Is Religion Violent? Are Religions Violent?
Gabriel Moran

Each of the distinctions in the previous four chapters is important for understanding the influence of religion in the contemporary world. Religions have been both a source of violence and of inspiration for nonviolent activity in the service of peace. These two aspects of a religion are not easily separated. The passion and commitment of its members which are the strength of a religion are always a danger to tolerance and peace. The paradoxical language of religion has to be understood even by critics if they wish to effectively oppose religion. Likewise, advocates of a particular religion need a critical understanding of their own religion and a sympathetic outlook toward other religions. This understanding of religion both from inside and outside a particular religion is sorely lacking in most discussions today.

After some exploring of violence and religion(s), this chapter focuses on the central teaching of one religious founder, Jesus of Nazareth, particularly as found in the Sermon on the Mount, and the movement that followed from his teaching and example. The chapter also includes the fundamental misunderstanding of that teaching in an essay by Max Weber which fails to employ the distinctions between force and power, force and aggressiveness, force, violence and war. Weber’s view unfortunately still underlies the assumption that a religious teaching on nonviolent living is irrelevant for national and international politics.

It seems certain that Jesus did not intend to start a new religion. Like most teachers who are identified as founders of a religion (Moses, Gautama, Muhammad), Jesus addressed his particular teaching to the tradition of his own people. As happens with many religions, what was seen as the universal implications of the particular doctrines and practices spurred the followers of Jesus to spread what the Christian Church called “the good news.” This missionary impulse is strongest in Christian and Muslim traditions, which today confront each other at numerous hot spots around the globe. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the future peace of the world largely depends upon Christians and Muslims achieving a critical understanding of their respective religions and a mutual tolerance based upon that understanding.

Before one can investigate the relation between religion and violence, it is necessary to point out an ambiguity in the meaning of “religion.” For most of its history, the word religion referred to practices (worship of god/gods). There was a right way and a wrong way to do it. In the late sixteenth century, the meaning of the term took a dramatic turn. “Religion” came to mean a plurality of institutions with names such as Judaism and Christianity. The earlier meaning did not disappear so that the two meanings today are mixed together which is a frequent source of confusion. One could paradoxically say that “religions” is not the plural of “religion”; it is the plural of “a religion.”

Religion in its older meaning was singular; there was (true) religion as opposed to false practices. Religion referred mainly to external action, the performance of a ritual by a community or a member of a community. In contrast, religion in its modern meaning is
plural; even when only one religion is the topic of discussion, the existence of many religions is presupposed. Religion in this newer meaning mainly refers to an institution that houses the interiority of its individual members.

The question “Is religion violent?” is related to but distinguishable from “Are religions violent?” The first question tends to fall to psychologists and researchers in human development. The second question is more the interest of historians and social scientists. When the question is asked, “Is a particular religion violent?” the answer involves social, cultural and political material in addition to “religion” in its earlier meaning.

A common claim today is that religion causes violence and even is the chief cause of violence in history. One cannot begin to respond to this claim without first sorting out the confusion in the use of “religion.” The link between religion and violence often assumes that there is a trans-historical essence of religion that is found everywhere. The particular arrangement of religious institutions, especially in modern Europe and North America, tends to be conceptually imposed everywhere. The answer that I propose to the double question in the title of this chapter is: Religion as a particular set of practices is seldom violent. Religions as social institutions do not have a good historical record regarding violence but they are not fated to always be sources of violence.

The original meaning of “religion” was a set of practices directed mainly though not exclusively toward God. Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century was aware of an ambiguity in the meaning of the term religion which the Christian Church had imported from the classical world: “We have no right to affirm with confidence that “religion” is confined to the worship of God, since it seems that this word has been detached from its normal meaning in which it refers to an attitude of respect in relations between a man and his neighbor.” Augustine’s awareness of the ambiguity in the meaning of “religion” did not prevent his writing a treatise *De Vera Religione*, the title of which refers not to Christianity as the true religion but to the fact that genuine worship has always existed.

There is nothing intrinsically violent about worship, respect, devotion, praise or honor directed to God. The attempt in religious practice is to make sacred all of life but religion is vulnerable to distortions because it touches the deepest roots of life. The most egregious misunderstanding of religion was the practice of human sacrifice as an attempt to acknowledge the Lord of life. Religious practices commonly involve rituals concerning food and sex. The rituals place some restrictions on these forces of life; the restrictions are not intended to be a negation of life. Such rituals create and express a community bond; religion is not a weekly affair; it is part of the fabric of daily life.

The modern meaning of religion emerged after bloody conflict between Catholics and Protestants. A tolerance of religious differences was signaled by the fact that Catholic and Protestant were now recognized as names of different religions. That usage in the late sixteenth century quickly faded as Catholic and Protestant became widely accepted as parts of the Christian religion. By the early seventeenth century, Judaism and Islam were seen to fit within the idea of “a religion” and thereby were tolerated as religions in
addition to Christianity. What other names belong on a list of religions is debatable. It is unclear if Buddhism fits the category of “a religion.” Hinduism as a religion is even more problematic. Some people have proposed simply getting rid of the term religion but that development is unlikely. However, the ambiguity built into the term should never be forgotten in any discussion of religion(s) and violence.

The peculiar logic of religion is often lost sight of. Religious language is mostly poetry, story, and instructions for performance. In the modern world, poetry is frequently thought to be an acquired taste, storytelling is understood as entertainment mainly for children, and instruction about behavior is generally considered to be an unwelcome intrusion in the life of the individual. The result of these contemporary attitudes toward the characteristics of religion is that religious literature and practices have difficulty getting understood.

A surface acquaintance, for example, with the Jewish and Christian Bibles as well as the Qur’an, suggests a claim that God delivered to his people the final and absolute truth. These truths would take precedence over anything that has happened since then. A deeper acquaintance with this literature, however, makes apparent that things are not that simple. Religious texts are not collections of truths; they are narratives written in the intimate language of one people. There are regular warnings against possessive adjectives. “Our” God is actually the God of the universe who is not our or anyone’s possession. This God deals with humans in the particularities of their existence, that is, with this group of people, at this particular moment, in this particular place. Philosophers speculate in language that becomes more abstract as it becomes more comprehensive. Religion never abstracts from concrete language.

