

Evangelical Review of Theology

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Volume 31 · Number 4 · October 2007

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Following Jesus in Contexts of Power and Violence

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KEYWORDS: *Christendom, globalization, culture wars, warfare, defence, military spending, nationalism, missionary church, suffering, democracy*

I Followers of Jesus and Christendom.

Any traveller knows that in order to get to a given destination, one must know one's present location. To be 'lost' makes arrival at any desired destination a matter of highly implausible chance. I begin the task at hand, then, by locating North American Christianity and its missionary expressions within the terra firma of Christian history. Much of what passes for 'Christianity' in the West issues from *Christendom*—the religious-political mutant conceived when the Body of the *self-giving Christ* became conjoined with the power of the *self-serving state*.

From its Jewish and Gentile genesis as related in Acts of the Apostles, the church engaged in spontaneous and aggressive proclamation, with a view to converting men and women to belief

in the risen Lord, and to a new way of life described by Luke in Acts 2:42-47. In its earliest days as a Jerusalem-based Jewish sect, the church offered converts teaching, fellowship, prayer, miracles, and a common life, and—in the words of St. Luke—'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). From the end of the first century the church grew by half a million in each generation so that by the time of Constantine's conversion in 312 AD, Christians constituted a demographically significant proportion of the imperial population.¹ In the words of McMullen, 'No other new cult anywhere nearly approached the same success. It can only be called extraordinary.... [The Christian credo] was presented in sharply yes-or-no, black-and-white, friend-or-foe terms; and those were

1 Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 86, 109-110.

unique.... Belief in no other God but Yahweh entailed an obligation to speak in his praise and win over other worshippers to his service.... Urgency, evangelism, and the demand that the new believer deny the title of god to all but one, made up the force that alternative beliefs could not match.²

Significantly, this growth occurred in the face of often formidable disincentives. Alan Kreider—mindful of the sporadic, sometimes lethal persecution that awaited converts to the Christian faith—observes that ‘if one wanted a soft life, or to get ahead in respectable circles, one did not become a Christian’.³ Conversion to Christianity was the sure road to marginality.⁴

With the conversion of Constantine, however, *Christianity* mutated into *Christendom*—the great-grand sire of what is today known as ‘The West’—a civilization in which Christian religious dominance was achieved by social, legal, and violent compulsions.⁵ Between the Edict of Milan in AD 313 and Justinian’s edict of AD 529, Christianity’s status in the Empire evolved from being one among several equally legitimate religious options, to being the only legal public cult in AD 392. Pagan worship was increasingly marginalized, stigmatized, and finally for-

bidden. Having moved from the margins of society to its centre, the *other* way became the *only* way.⁶

It is to Christendom that the missionary movement from the West must trace the still prevalent assumption that Christian mission is ‘out there somewhere’—anywhere but in Europe or in its cultural-political progeny, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.⁷ This notion—despite deeply regrettable flaws, lapses, self-serving wars, and various genocides that were and continue to be such a conspicuous dimension of the western story—is implicit and even explicit in many contemporary western evangelical churches, which find it well nigh impossible to disentangle their *Christian identities* from their deep *nationalistic conditioning*.

That economic, political, and military domination should generate self-confidence, assertiveness, and illusions of superior virtue on the part of those whom they most directly benefit is a truism. A mere century ago, Europe dominated all of Africa, the entire Middle East except for Turkey, and most of the Asian subcontinent. The 35 percent of the earth’s surface controlled by Europeans when Carey sailed for Serampore had grown to 84 percent by 1914. The British Empire, encompassing 20 million subjects spread over 1.5 million square miles in

2 MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, pp. 109-110.

3 Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1995), p. 6.

4 Eduardo Hoornaert, *The Memory of the Christian People*, trans. R. R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 81.

5 Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 8, 47.

6 Alan Kreider, ed., *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh and New York: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 22-24. See also Robert Lewis Wilkin, *Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

7 Kreider, ed., *The Origins of Christendom in the West*, p. x.

1800, engulfed 390 million people inhabiting 11 million square miles one century later.⁸ All of this was accomplished and sustained through violence. Yet in missionary thinking, this domination was both inevitable and happily providential, despite its regrettable brutality.

If the agendas and outspoken confidence of nineteenth century missionaries grates on our twenty-first century sensibilities, any newfound western modesty seems to be largely cosmetic, a façade fashioned from sheer forgetfulness, selective memory, and self-delusion—materials requisite to the fabrication of the flattering wardrobes of national mythologies. The fact is that many of the impulses that motivated nineteenth century missionaries continue to animate modern secularized societies. Western society is, it seems, intrinsically missionary, absolutizing its way of life and its institutions and driving globalization by proclaiming the good news of Mammon to the uttermost parts of the earth—especially to those parts with commodities and markets deemed useful in sustaining the steadily escalating, consumption-driven entitlements of its ageing populations.

The conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and the West, Samuel Huntington rightly observes, is rooted in irreconcilable values at the very heart of two civilizations. 'The problem for Islam,' he says, 'is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose

people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world.'⁹ It was western missionaries who would be the first to realize and point out the deeply flawed nature of their own Christendom civilizations, as I have elsewhere observed:

The Great War of 1914-18... plunged the 'Christian' nations into one of the bloodiest and most meaningless paroxysms of state-sanctioned murder in humankind's history.... for European missionaries, the war exposed the naïveté of missionary apologetics. Missionaries were unable to offer any credible rejoinder to the charge that the West neither believed nor practiced what the Bible actually taught....

.... Although old Christendom's claim to moral superiority had been exposed as a farce, it would take some time before U.S. missionaries began to reach similar conclusions about their own nation. But within the fifty years following the Second World War, profound uncertainty arose concerning the moral legitimacy of America's global economic and military modus operandi, fueled by the nation's ethically indefensible and militarily disastrous escapades in Central America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Only now, when it may be too late, have Christians on this continent—for long seeing nothing amiss in the

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 51.

⁹ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, pp. 217-218.

unholy union between personal piety and blind nationalism—begun to sense the nation's precarious position. U.S. Christians, at least in some quarters, seem increasingly troubled by the thought that their nation may be on its way to joining the long list of expired empires, each blinded by hubris, deluded by self-absorption, addicted to exploitation, and—if need be—determined to wreak destruction on those who stand in its way.¹⁰

The challenge for Christians in general, and for missionaries in particular, continues to be how to follow their Lord faithfully in their time and contexts, resisting the siren allure of human systems so fatally addicted to self-interest, frequently to the point of shedding the blood of those who stand in their way. The foremost and seemingly intractable issue that confronts and may well engulf many churches and missions throughout the third millennium is the *clash of civilizations*.

II The Clash of Civilizations

The 'clash of civilizations' to which I refer is not the incessant current preoccupation of our fear-driven western media. Since God's people are primarily obligated to speak *to* and *about* the sins and moral failures of *their own* peoples, rather those of strange peoples in far away lands, let me propose that the mortal struggle engaging western Christians today is not between Islam

and old Christendom, or between theocracy-oriented societies on the one hand, and commercially-driven secular oligarchies, on the other, although these are indeed struggles of tectonic proportions in our contemporary world. The greater struggle by far is between the followers of Jesus—whatever the nation state or kingdom in which they happen to have been born—and their own cultures.

1 Old Christendom's habitual recourse to violence

Since Christendom has from its earliest beginnings been so ethically and morally antithetical to the spirit and teaching of Christ, it would be a simple matter to do nothing more than provide a catalogue of its short-comings, a brief summary of which can be found in Paul's letter to the Colossians 3:5-10. Behaviour forbidden to individuals typically characterizes nation states. Even something as rudimentary as an apology is all but impossible in the discourse of nation states. But in this essay I will focus on only one of the most conspicuously anti-Christian characteristics of the society that still sends out more missionaries than any other.¹¹ The nation that is more con-

¹⁰ Jonathan Bonk, 'Edinburgh 1910: Friendship and the Boundaries of Christendom,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (October 2006), pp. 1-2.

¹¹ According to the latest numbers available, full-time foreign mission personnel in 2007 number approximately 453,000. A great majority of these still come from the old and the new lands of Christendom. Eleven countries send out more than ten thousand foreign missionaries each. See David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, 'Missiometrics 2007: Creating Your Own Analysis of Global Data,' in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 25-32.

spicuously, self-consciously, and professedly 'Christian' than any other—sending out almost a third of all Christian missionaries in the world today—is a violent nation. This is not to suggest that the United States is the most brutal nation in the history of empires! Even if that were true—and a plausibly convincing case could be made, given the scientific and technological amplification of violence in the form of nuclear and hydrogen bombs that have only ever been used to obliterate civilian populations—that is not the point of this paper. The question under consideration has to do with the clash of civilizations: How do followers of the *self-giving King* live faithfully in the world's *self-serving states*?

