Nonviolence Works — If Somebody Does the Work

Ivan J. Kauffman

Recent history has answered the question "Does nonviolence work?" with an unambiguous and categorical "Yes." In every case over the past half-century where there has been a sustained effort to pursue justice by active nonviolent means,[1] it has not only been successful, it has also resolved long-standing conflicts that appeared to be intractable, and has resulted in the creation of much more stable and humane political structures.

The question is not whether nonviolence works, but how it works, and on this question we still have a great deal to learn. Despite having witnessed more than a dozen successful national-scale nonviolent movements in the past fifty years, the scholarly and political communities have only begun to accept the implications for both ethics and practical politics represented by these epochal events. Our descendents a century or two in the future will likely not be astonished so much by the triumph of nonviolence in the late twentieth century as by our hesitation in recognizing it. For them the superiority of active nonviolence will be obvious and widely recognized. What will astonish them will be the evidence that we continued to use the old methods for dealing with international conflict, even after the power of nonviolence had been demonstrated beyond any question, above all in the defeat of the Soviet Empire.

This disconnect between our experience and our political actions was rather clearly evident in the fall of 2001 when the Christian churches struggled to respond to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. What this response revealed was that

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Ivan J. Kauffman is an independent author and former journalist living in Washington, D.C. A former executive of the Mennonite Central Committee peace office during the Vietnam War, he wrote a syndicated column for Catholic newspapers in the United States in the 1980s entitled Making Peace, which reported on the nonviolent movements of that decade. His most recent book is a nonviolent portrait of Jesus, He Was Here: Those Who Knew Jesus Speak *(Brazos, 2001).*

the Christian churches as an international community very much wanted to deal with this crisis nonviolently but were unable to do so. This essay describes the international churches' responses to the September 11 attacks, and then analyzes the reasons the churches were unable to propose a nonviolent solution.

The Churches' Response to September 11

In the ten weeks following September 11, more than seventy-five statements dealing with the terrorist attacks were issued by heads of denominations or denominational boards, or by heads of national or international associations of churches.[2] As a group these statements indicate the churches were engaged in this crisis very deeply. Christians throughout the world felt deeply involved, and their leaders' statements convey a widespread consensus that September 11 was a major event for both the world and the churches — perhaps even a turning point. "This is a tragedy of tremendous proportions with unforeseeable consequences for the entire world," said Archbishop Demetrios, head of the Greek Orthodox Church in America.[3] "The terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, and the days and weeks to follow will shape the future of the United States," said the National Association of Evangelicals.[4] Pope John Paul called September 11 "a dark day in the history of humanity."[5] The head of the National Council of Churches in the U.S. called the day's events "the worst attack on U.S. territory since Pearl Harbor."[6]

Within two days after the attacks some twenty major religious leaders had issued statements. All were either pacifist in tone or at least sought to avoid a military response. "Many are speaking of revenge," wrote the primate of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. But, he said, "never has it been clearer to me than in this moment" that Christians "are called to be about peace and the transformation of the human heart, beginning with our own. I am not immune to emotions of rage and revenge," he added, "but I know that acting on them only perpetuates the very violence I pray will be dissipated and overcome."[7] "Let us not engage in ethnic, religious, or national stereotyping for what may be the acts of a few irrational terrorists," said the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.[8] "We urge all Americans . . . to refrain from rushing to judgment against whoever may have committed these heinous crimes," said the United Methodist Board of Church and Society's general secretary.[9]

At a time when the U.S. government was vowing to respond to the attacks by using its full military force, the nation's religious leadership was almost unanimously calling on the American people to "resist the impulse to respond to violence with violence," as the president of the United Church of Christ put it.[10] "We must renounce violence as a means of imposing the will of some upon all," said the president of the Disciples of Christ.[11] "While others will choose the weapons of war and destruction in the pursuit of reprisal and revenge, we know that it is in the Cross that we will find the strength to stand firm, to keep vigilant in prayer, and to turn the hearts and minds of men and women to the ways of God's justice and righteousness," asserted the head of the Anglican Communion in London.[12] "As Baptists, who have long suffered as a religious minority from religious persecution, we call upon our people to pray and work for peace. We must never raise the sword," said the general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance.[13]

Two days after the attacks Pope John Paul II made a statement that summarizes the position of virtually all his colleagues in the world's Christian leadership. "I pray that this inhuman act will awaken in the hearts of all the world's peoples a firm resolve to reject the ways of violence," he told the U.S ambassador to the Vatican. He urged the United States government "to combat everything that sows hatred and division within the human family, and to work for the dawn of a new era of international cooperation inspired by the highest ideals of solidarity, justice and peace."[14]

