from a peace church perspective

In the face of the terror caused by the IS militias in Iraq and Syria, Western nations have reacted with air strikes and deliveries of weapons. A reaction that, given the atrocities described, has been widely accepted – also increasingly in churches. Among the same churches that almost unanimously raised their voices in protest against the American invasion of Iraq, there is now an increasing contingent which holds military intervention to be a moral responsibility compatible with the Christian faith.

The Theological Seminary Bienenberg is rooted in a peace church tradition whose commitment to pacifism is rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a position that once again faces fundamental questions in light of the terrible and threatening events in the Middle East. First and foremost, we find ourselves – insofar as is possible in well-protected Switzerland – deeply shaken when we hear about the persecution and execution of Christians and other minorities. We also experience feelings of powerlessness, anger, and the fervent longing that a stop be put to this brutal course of action as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, we believe that the situation does not render pacifist convictions obsolete. Because we are Christians, we now see ourselves challenged to find a way of dealing with the enemy according to the principles of nonviolence inspired by the Gospel. For this reason we are addressing all who profess Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace and seek to follow him. It is His call to love one's enemies that we hear as an appeal to the churches to witness to God's coming kingdom in this world.

By writing this, we are sharing a few rough thoughts about events that at times render us speechless. To speak out in this manner runs the risk of coming across as crude or cynical. We are also quite aware that we do not have a satisfactory answer for all things. However, we would like to share our wrestling with the pressing questions that time and again are raised by such eruptions of violence. We know that it is only possible to express some of these thoughts when at a safe distance from violent conflicts. We are also part of a society that has for far too long taken a passive role and has not yet exhausted all possibilities to help. However, we do not want to let ourselves be paralyzed by helplessness and resignation, but rather we carry on, humbly and with the help of God's Spirit, in the "hunt for peace" (Heb. 12,14) as best as we are able. This we do in fellowship and solidarity with the victims of these inhuman actions. God have mercy!

Objection 1:

Isn't (Christian) pacifism idealist and naive?

The current characterizations of (Christian) pacifism as naive are nothing new¹, but rather a familiar and recurring accusation. Throughout history, people and movements that set themselves against the conventional wisdom of returning violence with violence have been derided. Yet those with power

have often considered them to be far more than harmless crackpots. They recognized what was actually at stake and asked apprehensively, “What would happen if even more people were seduced into nonviolence?” They frequently answered this question in the form of sometimes violent persecution. The Anabaptists, for example, could tell a few tales in this regard. The question, “What would happen?” would by and large remain unanswered. Which is a shame, because history has recorded a good number of stories of peacemakers whose apparently “naive” pacifism impeded or put to an end to bloodshed.² These are examples of unexpected turns made possible because people acted “naively” in the best sense of the word. They cultivated a “culture of peace”³ which fostered an alternative relationship to violence. Therefore, it cannot be said that Christian pacifism is fundamentally doomed to failure, although there is of course no guarantee that it will always lead to the desired result. The same, however, can also be said of military intervention.

We must also not forget that Christian pacifism is a costly path.⁴ This too it shares in common with military intervention. The hope of being able to lead a “clean” war with intelligent weapons with which “only” terrorists are targeted and killed without further victims has long since revealed itself to be an illusion. Is there really such a great difference between the necessary willingness to make sacrifices of an armed soldier and a nonviolent Christian, that only the latter is seen as naive and unrealistic?

Objection 2:

Violence can only be stopped with violence

Eleven years ago, the American military made a move to overthrow the then-Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein as part of the “Axis of Evil”. They succeeded and celebrated this as the speedy success of their potent military machine. It did not take long, however, to recognize how short-sighted their strategy was. Instead of the quick withdrawal of troops they had planned, a long and drawn-out war persisted which did not just claim many victims, but also accrued horrendous costs. When the last troops withdrew in December 2011, they left behind them a region crippled by a political vacuum, which has since been filled by increasingly radical groups. The military action in Iraq had thus eliminated a dictator, but also paved the way for new excesses of violence. This is a phenomenon that has been demonstrated in other cases as well. Benjamin L. Corey rightly asks: “If the use of violence is how we got here, why would we think MORE violence would actually make things better?”⁵

Under the banner of R2P (Responsibility to Protect), political and ecclesiastic leaders have argued in favor of a three step program to solve, or at least hinder, violent conflicts: Prevention – Reaction – Rebuilding.⁶ However, the example of Iraq is a painful reminder that hasty and unilateral violent reactions to conflict do not solve the problem and sometimes only aggravate the situation. Such military interventions frequently promise far more than they are able to deliver. One can only imagine what would happen if at least as much funding were directed into conflict prevention and reconstruction (including trauma recovery) as is to the stockpile of weapons that is supposed to secure or reestablish peace.⁷

Objection 3:

Should we then simply stand by and watch as these terrible things happen?

No. A peace church position is not equivalent to apathetic passivity. The current situation requires a reaction. The question is, by which means? A military intervention seems justifiable at this point. Yet history shows that previous “just wars” have been carried out with dubious motivations at odds with their original or official intention. What are the goals of the “coalition of the willing” in Iraq? In its military actions, does it itself follow the rules of engagement that it demands from its enemies? Why do we not hear the cry of the responsibility to protect in the face of so many other instances of inhuman injustices in the world?

We are convinced that evil must be confronted. Military violence seems to us, however, unsuitable for the task. In the following points, we see alternative means of actions:

Prayer. We Christians ask God for astounding things. He who prays to God for a sunny day despite a bad weather report expects nothing less than that God will override the basic physical laws of meteorology. What makes this trust in God so fleeting when it comes to war and peace? When we pray not only for the victims and for those threatened, but also for the perpetrators, we do so in faith in God's promise: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit!” (Zach. 4,6).