Ever since Cain murdered Abel, human beings have been unable to resist the siren call of violence—particularly the lethal violence called war, sanctioned and pursued at every known level of human political and ethnic organization—as a means to accomplishing a greater good. That the last century has been the bloodiest in humanity's long history of violence is commonplace knowledge. *War is a force that gives us meaning*, war correspondent Chris Hedges concluded,¹² echoing ethicist Jonathan Glover in *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*.¹³ Glover shows on a case-by-case basis how human moral integrity can be and apparently always has been systematically and inexorably eroded,

enabling and even compelling ordinary, decent men and women to abandon objective truth and slide into self-deception and brutality, with bogus ends serving to justify murderous means. Christians since Constantine—when following Jesus was no longer essential to self identification as a Christian—have been as susceptible to this as anyone else. Followers of Jesus who are closely associated with power and privilege have almost always rejected—practically speaking—their Lord's calling to *endure* suffering, rather than *inflict* it.

In 'Wars and Genocides of the 20th Century', Piero Scaruffi estimates that 160 million people died in wars during the 20th century alone.¹⁴ Having deliberately precipitated the world's most savage civil war since 1945, the United States now serves as an unwilling metaphor for the ultimate impotence of brute power. Blinded by their own hubris when they launched the war that was to bring 'democracy' to the Middle East, America's political leaders now look on helplessly as the mightiest military power in the history of the world tries to muddle its way out of a Kafkaesque nightmare that threatens to spread chaos and carnage throughout countries in the region.¹⁵ In Iraq today, a country of some 29 million people, more than one hundred Iraqis are dying each day from

¹² Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2002).

¹³ Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ See also 1900: A century of genocides: <http://www.scaruffi.com/politics/massacre.html> and <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/NOTE5.HTM>

¹⁵ See Niall Ferguson, 'A War to Start All Wars', in *The Atlantic* (January/February 2007), pp. 27-28.

internecine violence. As Christian Caryl observed in a review, 'In a country of America's population, the equivalent losses would be a little more than 1,000 per day—or roughly two September 11 massacres per week.'¹⁶

2 Violence and neo-Christendom

I write as a follower of Jesus living in the United States, a nation whose economic reach and military power is unparalleled. I write as a deeply compromised beneficiary of this nation's militaristic self-absorption, ostensibly a 'Christian' nation, a majority of whose citizens attend church and believe Jesus to be the resurrected son of God. Christians in this nation both contribute to and directly benefit from a way of life that was born in violent resistance to God-ordained authority, expanded in the genocidal occupation of a continent, enriched through the forced labour of tens of millions of enslaved Africans, and maintained by both use and the threat of lethal violence—including nuclear—against civilian populations.

That this nation has ever since been deeply and tragically complicit in many of the world's recent wars is not surprising, since its entrenched economic, political, military interests and institutions are served and preserved by violence. Were the United States to halt all weapons-related research, manufacturing, and sales; were it to close

down its 750 plus military bases around the world;¹⁷ were it to withdraw its advisors and resources from the proxy-wars and insurgencies being waged here and there around the world; millions of ordinary American families, communities, businesses, and research centres would be ruined, the nation's economy would slide into recession, and social calamity would be assured. History is like a lobster trap. There is no escape from a national DNA that is violent at its very core. Self-righteous posturing provides only the thinnest, tragic-comical, façade for the troublingly stark underlying reality.¹⁸ At over one trillion dollars in annual expenditure—an incomprehensible figure that continues to rise—global military spending and arms trade surpass all other categories of global spending.¹⁹ The figures are astounding:

- 2005 global military expenditure reached \$1,118 billion, fully 2.5 per cent of world GDP or an average of \$173 per human being;
- World military expenditure in 2005 increased 3.4 per cent over 2004, and 34 per cent since 1996;
- Accounting for 43 per cent of global military expenditure, the USA is

¹⁷ See Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), chapter 4.

¹⁸ See David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁹ The summary is from chapter 8 of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SPIRI)'s 2006 *Year Book on Armaments, Disarmament and International Security for 2005*.

¹⁶ Christian Caryl, 'What About the Iraqis?' a review of four recent books on the war in Iraq in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LIV, No. 1 (January 11, 2007), pp. 36-39.

the principal determinant of current world trends;

- American military spending, at \$420 billion, dwarfs that of other high spending countries, including China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and France—each ranging from 6 to 4 per cent.²⁰

3 Neo-Christendom's grand illusion²¹

Of course, like all empires before it, the United States will not endure beyond God's sovereign purposes. Indeed, some believe that the nation may now be on a collision course with economic, social, and perhaps military, disaster.²² The figures provided by the U.S. Department of Defense, above do not include: (i) \$16.4 billion spent on nuclear weapons by the Department of Energy in 2006; (ii) \$41 billion in outlays by the Department of Homeland Security for the defence of the country; (iii) or \$68 billion spent by the Department of Veterans Affairs for lifetime care of seriously wounded soldiers. Nor do they include the billions of dollars spent each year by the Department of State to finance foreign arms sales and militarily related 'development', or the undisclosed amount spent by the

Treasury Department on pensions to military retirees, widows, and their families. Economist Robert Higgs estimates that in 2002 the Treasury spent \$138.7 billion in interest payments alone to cover past debt-financed defence outlays—a figure likewise missing from the tallies above. More recent figures—bound to be significantly higher—are not available.²³ Economist Joseph Stiglitz and public affairs specialist Linda Bilmes estimate that the five year cost to America of running its wars around the world, today most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan, is \$2 trillion—or an average of \$18,000 per household. Virtually the entire amount is borrowed.