But polls indicated 85 percent of the U.S. population expected war, and more than two-thirds said they were willing to support a war even if meant U.S. battlefield casualties in the thousands. President Bush, who announced he intended to carry out a vigorous military campaign against those responsible for the attacks, received some of the highest approval ratings in recent history. It quickly became apparent that the churches' leaders and their members in the local congregations and parishes held very different views.[15]

The result was a great debate in the churches, pitting what can be called consequential pacifism against the doctrine of necessary war. The consequential argument is based on the belief that military action is usually ineffective and always produces negative effects, both short-term and long-term. The necessary war argument holds that only military action can maintain international order,

and the good derived from such order outweighs the violence involved in achieving it.[16]

The consequential pacifist position was clearly evident in a joint statement by the five major Canadian Protestant church leaders shortly after the attacks. "In the past, a single-minded campaign against communism in Afghanistan helped create conditions of terror in Afghanistan, including support to the now accused Osama bin Laden," the Canadian leaders said, blaming the crisis on that past policy. "It spawned the Taliban, and it contributed to enormous instability in Pakistan," they added.[17] The leadership of the United Church of Christ in the U.S. took a similar view. "In recent years military campaigns in countless places have destroyed lives and threatened a whole generation of children while leaving in place oppressive regimes," said their statement. "Short-term solutions have sown the seeds of future catastrophe as we ally ourselves with the enemies of our enemy, only to discover that we have fed and armed those who would terrorize the innocent." [18]

Even the historic peace churches based their opposition largely on consequential arguments. A Mennonite Central Committee statement said that Mennonites throughout their history have opposed "a culture of violence" by "witnessing against war preparation, enemy demonization and the use of military force to solve difficult international problems." But the statement concludes by basing its opposition to military action in Afghanistan on predictions that such action will have negative consequences. "We speak from years of experience in the regions of the Middle East and Asia, where decades of suffering and struggle, including a history of intervention by Western countries, have led to feelings of suspicion and anger," the MCC statement says. "A military strike against Afghanistan risks massive human suffering. In an area of the world where almost half the population is below the age of fifteen years, this experience will shape attitudes and emotions for generations to come."[19]

U.S. Catholic and Lutheran bishops were the major exponents of the necessary war position. After the U.S. military began bombing Afghanistan on October 7 the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America said, "we understand that under certain circumstances there may be no other way to offer protection to innocent people except by use of military force."[20] The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said, "The dreadful deeds of

September 11 cannot go unanswered." The United States "has a moral right and a grave obligation to defend the common good against mass terrorism." That response must be multi-faceted, but includes "the legitimate use of force." But they added, even though military action may be "necessary" in some cases, "because of its terrible consequences" it must "always be undertaken with a sense of deep regret," even when it is justified and carried out with great care.[21]

Outside the United States there was little support for the necessary war position. The World Council of Churches was especially vigorous in arguing the pacifist case. Its general secretary sent a letter to WCC member churches in the U.S. calling on the United States to reverse its course, "rejoining the global community in a common pursuit of justice" and setting aside "its reliance on military might at whatever cost."[22] After the bombing began the WCC said, "We do not believe that war, particularly in today's highly technologized world, can ever be regarded as an effective response to the equally abhorrent sin of terrorism." The United States should "bring a prompt end to the present action."[23] The South African Council of Churches issued a statement saying that U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan did not meet the requirements for a just war.[24] The Church of Scotland issued a similar statement,[25] as did the Catholic bishops of Australia.[26]

But in the end it was neither the legal standards of the just war tradition nor the pacifist tradition's moral principles that determined the outcome of this debate. The question was not whether U.S. military attacks on Afghanistan were moral — on either Just War or pacifist grounds — but whether they were necessary. This debate involved practical politics rather than theological or moral principles, and as it became increasingly clear the available political options were either to do nothing or to attack the al Qaeda militarily in Afghanistan, the vast majority of the U.S. population chose to support a military attack. Many in the churches did so reluctantly, but they did so nonetheless—and even those who remained silent, neither supporting nor opposing the war, in fact lent their support to it.

