

Does the bible condone violence? essay sample

[Religion](#), [Bible](#)



1. INTRODUCTION

Bible texts contain many stories of violence and wars. The purpose of this paper is to explore basic interpretations of these Bible texts and discuss whether God, Who is the same in the Old and New Testaments, permits Christian violence, and, if so, under what circumstances. This is an important topic because the Old Testament books form the bases of three major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many verses in the Bible can be quoted out of context to justify “ Holy Wars in different faiths[i] and splinter religious groups, as are taking place in the Middle Eastern countries every day. In this paper I will explore whether our understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ provides guidance for Christians about the use of violence or justifiable warfare.

Bible quotes are from the *Harper Collins Study Bible (NSRV)*. Primary references are *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* by John J. Collins and *Jesus and Nonviolence, A Third Way*, by Walter Wink. My secondary references are a textbook discussing proper reading of the Old Testament;

Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. XX and XXI ; writings on non-violence and what it means by Martin Luther King, Jr., President Jimmy Carter, and Chaplain Charles Meyer; and conclusions from *The 9/11 Commission Report*. The goal of this paper is to understand better the objectives of the writers of the Old and New Testaments and the views of God presented therein; the teachings of Jesus Christ on violence by studying Collins and Wink; and review some of the opinions about violence and non-violent conduct in authoritative sources.

1. MAIN POINTS

Whether or not one believes that the Bible condones violence depends on one's personal authority given to the text. We must be careful in our reading of both the Old and New Testaments to consider both in light of the time period in which they originated. Even though each book describes historical events, we cannot read those books as if they were written as we today write history with concrete dates, people, and events. Biblical history is not an objective reporting of purely human events but rather an impassioned account of God's acts in history passed down as stories and put in written form centuries later.[ii]

Some modern writers believe that the Bible is not a model for morality; it is a mirror for identity. It is inappropriate to look to the Bible as a guide for *what* to do. We should view the Bible as a mirror, reflecting commentary and stories describing *who* we are and how we should interact with God and one another.[iii] In his book, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?*, theologian John J. Collins argues that the Bible appears to endorse violence, which he defines as any attempt of an individual or group to impose its will on others by injury coercion, or killing.[iv] He demonstrates this by quoting Exodus 15: 3, "the Lord is a warrior". He adds,

Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.' (1 Sam. 15: 2)

The following command is typical and foundational:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clear away the many nations before you - the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you - and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the people on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. (Deut. 7: 1-6)

Collins explains there are two primary factors in these passages warranting violence by Israel. One is the demand that Israel worship only one god, YHWH. Other peoples who might interfere with that demand may legitimately be killed. The second is the claim that a land is given to Israel by divine grant, so the previously inhabitants should be driven out or killed. [v] Collins continues by explaining that the main subject matter of the Old Testament is not monotheism, or the promotion of One God but the

advancement of one particular people. We must recognize that Biblical texts are ideological fictions written at a later time.

The writers of the Old Testament present Israel as they thought it should be, whether or not that was really what happened.[vi] Both the Books of Daniel and Revelation were intended to encourage patient endurance.[vii] For example, Daniel tells of a time of persecution so that the people may be “refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end. The archangel Michael fights on their behalf and prevails. The people are elevated to shine like the stars forever.” (Dan. 12: 1-3)[viii]

Collins explains that scriptures written later plus those in the New Testament present a sort of cosmic dualism and description of eschatological vengeance by God in the future. The identity of God in the New Testament is no longer tied to ethnicity or possession of land. Collins identifies the “Dark Side of the Bible”[ix] – the God as Warrior attitudes and assumptions on violence deeply embedded in the Old Testament that have had a long and effective history.

He suggests we must also consider the model of Jesus as the suffering servant, Jesus as the lamb, and God as the God of victims.[x] The hope of resurrection is introduced. Martyrdom becomes an option. The reward of the righteous is not on earth but in heaven.[xi] Jesus’ teaching about loving one’s enemies is framed by the prospect of a final judgment when the wheat will be definitely separated from the tares:

. . . The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. . . The slaves said to him, “ Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But (Jesus) replied, “ No . . . Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn”. (Matt. 13: 24-30)[xii]

Collins’ conclusion is that the Bible gives an unvarnished picture of human nature and the dynamics of history and religion, in addition to actions people take in the name of religion. After all, as he points out the wolf will lie down with the lamb in the future. The Bible never claims its stories are models for human action in all times and places.[xiii] Therefore, Collins places the Old Testament texts of violence in perspective of one God to be worshipped by his people Israel, who occupied land God provided that Israel sometimes had to take violently.

In later Biblical and Apocalyptic writings, plus the New Testament, the identity of one God had been established. Collins places the literature on violence and vengeance in God’s hands to be played out in eschatological times and ways as determined by God in the future. By so interpreting the Bible, we come to an understanding of patience and waiting for God’s true and future justice to take place in God’s good time. It is not for us to act violently to bring about the kingdom now.

