

# The Mission

A Theological Analysis by  
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## Movie Synopsis

*The Mission* is a film based on actual events that occurred during the 1750's and focuses on Jesuit missionaries who were expanding their missionary ventures in South America. The missionaries went to high and undiscovered plateaus inhabited by free Guarani Indians whose only previous contact with the outside world was in their own defense against slave traders. The Guarani were portrayed as an organized society that protected each other under their own king, and lived and played in harmony and peace.

The movie begins by depicting a man tied to a cross being set afloat down the river and eventually going over an immense waterfall. We later find out the man had been a priest sent by the Jesuits. The movie does not directly say why he was killed, but implies the Indians were responsible. His replacement was Father Gabriel, who had sent the first priest and resolutely intends to bring Christianity to the Guarani and build a mission. Captain Mendoza was a former slave trader who had hunted and killed the Guarani. As a result of extreme remorse over the killing of his brother, Mendoza ends up accepting the Jesuits' challenge to pay penance by a visit to the Guarani mission where he stays with Father Gabriel and later becomes a Jesuit priest.

The social and political issues of Spain, Portugal and the Catholic Church concerning the recent signing of the Treaty of Madrid eventually become a major crisis for the mission and the Jesuits. Since the mission is situated on newly acquired Portuguese land protected by the Catholic Church, the political ambitions of all three major powers become involved. There is added pressure from greedy local colonists who want legal slave trade under Portugal, impossible under Spanish Jesuit control. All these interests eventually come together against continuing the mission. In its decision to "sacrifice" the mission for what it privately claims is in its own best interest, the Church determines that the Jesuit priests and the Indians must abandon the mission. The Guarani consider the mission their home and vehemently tell the Church they will fight to remain. The Jesuit priests later decide they will remain as well.

Former Captain now Priest Mendoza, renounces his Jesuit vows, and is accompanied by two other priests who join the Guarani tribe to battle against the colonial military forces commanded to destroy the mission. Father Gabriel decides not to join in the fight, but instead remains in the church as a priest in solidarity with the women and children. At the prospect of a defense with only bows and arrows, Capt Mendoza quietly leads a Guarani band into the sleeping enemy camp and ends up killing a soldier in order to steal weapons. Nevertheless, the militia arrive armed with cannons and guns, slaughter most of the Indians and destroy the mission. Capt Mendoza dies leading his followers in battle and Father Gabriel is killed leading his followers out of the burning church.

## **I**ntroduction

The depiction of the lives and events that came together in *The Mission* inspired us to reflect upon the experiences of two priests who fell in love with a community and ended up defending it to the death. We identified several major underlying issues presented in the film that we decided to examine more closely in a theological analysis. From the individual perspectives of justifiable violence and non-violence, we addressed the issues of sin/evil, forgiveness, discrimination and the concept of ‘laying your life down for a friend.’

## **J**ustified Violence

*by Virginia Coakley*

Violence can and oftentimes is used by Christians as a method of liberation. In The film *The Mission* the writer does an excellent job of forcing the viewer to wrestle with the decisions that were made by the two priests and also to contemplate the decisions the viewer would have made if the roles had been reversed. As Christians the film forces us to examine our theology in practical terms. We are impelled to take our theology books off the shelves and are constrained to engage our theology from a practical position.

The storyline is about two priests who are faithfully living out their respective callings when they unexpectedly are faced with the vilest form of evil. The evil is manifested in the forms of injustice, violence, discrimination and racism. The two priests heroically choose to die for what they believe to be right. Paul Tillich once stated “if people tell you, I have no ultimate concern,” which all of you have probably heard, then ask them, “is there really nothing at all that you take with unconditional seriousness?” What for instance would you be ready to die for?”<sup>1</sup> This is the crux of the film; the ultimate concern of the two priests, both found something that they believed was worth living and dying for. In this paper, I will be examining the actions taken by the priest Rodrigo Mendoza after he grappled with the evil that fellow Christians intended to inflict and actually did inflict on a group of Indians.



Ultimately Father Mendoza resorts to a form of violence that Gutierrez defines as *just violence*. According to Gutierrez and other Latin American clergy we have to be careful not to equate “the unjust violence of the oppressors (who maintain this despicable system) with the just violence of the oppressed (who feel obliged to use it to achieve their liberation).”<sup>2</sup> Father Mendoza no doubt contemplated the situation the Indians were faced with and came to the conclusion that the Indians, although they did not deserve it, would be slaughtered. It appears that the only reason they are faced with such a

terrible fate is that the land that they are on is in demand by various governments and people wanted to use the Indians as slaves. Father Mendoza, upon recognizing the injustice of the impending destruction of the mission, the potential murder of many of the Indians, and the enslavement of those remaining, decided to do something. He made the decision to engage in justified violence; he chose to help the Indians in a tangible way. Gutierrez describes injustice and

oppression as “a sinful situation.” He also said “...where this social peace does not exist, there we will find social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities, there we will find the rejection of the peace of the Lord, and a rejection of the Lord Himself.”<sup>3</sup> (Attached picture taken from [www.cnsforum.com/cp/en/CNSforum/CNS\\_Magazine/Film/Film\\_mission.asp](http://www.cnsforum.com/cp/en/CNSforum/CNS_Magazine/Film/Film_mission.asp), 1/28/05)