The doctrine of the necessary war has never been described as such by theologians, nor officially adopted by any church, but it is widely held in the churches nonetheless, especially among the laity. Early in the war a *Washington Post* reporter, writing as "a Christian believer" said he believes any war leader's

primary responsibility is to win, and the most any leader can hope for "is to be on the better side, morally and spiritually, of what will always be a bad business . . . . If he is fortunate, his duty during war will not be the occasion for too many sins, nor too grave. But that is not his primary concern until after it is all over. He can worry over that in retirement and plead his case come Judgment Day."[27]

Later a Washington-area pastor wrote in the same newspaper, "Until Sept. 11 I would have described myself as a pacifist. I grew up inspired by the nonviolent teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and my preaching consistently opposed the use of violence." But he has now concluded that in "an imperfect world . . . resisting evil through violence may sometimes be a necessary evil."[28] A letter to the *New York Times* stated this view — that violence for some benefits humanity as a whole — very clearly: "The children who have lost parents suddenly and violently suffer equally, in America and Afghanistan," the writer acknowledged. But, she added, we must "fight for our survival with total dedication. If we let ourselves get caught up in sympathy for the enemy, we will lose this war, and untold numbers of children throughout the world will suffer even more."[29]

In the end this position was the one adopted by the great majority of churches in the United States, although with great reluctance. Even those who continued to believe that military attacks in Afghanistan would only worsen the situation were silenced by the sudden collapse of the Taliban regime only six weeks after the military campaign began. Predictions that U.S. military action would produce a Vietnam-like result were almost completely discredited by that unexpected outcome, and the flow of church statements, many of them based on consequential arguments, came to an abrupt halt. Before November 18 there had been on average more than one statement per day by a major church leader. After that date there would be none.[30]

There was no gloating among those Christians who had supported the necessary war position. They too were troubled by the position they had taken. They too would have preferred a nonviolent approach; they too knew there was a better way, that supporting violence violates our most basic Christian principles; that we were not following the example of Christ. But they also knew the United States had to do something. And so, believing the choice was between passivity and violence, they chose violence.

Why Did Nonviolence Fail?

Statements issued by church leaders after September 11 contain numerous indications that had a politically viable nonviolent response to the terrorist attacks existed it would have had the religious community's strong support. Ever since the 1960s religious leaders have provided strong support for nonviolent movements, beginning with the U.S. civil rights movement, and continuing with the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, the Solidarity movement in Poland, and the nonviolent movements in Central America, the Philippines, and Korea in the 1980s. The clearest indication of the churches' readiness to engage in nonviolent action in this case was the Episcopal bishops' decision to commit themselves and their churches to "waging reconciliation" as their response to the September 11 attacks.[31]

But there was no nonviolent movement for the churches to support in the post-September 11 situation. Why was this so? Several factors emerge, all of which have considerable significance for the future.

The most obvious is that nonviolence works only when a committed group of people have created an organization able to make it work. In all previous cases where nonviolence has been successful, these organizations have been created by people who were otherwise powerless and had no other way to seek justice. But this case was very different. The party seeking justice was the United States government — an exceptionally strong military power. For nonviolent techniques to have been employed in this situation, it would have required the United States to voluntarily give up the right to defend itself militarily — something that has never before been done. The churches could only urge the U.S. government to act nonviolently if there was some effective nonviolent process that could be offered as an alternative to military action, and at this point in time no such institutional alternative exists.

The major obstacle that prevents the churches from creating enabling institutional structures for successful nonviolent action is that nowadays the churches tend to see themselves as reactive in the political realm, not proactive. The churches take it as their primary role to criticize what others do, not to promote their own policies. For the most part church statements in response to September 11 involved criticism of actions taken by the various governments involved. There were a few suggestions for actions to be taken, but they tended to be tentative and general. This tendency to equate social justice with

calls for action by other persons and institutions, particularly governments, has marginalized the churches politically. The democratic process greatly privileges those who have a positive agenda, even if a flawed one, over those whose agenda is essentially negative, even if that agenda is valid.

This problem is compounded when nonviolence is being advocated, since in the present stage of political development governments capable of military action do not consider nonviolent action to be a viable option. Successful nonviolent actions to date have all been carried out by non-governmental movements — movements that had clearly defined, positive agendas to offer, as contrasted to only opposing the regime in power. Simply to oppose injustice, no matter how valid that protest may be and how committed the protesters are, often only compounds the evil being protested by giving people in the middle of the political spectrum — the sensible center, who make virtually all political decisions in a democracy — the impression that the only alternative to what is being opposed is anarchy.

A third factor preventing the churches from engaging in nonviolent action is the absence of appropriate leadership. At present the religious community's leadership is almost entirely theological and pastoral. These people's skills, great and necessary as they are, are not what is needed to fashion a successful nonviolent response to an event like September 11. Unfortunately, we do not have persons in the religious community, with a few notable exceptions, who are commissioned, trained, and empowered to provide leadership in situations of international conflict. This is equally the case in all the churches — Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox.

