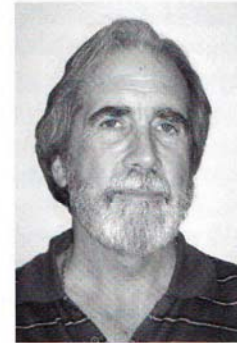# Is Christianity a Religion of Peace?

Craig M. Watts

CRAIG WATTS' *writings on peace-related issues have appeared in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Cross Currents, and Encounter, among other periodicals. He is the author of the book* Disciple of Peace: Alexander Campbell on Pacifism, Violence and the State. *He serves as minister at Royal Palm Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Coral Springs, Florida.*

Some time ago I ran across a comic strip in the newspaper that may be pertinent to an event like the one we are involved in this evening. In it two clerics of obliviously different faiths are shown coming from opposite directions and converging on a corner of an intersection. Each of them holds a large sign that bears the words, "MORE PEACEFUL THAN THOU ART!" The caption over the picture reads, "Prelude to a Bloodbath." I trust that the presentations made this evening during this inter-faith forum here in Coral Springs will not be a prelude to anything but increasingly positive relations among the adherents of our varied faiths.

No doubt it is possible to talk about a "religion of peace" without making any reference to war and violence. Peace of mind could be the focus. I could discuss inner tranquility, spiritual calm and rest-fulness. Or I could concentrate my attention on peace with God and explore divine reconciliation and the resolution of a conflicted relationship with God and address how Christians understand this to take place through Jesus Christ. While these are important matters, rather than examine the personal, inner and invisible peace so often assoc-iated with religious faith, I intend to discuss the way Christian faith has or hasn't contributed to a peace

that is public and visible before the watching world. So the question I will address is not whether Christianity has promoted peace in individual hearts but whether that peace has gotten beyond the confines of hearts to show itself peaceably practiced in the world.

I wish I could stand here and tell you that Chris-tianity offers an unambiguous witness for peace. I would very much like to be able to say that the church has consistently been an agent of harmony and reconciliation. I want to be able to truthfully claim that Christians faithfully dismantle walls of hostility and in their place nonviolently build bridges of understanding. But I can't. The record has been mixed. While there have been wonderful incidents of Christian peacemaking and there have been—and still are—Christians who tirelessly promote peace and work against war and violence, the opposite is not hard to find.

There are, of course, some conspicuous examples of expressly religious violence that can serve to call into question the claim that Christianity is a religion of peace. We readily think of the most often mentioned episodes in the history of Christianity like the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials. But long before any of these events, the church violently persecuted the so-called heretics, the Donatists, in the 4th and 5th centuries. In the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists were viciously per-secuted, and thousands were killed by both Protestants and Catholics. In the following century the Thirty Year War raged, which was at

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least in part, a religious war among Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists.

Aside from and more numerous than the explicitly religious episodes of violence are the "secular" wars in which Christians have fought. With the exception of the traditional peace churches like the Society of Friends or Quakers, the Mennonites and the Brethren Church, when states have called for war, Christians have readily responded. Often Christians who are separated by national boundaries have willingly killed each other at the bidding of their respective governments, allowing national loyalty to triumph over any allegiance based on spiritual communion and shared faith. Rather than being obvious agents of nonviolence and reconciliation, in times of warfare Christian churches in the warring nations have been largely either silently complicit or have added to the animosity in word and deed.

I will offer only a thumbnail sketch of the "just war" position. Normally it is laid out under two headings, jus ad bellum *and* jus in bello.

This is not to say that Christianity has not been guided by principles of some sort, even as it has sanctioned violence. The "just war" tradition as formulated by Augustine, Aquinas and others is essentially the majority report of the church in matters of war and peace. The "just war" tradition has been revised and refined through the years. This is no place to get into all the twists and turns of that development. Rather I will offer only a thumbnail sketch of the "just war" position. Normally it is laid out under two headings. The first, *jus ad bellum*, include criteria for resorting to warfare. These are:

- There must be a just cause for entering into warfare. Essentially just cause is limited to self-defense or putting a stop to egregious and ongoing injustice.

- The actions must be guided by right intentions. Right intention pertains to the reestablishment of peace and order, and not to intentions which lead to brutality, vengeance and humiliation for the enemy.

- A war can be justifiable only when declared by a competent and recognized authority.

- War can be engaged in only as a last resort. All other possible means of resolving the conflict

must be exhausted before war can be considered justifiable.

- There must be a high probability of success as far as can be determined. "Heroic" lost causes, however just, are not justifiable.

- The reasonably anticipated good to be achieved by engaging in warfare must be proportionally greater than the destruction to persons, property and culture which will likely result as a consequence of war.

