

The Iraq War and Christian Faith

by Joseph L. Cumming, April 20, 2004

It scarcely needs to be said that decisions about war are profoundly *moral* decisions. A decision to send troops into war is, in effect, a decision to kill a significant number of people including (given the reality of modern warfare) many unarmed civilians. Christian “just war” theory argues that, in certain limited circumstances, a decision *not* to send troops into war may be tantamount to a decision to allow many unarmed civilians to be killed by someone else. Historic Christian pacifism rejects even this justification for war. In either case the decision is clearly one of the most important *moral* decisions a Christian can make, and we might expect that Christian decision-making about war would be shaped by Christian faith.

Nonetheless, in March 2003, during the week before the U.S. commenced hostilities in Iraq, only 10% of Americans considered their religious beliefs to be the most important influence in shaping their opinions about the war. Among those who regularly attend religious services the percentage was only slightly higher – 17%. Only one third of Americans reported that religious leaders had had at least some influence on their views on the war, and only 11% reported that religious leaders had been highly influential. By contrast, 53% of Americans said that friends and family had influenced their views on the war, and 43% said that political commentators had influenced them. These are the results of a nationwide survey conducted March 13-16, 2003 and published on March 19 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.¹ Military hostilities commenced on March 20.

This failure of Christian decision-making on the war to be shaped by Christian faith occurred despite the fact that Christian religious leaders had spoken out publicly about the moral implications of the proposed war. During the months before the commencement of hostilities, the Pope repeatedly made clear his opposition to the war, and just two weeks before the Pew survey he sent Pio Cardinal Laghi to Washington to make an Ash Wednesday appeal to President Bush against the war. Vatican spokespersons repeatedly stated that “pre-emptive war” did not satisfy the moral conditions for a just war. During the months before the war the World Council of Churches took a similar position. On March 12 the WCC delivered to the U.N. Security Council a strongly-worded anti-war declaration which similarly denounced pre-emptive war as “immoral.” The Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs and the Archbishop of Canterbury were similarly unanimous in their opposition to the war.

Contrary to reporting in the secular press, evangelical leaders, with a few high-profile exceptions, were mostly opposed to the war. Ted Haggard, elected in early March as president of the National Association of Evangelicals, sought to mobilize 1,000,000 people to pray on March 3rd (03-03-03) that war might be averted. He did this because he was convinced that in November 2002 God had given him a vision in which he saw “pictures of suffering, pictures of

¹ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Different Faiths, Different Messages: Americans Hearing about Iraq from the Pulpit, but Religious Faith Not Defining Options,” March 19, 2003, p. 1 – downloadable at <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/iraq-war.pdf>.

children in Iraq, and the people in America suffering because of a war.”² On February 24th the World Evangelical Alliance issued a statement titled “Current Threat of War in Iraq,” in which they stated that “We believe that war or violence is almost always the worst solution for resolving conflict. Insofar as it is possible, all paths to peace should be explored and all possible means should be used for resolving any conflict.” The largest Pentecostal denomination in the U.S., the Church of God in Christ, wrote to President Bush on January 23rd that “Failure to satisfy these criteria renders the war aims, strategies and tactics, at a minimum, morally suspect and perhaps morally unacceptable in the eyes of the church universal and under the gaze of a just and holy God.” Needless to say, the traditional “peace churches” (Mennonites, Quakers, etc.) also strongly opposed the war.

Nonetheless Americans in March 2003 (just before the war) favored U.S. military action in Iraq by a nearly 2:1 ratio.³ Clearly either Christian religious leaders failed to get their message through to ordinary believers in the pews, or their arguments failed to persuade. In my own informal surveying of American Christians before the war, I found that most were unaware of the extent to which high-ranking international Christian leaders of nearly all traditions opposed the war. Most American Christians were dependent on the secular news media to inform them, and these media reported only sparsely on Christian religious opposition to the war. Many Evangelicals were completely unaware of the anti-war statements of prominent Evangelical leaders, and even some otherwise well-educated Catholics I spoke with were unaware of the Pope’s opposition to the war.

The Pew data suggest that failure to communicate was indeed a problem. Only 21% of Americans who regularly attend religious services reported that the clergy at their local place of worship had taken a stand for or against the war. 14% of local clergy took an anti-war position, and 7% took a pro-war position, while 75% of local clergy either took no position or did not speak about the war at all. These data would suggest not so much that ordinary believers rejected the pleas of their local clergy, but rather that the local clergy did not pass on the pleas of the senior leadership of their religious communities.