A substantial community within the churches is committed to nonviolence and expertise in its techniques, but that community is now quite fragmented. It consists largely of people dedicated to specific causes rather than to the nonviolent process itself. These various movements contain great energies, but there is currently no way to focus these energies on a single effort. If there had been an organization dedicated to promoting and developing nonviolence it would have had a major impact in the post-September 11 situation. All successful nonviolent movements of the past have involved such an organization — the Congress Party in India, the SCLC in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Solidarity in Poland, the ANC in South Africa, etc.

A fourth factor that prevented the churches from acting nonviolently is disunity. So long as each denomination acts independently, speaking for itself, political leaders can easily listen only to those who support positions they have already adopted, and ignore those with whom they disagree. Even the Catholic Church, which prides itself on its internal discipline and its ability to speak with a single authoritative voice, showed great divergence in how its bishops responded to this crisis. The clearest example occurred on November 14, when the Catholic bishops in the United States issued a statement supporting U.S. military policy in Afghanistan, and the same day the Australian Catholic bishops issued a statement declaring that U.S. military policy violated all but one of the six conditions in the just war doctrine and was therefore unjust.

Another major obstacle to successful nonviolent action that became apparent in the post-September 11 period was the divergence between the churches' leaders and lay members. At a time when church leaders in the U.S. were either opposing government policy or trying to soften it, the vast majority of the U.S. population — approximately half who attend worship services regularly — were indicating that they fully supported the government. Successful nonviolence requires popular support, and in this case that did not appear to exist. Instead, nonviolence appeared to be largely a leadership position.

We cannot solve problems we do not understand, but understanding a problem in itself does nothing to solve it. Theological leaders have an indispensable contribution to make, but they can only do so by entering into intense, ongoing, practical dialogue with persons involved in action — politicians, military leaders, business leaders, ordinary citizens. Successful nonviolent movements of the past have demonstrated such dialogue is possible, and by engaging in it workable alternatives to military action emerge. For nonviolence to succeed people must be offered real solutions to the real problems of their lives — solutions that provide concrete, immediate benefits, not utopian ideals.

It also became obvious post-September 11 that the information the churches were receiving via the secular media was incomplete and frequently misleading. Leaders who based their statements on this information, especially those who took a consequential position, were seriously discredited when the Taliban regime collapsed almost immediately. Yet there are numerous people in the churches with extensive expertise about the Islamic world. Many are

affiliated with the various churches as missionaries, aid workers, and scholars; others are in secular positions. Nothing is more essential to successful nonviolent action than accurate information. The churches must become much more intentional about gathering and disseminating information available through its worldwide web of relationships if it wishes to offer viable nonviolent alternatives to the political community.

There was also an evident disconnect between the churches' spirituality and their political activities. The churches' major source of power in the political arena comes from their moral authority, which in turn is derived from their spiritual power. However, most church-based action after September 11 involved advocating positions based on political considerations, not on their core religious beliefs. This had the effect of reducing the churches to merely another voice among those of the many political interest groups seeking to make their views heard.

What Happens Next?

There will be another crisis. It will not be exactly like September 11; it may be worse, possibly a biological or nuclear attack. But whatever form it takes, the churches will be faced with the same dilemma again. If nothing is done to prepare for that next crisis, it is virtually inevitable that the necessary war rationale will prevail once again in the western Christian community.

There is really only one convincing argument against the necessary war position, and that is a successful demonstration that war is unnecessary — that there are other ways, equally and in fact often more successful in bringing order to human affairs. Nonviolence is not the political equivalent of an ATM card that we can insert into an ideological bank whenever war occurs, expecting instant peace to be dispensed. It must be demonstrated in actual practice if it is to be taken seriously.

If nonviolence is going to be taken seriously by political leaders, the churches must take the initiative. We cannot wait until another emergency occurs to prepare; that is the major lesson the nonviolent movement learned in the post-September 11 period. The military had a large establishment ready to respond to the attacks of September 11, and since it was the only institution prepared, it was the one used. The religious community must institutionalize the nonviolent option in a politically relevant way.

What exactly that means remains to be seen, but this much seems clear: If nonviolence is going to work we are going to have to do what is necessary to make it work — including creating institutions that make it a viable political option. If we do not do this, we have helped to make war necessary, by failing to provide an alternative.

Notes

[1] Active nonviolence is understood in this essay as an attempt to achieve political change without using military coercion. Such actions may result in violence of some sort, but those engaged in nonviolent action limit themselves to initiating actions that do not depend on violence to achieve their purpose. This form of political activity was first demonstrated on a national scale by M. K. Gandhi in India, and has since been used successfully in the United States by Martin Luther King, Jr., and in numerous other nations since.