The Bible makes it clear that when it comes to nations and empires, *the writing is always on the wall*. Once a powerful nation has served God's divine purposes, it inevitably suffers the consequences of its delusional pride and self-serving obsessions. America's self-projection as innocent redeemer nation is no more delusional than the self-congratulating myths common to all empires. America's reliance on brute military power as a legitimate means to global domination is now conspicuously playing out, with tragic short-term results and disastrous long-term inevitabilities. Seemingly equating absolute destructive power with supreme virtue, America's self-serving goals have for the last fifty years been increasingly pursued 'by means of internationally illegal, unilat-

²⁰ Source: U.S. Military Spending vs. the World, *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, February 6, 2006.

²¹ Gary Dorrien, 'Grand Illusion: Costs of war and empire', in *Christian Century* (December 26, 2006), pp. 26-29.

²² For an overview of America's perennial involvement in violence, see James Carroll, *House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

²³ See Chalmers Johnson, 'Republic or Empire? A National Intelligence Estimate on the United States', in *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. 314, No. 1880, p. 66.

eralist, and preemptive attacks on other countries, accompanied by arbitrary imprisonments and the practice of torture, and by making the claim that the United States possesses an exceptional status among nations that confers upon it special international responsibilities, and exceptional privileges in meeting those responsibilities'. Given this deeply engrained national conceit, 'It is something like a national heresy to suggest that the United States does not have a unique moral status and role to play in the history of nations...'²⁴

This, then, is the civilization with which faithful followers of Jesus in the west must quietly but determinedly clash. Whatever their nationality, Christians should mark the ease with which personal identities blend with competing nationalisms to produce 'Christianized' but thoroughly idolatrous mutants that wrap both faith and fate in a nation's flag. The United States is not an exceptionally evil nation, but as an extraordinarily powerful one, its share of the manifest evil resident in all nation states is hugely amplified and globally conspicuous. Furthermore, as a fundamentally oligarchic 'democracy', touting and imposing itself as an exemplar of virtue among the nations, its predominantly 'Christian' citizenry must be held to the higher judgment of the One whom they

publicly laud as King of kings and Lord of their everyday lives.

4 New Testament context of domination and coercive violence

Most of the New Testament's books and letters were, it is helpful to recall, written by persons who were at the mercy of the irresistible brutality of Imperial Rome. Philo of Alexandria describes Pilate as 'a man of inflexible, stubborn, and cruel disposition', whose tenure was characterized by 'venality, violence, robbery, assault, abusive behavior, frequent executions without trial, and endless savage ferocity' (*Leg* 30102).²⁵ It is safe to assume that Pilate was neither better nor worse than his peers. We can be reassured, therefore, that Jesus and New Testament authors offer trustworthy guidance to Christians the world over who either suffer from violence, or who are tempted to advocate, support, or excuse violence because of its imagined short-term or long-term benefits. If there is one overarching emphasis within the biblical accounts of the nations and kingdoms scattered across the several millennia represented in its pages, it is that God is sovereign in the affairs of kingdoms and nations.

Given our enlightenment-conditioned sensibilities, and our deep thrall to the self-flattering myths of our western nations' formations in violence and genocide, it is oddly disquieting that New Testament writers appear to be

²⁴ William Pfaff's essay, 'Manifest Destiny: A New Direction for America', in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LIV, No. 2 (February 15, 2007), pp. 54-59 provides a helpful overview and assessment of the way 'manifest destiny' is used to justify American intervention and interference in the affairs of other nation states.

²⁵ Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (OUP 2005), pp. 60-61, citing Helen K. Bond.

uninterested in advocating violent insurrection against undesirable regimes, or in making the survival of Rome a cause worth either living or dying for. What is clear, however, is that followers of Jesus, like their prophetic predecessors in the Old Testament, regarded God's absolute sovereignty as a given, with *all* nations and kingdoms owing their existence and duration solely to God's providential will. This left them free to get on with the unique work to which they had been called and for which they had been equipped as Kingdom citizens.

