

## Why I Am (Try to Be) Consistently Pro-Life

By Wayne Northey

During World War II, famed literary scholar and “mere Christian” C.S. Lewis delivered a lecture to a pacifist society entitled, “Why I am Not a Pacifist”. From a writer whose pen could never be dull, this piece was Lewis’ authorial nadir.

It is akin to Bertrand Russell’s essay, “Why I am Not a Christian”, which discusses only philosophical abstractions. In it Russell sets the rules, such that, by “reason” outside of God’s revelation one “must” prove God, or not, case closed!<sup>1</sup>

Such negatives presuppose a counter. Upon reflection therefore, this article’s title was changed from “Why I Am Not Pro-Violence” to “Why I Am (Try to Be) Consistently Pro-Life”.

The other afternoon I met my seminary (Regent College) church history prof from 30 years ago. Upon re-introductions he said (somewhat) jokingly: “So this is the world-famous Anabaptist whose writings get me so riled!”

I am not world-famous (have *you* ever heard of me?), and I am decidedly *not* a card-carrying “Anabaptist”. But in the words of Robbie Burns, “Whene’re my Muse does at me glance, I jingle at her”. I heard, ever since that encounter, my “Muse” (whom I trust to be the Holy Spirit) jingling. And I felt riled too – not for the first time – on this issue, though you may judge whether with “sinless anger”, as we are enjoined in Ephesians 4.

Let’s get two things straight at the outset:

- Pro-choice people *are not!* The foetus has *no choice*, and an abominable violence against “the least of these” is committed in every abortion, whatever the mitigating circumstances.
- Pro-life people *are rarely!* Most of those I’ve ever met, heard or read are pro-death about war and/or capital punishment. They commit or support an abominable violence against neighbour and enemy whom Jesus also dubbed “the least of these”. Whatever the mitigating circumstances.

The early church watchword was: *Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* – the Church abhors shedding blood. Such an ethic was in the earliest period applied fairly consistently to

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a joke about the little child who lost a coin in a dark part of the street. Upon being asked why she was searching for it under a street light, she replied, “There is more light here”. Karl Barth (in “Christianity or Religion”, *Fragments Grave and Gay*, Karl Barth, London: Collins, 1971) said humanity’s search for God is “religion”, to all of which Christianity is opposed, beginning “when religion ends”. God’s “arising to go to man” is Christianity’s “essence”. We do not set the rules about that search, demanding God be found (or not) under the light of our own rationality. God on the contrary finds us if we are to be found in “active attentiveness to the acts and word of this God” – or not.

abortion, executions and war. Whatever the complexity then, there has never been majority Christian ethical consistency since.<sup>2</sup>

C.S. Lewis in his essay observes: “And when we turn to Christianity, we find Pacifism based almost exclusively on certain of the sayings of Our Lord Himself. If those sayings do not establish the Pacifist position, it is vain to try to base it on the general *securus judicat* [verdict] of Christendom as a whole. For when I seek guidance there, I find Authority on the whole against me.” He writes further: “The whole Christian case for Pacifism rests, therefore, on certain Dominical utterances, such as ‘Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.’” He then proceeds in a few short paragraphs to rebut a pacifist reading of this injunction. And he’s done with Scripture, except for this earlier observation: “Nor, I think, do we find a word about Pacifism in the apostolic writings, which are older than the Gospels and represent, if anything does, that original Christendom whereof the Gospels themselves are a product.”

Lewis thereby sadly commits a kind of Dominical and Scriptural *lèse majesté*, and in the decades since has never to my awareness been reprimanded by his worldwide Christian admirers (of whom I am one). Considering his towering reputation as literary scholar, his biblical Liberalism (selectively and superficially reading Holy Writ) is regrettable. Lewis betrays Jesus and the biblical text – and gets away with it in Christian circles, in favour of philosophical prolegomena and arguments from tradition. One might have expected that Lewis had done his biblical homework. He demonstrably had not. Though in all fairness, some of the best theological helps in this have been post-War publications<sup>3</sup>.