At their best, the three Abrahamic traditions – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – do not choose between the universal and the particular. Each of the religions uses a logic in which the particular and universal are always together. A particular place or time is particular insofar as it embodies the (nearly) universal. To the degree that any universality of doctrine can be said to exist, it is found embodied in particular people, events and places. Without the particular, the claim to universality fails to be more than a general and abstract pronouncement which is oppressive when it is not banal.

Great works of art manifest this logic by which they touch upon a human universality in their concreteness. What is true of a painting is also true of a great work of music, painting or sculpture. Anyone who looks deeply enough into a single work may discover truth and value that are not confined to the time and place of the work’s origin. The art embodies a nearly universal truth.

No work of art or religion is completely and finally universal; no human language can leave behind its concreteness. The future is obviously missing from any claimed universality. Each religion has to be careful not to fill in the gap between the truly universal and the intended universality of a particular religion. A particular religion should not speak as if it owned all the good words. Room has to be left so that the particulars of two or more traditions can point to a universality that goes beyond each and
all of them. If a religion lays claim to already being universal, violence is almost inevitable. All competitors are judged to be false, dangerous, and in need of being suppressed.

Each of the Abrahamic religions has had difficulty maintaining the tension between the particular which partially embodies the universal and a universal reality. Dialogue with their two siblings is a big help to keeping open the space between an intended universality and the reality of the particular time, place and people. It is a presumptuous but not an absurd claim of Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions that the history of the world is reflected in one series of events, and that the life of one people is representative of the human community. The test of the claim’s validity is whether the small community turns inward to protect what it thinks it possesses or whether its concerns are to share what has been given to it and to work at reducing violent conflicts that blind humans to their kinship.

Members of a religion tend to view their own religion as an advocate of peace. Christians claim that they are peace loving, despite the shocking record of violence that has accompanied the church. W. Cantwell Smith made the insightful comment that in religious controversies each side argues from the ideal condition of one’s own religion and the real condition of one’s opponent. Thus, when Christians say that “Christians love one another,” they speak truthfully of the Christian ideal. When Muslims say that Christianity is a source of violence they speak truthfully about much of Christian history.

One way to explain the differences of perception between Muslims and Christians is that when Christians say “Islam” they do not usually refer to the religious practice called Islam but to the social, cultural institution that is also called Islam. For their part Muslims have to be careful not to collapse the difference between Islam (the practice) and Islam (the institution). When Muslims talk about Christianity, they are not usually imagining a Christian practice, such as Eucharistic liturgy, but a Christian institution. And the institution is probably not the local church community but, for example, the Vatican or the United States government. Some Christians who insist on calling the United States a Christian country add to the misperception and confusion. For the peace of the world it is important for both Muslims and Christians to return to their respective sources and get an accurate perception of their religion in contrast to the contemporary institutionalizations of Islam and of Christian practice.

This chapter asks the question whether the Jesus movement was a missed opportunity in the emergence of the Christian religion. The working premise is that Jesus of Nazareth in his life and teaching gave impetus to a nonviolent way of living. Those who were his followers provided an embodying of that attitude for some decades or centuries. Perhaps it was inevitable that the movement became a settled institution that had to make compromises with its violent surroundings. Still, the “institutionalizing” could have taken various forms, and in fact there has been a nearly continuous attempt to make the form of the church be more congruent with the life and teaching of Jesus. There was a medieval saying that “the church is always in need of being reformed.”
To outsiders, the attempt to get it right after almost two thousand years may seem quixotic. But it is of concern to the non-Christian world that today’s followers of Jesus recover what they can of the early Jesus movement because the alternative is to leave “Christianity” to people who wield the supposed teaching of Jesus Christ as an ideology strongly prone to violence. Jesus’ actions and words are badly distorted by many people who use the New Testament for an answer book or for placards at football games.

It has to be admitted that there is no consensus about the historical record. Practically everything we know about Jesus is in the New Testament, composed by his followers. Lacking the journalist’s or the historian’s objectivity, the record is suspect. Furthermore, what is astounding about the gospel is that four different versions of the story exist. It did not seem to bother the early followers that they did not get their story straight with a single version. The result is some confusion and endless debate about the accuracy of everything in the gospels.

On the plus side of this diversity, the several versions of the gospel provide checks on the validity and meaning of particular passages. People who pull a sentence from one of the gospel versions with no attention to context are likely to misunderstand the text. The gospels are not collections of epigrams or abstract truths; they are narratives in witness to a particular life. Understandably, few people wish to devote endless hours and many years to linguistic, historical, archeological, and literary studies to become experts on the New Testament. Nonetheless, Christians who claim to know the mind of Jesus, as well as those who criticize his teaching, have an obligation to base what they say on more than a few isolated sayings.

A first and large problem is the name of the person we are discussing. “Christ,” is a title that the followers of Jesus (“Christians”) ascribed to him. For Christians to call him “the Christ” is their prerogative, even though it remains the central friction in Jewish-Christian relations. For Christians in their own doctrinal and liturgical settings, “Jesus-Christ” is appropriate as a language of prayer and religious belief. “Christ” was the Greek translation of the Aramaic for “Messiah,” a word expressive of the hope of the Jewish people. The Messiah as the anointed of God was to initiate a messianic age of peace. The term Christ includes some of the meaning of Messiah but it quickly took on political and cosmic meaning not found in the term Messiah.

During the presidential election campaign in 2000, George W. Bush was asked who his favorite philosopher was. He answered “Jesus Christ,” a response that drew much criticism and some ridicule. If one asks what was wrong with Bush’s answer, it is that “Christ” removes his answer from reference to a philosopher. If Bush had answered “Jesus,” he would have put himself into the company of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Bush’s answer did not refer to a philosopher but to a figure and a doctrine of Christian belief. This linguistic point is significant in that Bush’s policies of the succeeding eight years showed little to no awareness of the philosophy of Jesus but much influence from one narrow version of Christian belief.
The popular images of Jesus employ contrasting meanings of power. On one side is the picture of a sentimental and passive Jesus whose mission is to suffer all manner of violent attack and offer no reaction. On the other side is a forceful but nonviolent Jesus who combines force and aggressiveness with other forms of power that in resisting violence can change persons and political reality.8

Was Jesus political? Jesus was not a politician in our customary sense of the word. But neither are his teachings a-political nor was the movement he inspired irrelevant to politics. “He did not say (as some sectarian pacifists might) ‘you can have your politics and I shall do something else more important’; he said ‘your definition of polis, of the social, of the wholeness of being human socially is perverted.’”9

The Jesus movement, like so many reform movements, did not fulfill its hopes. The culprit is usually identified as the “Constantinian” moment in the fourth century when the Christian Church became cozily ensconced with the power politics of the day. The more radical hope for a transformed world did not cease to be but it did disappear from the public world and the world of politics. “Piety” became associated with a private world of devotions and rule-keeping.