[2] Full texts of these statements with summaries are available on the author's website: *www.ReligiousCommunityInitiative.net*.

[3] Statement of Archbishop Demetrios on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, Sept. 11, 2001.

[4] News Release, National Association of Evangelicals, Sept. 12, 2001.

[5] Pope John Paul II, General Audience, Sept. 12, 2001.

[6] Rev. Dr. Robert W. Edgar, General Secretary, National Council of Churches, and Rev. John L. McCullough, Executive Director, Church World Service, Sept. 11, 2001.

[7] Most Rev. Frank T. Griswold, Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church, Sept. 11, 2001.

[8] Administrative Committee, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Sept. 11, 2001.

[9] News Release, "Church agency supports punishment, not in-kind retaliation," United Methodist News Service, Sept. 13, 2001. The official quoted is Rev. Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society.

[10] News Release, "UCC leaders respond to terrorist attacks with online forum and call for peace," United Church of Christ Communication Office, Sept. 11, 2001.

[11] Rev. Richard L. Hamm, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Sept. 11, 2001.

[12] News Release, "Message from the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion," Anglican Communion Office, London, Sept. 12, 2001. Rev. John L. Peterson is the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion.

[13] Statement by Dr. Denton Lotz, General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, Sept. 12, 2001.

[14] Pope John Paul II, Address to James Nicholson, United States Ambassador to the Vatican, Sept. 13, 2001.

[15] "Public Voices Overwhelming Support for the Use of Force Against Terrorism," *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2001; "Poll Finds Americans Support War and Fear for Economy," *New York*

Times, Sept. 25, 2001; "Public is Unyielding in War Against Terror; 9 in 10 Back Robust Military Response," *Washington Post*, Sept. 29, 2001; "Public Support is Overwhelming; Poll Finds 94% Favor Bush's Ordering Strikes on Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 2001.

[16] These terms are used purely in a descriptive sense, not with any reference to the debates among ethicists and philosophers on these topics. Both positions being described are consequential, in that both base their ethical arguments on the predicted outcomes of certain actions.

[17] "To the members of our churches after the tragedy in the United States," Rev. Dr. Ken Bellous, Executive Minister, Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec; The Rev. Stephen Kendall, Principal Clerk, Presbyterian Church in Canada; The Right Rev. Dr. Marion Pardy, Moderator, United Church of Canada; The Most Rev. Michael G. Peers, Primate, Anglican Church of Canada; Bishop Raymond L. Schultz, National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada; Sept. 21, 2001. The officers of the Canadian Council of Churches addressed a letter with similar views to the leaders of the Canadian government on Sept. 27, 2001.

[18] Joint statement of Dale Bishop, Executive Minister, Wider Church Ministries; Edith A. Guffy, Associate General Minister, Office of General Ministries; Bernice Powell Jackson, Executive Minister, Local Church Ministries; John H. Thomas, General Minister and President, Office of General Ministries; United Church of Christ, Oct. 12, 2001.

[19] Executive Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, Sept. 22, 2001.

[20] The Rev. H. George Anderson, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Oct. 7, 2001.

[21] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "A Pastoral Message: Living With Faith and Hope After September 11," Nov. 14, 2001.

[22] Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser, Pastoral Letter to the World Council of Churches member churches in the USA, Sept. 20, 2001.

[23] Statement by World Council of Churches Acting General Secretary George Lemopoulos, Oct. 8, 2001.

[24] South African Council of Churches, National Executive Council, "Statement on the 11 September Tragedy," Oct. 25, 2001.

[25] Church of Scotland, Church and Nation Committee, "Statement on the military campaign in Afghanistan," Nov. 1, 2001.

[26] Bishop William Morris, Acting Chairman, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "ACSJC Position Paper: The Bombing of Afghanistan," Nov. 14, 2001.

[27] David Von Drehle, "A War President Shouldn't Ask What Jesus Would Do," *Washington Post*, Sept. 30, 2001.

[28] *Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 2001.

[29] *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2001.

[30] There were of course subsequent statements by Church leaders that referred to Sept. 11, but none known to me that were written specifically to address the Sept. 11 attacks and their aftermath, as the previous statements had been.

[31] "On Waging Reconciliation," Statement from Bishops of the Episcopal Church, Released by the Office of the Presiding Bishop, Sept. 26, 2001. The statement was jointly adopted by the 135 bishops of the Episcopal Church at their annual meeting in Burlington, VT.