

The Bible and Violence

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It is a commonly-held view in our community that the Bible is a violent book. In November 2005 Julia Irwin, Labor member for Fowler in the Australian Federal Parliament, presented a speech in the House of Representatives entitled 'Religious Tolerance'. Irwin made extended comments on the Bible, comparing it with the Koran:

Those who refer to Muslim fundamentalists may choose to quote from the Holy Koran, and there are passages that might be taken to show a vengeful God. But when it comes to good old-fashioned violence, the Judaeo-Christian God is hard to beat. I will take one example from the Bible story of the Exodus. ... as Moses heads into the Promised Land ... he is urged [by God] to hack women and children to death, rip unborn babies from their mother's womb and level the cities.

Although media reports of Irwin's speech showed her reading an open Bible, what she actually had to say suggested that she is not all that accustomed to reading it. There is, for example, nothing in the Bible about God telling the Israelites to rip unborn babies from their mother's wombs!

Irwin, a self-confessed convert to Catholicism, is representative of a growing phenomenon of Christians who feel very uneasy about the Bible's take on violence. Unfortunately this unease is often not based on a careful consideration of the issue. and many criticisms of the Bible are ill-considered.

What does the Bible teach about violence? Certainly the conquest of Canaan, as described in the Bible, was a bloody one. Some cities like Jericho were put to the sword.

Isn't it dangerous to have such material in the Bible? Might not these stories incite Christians to acts of bloodshed or even genocide against others? The answer to this question is a very emphatic "No!"

There are a number of reasons why the conquest of Canaan, and other stories of conflict in the Bible, do not incite Christians into violent acts of insurrection, murder and genocide.

One is that the account of the conquest of Canaan was entirely situation-specific. Yes, there is a divine instruction reported in the Bible to take the land by force and occupy it, driving out the inhabitants: "...you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places." (Numbers 33: 52) However this was not an eternal permission to believers to wage war. It was for a specific time and place. According to the Bible, the Canaanites had come

under divine judgement because of their religious practices, above all child sacrifice: "... it is because of such abhorrent practices that YHWH your God is driving them out before you." (Deuteronomy 18: 12; see also Genesis 15:16).

The sacrificing of firstborn children by immolating them before an idol (Deuteronomy 18:10) was a persistent trait of Canaanite religion. The Phoenicians were Canaanites, and as late as the 2nd Century BC the people of Carthage, a Phoenician colony, were sacrificing children to their goddess Tanit. Archeologists have found charred remains of tens of thousands of newborn infants and fetuses buried in Carthage. The practice of child sacrifice made the Romans despise the Carthagians.

The Bible's stories of the use of force against the Canaanites are more than balanced by the accounts of the destruction of Israel and Judah by foreign armies. These violent invasions are also described as being God's judgement, now turned against the Israelites because they did not distance themselves from Canaanite religious practices. Even the kings of Israel and Judah are charged with practicing child sacrifice (2 Kings 17:7, 21:6, see also Ezekiel 16:21).

Although the Old Testament does condone the use of force to purge a land of violence and injustice, the Bible's attitude to such violence is not that it is sacred or holy. On the contrary, King David, who fought many wars with God's active support and guidance, was not allowed to be the one to build God's temple in Jerusalem, because there was so much blood on his hands: "You shall not build a house for my name, for you are a warrior and have shed blood." (1 Chronicles 28:3).

Violence is regarded by the Bible as an inherently evil symptom of the corruption of the whole earth after the fall: "the earth was filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11). In contrast the prophet Isaiah looked forward to the day when the days of violence would be no more: "No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise." (Isaiah 60:18). Astoundingly, and in absolute contrast to the earlier kings of Israel, Isaiah describes the Lord's anointed as unacquainted with violence: "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth." (Isaiah 53:9).

In this way the Old Testament sets the scene for the revelation of Jesus Christ, and as the agnostic Andrew Bolt pointed out, writing in the Herald Sun in June 2002: "Christianity's biggest inspiration comes not from the Old Testament, but from the man who gave his name to the religion and made it so very different to what had been before. Jesus Christ's words, deeds, death and resurrection are the rock on which Christianity is built."

The key question for Christians is "What did Jesus have to do with violence?"

When we turn to consider Jesus and his followers, we find a systematic rejection

of religious violence. Jesus' message was that his Kingdom would be spiritual and not political. Jesus explicitly and repeatedly condemns the use of force to achieve his goals:

'Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.' (Matthew 26:52)

This last statement clarifies Jesus' comment just a few hours earlier to his disciples, that they were soon coming to a time when they would need a sword (Luke 22:36). In the light of Matthew 26:52, the earlier statement must be interpreted as a warning about the danger coming upon them, not as an effective injunction to use violent means. Indeed Matthew 26:52 appears to consist of a general rejection of violence: 'for all who draw the sword will die by the sword'.

As Jesus goes to the cross, he renounces force, even at the cost of his own life:

'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.' (John 18:36)

The Sermon on the Mount elaborates several aspects of Jesus' non-violent ethic. Retribution was no longer acceptable (Matthew 5:38), enemies were to be loved, not hated (Matthew 5:43), the meek will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5) and Jesus' disciples should rejoice when they are persecuted (Matthew 5:10).

At one point Christ says, 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.' (Matthew 10:34) This is sometimes cited by anti-Christian apologists as evidence for Jesus' militancy, but the statement occurs in an extended passage where Jesus is advising his disciples on the inevitability of persecution. The sword he refers to could be the one which will be raised against them, but it is most likely the 'sword' of division which will separate family members from each other, as is made clear by the immediately following verses:

'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' (Matthew 10:35-36)

Jesus' rejection of violent means to advance the Kingdom of God can be regarded as a development of the earlier Jewish position that Jews should submit to the rule of law in whichever country they find themselves, even if the king is a pagan (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

The New Testament supports the just use of force as a proper function of the state, whatever its religious identity. Thus it is not a specifically religious or sacred act to go to war, or to use force to implement justice. It is just a matter of public duty, one aspect of the ordering of society which God has established for

the common good. Fighting may be considered just, not because it is advancing any one faith over another, but because it is warranted and conducted according to principles of justice applicable to all people.

If only Christians had maintained this New Testament position down the centuries, the world would have been a better place. The invention of 'Christendom' in the fourth Christian century, and the later influence of a centuries-long struggle against the Islamic jihad, ultimately led Christians to develop aberrant theologies which regarded warfare against non-Christians as 'holy', and soldiers who died fighting in such wars were regarded as 'martyrs'.

Thankfully this view of warfare has been universally denounced in the modern era as incompatible with the gospel of Christ.

The New Testament's teachings on the state continue to sustain the more than 300 million believers who live in over 60 nations where Christians are persecuted. In none of these countries has persecution resulted in Christian terrorism or violent Christian insurgencies aimed at overthrowing civil authorities. On the contrary, China's 70 million Christians remain loyal to their nation and government, despite 50 years of the most intense oppression. In Nepal it is the Maoists who have been engaging in terrorism, not the half a million indigenous Christians.

The example of the IRA, so often cited as 'Christian terrorists', actually proves our point because its ideology was predominately Marxist and atheistic. Unlike modern-day jihadis, who constantly quote the Koran in their public statements, the IRA terrorists found no inspiration in the peaceful teachings of Jesus of Nazareth!