

JESUS / THE CHRISTIAN AS QUIETISTIC ACTIVIST

Today I led a Bible Clinic on "Hiroshima +50," the semi-centennial of the first military use of an atomic explosive. My diary of that day, 6 Aug 45, notes (1) that in the church year, the day was the Transfiguration of Christ, & (2) this: "News of atom bomb, concerning which I have known for 1½ years."....(A Bible **Study** works from text, a biblical passage, to the living context: a Bible **Clinic** works from the living context, our lives & their narrow & wide concerns, to biblical texts/perspectives illumining who/where/what we are & think & feel & fear & love & hope & should pray-&-work for.)

1 In the Bible Clinic, it wasn't long before someone asked "What would Jesus do [&, by implication, have us do]?" My response explains this Thinksheet's title. He would not withdraw (except for brief times alone): he was no quietist. And he would not join any sociopolitical movement for change: he was no activist. But he did believe (as he taught in the Lord's Prayer) that we cannot (to use an old liberal Protestant phrase) "bring in the Kingdom [of God]" or (another) "build the Kingdom of God on earth," only God can (so, "Your Kingdom come, your Will be done on earth"): he was a quietist. And he was engaged, involved by his witness in the moral-religious-social-political issues of his place & day: he was an activist (I remembered, & mentioned to the group, my mother's frequent quoting of "A man must be involved in the actions & passions of his time, on pain of not having lived"). (By "a man," Mother meant me, her only son: less, if at all, my sisters: "a man," in the quotation, was masculine, worse than generic.)

We best bring out the **tension** in Jesus between on-your-knees quietism & on-your-feet activism by adjectivizing one or the other noun. Had he died a natural rather than a political death, I'd call him an activistic quietist. But with his whole being he hurled himself behind his announcement of Kingdom Come in conflict with "the kingdoms of this world" & so worried the authorities that they executed him--well, for that I must choose the noun "activist" (& would choose "revolutionary" if that word did not, as it does, connote violence).

2 Did Truman do the "right" thing? In the group, a retired seminary professor of ethics objected: violence can never be "right." He would not be comforted by my saying that the question is not philosophical but pragmatic: "right" in this context means "preferable." The question is permanent, can never be answered, will always be debated. Then, I thought him wrong to drop the Bomb on cities, civilians: now I think me wrong to have thought him wrong. His was a calculus of lesser harm (the essence of Roman Catholic "just war" theory, though he was a Baptist). No point to arguing the matter in this Thinksheet: taking either side, I could overwhelm the other with "facts"! We need more humility about the complexity of human nature & therefore of decision-making & therefore of history. Should we then be knownothings, ~~throwing~~ up our hands instead of wrestling with the "facts" & arguing with one another? No, else we fail to feed (1) our sense of complexity in human affairs, (2) our knowledge of our ignorance of the future, including the unintended consequences of human decisions, (3) our willingness of listen up hard to all sides (right now, in the Balkans!), (4) our humility, & (5) our piety, our experience of centering in & dependence upon God, as classically put in the Lord's Prayer. Yes, & (6) our generosity & (7) our wisdom & (8) our hope.

3 Since we Christians are to worship God "with all our *mind*," we cannot mindlessly take Jesus as straight-line model for all our private & public behavior; but we can, & as faithful followers must, live the **tension** he lived between Kingdom Come (peace & joy now in God in heart/home/community/nature) & Kingdom Coming (word-&-deed living of the gospel "on earth" [Mt.28.18])......Not both feet in "the world" (i.e., be the world's friend) or both feet out of "the world" (i.e., be the world's enemy), but instead contrarians, one foot in "the world" & one foot out. And as Christian believers/families/churches, we are forever in the crisis (Greek, "decision situation") of standing with/against, inside/outside, passive/active.