Devout Jews in first century Judea and Galilee could respond to Roman rule in one of four ways, none of which needs be either idealized or stigmatized: (a) acceptance of and full cooperation with Roman rule; (b) acceptance of Roman rule, with the prerogative to question or even challenge the justice or appropriateness of its actions; (c) nonviolent rejection of Roman rule; and (d) violent rejection of Roman rule. Those electing for full cooperation with Roman rule could cite Joseph, Ezra, and Nehemiah as faithful examples; those whose cooperation with Rome was tempered by a willingness to challenge or question its policies could cite Queen Esther and Daniel as their exemplars; both of these could be seen interpreting and applying to their own situation the teaching of Jeremiah for those who found themselves in continuing exile; still others, choosing the path of nonviolent resistance, may have invoked Eleazar and the mother with seven sons—all of whom died, rather than obey Antiochus Ephiphanes—as their example; and finally, those electing for violent resistance could find easy

inspiration in the examples of Judith and of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers.²⁶

Biblical teaching does not concern itself with the shifting forms of human political systems, but is always concerned with the purposes for which those power structures have been divinely ordained. All human powers and superpowers, whether they acknowledge it or not, are under the judgment of God, and operate within God's timetable. It is the obligation of God's people to remind their own political rulers of this overlooked or ignored fact—*implicitly*, by how they live, and *explicitly*, by how they speak. 'Powers and superpowers are allowed to exist, and may even be approved, but they are always on notice. Biblical tradition is utterly opposed to the absolutizing of governmental authority (Dan. 3:4-6!) or to the exercise of that authority without concern for those who are subject.'²⁷ The governing authorities have a job to do, and the writers of the New Testament expect them to do it.

Even the book of Revelation is not so concerned with the evils of a despotic regime, as with the *idolatry* that is advocated in the name of the regime. The object of John's attack on Rome is not the idea of empire, but the claim by empire or emperor to be ultimately sovereign. The sin of idolatry is what John is concerned about, and it is a sin to which all human beings caught up in self-absorption of ethnic identity or the furies of nationalism are prone. Such preoccupations lead inevitably to reductionist anthropologies that place

26 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, pp. 34-45.

27 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, pp. 125ff.

oneself and one's own kind at the centre, with everyone else—especially enemies—on the margins. This is not the spirit of Christ, but of anti-Christ.

III Following Jesus in a World of Violent Conflict.

Can followers of Jesus today—including both citizens and beneficiaries of neo-Christendom—be faithful to their primary identities as citizens of God's kingdom? Is there any difference between Christians and atheists who kill at the behest of their political or military leaders, from the standpoint of the men and women and boys and girls whose lives they destroy? Does a baby or its parents care whether the pilot who drops napalm is a devout Sunday school teacher or an agnostic? Does it really make a difference that it was Christians rather than atheists who designed, manufactured and deployed the bomb that slowly incinerated its infant victims?

After Israel's phosphorus bombing of a hospital in Beirut, for example, several babies in the blasted maternity ward had to be put into a big bucket of water in order to douse the flames. When the nurse took them out half an hour later, they were still burning.²⁸ Should care givers be thankful that this injury was done by a son of Abraham? How can Christians deliberately injure or kill others—especially their enemies—given what Jesus taught his

disciples? Is it possible for Christians to defy the usually irresistible magnetism of ethnicity and nationality in contexts of war and violence? Given what we know about our Lord, and about his followers in the first and second centuries AD, and his persecuted post-Christendom followers around the world today, the answer to both questions must be a resounding 'yes!'

IV Case Studies

1 Mizoram-A missiology of the state

In these politically-charged times, it is instructive to note how church leaders and members reacted when, on February 20, 1987, following twenty years of rebellion spearheaded by the Mizo National Front (MLF), Mizoram was formally absorbed into greater India as the country's twenty third full fledged state. The story of the key role played by the churches in negotiating the eventual political settlement is instructive indeed, ensuring both the cultural integrity and the missionary dynamism of Mizo churches. So thoroughly have the Mizo churches incarnated their Lord's missionary impulse that they have interpreted their political subservience to a predominantly Hindu nation as God's way of bringing the gospel to India, since they now require neither passports nor visas to freely evangelize anywhere in the sub-continent.²⁹ One can only imagine what

²⁸ Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), is a book filled with the horrors of modern war. See also Chris Hedges, *What Every Person Should Know About War* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003).

²⁹ The key role played by the Presbyterian Church is related by Lalngurauna Ralte in his chapter, 'The Church and Political Developments in Mizoram', on pp. 33-39 of *The Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*.

would happen if the demons of nationalism to which we humans are so susceptible were displaced by such a missionary spirit in all Christians!

