VIOLENCE, CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE LEGACY OF CHRISTENDOM

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Stuart Murray Williams believes that he can put his finger on when it all went wrong. I think he would say that the crucial distinction between the perspective of Myers and Harvey is simply that of power. Myers writes from the perspective of Christianity as the faith of the marginalised, while Harvey implicitly takes the position of the one who is in a position to decide the direction of the society, that is, the perspective of the powerful. Stuart Murray Williams argues that Christianity is in its essence a non-violent faith from the margins and that it has been seriously compromised since the conversion of Constantine. As we move into post-Christendom a new opportunity arises for the Church to recover its authentic witness. CS

They were taken completely by surprise. None of them had ever imagined this might happen. They had no framework to understand it, no theology to interpret it and no time to reflect on it. And they were facing momentous choices and making decisions that would affect many future generations. Where was God in this unanticipated but maybe wonderful situation? How could they seize the opportunities that were opening up all around them? What should they do, and not do?

With the benefit of centuries of hindsight I am convinced that they made disastrous mistakes that compromised the Church and its witness. But I have great sympathy for the fourth-century Church leaders as they struggled to respond to the patronage of the emperor. Constantine had not only guaranteed them freedom from persecution (which they were hoping for) but was lavishing favours on them, underwriting their projects, inviting them to high office, discouraging pagan practices and urging his subjects to become Christians.

Suddenly – very suddenly – the world had been turned upside down. They had the ear of the powerful, the support of the wealthy and the respect of the influential. But with enhanced status came new challenges and responsibilities. They were no longer the illegal and marginal (albeit rapidly expanding) movement they had been for the past three centuries. They were now part of the establishment, a culture-shaping force that increasingly identified the fortunes of the empire with their own.

RETHINKING VIOLENCE

Among many other urgent ethical issues on their agenda was the question of violence, for their empire, like all empires, was maintained by institutional violence, defended by an army and reliant on coercion

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to ensure social compliance. Previously they had been able to opt out of participation in such messy activities, although they had been stung by the accusation of pagan critics that they benefited from the protection of an empire they would not fight to defend. But now they had vested interests in the status quo and its survival; they had civic responsibilities they should not shirk; and any who threatened the empire were also threatening the advance of the gospel.

Embracing violence and endorsing coercion, however, meant rejecting a commitment to peace that was deeply embedded in their tradition – a tradition they traced back to the example and teaching of Jesus himself. His call to love enemies continued to echo down the centuries, as did the older prophetic vision of a people who beat their swords into ploughshares and learned war no more (Is 2.4).[1] For many decades this had not just precluded involvement in the army but all forms of violence in a community whose self-identity was that of a "culture of peace".[2] How could they jettison this tradition?

There were, of course, some precedents for accommodation in the past century. Since about 170 AD, in fact, some Christians had served in the army, although Church leaders had insisted they should not kill and Christian soldiers were occasionally martyred for throwing down their arms and refusing to fight. As the Church grew, as soldiers were converted and as the pressure to conform increased, the pacifist tradition of the early Church was coming under increased threat. But the fourth-century Christendom shift presented challenges of a new order.

For a while, pragmatic responses to a rapidly changing context overtook theological reflection. But further developments required a more considered response. Emperors started requiring pagans to convert to Christianity on pain of punishment; joining the army was restricted to Christians; and the persecution of those regarded as heretics was becoming Church policy. A proper theological response was required that would guide Christians on issues of coercion and violence.

REINTERPRETING CHRISTIANITY

Although others contributed, the theologian who dominated the discussion and set out what would become the normative approach of the Christendom era was Augustine of Hippo. This towering figure offered on the issue of violence (as on many other issues) an attempted synthesis between biblical teaching and contextual necessities.

Augustine provided a rationale for participation in war and the use of coercion. What he developed (and others refined over the centuries) was the "just war" theory, a blend of classical pagan ideas and Old Testament examples. Far from glorifying violence or giving carte blanche to warmongers, this theory imposed several stringent conditions, *all* of which had to be satisfied before a war could be declared just. But it represented an innovation, a decisive break with tradition, an attempt to reinterpret Christianity for its new imperial context.

There are indications that Augustine was less than satisfied with the implications of his own teaching. Although he advocated coercive measures against pagans and those he regarded as heretics and schismatics, his earlier writings indicate distaste for this approach. He apparently changed his views reluctantly, frustrated that other measures were ineffective. His writings contain both admonitions to desecrate pagan shrines and advice to leave this to the secular authorities. He seems ambivalent about torture and consistently resisted the use of lethal measures against his opponents. But those who in later centuries appealed to Augustine's writings to authorise violence appear generally to have been less squeamish.

Augustine drew primarily on the Old Testament to undergird his teaching (although he never quoted Is 2.4). He struggled with the life and teaching of Jesus but found ways of interpreting this that did not conflict with his ethical conclusions. Following his lead, Christendom theologians frequently contrasted actions and intentions (so that Christians could slaughter their enemies lovingly) or differentiated between personal and political enemies. They also followed Augustine's insistence that "error has no rights" and his novel interpretation of "compel them to come in" (Lk 14.23) to justify coercive action to compel incorporation into the Church.

