

# *Nonviolent Resistance: The Third Way*

*"I don't see myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as  
a violent person trying to become nonviolent"*

Walter Wink

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Michael Kelly thinks he has killed pacifism. In an editorial in the *Washington Post* of September 26, 2001, he cites George Orwell's 1944 description of pacifism as "objectively pro-Fascist." "If you hamper the war effort on one side you automatically help out that of the other," Orwell reasoned. Applied to "America's New War," Kelly finds the logic irrefutable. "Organized terrorist groups have attacked America. These groups wish the Americans to not fight. The American pacifists wish the Americans to not fight. If the Americans do not fight, the terrorists will attack America again. And now we know such attacks can kill many thousands of Americans. The American pacifists, therefore, are on the side of future mass murders of Americans. They are objectively pro-terrorist." Hence the pacifist position is "evil."

Would that life were so logical! For what Mr. Kelly overlooks is a third way, neither passive nor aggressive. For millions of years his error has been endlessly repeated. It is the fight/flight response. But that third way has occasionally been tried, and, wonder of wonders, it has frequently succeeded. Religions pioneered the third way as a nonviolent protest against those two invidious alternatives. Starting with the Hebrew midwives, nonviolence was elaborated by Jainism and Buddhism, given political bite by Jews like the prophets and Jesus, articulated by Christians like St. Francis and Martin Luther King, Jr., and made programmatic and practical by the Hindu Gandhi and the Muslim Badshah Khan.

Nevertheless, I agree with Mr. Kelly that pacifism must go. It is endlessly confused with passivity. In the nations in which Christianity has predominated, Jesus' teaching on nonviolence has been perverted into injunctions to passive

nonresistance, which, as we shall see, is the very opposite of active nonviolence. Jesus had said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your outer garment, give your undergarment as well; and if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, go two" (Matthew 5:38-41). As it stands, this saying seems to counsel supine surrender. If you are a woman and you are struck by your spouse on one cheek, turn the other; let him pulverize you. If you are sued for a piece of clothing, give all your clothes voluntarily, as an act of pious renunciation. And if a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack one mile, be a chump: carry it two. And the crowning blow: don't resist evil at all.

For centuries, readers of this advice have instinctively known something was wrong with this picture. Jesus always resisted evil. Why would he tell us to behave in ways he himself refused? And that's where the trouble starts. The Greek word translated as "resist" (*antistēnai*), is literally "to stand (*stēnai*) against (*anti*)." The term is taken from warfare. When two armies collide, they were said to "stand against" each other. The correct translation is given in the new Scholars Bible: "Don't react violently against the one who is evil." The meaning is clear: don't react in kind, don't mirror your enemy, don't turn into the very thing you hate. Jesus is not telling us not to resist evil, but only not to resist it violently.

Jesus gives three examples to explain his point. The first is: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Most people picture a blow with the right fist. But that would

land on the left cheek, and Jesus specifies the right cheek. A left hook wouldn't fit the bill either, since the left hand was used only for unclean tasks, and even to gesture with it brought shame on the one gesturing. Jesus is speaking about striking the right cheek with the back of the right hand. This was not a blow to injure. It was symbolic. It was intended to humiliate, to put an inferior in his or her place. It was given by a master to a slave, a husband to a wife, a parent to a child, or a Roman to a Jew. The message of the powerful to their subjects was clear: You are a nobody, get back down where you belong.

It is to those accustomed to being struck thus that Jesus speaks ("if anyone strikes you"). By turning the other cheek, the person struck puts the striker in an untenable spot. He cannot repeat the backhand, because the other's nose is now in the way. The left cheek makes a fine target, but only persons who are equals fight with fists, and the last thing the master wants is for the slave to assert equality (see the Mishnah, Baba Kamma 8:6). This is, of course, no way to avoid trouble; the master might have the slave flogged to within an inch of her life. But the point has been irrevocably made: the "inferior" is saying, in no uncertain terms, "I won't take such treatment anymore. I am your equal. I am a child of God." By turning the other cheek, the oppressed person is saying that she refuses to submit to further humiliation. This is not submission, as the churches have insisted. It is defiance. That may sound a bit idealistic, but people all over the globe of late have been taking their courage in their hands this way and resisting, nonviolently, those who have treated them thus.

Jesus' second example deals with indebtedness, the most onerous social problem in first century Palestine. The wealthy of the Empire sought ways to avoid taxes. The best way was to buy land on the fringes of the Empire. But the poor didn't want to sell. So the rich jacked up interest rates—25 to 250 percent. When the poor couldn't repay, first their moveable property was seized, then their lands, and finally the very clothes on their backs. Scripture allowed the destitute to sleep in their long robes, but they had to surrender them by day (Deut. 24:10-13).

It is to that situation that Jesus speaks. Look, he says, you can't win when they take you to court. But here is something you can do: when they demand your outer garment, give your undergarment as well. That was all they wore. The poor man is stark naked! And in Israel, nakedness brought shame, not on the naked party, but on the one viewing his nakedness. (See the story of Noah, Genesis 9.) Jesus is not asking those already defrauded of their possessions to submit to further indignity. He is enjoining them to guerrilla theater.