The root of the church’s problem, which continues today, lies not in the fourth but in the first century. That may not sound like encouraging news. Christianity, it may seem, failed in a matter of decades. However, a surprising development of the last half century makes possible a new approach. Thanks to Christian and Jewish scholarship, the twenty-first century has a chance to appreciate the Jesus movement of the first century better than could any century in between then and now. The Christian churches are in urgent need of this understanding for their own mission, and the whole world would also reap some benefit.

The following section places Jesus in his proper milieu as a Jewish teacher in first century Galilee and Judea. I then take the most often cited example of his teaching, the Sermon on the Mount and, with the help of Jewish as well as Christian commentators, I place this section of Matthew’s gospel into its Jewish context and in relation to the rest of the New Testament. After that, I examine an essay by Max Weber that continues to influence the modern misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount and the Christian ethics summarized by that Sermon.

Jesua bar-Joseph

A thoughtful commentator, Norman Cousins, once said: “Jews and Christians have at least one thing in common; both have been unwilling to live with the idea that Jesus was a Jew.” Both communities have suffered from this stark denial of an historical reality. The Christian loss has been greater and the consequences for the rest of the world have been devastating. The first great Christian schism was the separation of the Jesus movement and the synagogue.
The effect on the nascent church was almost inevitable: a dichotomized church of institutional power hidden behind claims of universal ideals, combined with subservient members relegated to a private world. The positive development of today is that the Jewish-Christian split of two millennia has begun to be healed. No one expects a reunion of Jews and Christians, but the lessening of enmity and the beginnings of mutual understanding are giant steps forward. Without some knowledge of the language, culture and tradition of the Jews, Christians are cut off from a deeper understanding of Jesus’ life and teaching. Lifting selected passages from the Greek translation of the Christian Old Testament is no substitute for receiving help in understanding from the people most familiar with the language of the text.

Christians have to resituate Jesus in the context of his people and his tradition. The historical scholarship of the last half century has not penetrated very far into most of Christian piety and much of Christian theology. A Jewish scholar of the New Testament, in placing Jesus in the line of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, notes that “this historical anchoring need not and should not in Christian teaching preclude or overshadow Jesus’ role in the divine plan. He must, in the Christian tradition, be more than just a really fine Jewish teacher. But he must be that Jewish teacher as well.”10 The same author points out that Jesus taught like a Jew, argued like a Jew, risked persecution and died like thousands of other Jews on a Roman cross.11

Jesus lived within a swirl of reform movements in first century Israel. The Pharisees were the most complex group whose origin is not clear.12 Although the New Testament writers succeeded in making “pharisee” and “pharisaical” negative terms, Jesus’ teaching was close to at least part of the pharisaical school. When the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E. the Sadducees were dispossessed; the Pharisees were ready to assume leadership in meeting places called synagogues. Jesus’ blistering condemnation of the Pharisees, especially in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew’s gospel, reflects the conflict between synagogue leaders and Jesus’ followers during the decade of the 70s and later.

Within the first three (synoptic) gospels, Jesus is portrayed as having arguments with the Pharisees. Strong words of criticism within the group would not have been unusual. The Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is a Jew arguing with other Jews about Jewish tradition and practice. The fourth gospel, attributed to John, and written considerably later than the synoptic gospels, is a profound poetic work that moves away from confirmed historical facts. It is also the main source for the anti-Jewish and anti-semitic ideologues of later centuries.13

Jesus’ teaching was not a radical break from the prophetic tradition and other reforms of his time. Under the strong criticism of the prophets, the Jews had moved from seeing God as a warrior who would smite their enemies to a demanding but loving father. In early parts of the Bible, God is imagined or interpreted as leading the Israelites in wars and massacres. “Alongside the image of the divine warrior and hopes for Israel’s victories in battle, the Hebrew Bible also presents the hope for a world in which the wolf
shall live with the lamb, nations will live in peace, and the poor and the oppressed will find justice.”

The Jesus movement could conceivably have been an organic development from within the peace tradition of Israel. Probably a separation from the mother religion would eventually have happened but Rabbinic and Christian traditions could have functioned as siblings, not without conflict but certainly without the bloody trail of two thousand years. With the premature and total split from Jewish tradition, both communities suffered loss. The church became twisted back against its origin. As Martin Buber often pointed out, every Christian reform movement has to go back to the Jewish roots of Christianity. A critical reading of the New Testament needs to include Jewish scholarship as well as Christian.

The stain of anti-semitism is the worst scandal in Christian history, its most intimate failure. Christian teaching on love, suffering, violence, and war has been badly distorted by losing sight of the Jewish Jesus and the tradition within which his teaching is intelligible. For one of the primary examples of that teaching and its misunderstanding by both friend and foe, I turn to what is called the Sermon on the Mount.

Sermon on the Mount, Teaching on the Plain

The “Sermon on the Mount” refers to a long instruction in the gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7. Like much in the gospels, the sayings in these chapters have a cut-and-paste quality to their assembly as a single sermon. The meaning of the teaching requires the context of the New Testament (and its context), starting with a set of texts in Luke’s gospel that draws upon the same body of material as Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. I refer to Luke’s version as the Teaching on the Plain. Before commenting on several of the points in the Sermon, some general comments are needed to set the context.