In 2004-2005, the Overseas Ministries Study Center was home to three Mizoram missionaries, representing some 1,355 fully supported workers serving with the Mizoram Presbyterian Synod Mission Board (SMB), which in turn is supported by the 445,303 member-strong Mizoram Presbyterian Church.³⁰ Given the state's annual per capita income of approximately 6,000 Rupees (\$132 dollars), how can such a small, relatively poor church provide for so many missionaries? The short answer is that the entire church is 'missional'. If 'the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning', as Emil Brunner famously insisted, then the Mizoram church is very much alive, sparing neither effort nor ingenuity in pursuing its mission mandate. Indeed, they 'consider the task of proclaiming the Gospel as their responsibility as a nation'.³¹ In 2003, Mizoram Presbyterians gave Rs. 154,120,823 (\$3.4 million U.S.) to mission work.

How could this be possible? Since 1913, in a practice known as *buh-fai tham*, mission-minded women set aside a handful of rice when they prepare morning and evening meals. This rice is regularly collected from each

household and sold at an auction, with proceeds going to the SMB. In 2003, the 'handful of rice' offerings raised almost \$1,000,000 for missions. Similarly, sticks of firewood are set aside from each load that is delivered to a home, and children are encouraged to forage for firewood. The wood is then contributed to the 'mission firewood pile' on Sunday mornings.

Churches in rural areas frequently dedicate entire gardens, farms, and teak plantations to missions, while their urban counterparts open small shops and tea stalls. The human time and effort necessary to run such enterprises is provided by volunteers, with all profits going to support missions. Some churches construct buildings, with rental revenues going entirely to the mission fund. A high percentage of church women practise imaginary field visits, praying and collecting the amount of money that it would take to actually travel to the selected mission field, with resulting monies going to SMB mission funds. A significant number of churches have even sacrificed their lavish Christmas feasts, celebrating, rather, the joy of diverting the money towards missionary support. Some church members, especially women, miss one meal a week, donating the value of that meal to the mission fund. And, finally, church members practise tithing, giving a minimum of 10 percent of their monthly income to the church. Tithers designate their offerings for one of four options, two of which are mission-related.

One of our residents, Mrs. Vanlal Thalmi, had served as headmistress of the Mizoram Presbyterian synod's Karimganj mission high school in Assam for the children of middle-class

30 The 2003 report of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod Mission Board is available on CD-ROM from Rev. Zosangliana Colney, Secretary, Synod Mission Board, Synod Office, Aizawl, Mizoram 796001. Email: zosangc@yahoo.com

31 Zari Malsawma, 'The Mizos of Northeast India', p. 3.

Hindus and Muslims since 2000. Unabashedly Christian, each year the school features a Christmas pageant by the students. The event attracts parents and relatives of the performers, who gather to watch the re-enactment of the advent of our Lord. In December 2003, more than 10,000 people attended the final night of the pageant, watching, spellbound, as their Hindu and Muslim children played out the drama of Mary, Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, and the wise men on a stage at the front of the huge circus tents that had been procured just for this occasion, the local civic centre having several years ago become too small. Since seating had been provided for only 8,000 people, thousands had to stand. Following the play, Rev. D. K. Sarkar of Calcutta, a forceful Bengali-speaking evangelist, preached for almost an hour, concluding with an appeal to which more than 1,000 people responded by coming forward.³²

2 Sokreaksa Himm—Cambodia: A theology of forgiveness

Four years ago a small paperback book, *The Tears of my Soul* (Monarch Books 2003), arrived in my mail. The story begins in the town of Siemreap in Cambodia, where Reaksa (the more familiar form of the author's name) pursued a happy childhood together with his large middle-class family. His

father, a teacher, provided a high standard of living for his family, and all was well until the country was taken over by communists.

When the Khmer Rouge came to power in Cambodia in 1975, they instituted a program to remove all western influences from the country, killing all political and military members of the former regime, and evacuating all cities and towns. Urban areas had been the last to come under *Khmer Rouge* control, and they believed that all city dwellers had been corrupted by western capitalists, so they moved them into the jungles to 'purify' them by hard physical work. Intellectuals, teachers, and professional people were particularly at risk. Reaksa was eleven years old when his family was forcibly moved out of their home and his happy childhood ended.

What he lived through in the next two years is unimaginable to most North Americans. His family endured near starvation and a lack of medical help as they attempted to learn how to subsist in a jungle encampment. Members of his family were tortured almost to death, living in continual fear for their lives. Finally, in 1977, the entire family was marched out to a mass grave and murdered with hoes, axes, and knives. Reaksa survived by lying still under the bodies of his brothers and sisters until the killers went to find more victims. Climbing out of the grave, he escaped into the jungle where he was eventually befriended by a local villager and managed to survive until Vietnam defeated the *Khmer Rouge* in 1979. Only one sister who had married and moved to a different town survived the ordeal.