At this crossroad in the film it is evident that the church as depicted by the church leaders and armed forces is not fulfilling its mission. The church should be a beacon of light for the world to see; it should offer guidance and support in living lives that are well pleasing to God. The mission of the church should be the same of Jesus; that of binding up the broken hearted and freeing those who are oppressed. Instead what we witness, are alleged Christians purposefully choosing to inflict a form of oppressive suffering upon the Indians. Manas defined this type of suffering as “suffering enforced upon people by others, by willful inflicting of pain, crippling to one’s resolve and initiative, ...it is the result of violence and is evil and should be removed.”<sup>4</sup>

### **THE WILLINGNESS TO LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE FOR A FRIEND**

By choosing to fight, Father Mendoza was confronting the evil head on and removing it. Father Mendoza in effect had resolved to engage in a form of redemptive suffering. Buthelezi describes this type of suffering as “suffering after the model of Christ to save others...the power to endure this suffering comes out of love and seeks to realize the objective that lies beyond suffer, namely, liberation.”<sup>5</sup> Father Mendoza made the decision to fight and it was based not on hate, but rather based on a tremendous amount of love that he held for the Indians and their well-being. For him, fighting for the liberation of the Indians was indicative of how seriously he took his priestly vows. Father Mendoza recognized that there was a cost associated with his decision to fight and he was willing to pay it, even if it cost him his life.

I am certain that the writer of this script did not consider this a movie about Black Liberation. According to Boesak, Cone would in all probability disagree, in quoting he said, “liberation and blackness go together ...blackness signifies oppression in any given society”<sup>6</sup> Boesak states, “liberation is liberation from white domination, making blacks free to define themselves and their own world.”<sup>7</sup> I find this particularly interesting because the Indians who are darker skinned people and would be considered black made the decision to fight before the priest agreed to help them. When the tribal king was told that it was the will of God for the Indians to leave their land, he said would not listen to such talk and that the Indians would fight. Of course, the tribal king never read any of Cone’s Black Liberation writings, but it was instinctual in him that the Indians/Blacks were going to be free to define themselves and to make their own world. In other words no one was going to make them leave the mission unless they wanted to. Some may argue that this film isn’t about race nor do I want to make it such, but the fact of the matter is the Indians are dark skinned, similarly the men and women in Latin American countries are darker skinned. There may be some validity to Cone’s assertion.

### **FORGIVENESS**

This film does an exceptional job looking at forgiveness and the ways of imparting it. The Indians graciously forgave Father Mendoza, who they saw prior to his conversion killing, maiming and kidnapping their relatives. They laughed and cried with him after they cut off the weight that he

was obviously torturing himself with as an act of contrition and penance and freed him. There is no question in my mind that if the white Christians had changed their mind and decided not to try to destroy the mission or take them captives, the Indians would have forgiven them also. I believe Father Mendoza chose to fight alongside the Indians because he knew firsthand of the Love of God that was demonstrated towards him by the Indians. He may have recalled reading in the Book of John 13:35



“...By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you show love to one another,”<sup>8</sup> and realized that it was the Indians who were the true Disciples of Christ. It was the Indians who were living in peace not judging others as savages or less than human and resorting to demolishing and enslaving. He must have recognized that it was the Indians who saw in him a fellow human being made in the image and likeness of God, who had a right to be on the planet just as much as anyone else because God in creating them said so. (Attached picture taken from <http://kspark.kaist.ac.kr/Mission/The%20Mission.files/DeNiro.jpg>, 1/28/05)

To use the proverbial adage, the Indians were caught between a rock and a hard place. Their hands were tied and for them neither death nor enslavement was a viable option. I have not read enough of Cone’s writing and therefore have not formed a conclusion about his total theology, however when he spoke of the historical Jesus it was definitely a point to ponder. His belief that as Christians we should not be considering the question from a ‘what would Jesus do’ perspective, but rather from a “what is he doing...To use the Jesus of history as an absolute ethical guide for people today is to become enslaved to the past...it removes the elements of risk in ethical decisions and make people slaves to principles”<sup>9</sup> perspective, resonates as truth for me, more than ‘turn the other cheek.’ Black theology does not pretend that violence doesn’t exist, “[but] the Christian does not decide between violence and non-violence evil and good. He decides between the less and the greater evil...if the system is evil, than revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary.”<sup>10</sup>

It is here that many run into difficulty both with Black and Latin liberation theology. I do not unequivocally support Cone’s ideology, but I prefer some form of resistance as opposed to the passive sheep to the slaughter stance that Father Gabriel chose to take. It is not that Father Gabriel made the wrong decision; I respect the decision of both priests, both died valiantly for what they believed in the manner that they chose to go. For me, Father Gabriel’s response raises more questions than it answers.