This accords with empirical research conducted by Ralph Premdas on the relationship between the church and intercommunal conflicts in a number of countries around the world.⁴ Premdas found “that the inter-communal antipathies present in society at large are reflected in the attitudes of churches and their adherents.” Though clergy often seek to play a role in reconciliation, “the reconciling thrust quickly evaporates after the initial effort.” This is due to

² In a December 2002 prayer bulletin Haggard described his vision in more detail: “I saw a series of pictures in my heart: I saw Iraqi moms and dads, I saw a schoolyard full of Iraqi children, and I saw the spouses of Iraqi military personnel. As I saw these people, I realized that they would either be killed or have loved ones killed if we had a war. Then I saw American scenes: I saw American women whose husbands were in the military weeping, I saw American children at funerals for their fathers, and I saw pastors conducting funerals with grieving family members in front of caskets draped with American flags.” Downloaded from <http://www.wazzupatlanta.org/pdf/Saddam.pdf> .

³ 59% in favor, 30% opposed: Pew study, op. cit., p. 11.

⁴ Ralph Premdas, “The Church and Ethnic Conflicts in the Third World,” in *The Ecumenist* 1 (4 1994), pp. 53-56, quoted in Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 37. The quotations from Premdas in this paragraph are those selected by Volf.

the “inter-locking relations of church and cultural section,” so that both clergy and ordinary believers are often “trapped within the claims of their own ethnic or cultural community.”

However, to say that American Christians’ faith failed to determine their view of the Iraq war does not tell the whole story. More difficult to document, but more troubling theologically, is the question of whether influence may actually have gone in the opposite direction. That is, we must ask whether American Christians showed any tendency to change their religious beliefs under the influence of their patriotic political convictions about the war.

A superficial example of this can be found in people’s interpretation of chapters 13 and 17 of the Book of Revelation. This would be humorous if it were not being used to give religious justification for war. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* documents how many Russian Orthodox Christians in 1812 were convinced that Napoleon was the Beast after they devised a way to add up the letters in his name to produce 666. Other Christians during World War II pointed out that if A=100, B=101, C=102, etc., then H+I+T+L+E+R=666. Various Protestant and Orthodox Christians through the centuries have suggested that the Pope is the Beast since (Old) Rome is the “city on seven hills.” In the months before the 1991 Gulf War a number of Christian groups began circulating audio tapes and articles arguing that the “Babylon” referred to in Revelation is none other than... Babylon! Iraq under Saddam Hussein is the Beast. The wildly popular *Left Behind* series (first book: 1996) also took the position that eschatological Babylon will be located in modern Iraq, though they did not connect this with Saddam Hussein. I have personally encountered several American Christians who felt they should support the war because Iraq = eschatological Babylon.

Another example of influence going in the opposite direction may be in the interpretation of “traditional Christian just war theory.” Considerations of space prevent a full consideration here of whether pre-emption of anticipated future attacks with weapons of mass destruction might justify one nation in invading another nation which has not yet attacked it. Though one might argue that new realities require a revision of the tradition to allow for pre-emptive war, it seems more difficult to justify pre-emptive war on the grounds of the centuries-old just-war tradition itself.

Most Christian leaders who supported the Iraq war cited Augustine as the father of the just-war tradition which they seek to follow.⁵ But Augustine wrote, “A just war is justified only by the injustice of an aggressor.”⁶ It seems clear from context that Augustine meant that the aggressor must have already committed the aggression which justifies the war, and that that aggression must be ongoing. War waged pre-emptively in order to prevent anticipated future aggression does not seem to be part of the picture. Similarly the official Catholic position on just war allows only for wars of “lawful self-defense once all peace efforts have failed.”⁷ The Catholic definition of legitimate self-defense here requires that “the damage inflicted by the

⁵ Recent scholarship has questioned whether Augustine should be seen as the “father of just war theory,” but that debate is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (New York: Image Books, 1958), Book XIX, chapter 7, p. 447.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), paragraph 2308, p. 555, citing *Gaudium et Spes*, 79 § 4.

aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain.”⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* continues, “However, it is one thing to wage a war of self-defense; it is quite another to seek to impose domination on another nation.”⁹ It is difficult to see how pre-emptive war can be made to fit this tradition without fundamentally altering it.