The existing Sermon in Matthew’s gospel is the product of several translations. Obviously, an English, French or German version has been translated from first century spoken Greek. More important, the Greek is a translation from the Aramaic that Jesus spoke. In every translation, there are losses of meaning, not just because a word in one language is not the exact equivalent in another language. Jesus as a Jew stands in a long tradition so that much of what he says echoes previous teaching in the tradition. He gives new meaning or new emphasis to previous teachings but one cannot make sense of what he is saying without some knowledge of what he is modifying by imaginative reconstruction and syntheses.

In a few cases, there may simply be mistakes. For example, Jesus says in Matthew: “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt 5: 48). The parallel text in Luke reads “Be merciful just as your heavenly father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). Almost certainly Luke has it right. The command to be as perfect as God is logically impossible. And the immediate context is one of showing mercy and compassion. This relation to sharing God’s mercy and forgiveness is central to Jesus’ teaching here and elsewhere.
In a series of well known contrasts Jesus describes “what you have heard said” as opposed to what he says. For interpreting these contrasts it is indispensable to notice the passage in Matthew that just precedes them: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Admittedly, the word fulfill can have several meanings but the term has to be consistent with the next verse: “For truly, I say to you not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” (Mt 5:17-18). These two verses and the following two that lead into the contrasts make it impossible to read Jesus’ teaching as a rejection of “the law and the prophets” in favor of what would be their opposites.

The series of so-called antitheses (“You have heard that it was said to the men of old…but I say to you….) should be called super-theses, an intensifying of previous teaching. The meaning of the Greek word translated as “but” in the middle of each contrast is carried in English by “but also.” For example, when Jesus contrasts committing adultery and looking lustfully on a woman he is not replacing the first with the second; he is trying to deepen a law against adultery rather than abolish it. A Christian who reads Jesus’ teaching as consisting of the second half of each statement to the exclusion of the first half seriously distorts both Jewish and Christian traditions.

It is true that Jesus as a Jewish prophet uses startling metaphors to heighten the contrasts he makes. Presumably no one took literally his suggestion to pluck out your right eye if that is the only way to control your body. However, one of the most often quoted verses in the New Testament is Mt. 5:38: “You have heard that it was said ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’.” The peculiar thing about this quotation from Ex 21:24 is that the verb is omitted. The most likely assumption that is made by Christian readers is that the omitted verb is take, an approval of vengeance. The actual text is “If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth…” The concern is not vengeance from the side of the person harmed but restitution by the offender.

True, there are parallel texts – Lev. 24:20, Dt. 19:21 – where the viewpoint is different. The one who has been offended is told not to take more than an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. The law was a restraint upon, not an approval of, violent retaliation. An equality between wrongs that had been committed and compensation for those wrongs had represented an ethical advance. Jesus believed that the human race could do still better than trying simply to balance debts according to a rough equality.

The way that the sharp contrasts in the text are highlighted easily led to the conclusion that Jesus was inventing a Christian ethic as a contradiction of Jewish tradition. If one does not lift the contrasts out of context, it makes far more sense to say, as a Jewish commentator does: “In each case, Jesus is taking the Law, the Torah, so seriously that he extends prohibitions regarding action to prohibition regarding thought….Jesus does not oppose the law; he extends it. Moreover, his attitude toward it is not liberal, but highly conservative.” Many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers imagined a liberal Jesus in their own image. But like all genuine reformers, Jesus was deeply conservative as opposed to superficially conservative.
The Sermon on the Mount as a whole and as a summary of Jesus’ teaching has been misunderstood in two ways: By damning with faint praise or by just plain damning. The first of these misunderstandings is the more common. The Sermon on the Mount is praised as a beautiful poetic ideal that an individual should try to live by. Of course, it is also assumed to be highly impractical so that few people, except saints, seriously try to conform their life to this ideal. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if everyone lived according to this code of selflessness, forgiveness, and “turning the other cheek?” Nations, it is said, should not try to observe this individualistic ideal. It would be suicidal for a nation and its leaders to follow the Sermon on the Mount.

The second misunderstanding, which I have called “just plain damning,” denounces the Sermon on the Mount as slave morality. It is not only impractical, it holds out a glorification of poverty, suffering, and subservience. This reaction is actually more respectful of Jesus’ teaching than the pious rhetoric that reduces the words to an individual and impractical ideal. A frontal attack on the teaching as dangerous admits or implies that the Sermon has important social, economic and political implications. Jesus’ life and teaching was to challenge the powers of religious and secular empires at the risk of his own life. The Sermon on the Mount is not a series of nice thoughts about love.

Many German leaders, starting with Bismarck, expressed admiration for the Sermon on the Mount – before dismissing its relevance to politics. Herbert Marcuse took the Sermon on the Mount more seriously in a 1968 speech to students in Berlin: “With the Sermon on the Mount one cannot revolt….Nothing is more abominable than the preaching of love: ‘Do not hate your enemy’ – this in a world in which hate is everywhere institutionalized.”

Marcuse was no doubt right that hate is everywhere institutionalized. But does not hating one’s opponent only add to the problem? Marcuse was contemptuous of the preaching of love. Certainly, preaching is worse than useless unless it is an advocacy of action within a particular community that already professes belief in these actions. Preaching love in general is likely to be a sentimental cover up of particular situations that require intelligence, dedication, and risky action. The Sermon on the Mount is far from being sentimental preaching.

Some Textual Misunderstandings

To counter the general misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount it is necessary to examine particular passages, verses, and words. For example, Jesus says “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5: 43-44). Jesus cites here a verse from Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Several things should be noted about the cited text. First, the word neighbor is in the dative rather than accusative case. That is, a more accurate translation into English would be “love to your neighbor.” The love he urges is not a pious feeling but concrete
actions. Second, there is nothing in Leviticus about hating your enemy. Jesus or the evangelist is quoting what may have been a popular inference from a restricted meaning of neighbor. Third, the verb is in the future not the imperative: “You will love your neighbor,” rather than “Love your neighbor.” Critics often complain that telling people that they should love does not work. Jesus does not tell people to feel love instead of hatred. Jesus’ teaching of love to your enemies is a practical, long-range program of reducing personal and institutional hatred. Faced with hostility, a person can perform actions that show we are not doomed always to be enemies.

