

DO CHRISTIANS HAVE COERCION RESPONSIBILITIES?

Today in church I asked prayers "for Saddam Hussein, that he may have the wisdom & decency to step down [from the presidency of Iraq], in response to the Arab League's unanimous appeal." Eariler, I'd e-mailed about 100 friends in support of a six-point program* (worked out by a group of American clergy after a long interview with P.M. Tony Blair--not having been able to get an audience with Pres. Bush) aimed at increasing the pressure on SH while decreasing the U.S. rush to war (& added this message: "Five minutes to midnight is not midnight. Pray with the Arab League that Saddam Hussein will step down"). Yesterday I sent the same e-mail message to our children. And the White House has thanked me (doubtless by automatic machine, but at least tallying) for submitting the six-point program.....

....so I qualify as pacifistic (not pacifist) in praying for a nonviolent resolution of the present U.S./Iraq confrontation, while being realistic in supporting Washington's efforts to give nightmares to the Iraqi leaders (i.e., psywar) by threatening physical violence (i.e., somwar, the soma's parallel to the psyche)--although Bush's arrogant tone & messianic tinge worry me.

This Thinksheet steps back from the immediate U.S./Iraq/U.N. crisis, to ask its title's question.

1 Christians, it seems to me, should avoid the extremes of happy warrior (Gen. Geo. Patton's "God, how I love war!") & the absolute pacifist. Nothing in Islam blocks the former position (Muhammad having been a successful military leader), but Jesus' physical nonresistance (in word & deed) is an insuperable barrier for the Christian (while Jesus' violent behavior in the Temple-cleansing suggests nonsupport for the nonviolent-pacifist extreme).

2 Ordained soon after Hitler's 9.39 takeover of Poland, I remember the antiwar propaganda & pacifist rhetoric (including the widespread distribution of pacifist classics) in the U.S. Sherwood Eddy's writings (in reaction against WWI) come to mind. Since WWII, today's pacifist/neopacifist/situation-pacifist reaction against Pres. Bush's belligerence vis-a-vis Saddam Hussein is at least as loud as the opposition to our entering WWII was. And John Howard Yoder (& his disciples, especially Stanley Hauerwas) is the Sherwood Eddy parallel.

Yoder's 1972 classic THE POLITICS OF JESUS honors his native Mennonite radical pacifism & in that way is not radical at all, but conservative within his heritage. Unlike the Jesus Seminar, he teaches that Jesus is Lord: like the Jesus Seminar, he seeks to recover the historical Jesus--& argues that the gospel call is for the Christian community/church to enact this Jesus' allegedly pacifist way of being in the world: the kingdom has come, the jubilee is now, the Christian life is to be (socially, economically, politically) cruciform. (He did not appreciate my asking him where the cross was appearing in his life, which was occupationally cushy [a Notre Dame professorship, when I spoke with him there] & denominationally comfortable [confirming, not confronting, the tradition & its contemporaries]--though later he did have to bear a different sort of cross, from disgraceful sexual behavior.)

Extremists are anti-nuance, & Yoder would not abide my nuancing of Jesus on violence: in his classic, he treats me as promoting Jesus as warrior, pro-violent revolutionary--an extreme I've never approached. And he did not respond to my complaint that he had abused me. (Knowing that extremists treat nuancers as unworthy compromisers, I didn't take the abuse personally, & have never sweated it.)

3 In contrast to Yoder, Clarence Jordan (the primary founder of Koinonia Farms, Americus, GA--now best known as the womb of Habitat for Humanity) did live a cruciform life (daily facing death from rednecks threatening the interracial farm, which began in 1941, the year he & I ceased to be fellow-students in seminary). Both men believed the kingdom has come, & our being is to be in our world as Jesus was in his. But John lived with approbation of church & culture, & Clarence suffered opposition from both. John was a pacifist ideolog, Clarence was a realist visionary. One other difference: Clarence developed his vision from struggling on the race issue in the late 1930s (some of us, under his leadership, instigating a successful sit-down strike to integrate Southern Baptist Seminary in 1939): John developed his

particular "Jesus-olatry" (Max Stackhouse, in his critique, called it) in the highly politicized atmosphere of 1960s America (traditional anabaptist Jesus in hippie garb, I'd put it).