Walter Wink, in *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* , presents his reinterpretation of the teachings of Jesus Christ. He believes that it is

important to discuss the Bible and violence so we can learn to participate in the struggle of the oppressed for a more just world.[xiv] Wink's basic concept of nonviolence is that Jesus instructs us on how to fight evil without striking back at it—an early form of what Wink calls “ militant nonviolence”. [xv] Jesus actually presented an alternative to both passivity and violence as responses to evil.[xvi] Through his examples, Wink suggests that Jesus meant that Christians should refuse to be awed by the power of the government and use forms of ridicule against the aggressor.

Wink uses one example of Jesus' parable about turning the other cheek. Jesus instructs his followers that if any one strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also. If a person strikes one's right cheek with the right hand, that person would be slapping the first with the back of the hand. In Jesus' times, this was considered an insult or humiliation. A backhand slap was the normal way of admonishing inferiors.[xvii] If the person struck turns the other cheek, that person is in effect saying that the attempted humiliation did not work and the parties are equal in status.[xviii]

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 evil-doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Matt. 5: 38-42)

Wink's second example is Jesus' parable about a person being sued for his outer garment. Only a very poor person would have nothing but an outer

garment to offer as collateral for a loan. Jewish law required that it be returned at sunset, for that was all the person had in which to sleep.[xix] Jesus counseled His followers to give over the inner garment as well and marching naked out of court. This left the creditor holding all your clothing. Nakedness was forbidden in Judaism, but the same fell on the person causing or viewing the nakedness.[xx] Jesus' advice shamed the person who wanted the garments in the historical context of the times. He was in effect sponsoring a form of clowning or ridicule.[xxi]

When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. You shall wait outside, while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the LORD God. (Deut. 24: 10-13)

Wink's understanding of Jesus' nonviolence is that He was teaching a kind of moral martial arts for using the momentum of evil to overthrow it. This requires "penetrating beneath the conventions of legality to issues of fundamental justice and hanging onto them. . ."[xxii] According to Wink, Jesus was establishing "a new counter-community that developed universalistic tendencies, erupting out of his own Jewish context and finally beyond the Roman Empire." [xxiii] Jesus' commitment to justice included overthrowing oppression while loving your enemies. Love of enemies causes us to recognize that the enemy is also a child of God.[xxiv] Jesus' Third Way

does not permit Christians to avoid persecution and death. It deliberately “ evokes the violence of an oppressive system, using its momentum to throw it”.[xxv] Wink suggests that for Gandhi also, nonviolent revolution was not a program for seizing power. It is a program for “ transforming relationships, ending in a peaceful transfer of power.[xxvi] Wink is urging the practical application of Jesus’ teaching of “ militant nonviolence” as a means of overthrowing oppression and furthering the Christian’s commitment to justice for all people.

Other theologians have discussed the relationship of the Bible to warfare and the role of Christians in light of the teachings of Jesus. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* , specifically defended the right of a government to wage wars and initiate violence under certain conditions. Governments assuredly had the right to protect their citizens and defend them from foreign invaders and criminals who lived within their borders.

Therefore, both natural equity and the nature of the office dictate that princes must be armed not only to restrain the misdeeds of private individuals by judicial punishment, but also to defend by war the dominions entrusted to their safekeeping, if at any time they are under enemy attack. And the Holy Spirit declares such wars to be lawful by many testimonies of Scripture.[xxvii]

Calvin defended his opinion through his opinion that the writings of the apostles were intended to establish the spiritual Kingdom of Christ, not to fashion a civil government.[xxviii]

The writings of Rev. Martin Luther King concerning nonviolence roughly coincide with those of Gandhi and Calvin. In his book, *A Testament of Hope*, Chapter 11 is devoted to his understanding of “ Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom” and how nonviolent resistance was the only effective strategy for social change available to African-Americans.[xxix]

Violence as a strategy for social change in America is nonexistent. . . I am convinced that for practical as well as moral reasons, nonviolence offers the only road to freedom for my people. In violent warfare, one must be prepared to face ruthlessly the fact that there will be casualties by the thousands.[xxx]

Not a single person has been killed in a nonviolent demonstration.[xxxii]

He, too, justified self-defense. The Constitution guaranteed a person’s right to defend his or her home even in the worst area of the South. However, Dr. King conceded that self-defense must be approached from another perspective in a nonviolent demonstration. There is a very fine line between defensive violence and aggressive or retaliatory violence. “ When violence is tolerated even as a means of self-defense there is grave danger that in the fervor of emotion the main fight will be lost of the question of self-defense.”[xxxiii] He believed that only a refusal to hate or kill could end the violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men could live together without fear. Dr. King wanted to use his nonviolence to dramatize the evils of society to bring pressure to change those evils by forces of good will in the community.[xxxiiii] He wanted his followers to reject the racism,

materialism and violence characterizing Western civilization and to work towards a world of brotherhood, cooperation, and peace.[xxxiv]

Dr. Garcia, in *Dignidad - The Church: A Community*, discusses ethics and theology through Hispanic eyes, evaluating the cultural system that oppresses and commits violence against the Hispanics in general because of their poverty, race, language, or ethics.[xxxv] His viewpoint is steadfastly that in the context of such oppression and domination, the church must proclaim the Word of self-love and service to others. The church exists to serve and minister to all of God's creatures and creation.