Still, the essay should have been returned by the publisher, Lewis’ section on “Dominical utterances” and his comment on “the apostolic writings” crossed out in red with the comment: *PLEASE GO BACK AND READ THE SOURCES!*

For starters, *if* one must be restricted to a solitary dominical saying (but why?), Lewis copped out. Why did he not choose “Love your enemies”? In the entire sweep of Christian history, no one has ever demonstrated how one may “love (*agapao*)” enemies in any faithful biblical meaning of the term<sup>4</sup>, while running him through with a spear, putting a bullet to her head, or bombing them to smithereens. No one! Why was that text (apparently) rejected out of hand? Everyone so minded does. *Everyone*. And no one,

---

<sup>2</sup> Sadly, that watchword changed in time to mean church functionaries would never shed blood, but gladly mandate and bless the secular authorities to “let blood roll on like a river” in complete inversion of Amos 5:24.

<sup>3</sup> Three publications with excellent bibliographies on this topic are: *The Church’s Peace Witness*, edited by Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingrich, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994; “Violence in Defense of Justice”, in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Richard B. Hays, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996; and *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*, Charles K. Bellinger, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> *Agapao* in New Testament usage means “to constantly invite into one’s circle of friends”, as in Romans 5:1 – 11, where God’s *agape* (verse 5) is implicitly explicated as model for human behaviour; reprised explicitly in Romans 12, 13, and Ephesians 5.

except by Liberal fiat, has ever discovered a biblical exception clause<sup>5</sup>. (“Miracles do not happen, therefore...” “Jesus could not have meant that, therefore...”)

Second, Lewis glosses over the injunction, “turn to him the other [cheek] also”, in the Sermons on the Mount and Plain, relegating it to a bit of innocuous personal advice, like Ann Landers might have written. He comments: “Indeed, as the audience were private people in a disarmed nation, it seems unlikely that they would have ever supposed Our Lord to be referring to war. War was not what they would have been thinking of. The frictions of daily life among villagers were more likely to be in their minds.” This is exegetical fluff. Lewis’ failure to understand Jesus and the New Testament in a political context is blatant. John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*<sup>6</sup> amongst many studies is a helpful corrective.

In understanding the New Testament as only for one’s own private spirituality and not for the *cosmos* (Ephesians 1, Colossians 1), Lewis nonetheless makes the default *political* judgment that the state’s violence *de facto* must unquestioningly be supported in war and capital punishment. Why this default?<sup>7</sup>

Glen Stassen in *Just Peacemaking*<sup>8</sup> asserts: “It has become clear that efforts to confine the authority of Jesus’ teachings about God’s will to an inner, private, or individual realm, and to keep them from having authority in societal or political relationships, are efforts at evasion that contradict Jesus’ holistic faith that God is Lord of all life.” Over against Lewis’ evasive reading of Jesus and the New Testament, Stassen and other interpreters point to activist nonviolent “transforming initiatives” with direct real world political consequences in the “other cheek” passage, throughout the two Sermons and the New Testament.

Third, the outstanding *succinct* study that contradicts Lewis is New Testament scholar Richard Hay’s “Violence in Defense of Justice” in *The Moral Vision of the New*

---

<sup>5</sup> The most blanket is God-ordained Old Testament violence. As if they never read Jesus or Paul who taught the entire sweep of Old Testament ethics hangs on “these two commandments [love God, concomitantly neighbor] (Jesus in Matt. 22:40)”, and “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Paul in Rom. 13:10).” In Christian ethics, “If irreconcilable tensions exist between the moral vision of the New Testament and that of particular Old Testament texts, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament.” (Richard Hays. *Ibid*, p. 336.)

<sup>6</sup> This book is “a new beginning” in reading the foundational texts faithfully, claims “America’s best theologian” (*Time* magazine), Stanley Hauerwas.

<sup>7</sup> There is no place in this reflection to pursue that question. Anthropologist René Girard is the premier theorist. A great place to begin is Charles Bellinger’s study, *ibid* (see footnote 3). Also read *The Girard Reader*, edited by James Williams, New York: Crossroad, 1996; *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, Willard Swartley, Telford: Pandora Press, 2000; and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, René Girard, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001. A vast rich world opens up!