In addition to the criteria for engaging in warfare are the standards of behavior necessary for the just conduct of war or *jus in bello*.

- The amount of force used in war must be proportionate to the goal being pursued. In other words no more force should be employed than is necessary to accomplish the just cause.

- Those fighting in war must discriminate between the enemy combatants who are legitimate targets in war from the innocent civilian population who should remain immune from intentional attack.

These standards may appear reasonably clear and straightforward. In fact, they are anything but. There are serious conceptual problems with each of the criterion as well as significant difficulties with implementation. Through the centuries the tendency has been to weaken, rather than strengthen the constraints against violence set forth in the standards. While I said earlier that the "just war tradition" reflect the "majority report" within Christianity in regard to the use of violence and the practice of war, in fact it is questionable whether this is true in actual practice. The language of just war continues to be used but it has not been operationalized in a disciplined way. Instead Christians have tended to uncritically support the military ventures of the state in whatever country they happen to live. With an obligatory nod in the direction of the just war tradition, Christian leaders—often in opposing countries—routinely pronounce the war pursued by their respective nations as "just." That this has occurred so consistently for centuries makes it difficult not to conclude that the just war tradition has become less a tool for discerning whether or not a given war is justifiable than it is a pretext for supporting a foregone conclusion based on national interests and political "realism."

This fact has been recognized, not only by critics of the "just war" tradition but by some of its most

articulate and insightful supporters. The standards of the "just war" tradition can be considered credible only if they serve their rightful purpose of restraining violence and discrediting some wars. But the record of the church has been deplorable in that no major church body for centuries has used the criteria of the "just war" tradition to declare as unjust any war engaged in by its national government. The only exception is the condemnation of the current war in Iraq by the Roman Catholic bishops and by the leadership of virtually every mainline Protestant church in the U.S., as well as be ecumenical church bodies. Further, the church has not bothered to teach its members about the "just war" tradition with enough clarity and care to enable them to make informed judgments about the justice or injustice of any given war. Still further, the church for the most part has not deliberately nurtured the sort of strength of character among the membership that would enable them to say, "No!" to the state and refuse to support unjust wars. Consequently, despite claiming to embrace the "just war" tradition, in practice there largely is a willingness among Christians to offer indiscriminate support to the nation at war. The "just war" tradition has shown itself to be dysfunctional.

But my complaint with the "just war" tradition is not simply that it has considerable conceptual problems or that it has failed to be implemented in any meaningful way. For me the bigger problem is that it is not compatible with the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and the apostles or with the words of the leaders of the earliest church, prior to the fourth century. I believe what we find as we look to them is a thoroughgoing commitment to nonviolence.

It was over three hundred years after the time of Jesus before church leaders began to scour the Christian scriptures in search of some metaphor, some reported incident, some statement, even some passage that could provide an opportunity to construct an argument from silence, in order to provide justifications for Christians to engage in warfare and use violence in the service of the state. After Christianity was legalized by the Roman Empire early in the fourth century, interpretations of scripture began to be set forth that were never previously proposed by the ancient church fathers. During the earliest decades of Christianity non-retaliatory love was consistently advocated by the leaders of the church.

In the mid second century Justin Martyr wrote that "we [who are now Christians] who formerly killed... refuse to make war on our enemies" (*First Apology* 39.3). Later in that same century Tertullian wrote "that according to our doctrine it is more permissible to be killed than to kill" (*Apology* 37.4). He refused to make any distinction between murder and killing in war (*On the Resurrection* 16.7-8) and he held that when Jesus took away the sword by which the apostle Peter attempted to defend him, Jesus disarmed every Christian who would be inclined to be a soldier (*On Idolatry* 19.1-3). Early in the third century Hippolytus of Rome taught that if a soldier was converted to Christianity while in the military, he need not desert so long as he did not kill anyone and if ordered to do so must resist.

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In the same century the great Christian thinker Origin wrote, "For we [who have become Christians] no longer take up the sword against any nation, nor do we learn the art of war any more. Instead . . . we have become sons of peace through Jesus our founder" (*Against Celsus* 5.33)." Early in the fourth century Arnobius criticized the wars of Rome and contrasted these with the Christian way in which "it is not right to repay evil for evil; it is better to suffer an injury than to inflict one and to shed one's blood rather . . . than the blood of another" (*Against the Pagans* 1.6).