Having been forced to endure the

32 The pageant is performed annually on three successive nights, December 22, 23, and 24. During the day, teams of Christian evangelists and musicians fan out into the villages and countryside, singing, preaching, and inviting people to the event. (Source: Mizo missionary Mrs. Vanlalthawmi).

prolonged torture of his ten-year-old brother, the abuse and slaughter of his family, and having suffered this himself, he was broken and disfigured emotionally. How could he escape the recollection of all this, and of the mass grave into which they—and he, seemingly dead—had been dumped in 1977? After spending five years in a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand—where he first encountered Christians—he was rejected by American immigration officials. Deeply discouraged, he prayed, ‘God, if you exist, take me to Canada and I will believe in you.’ His prayer was answered, and in May of 1989 he arrived in Toronto, where he was taken to the World Vision Reception Center. Deeply impressed by the practical goodness and kindness of the World Vision staff, he was converted, and baptized in June 1990. Following graduation from Tyndale College in 1993, he came to Providence Seminary, graduating with his MA in 1996. While at Providence Seminary, he would sometimes come into my office and would sit, speechless, and cry.

In 1999, Sokreaksa returned to Cambodia as a missionary. Over the years, his insatiable lust for revenge miraculously metamorphosed into a deep longing to forgive his family’s killers. He wrote to those of us who knew him, asking us to pray that he might find his family’s killers, so that he could meet each one of them and forgive them, in the name of Christ.

In a June 7, 2003 email he reported his discovery that three of his family’s murderers had been killed; one was psychologically deranged; and the others resided in villages some distance from where he lived. He made preparations to visit one survivor, and on June

14 made the journey to complete the hard work of forgiveness. ‘I met one of my family’s killers’, he wrote; ‘I gave the man the Bible and I read Luke 23:34 for him, and told him that I have forgiven him. He was so nervous, but then, he felt the joy of hearing the message of forgiveness.... I gave him my shirt as a symbol of my forgiveness, a scarf representing my love for him, and a Bible, representing the message of hope and forgiveness for him.’

Attached to the email were photographs of Sokreaksa embracing his family’s mortal enemy. ‘I thank God for giving me a spirit of peace to forgive my family’s killers’, he wrote five days later. ‘He was trembling when he first saw me. But after that he was filled with joy. I am feeling great now. After the rain, the sky becomes clear.... I have done a difficult job that not many people can do. I thank God for giving me strength to face this difficult task. I am now finding a way to help dig two wells for the people there.’

V Following Jesus as victims of power and violence: lessons from the case studies.

- Both are reminders of who we are, why we are here, and how we should live out our days in relationship to our friends and our enemies.
- Both in their own way remind us that Christian treatment of others—especially enemies—is unique, and that suffering for the sake of the gospel is an integral element of our calling. Followers of Jesus—even those who are citizens of powerful militaristic nations—

are nowhere encouraged by their Lord to *inflict* suffering, but are everywhere called to *endure* suffering. This is God's way for his people in the moral universe created and redeemed by him.

- The story of Mizoram reminds us that expending human life in pursuit of political self-determination is not what the Christian life is ultimately about.
- The story of Sokreaksa reminds us that although the way of forgiveness is neither easy nor natural, it is more powerful than revenge, retribution or brute military force. While it is unimaginable to a self-serving nation state, the way of forgiveness is not surprising for followers of the One who created the universe and who prayed, as he hung on the cross, giving his life in order to free the universe from bondage to the one who knows only death and revenge, 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they do'.

1 Inflicting or enduring violence?

The apostle Paul learned that the special calling of Jesus' followers is not to *inflict* suffering, but to *endure* it. A follower of Jesus caught up in his or her nation's efforts to inflict violence must reflect carefully on a number of questions: Should a follower of Jesus play an active role in the lethal violence advocated by the state? Can participation in the general killing of enemies glorify Jesus Christ? Can lethal violence be a positive witness to our Saviour's self-giving love? Can it be an evident and indisputable expression of one's imitation of and loyal obedience

to Jesus? Can it be an incarnate, living testimony to the Son of God crucified and resurrected so that all persons might have life? Can it be an evidence of the fruit of God's Spirit within us?