Some would argue that Jesus is a God of love and forgiveness and we should not engage in violence. I submit to you that it is my belief that most Liberation Theologians would not disagree with the statement that Jesus is a God of love and forgiveness, but would debate the latter part of the statement. Scripture informs that Jesus was a rebel who oftentimes resisted the law. On numerous occasions he chose to heal on the Sabbath, to forgive sins and consistently freed those who were possessed and oppressed by evil powers. In Matt 10:34 Jesus gave us insight into his thoughts on his ministry when he said “...think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I come not to send peace, but a sword.”<sup>11</sup> Christian non-violence advocates are quick to present Jesus as the lowly lamb, that is one part of Jesus’ character, but Jesus came preaching an apocalyptic

message. His message is that God is going to intervene to combat the evil cosmic forces that oppose not only God but the people of God too. Christian non-violence supporters raise questions about the ethics of Christians who support justified violence and it is interesting to note that they are not coming from a place of having been oppressed. They frequently raise the argument of scriptures admonishments that we should be examples of God's love and yet they themselves are not reflecting God's love or they would not be engaged in such behavior. This film caused me to consider the many run-ins Jesus had with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They had a form of Godliness, but had evil in their heart. Every good thing that Jesus did they found fault with, and subsequently plotted to kill him. The thief on the cross-had more righteousness than them. Jesus as God is a God of love, compassion and forgiveness, but scripture informs us that he is also a God of War and that ultimately he will come back to rule and judge the world. Those found wanting are going to face eternal damnation; like us there are parts of God that seek justice too.

### **JUSTIFIED VIOLENCE CONFRONTATION WITH SIN/ EVIL**

It was Mendoza's pursuit of justice on behalf of the Indians that brought about a good in the face of all that evil. I believe that it was the resistance on the part of Father Mendoza and his followers that enabled some of the children to escape. Mendoza actually was shot the first time helping a child escape. Had Mendoza and the fellow fighters resorted to non-violence, all of the Guarani would have been killed or enslaved, as was the case of all who were in the church. In the final scene we see a canoe full of young children going off to create what will hopefully be a more peaceful and loving world. Jesus does want us to love and forgive our enemies but he also wants us to respect and protect our bodies, as our bodies are temples of the God. The gospels recount the incident of Jesus going into the temple and driving out the moneychangers. He was upset and was throwing over tables. Why would the loving Jesus be doing this, you might ask? The Bible tells us that he was doing it because he was upset because they were desecrating the temple. They were selling animals probably for the purposes of offering sacrifices, but Jesus was angry. Evidently he did not feel like that kind of behavior should have been occurring in the temple of the Lord. I find this intriguing. If Jesus got this irate over what was going on in a building it raises the question of what might his response(s) have been to the events that occurred in the film *The Mission*, and equally as important to other events that have occurred and continue to occur in our world today. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 the apostle Paul admonishes us to be careful how we take care of our bodies. He emphatically informs us, "Our body is the temple of the Holy Ghost."<sup>12</sup> If Jesus was angry about a building my belief is he would not have been happy with what was happening to the Indians during the 1750's or to our physical and psychological temples as it relates to slavery, racism, discrimination and other forms of oppression.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In theory non-violence seems like the best possible answer. However in practice, as it relates to self-defense and other oppressive forms of violence, it is not always practical. Inactive non-violence will not bring about the desired change that non-violence advocates want. Faith is an action word that requires prayer and initiative. In order to exist in a world that does not engage in justified violence as an alternative, the system has to be transformed. Until that glorious day happens it behooves us to both watch and pray.

The conclusion of this movie portrayed such a stark contrast between the actions of the two priests that I became interested in taking a closer look at the theological issues surrounding the concept of non-violence and its relationship to Christianity. I couldn't help but realize that the people Jesus spoke to were helpless victims in the face of oppression just like the community in this movie. They suffered many of the same injustices that we face today: imperial domination, dehumanizing treatment and discrimination by race, gender, class and poverty; but the oppressed in Jesus' time didn't have the options of strikes or initiating lawsuits. Why did Jesus counsel these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek and love their enemy? How did Gandhi do it? Why did Martin Luther King Jr. call people to the cause of non-violence in the name of Christian witness? Initially I came across some amazing statistics. Most striking was the turbulent year between 1989-90 when fourteen nations underwent non-violent revolutions that involved 1.7 *billion* people, and the majority of these were successful.<sup>13</sup> That told me that non-violence has become a viable solution in today's modern world. This got my attention and I went for a closer look. After reading and reflecting upon various sources, I was able to come to a more educated understanding of the issues and past experiences and was able to develop my own perspective. It is reflected below, first in coming to an understanding of the concept of non-violence and then progressing into the major issues of the movie as addressed by theologians and in biblical context.