There are several ways of explaining this new approach to violence: the sheer surprise of the imperial invitation to the Church to exercise authority and the need to adjust to an unexpected scenario; the gradual (though not unopposed) erosion of the Church as a culture of peace during the third century; and Augustine's sterling efforts to retain biblical and ethical rigour while adapting his teaching to the new political situation.

REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE

But the Church's endorsement and use of violence throughout the Christendom era is a major stumbling

NOTES
1. This text was frequently quoted in the early Church. See, for example, Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 110.2–3; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer* 4.34.4; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3.21; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.33; *Didascalia Apostolorum* 6.5.
2. See Alan and Eleanor Kreider, *Becoming a Peace Church* (London: Anabaptist Network, 1999).
3. See Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 13ff.
4. An Anglican working party on this issue is due to report soon.
5. See, for example, the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams (www.cptuk.org.uk). See further Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).
6. See further Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). See also www.anabaptistnetwork.com

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▶ block to informed and sensitive people in post-Christendom. The just war criteria may be stringent in theory, but this theory has been toothless: the Church consistently supported all wars declared by the empire or nation state to which it owed allegiance. Augustine may have urged restraint in the use of coercion, but restraint is less evident in the following centuries, as the Church used inquisition, hideous torture and executions to maintain its authority and advance its interests. Violence infused evangelism, Church discipline, pastoral ministry, Church politics and all aspects of a supposedly Christian society.

At times "holy war" supplanted the just war approach as Christian crusaders fought under the sign of the cross (grievously distorting its meaning) and regarded warfare as an act of devotion. Jews and Muslims were not the only recipients of this expression of Christian mission, but they retain vivid memories of Christian violence towards their communities.

Sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, genocide in the Balkans and Rwanda, the "war on terror" declared by representatives of the officially "Christian" West against Islamic extremists and many other more recent examples continue to support the notion that religion in general and Christianity in particular are incorrigible sources of violence, conflict and inhumanity. This is one of the most damaging legacies of Christendom and the fateful decisions taken in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Are there any glimmers of light in this dark story? Yes, there are, but not enough yet to dispel the gloom or repair the reputation of the Church.

There are examples in the Christendom era of principled opposition to violence and attempts to recover the primitive peace tradition of the Church. Given that this peace tradition is rooted in the Gospels, it is not surprising that individuals and communities who rediscovered the life and teaching of Jesus often reached this conclusion. Among noteworthy examples are Francis of Assisi, Petr Chelcicky (a radical Hussite), many Waldensians (in southern France and northern Italy), most Anabaptists (in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands) and later George Fox and the Quakers in England. Several first-generation movements embraced pacifism – only to renege on this as they became numerous and respectable. But the Anabaptist and Quaker traditions emerged as the main representatives of the so-called "historic peace churches".

The reaction of mainstream Christendom churches to these provocative movements and their advocacy of peace was generally violent. In a society founded on violence and defended by violence such nonconformity was subversive and very threatening. The persistent charge (echoing that of pagan writers in the early centuries) was that such views were idealistic and irresponsible. In the "real world", the use of violence, though regrettable, was crucial to achieve justice and prevent anarchy. Pacifism was understood as "passivism".

RECONSIDERING THE LEGACY

As the Christendom era comes to an end, are there any grounds for hoping that post-Christendom Christians will seize the opportunity to reconsider the issue of violence? Actually, there may be some: (1) The unrelenting warfare of the twentieth-century has demonstrated not only that secular ideology is even more prone to violence than religious ideology but also that the "myth of redemptive violence"[3] is losing its hold on many people (as proliferating anti-war protests indicate). Many Christians have been deeply involved in these anti-war protests and their experience is challenging churches that remain wedded to just war thinking to reconsider this approach. (2) The inapplicability of just war criteria in the context of modern technological warfare is so glaringly obvious that even supporters of this approach admit that new thinking is needed.[4] Although this may only result officially in some tweaking of the criteria, many are becoming convinced that the approach itself is flawed and unsustainable. (3) The twentieth century also witnessed many remarkable examples of political change being achieved and injustice being confronted through non-violent action. Not all of these were motivated or supported by Christian initiatives, but some were, as Christians committed to peace have demonstrated that the conflation of pacifism with "passivism" is illegitimate by engaging in active and often risky peacemaking.[5] (4) The influence of the "peace church" tradition is slowly growing as Christians from many denominations realise that in post-Christendom many assumptions and practices of imperial Christianity no longer make sense. Reconsidering the issue of violence is part of a wider process of discernment as we adjust to life on the margins of a plural society and make decisions about what to carry with us from our Christendom past and what to repudiate.[6]

Unlike the Christendom shift in the fourth century, which took the Church by surprise, the gradual transition to post-Christendom has been apparent for decades and it will be many years yet before some of the vestiges of Christendom disappear from Church and society. But we face comparable challenges and opportunities to Christians in that era. Like them we must sift through the traditions we have inherited, choosing what to retain and what to discard. Like them we must wrestle theologically and ethically, not just pragmatically, with our changing context and status.

Fourth-century Christians were moving from the margins to the centre of society and ended up effectively marginalising the example and teaching of Jesus. As we move in the opposite direction, perhaps we can not only recover the peace tradition of the pre-Christendom Church but many other aspects of Christian discipleship that come into focus as we restore the life and teaching of Jesus to the central place in our thinking and decision making. ■