From the beginning we humans have sought security through violence. The evolution of weapons, from clubs to longbows, from chariots to tanks, from slings to nuclear missiles, each calculated to deter aggressive neighbours, demonstrates the impotence of worldly power in curbing violence. Violence breeds hatred, resentment, and more violence, never peace or love. The law of the harvest applies also to violence: we reap not only what we sow, but more than we sow (Galatians 6:7); grapes are not gathered from thorns (Matthew 7:16). The cross is the only way of victory over the power of evil. The way of the cross is not for cowards. But Jesus called 'weak' men and women to follow this path in fighting evil (Mt. 10:16, 38; 16:24-25; Luke 9:23, 24; Mark 10:39-45; John 10:15-16). The ultimate, though not immediately apparent, potency of any Christian action lies in the cross, where our Lord's life found its most complete expression.

2 Resisting reductionist anthropologies

Followers of Jesus described in the three stories cited above shared the unique perspective of the earliest believers, so helpfully outlined by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. In contexts of neo-Christendom power and violence, Christ's followers must resist the temptation to regard other human beings—especially enemies—'from a worldly point of view'. Through the

ages, people everywhere have tried to make themselves and their societies healthier and more secure. Science, education, religion, laws, threats, imprisonment, executions, and wars have all been brought into the service of human betterment. Yet the problems remain intractable, and social, political and economic degeneration—if not actual pandemonium—remains alarmingly, persistently imminent.

Even in something as relatively simple as our interpersonal relationships, we find it almost impossible to measure up, even to our own flexible, self-accommodating standards. We know that we should be gentle, kind, patient, forgiving, generous, self-giving, and helpful, but we find ourselves being just the opposite—harsh, mean, impatient, unforgiving, stingy, and self-absorbed—often with the very people for whom we care the most, our children, our spouse, and our neighbour. Paul describes the root problem in Romans 7:14-25: just as our physical bodies are genetically programmed to deteriorate and die, so we are spiritually programmed to sin.

What God offers us through Christ is a 'spiritual stem-cell' transplant, so that we can be *spiritually* and *relationally* renewed, with both the inclination and the potential to become the kinds of people that God has called us to be. 'If any one be in Christ', Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, 'he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.' The love of Christ, as Paul understood it, makes it illogical for his followers to regard themselves or anyone else *from a worldly point of view*. Followers of Jesus are *compelled*, not because there are no other options, and not because they are

filled with feelings of gratitude to God, but because if Christ went to such extremes to reconcile the world unto himself, other options no longer make any sense, no longer fit with actual reality. It no longer makes sense to live for ourselves (v. 15).

Such an outlook represents a major perspectival shift that impacts one's orientation to everything and everyone. It is as earthshaking as the Copernican revolution that shook the physical sciences; as radical as Louis Pasteur's notions about the relationship between germs and infection that underlies modern medicine. Such an outlook sets us free from the tiny, dark dungeon of our egos, from the self-absorption that is promoted, celebrated and rewarded in our own society—the siren allure of 'me first' to which we so easily give credence and support.

What is 'a worldly point of view'? It is the utilitarian view of other persons, ethnic groups, nations. Love your friends, hate your enemies, live as safely and as comfortably as you can, avoid conflict if possible, but if not, make sure your enemy suffers more than you do. Essentially, my life and the lives of those who define me and support me are worth more than your life and the lives of those who define you. If push comes to shove, you are expendable.

Each of the stories above reminds us that those in Christ work hard to resist such reductionist anthropologies. In 'The Weight of Glory'—a sermon preached originally on June 8, 1942 in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford—C. S. Lewis addressed this point in his inimitably lucid fashion:

...It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dulllest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.... Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ *vere latitat*—the glorified and the glorifying, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.³³

One cannot but be struck by the stories of young men and women who respond to this deeply rooted human impulse to risk their security, their careers their mental and physical health, their very lives for the sake of a noble cause—whether it be the democracy of the West or the theocracy of Islam. It is this impulse that is at the heart the selective, self-flattering memories and myths that serve as the histories of human families and nations. It is this impulse that partly accounts for my own adolescent absorption in the far-fetched adventures of Odysseus and his rough gang of adventurers, Jason and his Argonauts, King Arthur and his chivalrous but relentlessly violent knights of the round table.

How meaningless our lives can be. How wretchedly, banal the details of our destiny! How we yearn to be part of something bigger, grander, more enduring!! There is something in our human natures—a vestige of the image of God, I think—that instinctively prefers to die *for* something than to merely die *of* something. It is this that makes the great epics *epic*! The key to following Christ in a broken world—a world in thrall to violence and power—is conversion to God's perspective on who we are, who they are, and what our unique calling as Jesus' followers is:

So from now on we [can] regard no one from a worldly point of view.... God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and.... has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are... Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:16, 18, 20).

33 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1965), p. 15.