These and the other earliest Christian leaders didn't all agree about whether Christians could serve in the military. Yet even among those who agreed that Christians could remain in the military if they were already enlisted when converted, most looked very negatively upon Christians volunteering for the military. These early leaders had particular reservations about Christians who were officers since they were required to offer oaths and sacrifices associated with idolatry. The requirement of oath-taking apparently was not always imposed on the rank and file (Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19. 1-3). But about one matter all the most ancient church

leaders appear to have been of a single mind: under no circumstances—in the military or out—was it permissible for Christians to use deadly force. However, this did not stop them from praying for the Roman Empire and even praying for strength of its army in battle. They believed that God providentially used the power of Rome to enforce order on the ancient world, an order that enabled the Christian message to be more easily spread. So even though they refused to fight and kill for the Empire, they asked that God guide the Emperor so that Rome's power—however evil it might be—would combat even greater evil and serve justice, albeit imperfect.

But the earliest Christian leaders recognized that the purpose of the Empire and its government was not the purpose of the church and its members. They did not aspire to grasp in their hands the power to coercively rule over others in this world. Their purpose was to follow Jesus and to show the world a new way through the gospel they proclaimed and the life they lived together. They derived this conviction from Jesus and the witness of the apostles as given in the testimony of scripture. Among the first stories told of Jesus in the gospels is that of him being tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11, Lk. 4:1-13). One of the temptations was a satanic offer to rule over the kingdoms of the world, an offer he decisively rejected. Repeatedly Jesus insisted that those who follow him are to serve from below rather than rule from above (Matt. 23:10-12, Mk. 9:35, 10:42-45, Jn. 13:13-16). He taught that his followers should accept blows and not respond in kind (Matt. 5:19, Lk. 6:29). Jesus told them to bless those who persecuted them rather than harm or even curse their opponents (Matt. 5:44, Lk. 6:28). He called upon his disciples to repeatedly forgive rather than demand recompense (Matt. 6:15, 18:21-35, Lk. 6:37, 17:4). Jesus declared, "Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called the children of God" (Matt 5:6) and he issued that most radical of commands, "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44, Lk. 6:27, 32-36). At no point did Jesus ever sanction or encourage the use of violence or deadly force for any reason. He reinforced his message with his nonviolent life, even to the point of praying for his tormentors from the cross, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:24).

The apostles, no less than Jesus, repudiated the use of violence and called for non-retaliating love. The apostle Paul taught that though Christians are in a spiritual struggle, they do not battle against enemies of flesh and blood and are not to fight using weapons that are worldly (2 Cor. 10:3-4, Eph. 6:10-17). Echoing Jesus' call for non-retaliation, he insisted, "See that nobody repays evil for evil, but always pursue good toward one another and toward all" (I Thess. 5:15). While Paul recognized that God providentially uses the violence of governmental power to curtail evil (Rom. 13:1-7), he taught that Christians are called by God to something very different, and, so, declared, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse . . . . Repay no one evil for evil . . . . Never avenge yourselves . . . . But, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink . . . . Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good" (Rom. 12:14, 17-21).

In the portion of scripture attributed to the apostle Peter, the nonviolence of Jesus in the face of suffering and death is the explicit basis for Christians to reject violence. Peter wrote during a time of increasing persecution and urged his readers to endure the hardship with patience. "For to this you have been called," he stated, "because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps . . . . When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten . . . "(I Pet. 2:21,23). The cross of Christ is not viewed here one dimensionally, as a means of salvation in an afterlife but also is lifted up as the shape of life in the present for those who would follow Jesus, a cruciform shape for those who will endure suffering but not inflict it upon others.

As I noted earlier, after the so-called conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the words of Jesus and the apostles began to be reinterpreted in a way that made them more compatible with the new found status of Christianity as the state religion. Following the lead of such thinkers as bishop Augustine of Hippo, leaders began to be argue that being a blessed "peacemaker" did not exclude killing in war so long as one's aim was to achieve peace, albeit at the edge of a sword. And the command, "Love your enemies" was reconceived, removed from the domain of behavior and internalized, so that one could maim and kill enemies so long as one did it without hate and animosity in one's heart. Further, after Christianity was given establishment status church leaders began to teach that the commands of Christ and the apostles regarding forgiveness, non-retaliation and

the love of enemies applies only in personal relations and does not pertain to what a Christian does on behalf of nations in war. But this distinction is foreign to Christian scripture and essentially ignores the example of Jesus. Any credible definition of what Jesus meant by being a "peacemaker" or by loving one's enemies must arise from the example provided by the life of Jesus himself, a life that could be confrontational and even disruptive, but, nevertheless, nonviolent even to the point of his own unjust execution. It was the Jesus who practiced nonviolent love without limit and who endured unjust suffering without inflicting injury upon others who issued the call, "Follow me."

But, I believe, to a great extent Christians have not followed him, not at least in the ways of peace. The church, while claiming Jesus Christ as its foundation, has violently persecuted Jews, gone to war against Muslims and even sanctioned Christians killing other Christians on behalf of antagonistic nations. All this seems to me to fall far short of being a faithful embodiment of any religion of peace genuinely derived from Jesus or practiced and proclaimed by the apostles and the earliest church leaders.