4 "Induce/Force" are the relevant antonymic categories in WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY OF SYNONYMS. To induce is to move by "reason or judgment": to persuade is to appeal to another's "feelings or desires." To force/compel/coerce/constrain/oblige mean "to make a person or a thing **yield** to the will of a person or to the strength or power of a thing." (I boldfaced "yield" to emphasize that the heart of the "force" semantic field is the overcoming of resistance [either passive, i.e. unwillingness; or active, i.e. opposition].) While compel is strong, "coerce suggests far more severity in the methods...violence or duress, or the use of...threats, intimidation, and the like" (the text illustrates by the beheading of Charles I because of his coercive rule).

I judge that the induce/persuade distinction is now rare, persuasion now including appeals to "reason or judgment." But the compel/coerce distinction holds; in this Thinksheet's title, "coercion" being stronger & suggesting an escalating process (as now the U.N.Security Council is applying increasing pressure on Iraq in hope of Saddam's surrendering his WMD [weapons of mass destruction] in order to avoid war.)

5 The Bible loudly prefers persuasion (let's say, "pullya") to coercion (let's say, "pushya"). Early New England separated the two (to this extent, separating church & state): clergy, persuasion; magistracy, coercion. The 2002 "The Salem Witch Trials" film, wanting to blame the deaths on religion, has a clergyman (Peter Ustinov) as judge! This sets up the viewer for the secular-triumphalist film-ending, in which the state (the Restorationist governor) instigates the cessation of the trials (whereas it was a clergyman, Increase Mather, who did so, by persuading the state [governor & court] to cease giving weight to "spectral evidence." The historical monstrosity ends with a text including the ridiculous announcement that the end of the trials was "the end of Puritanism." (As Christianity is on the rise in our populace, so is anti-Christianity in our media.)....Personal note: I prefer persuasion: my father was a judge, & I am a clergyman.

Anti-pacifist ("realist") Rein.Niebuhr accused Ghandi of "confusion" in preaching nonviolence but practicing political realism: "non-violence does coerce and destroy....The responsible leader of a political community is forced to use coercion to gain his ends" (241-4, MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY: A Study in Ethics and Politics [Scrib/32/60; index has nothing on "pacifism," much on "violence"; his last note to me, 1968, asked "Why now is there so much talk of violence?"]). (The book was published a year *before* Hitler came to power: a fact corrective of the notion that it was in revulsion to Nazism that N. turned from pacifism.) Reason being inadequate to control sinful human beings, coercive power is necessary. But political action is ambiguous & can only approximate the objectives of freedom, order, & justice. Yoder accused N. of limiting to the individual & church the relevance of Jesus' example, but I side with N. Our Savior-Lord is our life-in-the-world personal model, but not our social model: (1) His job-description, as he understood it, was uniquely messianic; (2) As a non-Roman citizen, he was--in contrast to us--"irresponsible," ir-responsible, not responsible for political processes in the shaping of society. But he--his influence in history--was a factor in our having the civic powers/responsibilities we have. (It's the viewpoint, too, in Dan.P.Moloney's "the politics of God the Father," a deliberate change from Yoder [FIRST THINGS, Mar/03]; & of Edward Voosen [a grad. of NY & Princeton seminaries] in a long sermon ["Should Christians always oppose war?"] in the 3.9.03 CAPE COD TIMES.)

6 Christians have coercion responsibility in all concentric circles of obligation to stop the momentum of active evil & overcome the inertia of passive evil, but coercion is indicated only where persuasion fails or is inapplicable. The cross appears when, ambiguously, "an irresistible force meets an immovable object"; & when, unambiguously, we are called upon to suffer rather than inflict suffering. As power over & therefore *in loco dei* (above, in God's place), coercion is an unnecessary necessity & therefore calls for sorrow & forgiveness. Children must be disciplined, criminals must be restrained, wars must be threatened & fought; but our joy is elsewhere, in the persuasions of truth & love.