One’s actions can “de-hostilize” the situation so that over time we may find a way to live on the same planet or even in the same neighborhood. If you act in kindness it will lead to an affirming of both your neighbor and yourself. There is no restriction of “neighbor” to a friend or someone who lives next door; neighbor is anyone who is close by and in need. This principle is not restricted to personal encounters; nations can also practice the same “de-hostilizing.”

The assumption that the Sermon on the Mount is a platform of spineless passivity is particularly based on Mt 5:39: “But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil.” From comparison to at least five similar passages in the New Testament, the apparent meaning of this text would make no sense. Paul’s teaching in Rom.12:21 expresses what most likely is Jesus’ meaning: “Overcome evil with good.” Jesus probably said something close to “Do not compete in doing injustice” or “Resist evil with kindness.” The Greek word for resist that is used in the text was often used in a military context. Thus the sense of the text might be not to violently resist an evildoer.20

There are other counsels in the text that are puzzling and paradoxical. The second half of 5:39 reads: “But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” The detail of the right cheek is significant. An attack of an opponent would usually come from the left. Being struck on the right cheek would be a back of the hand slap, as in challenging a person to a duel. The strange gesture of turning to present the other cheek is a refusal to be drawn into violent conflict.

There were several events in Jewish history that used this tactic of “passive resistance.” The most famous is a story recounted by Josephus in his history of the Jews.21 A group of Jews confronted by violent actions on the part of Roman soldiers threw themselves on the ground and offered their necks rather than break the law. The Romans were taken aback by the gesture, which was not suicidal in intent but a challenge to the humanity of their oppressors. It is not wildly speculative to connect this gesture to what is commonly done by other animals that are smart enough to substitute a gesture of nonresistance for a fight to the death.

Similar acts of “nonresistance” (actually, nonviolent resistance) are suggested by going two miles if forced to go one, or to give away one’s cloak along with a stolen coat. A quite understandable reaction to such acts of nonviolent resistance is to call them foolish or crazy. Jesus’ own family said: “He is out of his mind.” (Mk 3:21). But these
actions are not an absence of response. What Jesus calls for is action that at times is paradoxical but always with an appeal to the humanity of both parties.

When someone is violently attacked, there may be a variety of legitimate responses. What is excluded is a symmetrical response of violence for violence. Only the situation can supply the exact way to respond to corruption, evil and violent oppression. In all cases, Jesus says, his followers must be gentle as doves and wise as serpents (Mt 10:16).

Jesus’ attitude to violence and war is prominent in the first section of the Sermon on the Mount called the Beatitudes (Mt 5: 3-10). This teaching consists of eight poetic statements, each beginning with the word blessed or happy. Unlike the super-theses in the chapter, the contrasts in the Beatitudes are left implicit, at least in Matthew’s version. If the meek shall inherit the earth, we are likely to conclude that the non-meek will lack that inheritance. In Luke’s version of the Beatitudes (6: 20-26) there are a series of “woes” directed at the oppressors of the blessed.

The problem with the Beatitudes lies in how to understand the praised categories, for example, the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, or those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Luke’s lesser known version of the Beatitudes presents a sharper political image in contrasting the rich and the poor, the hungry and “you that are full.”

The Beatitudes in Matthew’s version can be misunderstood as advocating powerlessness, suffering, and submission in this world because in heaven the tables will be turned. “Pie in the sky” was Marx’s pithy criticism, which does in fact describe some religion. The teaching of the Galilean prophet taken in full does not consist in “otherworldly” promises. He began his mission in Nazareth by saying that he had been sent “to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Lk 4:18). The home town crowd responded to his saying that “no prophet is acceptable in his own country” (4:24) by trying to throw him off a cliff (4:29).

Several times in the Beatitudes Jesus refers to the kingdom of heaven. This image, or its variation “the kingdom of God,” is central to his teaching but a problem for readers today. Kingdoms are not much in vogue these days. Attempts to translate “kingdom” with more up-to-date language fall flat and lose the connotations that come from the biblical tradition. Jesus himself played with the image of kingdom, coloring the picture with elements from his Galilean background: fields, vineyards, seeds, fish nets, children, poor workers. Some political meaning of kingdom was obvious.

One of the strangest developments in Christian history was the attempt to completely spiritualize the meaning of “kingdom.” In a defensive move of the nineteenth century, Christian writers gave central place to the saying in Lk 17:21 misleadingly translated as “the kingdom of God is within you.” That image is lacking in logic, collapsing the obvious political meaning of kingdom into the interior of a human individual. A more accurate translation of the text as “the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” restores
some logic. The text is a call to challenge all the secular kingdoms by seeking the kingdom of God which has its own key, entrance gate, and places to sit.26

The use of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s Beatitudes suggests spiritualizing of another kind. In Jesus’ teaching, heaven takes its primary meaning from association with his father who is father of all on earth. The heavenly father is not located in a place called heaven; his reign extends everywhere; his dominion is the earth. The contrasts that Jesus uses are more temporal than local. The favored Jewish phrase “world-to-come” does not refer to a place above but to a transformation of the only world that there is.

This element of first century Jewish thinking should not be foreign to twenty-first century thinking about social and political change. The kingdom of heaven is not a different world from the one that exists but emerges as the hoped for era of peace and justice. In looking towards this kingdom of heaven, Jesus echoes the vision of peace found in such books as Isaiah and Micah.

Jesus states five beatitudes that are needed as preparation before stating the sixth: “Blessed are peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God” (5: 9). Peace is not something found; neither is it a mere absence of war. Human effort is required to make peace.27 The political implications of this calling are unmistakable. The word for peacemaker was on the emperor’s coins. The followers of Jesus were to build a true peace in place of or up against the pax romana.

Imperial Rome claimed to be a pacifier, invoking the gods for support of its empire. But peace imposed by an outside force cannot be genuine and long-lasting. A longer and more radical transformation of the heart and the community is needed for the peace of the world-to-come. Jesus dissociates his cause from the group known as Zealots who hoped to overcome Rome by armed rebellion. Those efforts led to disastrous bloodshed in 70 C.E. and a more definitive defeat in 135 C.E.