### **THE CONCEPT OF NON-VIOLENCE**

Belief in the concept of non-violence is by no means just one specific position, but a wide variety of responses to the use of violence. These responses range from a complete separation from society to the person who will support war as long as they themselves do not have to kill anyone, and encompass a multitude of positions in-between.<sup>14</sup> In general though, all these positions agree that violence and war are morally wrong and thus maintain a strong dedication to the promotion of peace.<sup>15</sup>

Historically the official position held in theology by all of the major Christian church bodies since the Crusades with a few small exceptions, has been a doctrine of justifiable violence.<sup>16</sup> This doctrine asserts every ethical decision must be made concretely not by an absolute commitment for or against war in general, but by applying moral integrity critically and rigorously to individual cases.<sup>17</sup> This disciplined approach to decision-making determines whether or not the cause justifies the use of violence. As a Christian watching our world and its people torn apart by the ravages of violence and war, and in light of Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, I began to realize that something was wrong with this picture. In response to the historical position of the Church, I was forced to ask what happened to Jesus' commandment to love our enemies? If the words of Jesus were not for all time, for every age, then what was the point? I don't believe it is our Christian business to bend this rule and fit it to specific cases as we see fit. I was thus drawn to reflect upon other quite different but successful concepts of non-violence that have emerged from individuals like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. and their application to Christianity.

I concluded that the position of non-violence in relation to a faithful Christian represents **the ultimate expression of God's love as an active witness of that faith**. In this context I would

equate violence with sin/evil and therefore reject it; not merely in obedience to God's rules about killing, but in obedience to God by reflecting his loving character in the realization of the oneness of His creation. As a Christian witness, I do not regard non-violence as passive submission, but as duty-bound action to *confront* sin/evil with the mercy and love of forgiveness and hope. The attitude of Christian non-violence in faith doesn't cooperate or participate in the sin/evil of violence, but rather actively expresses the fruits of one's inner unity with God's love.

John Yoder notes that, in biblical history just prior to the arrival of Jesus, "the collective non-violent resistance by the Jewry of Palestine was successful against the Roman forces twice within one decade."<sup>18</sup> When Jesus came along, he rejected the idea of fighting his oppressors, because "he counted equality with God as not something requiring an act of force upon the world,"<sup>19</sup> but took the form of a servant. His only other alternative to save the people from their oppression and suffering would have been to perform a convincing display of power to threaten his aggressors into submission, but "when he suffered he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges rightly."<sup>20</sup> Jesus therefore didn't use force or threaten his adversaries; nor did he reject their violent society and retreat from history into a monastic lifestyle of prayer and reflection. As John Yoder explains, "The choice that he made in accepting the cross was the commitment to such a degree of faithfulness to the character of Divine Love that he was willing for its sake to sacrifice "effectiveness"... Jesus thereby excluded any normative concern for any capacity to make sure that things would turn out right."<sup>21</sup> The point is not that one can attain all one's legitimate ends without using violence means. It is rather our readiness to renounce our legitimate ends whenever they cannot be attained by legitimate means."<sup>22</sup> This is a vision of ultimate good being determined by faithfulness in God's ultimate salvation and not by human effort. Christian non-violence



represents the kind of faithfulness that is willing to accept evident defeat rather than complicity with evil, by virtue of its conformity with God."<sup>23</sup> This is the theology expressed by Father Gabriel in his confrontation with Rodriguez who intended to battle against the anticipated invasion, when he declares, "You promised your life to God and God is love. If might makes right than love has no place in the world...I can't live in a world like that." Jesus made the same decision. (Attached picture taken from [windshoes.new21.org/film-mission.htm](http://windshoes.new21.org/film-mission.htm), 1/28/05).

### **NON-VIOLENT CONFRONTATION WITH SIN/EVIL**

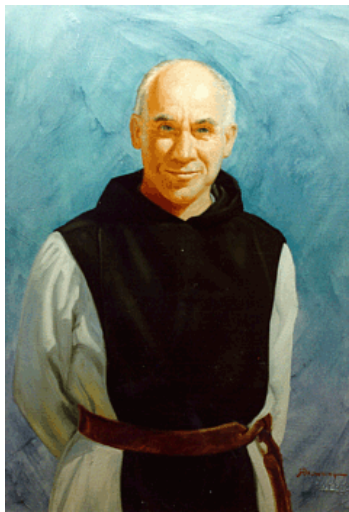
Throughout the movie, forgiveness was a major issue. The Jesuits forgave Capt. Rodriguez the murder of his brother and as a recognized slave trader, his former oppression and murder of the Gueriz. The Indians too forgave the Captain, although he had persecuted them. In our day the winner of a two-man confrontation that ended in death would typically be punished by imprisonment and possibly eliminated by the death penalty. Victims of such a blatant disregard for their own humanity would typically react with bitterness and hatred. The issue of forgiveness insists that we take a look at the enemy we are supposed to forgive. Who is this enemy that embodies sin/evil as our aggressor? How do we, as an active witness of God's love, confront this enemy?