4 Vis-a-vis **force**/coercion/violence/war, what are we Christians to make of our Lord's programmatic nonviolence? We are not, I think, to harden it into ideologi-

cal nonviolence, i.e., pacifism, a position I've never taken & consistently resisted as a mindless, straight-line extrapolation from Jesus. I respect all sincere fellow-believers whose construal of how to live the Jesus-tension differs from mine, but I must critique the world-enmity position (e.g., being against "the war system") as sharply as the world-friend position (the conformity of going along to get along).

I'll put starkly the hermeneutical adjustment I believe the risen Lord in the Spirit calls his church & its members to: Jesus was sociopolitically "out of it," irresponsible in the sense of not being institutionally participant: no wife/children, no social authority in the Jewish community, & of course no structural-political influence on the Roman authorities. Ergo, persuasion was the only force available to him in the Spirit (with the one exception of the cleansing of the temple, an anti-institutional act as viewed from below, i.e. by religious & political authorities). (Contrast Mohammad, who formed his disciples into an army.) Yes, I do not despise those who believe themselves called to some measure of Jesus-type irresponsibility, of whom Francis d'Assisi is a near-pure instance (though before his death, he did yield to pressures to institutionalize his movement; so did a fellow-student of mine, "cotton-patch-version" Clarence Jordon, founder of Koinoinia Farms, seedbed under Millard Fuller of Habitat for Humanity). But I believe myself called to persuade against ideological nonviolence, & was so preaching before Reinhold Niebuhr rejected his pacifism for what he came to call "Christian realism."

5 Beware **ideological distortion**. Somebody says AIDS is not a punishment from God & when pressed as to what is, says nothing: nothing is: "I don't believe in a punishing God." Somebody says Truman was wrong on the Bomb & when pressed admits to believing the whole "war system" is wrong, so Truman couldn't've been right! My AIDS example shows only distorted thinking, but my Bomb example adds unfairness: much I'm now reading about Hiroshima is dogmatically unfair to Truman. Distortion, confusion, illusion, injustice--all in the name of good will & "peace on earth"!

The phrase "the war system" reveals the illusion that human beings can transfigure themselves out of one system into another (yes, back to Hiroshima as occurring on Transfiguration of Christ day). War is not a can-make-it-or-break-it-or-change-it system but a fact of human nature on the hoof, as we are, so deep in sin that we could be delivered, redeemed, only by God's coming & dying & rising for us: the gospel humiliates our self-important activisms. Christians should oppose force wherever persuasion works, & favor it wherever we decide that it will effect less harm & more good: I'm neutral, not pre-judiced (pre-judging), on force/coercion/violence/war. Hiroshima was, I think, on balance, a good idea, not something we should be ashamed & repent of....

6 ....or feel happy/triumphalist about. Jesus wants us to feel sad about it. About war. About fallen human nature & its baleful reverberating consequences in the human heart & in history. For Jesus never will free us from seeing a single human face in whose suffering we are in any way, even remotely, involved. And he will never relieve us of the Good-Samaritan question as to when & where we are to divest ourselves of continuing responsibilities to meet an immediate human need. We must never forget the before-&-after faces of the Hiroshima Maidens, & to thank God for the after & the MacArthur Plan of Japan restoration.

7 I began the Hiroshima Bible Clinic by suggesting that in our conversation, we might be aware of which storey of the **three-storey house** we're speaking from. The first floor is our basic humanity, flesh/spirit, creatures of God responsible to him & to one another, & assigned to tend his garden the earth. Second story, our citizenship (Augustine's *civitas terrena*, earth city, where persuasion & coercion swirl). And the top floor, closest to heaven, is spiritual community here & hereafter, the church of the Holy Trinity (Augustine's *civitas coelestia*, heaven city, of which the church on earth when faithful is foretaste). We are to live in, & honor, the whole house, realistically avoiding idealism & its twin, cynicism, & disciplining ourselves to "the ancient practice of absorbing the universe into the biblical world" (Geo. A. Lindbeck, *THE NATURE OF DOCTRINE*, Westminster/84, 135)--in another Niebuhrian phrase, living "the impossible possibility," joyfully anticipating God's Consummation.