The one incident that is most often cited to support a “zealous” approach to armed conflict is Jesus’ “cleansing of the temple.” Luke describes the event simply as “he entered the temple to drive out those who sold.” The term for “drive out” is one that is often used for sending or taking out; it indicates an authoritative dismissal. Jesus’ reason for this symbolic action is given in the next verse: “It is written ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers” (Lk 19:45-46). Matthew adds that “he overturned the tables of the money changers (Mt 21:12). Only the fourth gospel includes the imaginative detail that he made a “whip of cords” to drive out the money changers and their animals (Jn 2:15).

Was this an act of violence? It was certainly an aggressive act inspired by holy wrath. For people who equate force and violence, any action not meekly subservient can be classified as violent. But, as R.H. Bainton points out, a whip of cords is not a hand grenade.28 There is no suggestion that bones were broken or blood was shed. The gesture was a symbolic protest that made appeal to ancient tradition against business interests taking over the temple. Jesus’ words refer to Jeremiah’s warning not to put all one’s trust
in the temple. Has this house, asks Jeremiah “become a den of robbers”? (Jer. 7:11). The phrase could be translated as a “den of violent ones” which would specify better that the problem was not thievery but mistrusting the temple as a protection against Rome’s power.29

For critics of Jesus’ teaching of nonviolence, much is made of a strange passage in Mark’s gospel placed immediately after the temple incident. Jesus was hungry and looked for fruit on a fig tree. Finding no figs, he cursed the tree saying: “May no one ever eat fruit from you again” (Mk 11:12-14). The symbolic point of the story is puzzling; it seems to be a continuation of the attitude reflected in the temple cleansing. Some people think that it shows petulance; one could also find it comical. In any case, cursing a tree can hardly be called an act of violence.

The more serious challenge on the issue of violence consists of a few texts that speak of “the sword,” most notably Mt 10: 34: “Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” Jesus is not making a casual remark here but describing his mission in life. This isolated text, however, needs the context of all the other places where he describes what his life’s work is.

Once again, it is helpful to look at the parallel text in Luke’s gospel. There Jesus says: “Do you think I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you but rather division (Lk 12:51). There is no way to say definitively whether he used the word sword or division. However, he does go on immediately to describe the division that will be caused between members of the same family (Mk13:12). Jesus is not referring to a war with swords.

An explanation of this text needs to relate it to the prophetic tradition out of which Jesus spoke. When prophets spoke they were heard by part of the community. But prophets – today they might be whistle blowers – did not find acceptance during their lifetimes. The common fate of prophets is to be recognized after they are dead. Prophets give rise to a hope for unity but their immediate effect is to sharpen existing divisions even among families and friends.

Jesus’ explicit reference here is to the book of Micah, which has the passage: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Mic 4:3). But Jesus is most directly referring to another passage in Micah that describes son rising up against his father, daughter against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (7:1). The swords will be beat into plowshares but only at the risk of division within families.

In paraphrasing this passage on family division, Jesus warns his followers what they have to be ready for. The passage is troubling for anyone who endorses what in recent years has been called “family values.” From everything he says, Jesus obviously values the love between spouses and the love between parent and child, but an outgoing love can be a challenge to the most intimate relations. Does a man really love his own family if he
is unmoved by the plight of a suffering neighbor? Does a man love his nation if he hates the people of another nation?

There is another surprising passage in which Jesus refers to the sword. He advises his disciples: “Let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one (Lk 22:36). Clearly, he was warning his disciples that conflict was imminent. When one of them replies, “Look, Lord, here are two swords,” his enigmatic reply is, “It is enough” (Lk 22:38).

What illuminates the passage is the actual violence that immediately follows. When the crowd comes to seize Jesus, one of his disciples asks, “Lord shall we strike with the sword?” Before the disciple gets an answer, “one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear.” Jesus responds by saying, “no more of this,” and touches the slave’s ear to heal the wound (Lk 22: 49-51). He complains that the crowd has come for him with clubs and swords, as if he were a robber rather than a teacher. Whatever is the meaning of his advice to buy a sword, he refuses to return violence for violence or let others use violence in his defense.

This passage leads into the culminating event in the gospel where Jesus’ teaching becomes too much to take for the guardians of political order. “That the threat was not one of armed violent revolt, and that it bothered them to the point of their resorting to irregular procedures to counter it, is a proof of the political relevance of nonviolent tactics, not a proof that Pilate and Caiphas were exceptionally dull or dishonest men.”

Jesus “died on a cross.” The phrase has been repeated endless times throughout the centuries. The cross has been the chief symbol of Christians. Millions of Christians wear a cross around their necks. The significance of death on a cross should be obvious: an execution of an enemy of the state.

There is general revulsion today against the symbolic use of the cross during the “crusades,” a word for cross. The alternative, however, need not be a depoliticized cross. “The cross of Calvary was not a difficult family situation, not a frustration of visions of personal fulfillment, a crushing debt, or a nagging in-law; it was the political, legally-to-be-expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society.”

In the early centuries of the church Jesus was portrayed on the cross in glory. The Orthodox Church’s liturgy refers to “the holy and life-giving cross.” The point was that his suffering and death were transformed into new life. Perhaps that was an obscuring of the harsh reality of the death he had suffered. Starting in the twelfth century, emphasis on the quantity of suffering overshadowed other considerations. The focus on the tortured figure on the cross was one of Francis of Assisi’s less helpful contributions to Christian piety.

A reminder to Christians that following Jesus (or “imitating Christ”) can be a dangerous and painful journey was a warning. Jesus repeatedly invites his followers to “take up your cross” and follow me. The warning loses its realistic bite if “cross” is reduced to a metaphor for any personal problem. We still have state executions of
prisoners, euphemistically called “capital punishment”, a practice that Christians should presumably oppose with special passion.

Modern forms of execution (needles, electric chairs) do not offer a symbol comparable to the cross. The prisoner who was crucified carried his own instrument of execution before being nailed to it. The cross carried a specially humiliating and torturous meaning, perhaps matched in our day by the torture of suspected terrorists. “Taking up the cross” was not an invitation to enter the monastery; rather it was an invitation to take unpopular stands against state execution of prisoners, torture of detainees, vicious policies against the poor, and stirring up hatred of other nations.