Yet those Christian leaders who supported the Iraq war attempted to do just that. They argued that just-war theory must be understood to allow for pre-emptive war to prevent future attacks with weapons of mass destruction, even if the nation to be invaded has not yet launched an attack. This profound reconstruction of the just-war tradition has occurred without serious reflection by its advocates about its implications for future conflicts. That is, if a nation is morally justified in God’s eyes in invading another nation which has neither threatened it nor attacked it, solely on the grounds that its leadership sincerely believes (contrary to the opinion of other nations) that that nation *will* attack in the future with WMDs, then it would seem that the North Korean leadership would be justified in invading the U.S. A variety of nations would be justified in invading Israel. India and Pakistan would be justified in invading each other. There has not been serious Christian reflection by pro-war Christians on the implications of such a moral standard, nor on its conditions or limitations.

Furthermore, I am not aware of any prominent Christian leaders from outside the U.S. who endorsed the Iraq war. Is it possible, as Premdas suggested (see above), that the American leaders who endorsed the war were “trapped within the claims of their own ethnic or cultural community”? Is it possible that the claims of their cultural community were so compelling that they were persuaded even to modify their traditional Christian religious beliefs?

These two issues (interpretation of eschatological prophecy and interpretation of traditional just-war theory) are just two examples among others which might be examined to consider whether American Christians’ religious beliefs have been influenced by their patriotic emotion in time of war. The reader may disagree with my analysis of one or both questions, or may think that another question would provide a better example. However, Premdas’s research would seem to suggest that American Christians alone, talking only with our fellow-Americans, will not be able to answer these questions adequately. Ephesians 2-3 suggests that it is only through a multinational, multiethnic universal church that the many-colored wisdom of God can be adequately known, and it is only together with all the saints (from all nations and all ages) that we may fully grasp the multidimensional love of Christ. That is, if we wish to consider these questions in an authentically Christian way, then we must listen to the voices of believers in Christ from other nations – especially believers in the Middle East and in other Islamic nations.

The effect of the Iraq war on Christians in Islamic nations has been little short of disastrous. Muslims widely consider the war to have been a “Christian” war against Islam, and local Christians have borne the brunt of the resultant Muslim hostility. Persecution of Christians has increased almost everywhere in the Muslim world, and foreign Christian workers have been driven from a number of Muslim countries by expulsion, murder or credible death threats.

⁸ Ibid, paragraph 2309.

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 79 § 4.

President Bush's *lapsus linguae* in which he referred to the war on terror as a "crusade" has been reported again and again in the Muslim press. Muslims were not persuaded by assurances that the President (whose Christian faith is well known among Muslims) did not mean it the way it sounded. They were more persuaded by statements of certain prominent televangelists (widely reported in the Muslim press) giving Christian religious endorsement to the war. Muslims were also not comforted by assurances that the President's use of the word "crusade" was a one-time slip which would not be repeated. Their worst fears seemed confirmed when the chairman of the Bush-Cheney re-election campaign, Marc Racicot, wrote just last month that the President is "leading a global crusade against terrorism." This too was reported widely in the Muslim press.

Such events have fueled a sharp rise in attacks and threats against Christians throughout the Islamic world. Just yesterday, for example, an Iraqi Islamist militant group pledged to attack local Iraqi Christians if the U.N. does not lift the U.S. siege of Falluja (one wonders how the U.N. could possibly do so). The militant group said that they would destroy churches, assassinate or kidnap priests, and target local Christians. Increased violence against Christians in the West Bank and Gaza in the last year has accelerated the rapid decline of the 2,000-year-old Christian community in Palestine which is now threatened with extinction.

Christians are not the only religious group that has been targeted in response to the war. Several months ago the World Evangelical Alliance issued a "Religious Liberty Prayer Posting" describing the dramatic rise since last year in murders and rapes of Iraqi Mandeans¹⁰ at the hands of Islamist militants. The WEA report expresses concern that the Mandaean community may be facing "genocidal intentions" toward a "final solution."¹¹

Clearly there is a serious problem here. If Christians want the world to take our Christian faith seriously, then it is imperative that we ourselves take that faith seriously enough to let it determine our views and actions on war, and not merely use it to validate decisions we have made for reasons which have nothing to do with Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ A pre-Christian group which venerates John the Baptist

¹¹ Elizabeth Kendal, "Will the Mandeans Survive Post-War Iraq?" downloaded on April 20, 2004 from http://www.worldevangelical.org/persec_iraq_24jul03.html.