We live within the Oneness of God's creation that He judged as good. Although our senses tell us there is separation between one and another, science has shown us that there is a deeper truth that our eye cannot see. Physically we are all linked together by atoms and molecules constantly

intermingling with one another and there is really no physical void between us at all. If “God is spirit,”<sup>24</sup> and if we understand this as the spirit of life, the *élan vitale* that flows through and with all of creation, then physically and spiritually there is no separateness between us and our fellow man. “The Lord is One,”<sup>25</sup> and we are commanded to worship him in the spirit of love to others. We alone may shut out the glories that may be our experiences in the realization of the **unity of God’s spirit living in the world.**

All have sinned and fallen short. We live in “common relationship within a common complex of sins,”<sup>26</sup> but we must realize that though we make our bed in hell, He is there.<sup>27</sup> If we understand the oneness of God’s love in creation, we must also assume the intrinsic goodness of mankind living amidst his shortcomings. Thomas Merton’s approach to humanity asserts, “The truth I must love is God himself, living in him. I must seek the Spirit of God breathing in him.”<sup>28</sup> Our enemy lives in darkness, troubled and confused. St. Thomas Aquinas believes evil is itself punishment to the oppressor and should invoke such sadness and grief that we cannot help but feel compassion.<sup>29</sup> The person who has fallen needs forgiveness seven times seventy more times than those who live in His light. What kind of love only loves those who are loving? In its highest form love must be desirous of “liberating the oppressed as well as the oppressor together...The oppressed must be able to free himself within so that he may begin to gain the strength to pity his oppressor. Without that capacity for pity, neither will be able to recognize the truth of their situation.”<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther King went to great lengths to teach his followers to reach out to their oppressors as victims. “It became the ethos of the entire civil rights movement.”<sup>31</sup>

We are not puppets. God is not playing solitaire. He has created us in His image with the free choice to open ourselves up and allow the power of God’s love to work through us to bless and transform a hurting world. Or we may become apathetic, submissive, or at worst we may choose to retaliate in kind with hatred and violence. What is sin but passions turned another way, fed upon and nourished until they become an evil force that threatens the fearful on every side? If we resist violence with violence we embody its evil. We reap what we sow. If we would have friends, we must be friendly. If we would have love in the world, we must be loving.



Thomas Merton, in asserting the philosophy of Gandhi, claims, “There can be no peace on earth without an inner change that brings man back to his right mind.”<sup>32</sup> That change is the good news of a transformation in relationships promised by Christ. “We need to choose a way of living that is already a living of the outcome we desire. The Reign of God is already in the process of arriving when we choose means consistent with its arrival.”<sup>33</sup> “Thy Kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>34</sup> The mentality of violence would seem to say that sin/evil is irreversible and that the one who embodies it is not able to be transformed. Those who would do violence are in effect saying they have given up hope in the enemy and decided he must be punished or eliminated, not loved. They come to judge the oppressor, not to save him. The concept of Christian non-violence has faith in the intrinsic goodness of man

created in God’s image. Yoder reminds us that evil lies in men, not structures and that “reaching hearts is the only significant task.” He sees the perspective of non-violence as the possibility of transformation in every person and the ability to reach a man or team at the heart of every institution that can affect redemption.<sup>35</sup> There is an undeniable contradiction in peace through



violence, and love through destruction. Christian non-violence asserts there is no love embodied in its opposites. To forgive is to enter into the healing mystery of Christ by which we are cleansed. The way is narrow and not many find it.<sup>36</sup> According to The Scholar's Version, using the correct translation of the word *antistenai* (Resist not),<sup>37</sup> Jesus said, "I say to you, *do not react violently* against an evildoer...Love your enemies... for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good."<sup>38</sup> (Attached picture taken from [www.geocities.com/ganesha\\_gate/merton.html](http://www.geocities.com/ganesha_gate/merton.html), 1/28/05).

This movie had much to say about the power of forgiveness to transform evil into love. In the ability to forgive the Indians for the murder of a fellow priest, Father Gabriel was able to become the spirit of love that transformed others and came into such a remarkable experience of love himself for these same people that he was willing to die it. The forgiveness of the Jesuit order, which did not condemn Rodriguez, challenged him into enduring the physical penitence that eventually led to his transformation. The forgiveness of the Indians toward someone who had wantonly stalked, murdered and enslaved them transformed that evil into such great love that this Captain who had lived without regard for their humanity was ready to give up his own life to save them. Would he have understood this community if they had rejected him or become hostile towards him? Certainly. Would he have been transformed? Certainly not. "Love is kind...it bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things."<sup>39</sup> "Do not judge...do not condemn...Forgive."<sup>40</sup>

The non-violent choice was successful in the Philippines a year and a half before Marcos was toppled from power. Following an invitation by Filipino Christians, the International Federation of Reconciliation conducted six weeks of seminars and forty conferences on active non-violence in thirty provinces. When the crisis came and they were surrounded by military troops, the people were prepared. Hundreds of thousands of people made a human wall of defense, tying yellow ribbons on the gun barrels of tanks and offering soldiers gifts of food, candy and garlands of flowers. When President Marcos ordered the attack, the commanders and soldiers refused and defected to a nearby U.S. military base. This is an excellent example of the power of active non-violence.<sup>41</sup>