<sup>8</sup> Stassen’s preferred term is “just peacemaking” as opposed to “pacifism”, which latter at once connotes quietistic passivity (as in much of Anabaptist/Mennonite history), and misses the active “triadic structure” of Jesus’ ethic, which is aggressive resistance to evil, but never retaliation in kind (Compare Eph. 6:10ff, and *passim*). See *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*, Glen H. Stassen, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992.

*Testament*<sup>9</sup>. After discussing the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Hays concludes in a similar direction to Yoder, Stassen, and a host of interpreters, that it “*teaches a norm of nonviolent love of enemies* (italics added).” He then asks: “Do the other texts in the canon reinforce the Sermon on the Mount’s teaching on nonviolence, or do they provide other options that might allow or require Christians to take up the sword?” He responds: “When the question is posed this way, the immediate result – as Barth observed – *is to underscore how impressively univocal is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point* (italics added).” Hays allows that “narratives about soldiers provide the one possible legitimate basis for arguing that Christian discipleship does not necessarily preclude the exercise of violence in defense of social order or justice.”, though doubts that is the right interpretation.

When discussing “other authorities”, which is what Lewis mainly adduces while dismissing all but one “straw-man” New Testament text, Hays writes: “This is the place where New Testament ethics confronts a profound methodological challenge on the question of violence, because the tension is so severe between the unambiguous witness of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason, and experience*.” Tragically, Christian history is littered with the myriad victims of those “countervailing forces” – right up to the current “War on Terror”.

The Templeton Prize winner for progress in religion in 2004 was theoretical cosmologist and South African Quaker activist George F. R. Ellis, who co-authored with theologian Nancey Murphy *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics*, in which they argue compellingly “from below” in the social sciences, and “from above” theologically, for a “kenotic ethic” that centres on self-sacrifice and nonviolence. When asked why so few Christians align with this kenotic nonviolent “grain of the universe”<sup>10</sup>, Ellis responded simply: “It is just too hard.”

Hays’ final paragraphs are pointed:

“One reason that the world finds the New Testament’s message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that *the church is so massively faithless*. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. (By comparison, our problems with sexual sin are trivial.) This indictment applies alike to liberation theologies that justify violence against oppressors and to establishment Christianity that continues to play chaplain to the military-industrial complex, citing just war theory and advocating the defense of a particular nation as though that were somehow a Christian value.

“*Only when the church renounces the way of violence will people see what the Gospel means, because then they will see the way of Jesus reenacted in the church...* (ibid, p. 343, italics added)”

---

<sup>9</sup> It is a huge tome in which Hays develops meticulously how one should mine the New Testament for its “moral vision”.

<sup>10</sup> This is John Howard Yoder’s expression; title, when prefaced by “With the”, of Stanley Hauerwas’ outstanding 2001 Gifford Lectures and book (*With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology*, Stanley Hauerwas, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001). Yoder wrote: “... people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe.”

C.S. Lewis and majority Christendom are pro-violence, Hays concludes, not *because of* Jesus and the New Testament, but *in contradiction of* both. In the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, Captain John Miller comments: “I just know that every man I kill, the farther away from home I feel.” In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, an American soldier in Iraq comments: “When you kill another person, you kill part of yourself.” The breathtaking Good News declares there is Christ (the Quakers say “that of God”) in *Everyone*. The movies got it right where Christendom largely has not: if one destroys the neighbour/enemy, one destroys God in Christ in “the least of these”, one wanders far from home and God.

If Walter Wink is right that “Violence is the ethos of our times.”<sup>11</sup>; if Christendom for centuries has endorsed it; if states like America wield it brutally worldwide with overwhelming Western Christian approbation; if Mahatma Gandhi was accurate in observing, “The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians.”; perhaps my former church history prof can appreciate why a Christian minority feels riled like Jesus in the Temple (and not a little betrayed) by such massive unfaithfulness.

God’s will on earth *will* ultimately be done as it is in heaven, regardless! This is foundational Gospel faith and hope.

*When it comes to state violence, it just would be nice for a change to see God’s will done by majority Christians...*

---

<sup>11</sup> Opening words of *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Walter Wink, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 13.