Each of Jesus’ followers has his or her own way of responding. The rich, well-positioned members of society have the greater responsibility. Jesus’ admonition to “sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor” (Lk 18:22) can be followed literally by some people. Not everyone can or should attempt to help the poor in that way; providing jobs for the poor might be more helpful. However, a church with a few monks and nuns having a vow of poverty alongside comfortably rich and politically complacent congregations of Christians is not likely to be what Jesus or his early followers envisioned.

It has to be admitted that there is a tension in the New Testament between the potential rebelliousness of the Sermon on the Mount and the sentiments expressed by Paul in chapters 12 and 13 of the Letter to the Romans. Paul’s endorsement of civil authority as established by God was the basis for modern Christianity’s readiness to obey unjust government policies.

Similar to Jesus saying “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Lk 20:25), Paul respects the historical process in which civil authority is necessary. However, saying that all authority is from God was not a blank check of approval for every political policy. When to obey and when to refuse obedience depend on the situation and on the wisdom of the tradition that guides the community. Paul’s list of “things due to authority” (13:6-7) does not include participation in armed service.

In the post-enlightenment period, the churches were inclined to pass on decisions of war and peace to civil rulers so long as a safe place was provided for churches. In recent decades, the churches that have been speaking out publicly may be unduly “politicized.” It is possible, however, that they are rediscovering the initial thrust of the Jesus movement.

The Standard for Misinterpreting the Sermon on the Mount

During political discussions in the twentieth century the regular way to refer to idealism or utopianism was to invoke the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes the reference was accompanied by a phrase to clinch the case (favorites include “turn the other cheek,” “don’t resist evil,” and “love your enemy”). More often it was not deemed necessary to establish the case. Everyone, it was assumed, knows that the Sermon on the Mount is a
string of poetic but unrealistic sayings that only a mystic or a saint, far removed from political life, would try to follow. Most secular writers on ethics, politics, and international relations seem not to have expended even minimal effort to understand what the text of the New Testament actually says.

The puzzling fact is that many Christian theologians basically accepted this secular assessment. It was said that the Sermon on the Mount has little to offer regarding political and economic institutions. After all, Jesus spoke in an entirely different setting and probably with the assumption that the end of the world was near. One dissenter from this view, the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, criticized liberal Protestant theology for the view that the gospel is “a purely religious power which encompasses the individual man in his outlook but is at the same time indifferent and unconcerned with regard to worldly institutions and conditions.”

One essay stands out in providing the standard misinterpretation of the Sermon on the Mount: Max Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation.” Weber was a prolific and brilliant scholar but this particular essay has badly distorted an understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. The essay obviously has antecedents in both Christian theology and secular political writing that Weber drew upon. It is nonetheless remarkable that so many writers after Weber assumed his claim that the Sermon on the Mount advocates passivity and an ethic that is the opposite of “responsibility.” After World War II, Protestant writers endorsed “responsible society” with far more debt to Max Weber than to the New Testament. A close look at Weber’s celebrated essay reveals that it contains confusing and inconsistent elements due in part to its particular context.

“Politics as a Vocation” was developed from a lecture to students in Berlin during 1919, shortly before Weber’s death. The conclusion of the lecture indicates that Weber was skeptical that the students, who were enthusiasts for peace in postwar Germany, understood how complex the problem was. Weber challenged the students to come back in ten years and still have the same naïve view of peace.

By 1929, Weber was no longer alive but many of the students in his audience had probably discovered the accuracy of his warning. Peace did not come to Germany or its neighbors simply from anti-war sentiment and saying that we should all get along together. Peace had to be worked at by people with a “vocation” of staying with the problems of political conflicts and sustainable compromises. But Weber’s realistic concern for the difficulty of achieving a stable peace was not matched by the ethical framework he provided.

The essay begins with an announcement of that framework: “We must be clear that all activity which is governed by ethical standards can be subsumed under one of two maxims, which are fundamentally different from, and irreconcilably opposed to each other. Ethical activity may be based on a standard either of intention or responsibility.” (217). One might criticize Weber by saying that these two standards (or maxims) are not a logical pair and it is not obvious that ethics must fit under one or the other. And in fact
at the end of the essay the vocation of a politician is described as one that brings together these “irreconcilably opposed” maxims.

“Responsibility” is a word with a long and complex history. It has become an ever more popular term in politics even though its meaning as used by politicians is usually vague. Politicians discovered that saying “I take responsibility” usually frees them from actually doing anything to correct a messy situation. Weber cannot be blamed for this evacuation of the meaning of responsibility but he is responsible for a lack of logic and history in how he used the word.

In the sentences that immediately follow his contrast of the two maxims, Weber says: “Not that an ethic of intention is the same as irresponsibility or an ethic of responsibility the same as indifference to intentions. Naturally, there is no question of these two things” (217). There may be no question of these two things for him, but his “fundamentally different and irreconcilably opposed” standards logically lead to such a conclusion. An ethic of responsibility as he defined it does exclude intention. And his contrast is worse for an ethic of intention: Defined as the very opposite of responsible, it is precisely “irresponsible” and Weber implies such a meaning.

For concretizing an ethic of intention, Weber invokes the Sermon on the Mount. Citing the phrase, “turn the other cheek,” he concludes that “it is an ethic which denies all self-respect – except for a saint. That is the point: one must be a saint in everything, at least in intention” (216). This sufficiency of intention for sainthood is peculiar, given the well known saying from Christian history that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Jesus of Nazareth’s standard of holiness was: “By your fruits you shall know them” (Mt 7:16). The final judgment that Jesus described was based on whether someone fed the hungry, clothed the naked, housed the homeless, and visited the imprisoned (Mt 25: 31- 46).36

According to Weber, “the Christian acts rightly and leaves the outcome to God” (218). As soon as Weber tries to spell out what the Christian acting rightly might entail, his fundamental opposition between intention and responsibility breaks down. “The man who bases his ethics on intentions feels that he is “responsible” only for seeing that the flame of pure intention, the flame of protest against the injustice of the social order, is not extinguished. The aim of his action, which considered from the point of view of its possible consequences is totally irrational, is to keep fanning this flame; the action can and should have only the value of an example” (219).