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The way for Christianity to be more truly a religion of peace is not by abandoning its distinctiveness and adopting an amorphous "spirituality," becoming something unrecognizable as historic Christianity. There is nothing in the ecumenical creeds of the church which have defined Christianity for many centuries, nothing in these beliefs that necessarily lead to the support of violence. It is not through disavowing the core truth claims that have been affirmed for ages that Christians will become more adequate agents of peace. I suspect this to be the case as well for Jews, Muslims and others in relation to their own faith. The fact is, there is no necessary connection between making religious truth claims -even exclusive ones- and violence, no causal connection at all. Those who claim otherwise

misdiagnose the problem of religious violence. Three hundred years of early Christian history offers considerable evidence against their view. Additional evidence can be found in hundreds of years of Mennonite, Brethren, and Quaker history. Members of these faith communities lived their lives, engaged in ministry, and practiced evangelism. Yet they did so without trying either to dominate others by force or to even defend themselves with violence when they were being killed.

It is a mistake, I believe, to think that for Christians the way toward peace is through abandoning convictions that are distinctively Christian and instead to embrace values or viewpoints that are purportedly more universal. Believing in "the sacredness of human life" does not necessarily lead to a religion of peace. Lots of people who affirm this belief still justify violence in certain circumstances. Believing that every person is created in the "image of God" in itself does not lead to a religion of peace. Most of the religious people who condone using deadly force in select instances share this belief. Believing that "love" is the highest and most holy value does not necessarily lead to a religion of peace. This, too, is often believed by people who kill each other in wars. The "sacredness of human life," the notion that humans are in the "image of God" and even "love" are abstractions that have not closed the door on violence. All of these abstractions can be -and have been- defined in such a way that not only leaves room for violence and war but may even require such destructive behaviors as a "lesser evil" over against some great villainy.

Affirming high sounding abstractions will not lead Christianity to recover its credibility as a religion of peace. The church and its members must instead recover an active devotion to the concrete and particular person of Jesus Christ. Like him, they must resist the temptation to take the control of the power of government to dominate others and they must reject the methods of violent coercion. Instead they need to endeavor to influence the world through persuasive words and servant ways. Christians should be what Jesus called "salt" and "light" which gently impacts and makes a presence known without overwhelming and destroying what is touched. Christians should remember that Jesus expected his disciples to be a distinctive and faithful minority, not a dominant and dominating majority.

He did not offer standards by which to run the nations but guidance for his willing followers. To

help recover the credibility of Christianity as a religion of peace Christians should not just love, but love in the peculiar way Jesus did: defenselessly, indiscriminately, unrelentingly, sacrificially, enduring suffering and injury yet inflicting none. Christians should always keep their eyes on the twists and turns of the Jesus story and endeavor to embody that story in their own lives in the present as the community called church. All of this does not mean Christians must withdraw from public/political life. Indeed, Christians should seek to influence the state for the common good, always doing so in ways compatible with following the nonviolent Christ.

No doubt there will always be some within the church who will anxiously envision dreadful consequences if all Christians follow ways of nonviolent love. Certainly, risk is involved. After all, those who are unwilling to resist aggressors with violence may be more likely to be attacked. But the right question is not, "What will happen to us if we don't fight with violence those who are violent?" Rather the right question is, "What will happen if we fail to follow the way of nonviolent love revealed in Jesus Christ?" It is not first of all the skillful calculation of consequences that is required of Christians. Instead I think those who claim to be his disciples should walk in the steps of Jesus, come what may, and leave the consequences in the hands of God. Yes, suffering may be the result but God can do amazing things with radical obedience. It was God, after all, who vindicated the crucified, nonviolent Christ through his resurrection from the dead. Faith in the grave-overcoming power of God is necessary for Christianity to be a religion of peace.

Of course I realized that as I speak of a distinctively Christian foundation for peace the convictions of which I speak are foreign to the theological assumptions of many of you. Nevertheless, I would like to believe that in every major religion there are spiritual resources and threads of tradition that can help support movement toward ways of peace. In the end, each faith body will draw from its own well. We can share with each other what we find. I hope we can continue to learn from each other and come to deeper appreciation of one another to replace the vast ignorance that prevails. For the sake of the whole world, religious leaders must lead in ways that will reduce fear and threat and foster honest understanding. Even though inevitably there are differences, there are also beliefs that we share and behaviors we all affirm. I am convinced we can collaborate for a common good without betraying convictions we hold dear. When we do this, I believe there is rejoicing in heaven.