Nonviolent peacemaking operations. Often unheeded by official reporting, people in conflict zones around the globe dare to place themselves between the fronts without weapons.⁸ They do not shut their eyes before evil, but rather confront it bravely with their unarmed presence. In their vulnerability, they break through the classic friend-enemy mentality, which can open the door to unexpected possibilities for action. Impressive reports of such peacemaking operations show that there is a “third way” and raise challenging questions about conventional peacekeeping strategies.⁹ They also continually remind us how important contact between people and (church) communities in conflict areas is in helping us not to be led by media coverage into indiscriminately dividing parties into “good” and “evil”. In searching for an appropriate course of action against the terror of the IS, we would therefore especially like to hear from directly-affected Christians.

Help for refugees. Our Anabaptist history contains many examples of people who responded to repression and persecution with flight. Many of these experienced a great deal of solidarity and hospitality in difficult times. Today we can take on responsibility as hosts with similar generosity – whether providing emergency assistance at the local level or seeking to improve the process of admission of refugees here in Europe, who at the moment are far too often impeded by bureaucracy.¹⁰

Police operations. The phrase “just policing”- calls to mind in church circles the deployment of international (!) police troops. Trained in nonviolent conflict resolution and held to the standards of international law and Human Rights, such teams could be deployed in order to protect people. Whether they would be completely unarmed is debatable. If weapons were, however, to be used in an extremely restrained manner – for example, to secure a refugee corridor – it would nevertheless amount to a completely different strategy, than a large-scale military invasion with the goal of eliminating the enemy. Peace church circles that consider such an operation to be acceptable strongly plead for a “nonlethal use of violence.”¹¹

Objection 4:

Doesn't the Bible also speak of necessary violence?

There are without a doubt some vexing passages in the Bible in which violence is described as desired, or at least legitimized, by God. However, to derive from these instances an across-the-board rule of thumb that violence is just sometimes necessary seems inappropriate to us. Taking into account the overarching lines of the biblical narrative as a whole, it becomes clear that God truly desires *Shalom* – a just peace. This can be seen most clearly in the comprehensive will to peace of Jesus. He wages a battle without compromise against pseudo-religion of any kind, against injustice and self-righteousness – and in spite of it all loves his enemies instead of killing them. Even upon being sentenced to death on the cross by the political and religious powers that be, God protests against this logic of violence with the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Morning and in so doing validates Jesus and his way. In reflecting upon the story of Jesus, the early church arrived at the conclusion: in Jesus, God responded to human hostility with reconciliatory love (Rom 5,10). Instead of fighting back, God embraces the world and brings about *Shalom*. It also becomes clear that Jesus set an example for how *Shalom* can take root in our own relationships (Phil 2,5-11). As Christians, we see ourselves called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus (1Pet 2,21; Lu 22,49-51) and to overcome evil with good (Rom 12,21). In saying this, we are aware that there is no guarantee that this way will come without suffering and always deliver the desired results. Throughout the centuries, peacemaking individuals have occasionally paid a very high price. Yet it is the resurrection that stirs in us the belief that enmity and death do not have the last word, but rather God's love makes everything whole. We pray therefore, that our fear abates to the love that reaches even to our enemy.¹²

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September 16, 2014

¹The wanting realism of Christian pacifism has, for example, recently been criticized by Reinold Scharnowski in his article, „Allerletzte Möglichkeit ist Waffengewalt“, (http://www.livenet.ch/themen/glaube/glaube/261886-allerletzte_moeglichkeit_ist_waffengewalt.html).

²A collection of such stories of peace can be found in Cornelia Lehn, *Friede sei mit euch!*, Weisenheim am Berg 1987.

³Also see Alan & Eleanor Kreider, Paulus Widjaja, *Eine Kultur des Friedens: Gottes Vision für Gemeinde und Welt*, Schwarzenfeld 2008.

⁴This costly way is described by Ron Sider, „Gottes Volk versöhnt“ in: XI. Mennonitische Weltkonferenz Straßburg, 1984: Hauptansprachen. Strasbourg: CMM (:35-39), in English: <http://www.cpt.org/resources/writings/sider>.

⁵<http://www.theologiestudierende.de/2014/08/19/irakischer-voelkermord-unsere-gewalt-hat-uns-hier-her-gebracht/>

⁶The concept is thoroughly explained here: <http://www.schutzverantwortung.de>. A detailed examination from a peace church perspective by Jakob Fehr can be found here: (http://www.dmfk.de/fileadmin/downloads/Fehr_-_R2P_die_Konfrontation_mit_dem_Boesen.pdf)

⁷For the call to a long-term strategy for Iraq, see also http://www.huffingtonpost.com/derek-flood/is-there-a-nonviolent-isis_b_5670512.html

⁸An example is the Christian Peacemaker Team (<http://cpt.org/>)

⁹To such reports can be found on <http://mennoworld.org/2014/09/01/cpt-aids-refugees-seeking-safety-in-iraqi-kurdistan/> and <http://mennoworld.org/2014/08/29/jim-foley-is-and-what-i-learned-from-being-kidnapped/>

¹⁰American Benjamin L. Corey asks on a related note: „Why not stage the largest airlift since the Berlin Airlift, and bring all of these religious and ethnic minorities out of their situation, and grant them asylum here in the United States?“

¹¹See also the presentation of Fernando Enns „Gerechter Frieden zwischen Interventionsverbot und Schutzgebot“, <http://friedensbildung-schule.de/sites/friedensbildung-schule.de/files/anhang/medien/fbs-responsibility-protect-449.pdf>

¹²Alice Su describes this transformation impressively on <http://gospelworldview.wordpress.com/2014/09/03/1-john-isis-and-the-gospel-versus-terror>. A German translation can be found here: www.bienenberg-blog.ch.