## **NON-VIOLENCE VERSUS VIOLENCE**

Violence is essentially a wordless and impersonal communication. It does not come face to face with a human being, but seeks to communicate by force to punish or eliminate that human being. In its most extreme form, the violence of war is a dramatic communication to its enemy, to its own people and to the world about a political and human value system. War proclaims an understanding of God and how he deals with sinners in the name of peace. It proclaims a message about whether the enemies are the objects of God's love or not.<sup>42</sup>

Like those Christians who advocate non-violence, war too believes in the intrinsic goodness of man, but on its own terms. War entrusts peace and freedom to the military establishment, and trusts a person or nation with powerful weapons to be morally self-critical. It places enormous trust in those who have been hardened to think of other men as worthy of extermination and to transform evil based on their own human discretion.<sup>43</sup> War makes promises to create a new world situation through human power and superiority, not through the extension of God's love. It says that moral leadership comes in the presence of commercial and military domination and makes promises that after defeating the bad guys its forces can go home. This conceives of a false idea of utopia...sin has been wiped out because sinners have been eliminated.<sup>44</sup> In *The Mission* what would have been accomplished if the warring priest had won the battle? Would he go back to the church and preach about God's love working through the violence and killing they had just

witnessed? Would the Indians now feel justified in warring against others if they decided an injustice had been done? Would they plan an assault on the slave trader's plantations or the military garrisons?

Walter Wink's words challenge this utopian idea. "Violence is simply not radical enough, since it generally changes only the rulers and not the rules."<sup>45</sup> By contrast, Christian non-violence assumes sin is recurrent and needs forgiveness to release us from what has been done and to free us for transformation into a new creation rather than one who has been beaten into submission. Real liberation which "liberates both the oppressed and the oppressor," frees us from the cycle of suffering, revenge and violent actions.<sup>46</sup> Real liberation transforms relationships by changing value systems.

Once we place our faith in the power of God's love, it is difficult to justify the costs, both physical and spiritual, of putting our faith in secular power to transform evil. In discussing the dominance of secular power, Dennis Kuhns reminds us of the nature of Jesus' adversaries, "Religious and political authorities believing they were operating for the common good in the name of justice and law crucified Him...By his death on their cross, Christ unmasked their presumption ....In Christ, God has challenged the powers, has penetrated into their territory and ... disarms their powers. Their weapon was the power of illusion, their ability to convince men that they were divine regents of the world...with ultimate authority and worthy of absolute allegiance."<sup>47</sup> To entrust men to take human life in our name is to emulate the Jewish authorities that turned the dirty deed over to the Romans. In addition, Thomas Merton asserts that it is impossible for a modern state based on force to non-violently resist forces of disorder, whether internal or external. He asserts there is an inherent contradiction in the idea that violence or the threat of violence leads to non-violence. Political acts are at the same time spiritual acts. Man cannot serve both Mammon and God. We must be willing to give up on the value of human life to be willing to threaten or take human life.<sup>48</sup> "I set before you this day cursing and blessing...choose."<sup>49</sup>

The idea of choice was presented in the movie in both obvious and subtle ways. When Rodriquez decides to join the violence of the battle, he relinquishes his vows, discards his priestly attire, and chooses the sword as his weapon against the enemy. Yet he asks Father Gabriel for a blessing. His statement to Gabriel gives one pause as to his motives in choosing. He says, "They think God has abandoned them; I must help them." Gabriel responds, "Then help them as a priest." Was Rodriquez really joining the battle because he had more faith in the sword, or had he too lost all hope of deliverance and became more concerned that the people would think that he had abandoned them as well? What does his participation in the battle say to the community? Do they understand by his witness that God has indeed abandoned them and they must fend for themselves? The strength of this movie is that it leaves us these unanswered options to reflect upon. (Attached picture taken from [www.jeremy-irons.com/film/main2.html](http://www.jeremy-irons.com/film/main2.html), 1/28/05).



### **THE WILLINGNESS TO LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE FOR A FRIEND**

The idea of laying down one's life for a friend implies that the greatest thing one can do for another is to sacrifice their own life. If the sacrifice of a life is the greatest act of love possible,

then we are also saying that the highest principle we can uphold is the value of human life. The concept of sacrifice means we are ready to give something up to achieve a greater end. Once a desirable cause is identified, once we know what is right, then it is assumed we should be willing to sacrifice to achieve it. And if the cause is considered valuable enough, we should be ready to sacrifice our life for it. If there is indeed no higher moral principle than love of human life, how can we ever justify taking it? The ethics of violence however, assumes this right. John Yoder asserts, “The achievement of the good cause, the implementation in history of the changes we have determined to be desirable, creates a new autonomous ethical value, “relevance,” itself a good in the name of which evil may be done,” and he notes that “In the past Christians have debated the theoretical issue of whether evil may ever be done for the sake of good.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed there is an even deeper issue at stake here, because as Christians we are called to emulate Jesus.