The church's ground, motivation, and spiritual foundation are in Jesus, the servant Lord, who gave his life so others may live. We must always remember that Jesus was servile to God, not to other men and women. [xxxvi] He urges Hispanic Christians to become proactive public participants and proclaim the sovereignty of God within the political system as well as the church. He clearly advocates political change by working within the existing system rather than personally taking violent actions to overthrow that system. This is similar to some of Wink's proposals based on his interpretation of Jesus' "militant nonviolence".

This form of Christian action is also urged by President Jimmy Carter in "The Christian Citizen", an article in his book, *The Personal Beliefs of Jimmy Carter*. He quotes from I Peter:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the kind, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who

are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. . . Show proper respect to everyone: love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. [xxxvii]

President Carter urges us to remember that these words were written when the Roman Emperor, the supreme political authority throughout most of the known world, was severely oppressing the Christian church, imprisoning and even killing Christians on account of their faith. He continues by explaining his understanding of the meaning of these words in a world where Revolution against British rulers created America and Hitler twisted Christian teaching and Nazis carried out the greatest crime of modern history. He urges that in general government is a necessary, beneficent force that preserves peace and order, punishes criminals, and lets citizens have a voice in shaping its policies.

Normally governments deserve our respect and support. Our responsibility to our government changes when it seeks to impose laws that are unjust and contrary to God's commands. Then we must consider what talents and influence we can bring to bear on the situation and how best to work to moderate or modify government policies. Violent revolution may then be appropriate. More dramatic steps may be needed, including forceful public protests or even civil disobedience. Sometimes the rejection of such oppressive authority requires our willingness to accept imprisonment or even death.[xxxviii]

We should not forget that noted German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was killed for his part in an assassination plot against Adolph Hitler.

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Bonhoeffer's role in conspiracies against Hitler was not central. His moral presence and legacy were substantial. Bonhoeffer manifested extraordinary strength of faith during his long imprisonment in military prisons and finally in Buchenwald. Bonhoeffer was hanged in early April 1945 at Flossenburg concentration camp. Shortly before his death, he told an Italian fellow prisoner that:

As a pastor he considered his duty not only to console or to take care of the victims of exalted men who drove madly a motor-car in a crowded street, but also to try to stop them. [xxxix]

III. CONCLUSION

By presenting the teachings of Jesus through different eyes and world views, I hope that I have, at least briefly, provided the basic information about my thesis to let myself and others do further study of how the teachings of Jesus Christ provide guidance for Christians about the use of violence or justifiable warfare. My main conclusion is that there is no one conclusion about what Jesus meant during the times when he taught. There are even disputes over which sayings are the real teachings of Jesus.

I would like to study further the different types of nonviolence which have been presented in these readings and in others so that I might better understand their meanings. I would also like to be able to reconcile Jesus' basic teachings of loving God and your neighbor with the use of nonviolence and violence as illustrated in this paper. It seems to me that most, if not all, of

the Biblical texts can be interpreted through the history of their times and that most have many layers of meaning.

[i] *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004) p. 54 which states that, “ Most Muslims prefer a peaceful and inclusive vision of their faith, not the violent sectarianism of Bin Ladin.”

[ii] Raymond D. Dillard and Tremper Longman, III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994) introduction.

[iii] Charles Meyer, *Surviving Death* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2000) p. 43.

[iv] John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) p. 2.

[v] Collins, ps. 4-11.

[vi] Collins, p. 15.

[vii] Collins, p. 25.

[viii] Collins, p. 22.

[ix] Collins, p. 29.

[x] Collins, p. 23.

[xi] Same.

[xii] Collins, p. 24.

[xiii] Collins, p. 31.

[xiv] Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence, A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p. 6.

[xv] Wink, p. 12

[xvi] Wink, p. 13

[xvii] Wink, p 15.

[xviii] Wink, p 16.

[xix] Deut. 24: 10-13, 17.

[xx] Gen. 9: 20-27.

[xxi] Wink, p. 21

[xxii] Wink, p 43

[xxiii] Wink, p. 45

[xxiv] Wink., p. 59

[xxv] Wink, p. 90.

[xxvi] Wink, p. 70.

[xxvii] John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. XX and XXI* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960) p. 1499.

[xxviii] Calvin, p. 1500.

[xxix] James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991) p. 54.

[xxx] King, p. 55.

[xxxi] Same.

[xxxii] King, p 57.

[xxxiii] King, p. 58.

[xxxiv] King, p 61.

[xxxv] Dr. Ismael Garcia, *Dignidad: Ethics Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1997) p 26.

[xxxvi] Garcia, p. 162.

[xxxvii] I Peter 2: 13, 17

[xxxviii] Jimmy Carter, *The Personal Beliefs of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1990) p. 120.

[xxxix] Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich, a New History* (London: Macmillan, 2000) p. 727

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