Imagine the debtor walking out of the court in his altogethers. To the question what happened, he responds, That creditor got all my clothes. People come pouring out of the streets and alleys and join the little procession to his home. It will be a while before creditors in that village take a poor man to court!

But, of course, the Powers That Be are shrewd, and within weeks new laws will be in place making nakedness in court punishable by fines or incarceration. So the poor need to keep inventing new forms of resistance. Jesus is advocating a kind of Aikido, where the momentum of the oppressor is used to throw the oppressor and make him the laughing stock of the community. Jesus is not averse to using shame to kindle a moral sense in the creditor.

Jesus' third example refers to the angaria, the law that permitted a Roman soldier to force a civilian to carry his 65 to 85 pound pack. But the law stipulated one mile only. At the second marker the soldier was required to retrieve his pack. By carrying the pack more than a mile, the peasant makes the soldier culpable for violation of military law. Again, Jesus is not just "extending himself" by going the second mile, as the popular platitude puts it. He is putting the soldier in jeopardy of punishment.

So you can see why I agree with Mr. Kelly. The examples Jesus gives are something more than nonresistance. They are gutsy, courageous, and aggressive. So I don't regard myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as a violent person trying to become nonviolent. Mr. Kelly and I concur that the "flight" option is cowardly, irresponsible, and ineffective. But where he is still mired in the

“fight” option, I am prepared to risk active, even militant, nonviolence—a third way. Far from proving impractical, nonviolence has been about the only thing that has been working of late. In 1989-90 alone, fourteen nations involving 1.7 billion people underwent nonviolent revolutions, all but one successfully (China). During the twentieth century, 3.4 billion people were thus involved. Yet the churches have, since the time of St. Augustine, embraced the Roman “just war theory,” convinced that nonviolence won’t work, that only violence can save or redeem us. (I call this “the myth of redemptive violence.”)

The current crisis challenges both Mr. Kelly and me. Mr. Kelly, because he is unable to point to many successes for the “fight” option in the last two decades. And he is impaled on the spiritual law that says, “If I win, I lose.” If we destroy the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, tens of thousands will stand in their places. All out war with Arab Muslims could lead straight to World War III, complete with biological and nuclear weapons. At the very least, we can expect a world unsafe for Americans, even in our homeland. Civil liberties will be lost, and we may find ourselves in a situation “objectively pro-Fascist.” If we win, we lose. Our very lust for retaliation is proving the truth of the adage that violence can only lead to more violence.

There are causes for this war, and most of them should have been taken care of years ago. Most of what Osama bin Laden claims to be fighting for should have been the basis of America’s Middle Eastern policy. We should have lifted the sanctions in Iraq, which have killed upwards of a million people, over half of them children under five—a war crime of which we are guilty. We could have easily withdrawn our troops from Saudi Arabia, since it is offensive to pious Muslims to have non-Muslim troops in their holy land. After all, it was Kuwait we fought to save; let Kuwait harbor our troops. We should have used our enormous influence to stop Israelis from settling in the West Bank, and secured for Palestinians a state. And we should quit propping up anti-democratic dictatorships in the region, many of which would collapse without our support.

Not that these unjust situations adequately account for Osama bin Laden’s vendetta against America. The rationale of terrorists is terror, and reasons given today may shift tomorrow. The terrorist who regretted being caught before he could kill 250,000 Americans betrayed the game. It is simply to kill Americans. No pretext can ever excuse the slaughter of innocents, whether Americans in the Twin Towers or Afghan civilians in the Middle East.

But the current crisis also challenges me. I distinguish between force and violence, arguing that force, rightly exercised, is the legitimate use of restraint to prevent some from doing harm to others. Violence, by contrast, is injurious or lethal harm deliberately intended, and can never be justified. I am struggling with that distinction today. Is there a continuum from force to violence, or from police action to war? How, then, do we know how much force we can use before it becomes violence? Could we have sent in special forces to seize Mr. bin Laden and bring him to trial at the World Court? But we didn’t know where to look! (But neither do our soldiers.) Didn’t the “restrained” use of force already escalate to violence the moment President Bush declared war? Can these distinctions be anything but rationalizations unless we have committed ourselves to nonviolence from the outset?

It’s easy to see why Bush declared war. It was in response to the killing of our civilians. But when we kill innocents—inevitable in a war where innocents are mingled among combatants—we write them off as “collateral damage”—as if real people weren’t involved. We watch as the full military resources of the world’s most commanding military are devoted to destroying an entire sector of the Afghanistan population. I cannot see how we can regard this war as anything but immoral.

Doing justice in the Middle East will not mollify true terrorists. But it could remove the source of much outrage, and thus dry up the reservoir of recruits for holy war. To that end, we must act with vulnerability and compassion to remove the causes of anger, even as we ferret out those whose terrorist violence led to the tragedy of September 11, 2001. □

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Dr. Wink's recent books include *The Powers That Be* (Doubleday, 1998) and the newly-released *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man* (Fortress, 2001). His earlier works include a trilogy, *The Powers*:

- ▶ *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984)
- ▶ *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986)
- ▶ *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

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