Claude Ortemann says, through the fact that Jesus refused to do harm to anyone and even forgave those who do harm, we understand that Jesus’ death was “the only way left to him not to disown his own non-violent teaching about God’s love, not to repudiate his own conduct which mirrored God’s.” Ortemann explains that Jesus was willing to suffer as a witness to his faith in God’s ability to heal and to *die for the cause* of non-violent love that God represents; and through him we are able to continue to love in the face of adversity.<sup>51</sup>

During his life Jesus bore many burdens, wept and suffered with others, healed the sick and raised the dead. By his death he proved that a new kingdom of love had broken in and defeated the power of sin/evil. As a testimony of love, Jesus agreed to bear our burdens of violence, to bear these sins as marks on his body, and to display them in all their horror, thereby revealing the true nature of violence. Walter Wink claims, “The very essence of Christianity is the cross. It is through the cross that we will change.”<sup>52</sup> As a representative of the power of love, Jesus crucified the authority of violence and crossed out its ability to rule over the love he stood for. Through Jesus’ sacrifice for the cause of love, God transformed the world from the powerful sins of violence to a new way -- the opportunity to triumph over evil through the power of love. And Jesus promised to send his spirit to take the burden off our shoulders and effect a transformation. As God’s ambassador Jesus gave us an example to follow. “Take up my cross and follow me...Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”<sup>53</sup> Jesus sacrificed his life for the cause of love and commands us to do the same. “Non-violence is a lifestyle of love...the final objective is humanity. It is life.”<sup>54</sup> “I am the way, the truth and the life.”<sup>55</sup>

This is not the way of the world and we are not *comfortable* with the idea of not taking enough action to bring immediate results. We feel *guilty* if we don’t do all we can and *see no value in ourselves* without the satisfaction of having helped the oppressed through every possible means. But this is not about us. It’s about serving God and others. The Christian is called to act not in violence, but in love at all costs. It is about enabling God’s healing power of love to transform a relationship between oppressed and oppressor. Jesus was all about the cross. “The cross is not a recipe for resurrection,”<sup>56</sup> but a vision of ultimate good determined by its faithfulness to that good.

It is difficult for us to give up violence because it means giving up our ultimate power to effect change. The Reverend Lee-Pollard addresses this idea of power in a theological exegesis of the Gospel of Mark by proposing it teaches that the power of God’s kingdom is found through becoming powerless. Lee-Pollard explains that in Mark, Jesus first demonstrates the immense power of God’s love through his miracles and healings and his emphasis on the new creation of an empowered community. When Jesus turns toward Jerusalem however, he turns from “the way of

power to the way of powerlessness.” His suffering on the journey and in the Garden depicts our resistance to let go of our own power and receive God’s Kingdom. Lee-Pollard concludes that through Mark’s passion narrative he teaches that the suffering and powerlessness of Jesus’ insistence on love at all costs, enabled him to encounter God’s power of transformation. Thus through powerlessness Jesus became the ultimate power of Christ.<sup>57</sup> If we cannot accept this attitude of powerlessness, how can we accept the cross that Jesus chose above all other alternatives?

In the movie both Father Gabriel and Rodriquez were willing to lay down their life because of their great love for the community. The position of Father Gabriel was clear. He would remain faithful to his belief that God is about love and that violence cannot make things right. It is not clear whether he did this in obedience to God’s teaching or because he valued the lives of the enemy and had hopes of transforming them as he had done the Indians. Because he initially stayed in the church and did not confront his aggressors, the former is more likely. Rodriquez obviously understood that the essence of the Jesuit’s teaching about God is love, but instead chose to battle the enemy. Perhaps he was too new to the Order and did not have enough understanding. While Jesus “learned obedience by the things he suffered,” Rodriquez was obviously not prepared to submit to the idea of mere obedience. He clearly did not value the lives of the invaders and considered them evil forces that he wanted to eliminate. He did not die to further the cause of love in the world by acting as a testimony to it. Instead he seemingly chose a testimony of unity with violence that he felt the Indians would consider an act of love. Whether his motivation was guilt, power, passion, pride or martyrdom is not clear. From his concern over their feeling abandoned by God, perhaps he felt in this way he would assure them that God still cared. I would not consider either of these to be an expression of God’s love as an active witness of faith to the world. Although both may have attempted to represent expressions of God’s love to the community, neither expressed an all-embracing love that included the enemy and could transform the people or the situation. Father Gabriel did not witness to his aggressors by confronting them until the end when he was forced out of the burning church, and even then did not appear loving. Rodriquez likewise showed no love toward his enemy. The Indians laid down their life for their homes and in the end those who were left were right back where they began, defeated and not understanding what God’s love is all about. (Attached picture taken from [www.jeremy-irons.com/film/main2.html](http://www.jeremy-irons.com/film/main2.html), 1/28/05).



### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The essence of Christian non-violence is simply that if given the opportunity for expression, the power of love conquers all; not through human endeavor, but through spiritual transformation. The action of Christian non-violence is the active expression of God’s love as a witness of faith. If we truly want to change the world, we will have to change ourselves first. We will have to reach for the love that is God’s mind. We will have to return to our own right mind.

## Conclusion

Even though they faced overwhelming odds and likely did not expect to overcome the enemy, both priests made the conscious decision to risk their lives because they loved and respected this community. After examining this film individually, we are both faced with the underlying question of how oppression and injustice should be dealt with today. Both from a justified violence and non-violence perspective we agree that if faith without works is dead, we indeed must do something. Indifference or submission have no place in a world of moral consciousness whose ultimate concern should be for each other. Instead we must always strive to take effective pro-active and re-active measures to oppose evil in serious and positive confrontation in order to overcome it with good. .

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology I* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1951) p 14.
- <sup>2</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1971) p 64.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p 64.
- <sup>4</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Black Theology Black Power* (London: Mowbrays, 1976) p 94.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p 94-95.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p 95.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p 125.
- <sup>8</sup> Coogan, M. Z. Brettler, Newsome, A., Perkins, P., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p 39 NT.
- <sup>9</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Black Theology Black Power* (London: Mowbrays, 1976) p 125.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p 126.
- <sup>11</sup> Coogan, M. Z. Brettler, Newsome, A., Perkins, P., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965,1989) p 22 NT.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p 275 NT.
- <sup>13</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p 2.
- <sup>14</sup> Yoder, John H., *Nevertheless; The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971) p 9-10.
- <sup>15</sup> McKim, Donald K., *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster, 1996).
- <sup>16</sup> Yoder, John H., *Nevertheless; The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971) p 22-23.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p 21.
- <sup>18</sup> Yoder, John H., *The Politics of Jesus* (Grandrapids: Eerdmann, 1972) p 92.
- <sup>19</sup> Zeolla, Gary F, *Analytical-Literal Translation of the New Testament of the Holy Bible* (Pennsylvania: Zeolla, 2001) p 725.
- <sup>20</sup> 1 Peter 2:23: Unless otherwise indicated, all endnotes will be from Society of Biblical Literature, *The Harper Collins Study Bible; News Revised Standard Version* (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, London: Harper Collins, 1989); See also Yoder's theological analysis regarding this text in *The Politics of Jesus*, p 234.
- <sup>21</sup> Yoder, John H., *The Politics of Jesus* (Grandrapids: Eerdmann, 1972) p 234.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p 237.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p 238.
- <sup>24</sup> John 4:24.
- <sup>25</sup> Deut 6:4 (Z)
- <sup>26</sup> Merton, Thomas, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965) p 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Liberty University, *The King James Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988) Psalms 139: 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Merton, Thomas, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965) p 25.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p 12 (Merton on Aquinas from *Summa Theologica, II, IIae, q.30, art. 1, ad. 1*).
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p 14-15.
- <sup>31</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p 64.
- <sup>32</sup> Merton, Thomas, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965) p 16.
- <sup>33</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p 89.

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- <sup>34</sup> Zeolla, Gary F., *Analytical-Literal Translation of the New Testament of the Holy Bible* (Pennsylvania: Zeolla, 2001) Matthew 6:10.
- <sup>35</sup> Yoder, John H., *Nevertheless; The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971) p 92.
- <sup>36</sup> Liberty University, *The King James Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988) Matthew 7:14.
- <sup>37</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p 10.
- <sup>38</sup> Matt 5:39-45.
- <sup>39</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4,7.
- <sup>40</sup> Luke 6:37.
- <sup>41</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p 97-99.
- <sup>42</sup> Yoder, John H., *Nevertheless; The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971).
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, p 113.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, p 73.
- <sup>45</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p 72.
- <sup>46</sup> Merton, Thomas, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965) p 14.
- <sup>47</sup> Kuhns, Dennis, *Atonement and Violence* (www. Quodibet.net, Quodlibet Online Journal, 2003) vol 5, #4, p 15.
- <sup>48</sup> Merton, Thomas, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965) p 9-10.
- <sup>49</sup> Liberty University, *The King James Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988) Deuteronomy 30:19.
- <sup>50</sup> Yoder, John H., *Nevertheless; The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971) p 238-9.
- <sup>51</sup> Ortemann, Claude, *Lumen Vitae International Review of Religious Education* (Brussels, Int Center for Studies in Religious Education, 1983) vol. XXXVIII, no 1, p 42-44.
- <sup>52</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p 85.
- <sup>53</sup> Matthew 16:24, Luke 23:34.
- <sup>54</sup> Wink, Walter, *Jesus and Non-violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p 36.
- <sup>55</sup> John 14:6.
- <sup>56</sup> Yoder, John H., *The Politics of Jesus* (Grandrapids: Eerdman, 1972) p 238.
- <sup>57</sup> Pollard-Lee, Dorothy A., *Powerlessness as Power: A Key Emphasis in the Gospel of Mark* (Scotland: Journal of Theology) vol 40.