The fact that Weber puts “responsible” in quotes does not hide the fact that intention and responsible are shown to be connected. The person acting from an ethic of intention is in fact being responsible to “the injustice of the social order.” The aim of the action, Weber says, is to spread the example of protest against injustice. No doubt more has to be said about the effectiveness of different kinds of protest but Weber provides no basis for his sweeping generalization that the “possible consequences” are “totally irrational.”
In Weber’s view, the real problem with practitioners of his ethic of intention is that they use ineffective means for their goal. That is so because “the only logical course for the ethics of intention is to repudiate all activity which involves the use of morally dangerous means” (219).

Weber has in mind a very specific means that has to be repudiated: the use of “force.” The crux of his argument is that the “ethic of the gospel” cannot include the use of force. He is contemptuous of those “who have been preaching ‘Love against Force’” and who suddenly turn to the use of force “for the last time, so as to bring about a situation in which all violence will be abolished” (219).

His disdain is understandable for so-called pacifists who supported the war to end all wars, and for postwar advocates of love as a replacement for force. Nevertheless, Weber’s own language that draws no clear distinction between force and violence assumes a choice between intentions that lack any forceful means and a politics of violence. He assumes that “anyone who wants to act according to the ethics of the gospel should not go on strike, since strikes are a form of coercion” (217). In Weber’s “ethic of intention” the force of coercion is excluded. As described earlier, the ethics of the gospel excludes violence but it embraces a range of forceful actions that are integral to human existence.

Weber assumes that he knows the ethic of Jesus and his most dedicated followers. “The great virtuosi of other-worldly love of mankind and saintliness, whether from Nazareth or Assisi or the castles of Indian kings, have not employed the instruments of politics, force….Politics have quite different goals, which can only be achieved by force” (222-23). Of course, in a choice between “other-worldly love” and the force of responsible action, politicians have nowhere to go except to Weber’s version of responsibility. “If the consequence to be drawn from the other-worldly ethics of love is ‘resist not evil with force’ the contrary proposition is true for the politician: Thou shalt resist evil with force (otherwise you are responsible for the victory of evil)” (217).

An interesting twist in Weber’s citation of this passage is that he does not quote Jesus as saying “do not resist evil.” He adds the phrase “with force” which is closer to Jesus’ meaning but still distorts it. As I indicated earlier, the line can be variously rendered as “do not compete in doing evil,” or “do not violently resist an evildoer” or “resist evil with kindness.” The only way to justify Weber’s version, “do not resist evil with force” is to assume that force is evil. That is a belief that Weber ascribes to Jesus and his followers, a belief that would strip Christian religion of any force for good.

If Weber’s meaning of “intention” lacks effectiveness, his “responsibility” lacks both a firm anchor in intention and a standard of restraint in its results. Weber removes the word responsible from its Jewish and Christian history. It is ironic that he defines a Christian ethic to exclude responsibility whereas it was mainly out of Jewish and Christian traditions that there arose the idea of an individual being judged or held responsible for his or her actions.
Weber’s ethic of intention is sometimes called an “ethic of ultimate ends” which would be closer to a description of the Sermon on the Mount. Then the choice would be between responsibility to ultimate ends versus responsibility to immediate ends. Weber’s description of responsibility is dangerously lacking an answer to the question: To what or to whom is a politician ultimately responsible?

Weber implies an answer to that question when after saying a politician needs passion for the job, he says “that alone does not make a politician, unless it is used to further some real cause and so makes a sense of responsibility toward this cause the ultimate guide of his behavior” (212). The last phrase is frightening; Weber makes the ultimate guide of behavior to be responsibility toward “this cause.” The twentieth century was sprinkled with maniacal characters whose ultimate guide of behavior was devotion to their cause, whether communism, fascism, nationalism, or free-market capitalism.

The “ultimate end” as articulated by Jesus may not be the right one for everybody. But at least Jesus insisted that immediate gains have to be measured by a standard that goes beyond political expediency. Weber, with seeming disregard for long-range consequences, can blithely say: “For politics, the essential means is violence” (218). Saying that “the essential means” of politics is violence puts no restraint on a nation’s violence other than counter-violence.

Toward the end of the essay, Weber comes down hard on the ethics of intention as an obstacle to achieving international peace. He says that the goal of peace is desirable “but when the goal is pursued with the pure ethics of intention in a war of faith, it can be damaged and discredited for generations to come, since no one takes responsibility for the consequences” (223). Weber assumes that this “war of faith” excludes the use of force. In contrast, his meaning of responsibility includes political force which is indistinguishable from violence. Thus, in Weber’s contrast violence is the way to peace; nonviolence becomes the cause of war.

Near the end of the essay Weber describes the vocation of politics. Surprisingly, it includes the two elements he has repeatedly said are in fundamental opposition. His final judgment on those who talk about an ethic of intention is that nine-tenths of them are “windbags.” On the other hand, he says that “it is enormously impressive if a more mature man (whether old or young in years) who feels his responsibility for the consequences genuinely and with all his heart, and acts according to the ethics of responsibility, says at whatever point it may be: ‘Here I stand: I can no other’” (223).

The reference here seems to be to Martin Luther who is offered as an example of the mature man, even though he separated the kingdoms of God and Caesar. Weber allows that the mature man may be old or young in years but it is surely significant that he is speaking at the end of his career to students who he says [on the issue of a peace movement] “share in the frenzy which this revolution amounts to” (224).

Weber concludes his description of the mature man by saying: “To that extent, the ethics of intention and the ethics of responsibility are not diametrically opposed but
complementary: together they make the true man, the man who can have the ‘vocation of politics’” (224). His original premise of a conceptual chasm between intention and responsibility is stripped away; the two opposed ideas are parts of a synthesis.

Weber’s claim, however, that intention and responsibility are ultimately complementary does not hold up within his description of them. For Weber, the man of responsibility discovers intention and resolve. However, Weber does not allow for the man of intention to discover that he is responsible. The Sermon on the Mount or “ethic of the gospel” is left to other-worldly love and a lack of force in achieving any useful results.

Conclusion

Did the Jesus movement succeed or fail? One answer would be that it is too early too tell. In church histories the narrative line often was that the church was constantly persecuted by the Roman Empire but that the blood of the martyrs only strengthened Christians in their resolve and they finally triumphed. In secular histories, the Jesus movement was inevitably absorbed into one more institution that wielded political power. The church was and is a dangerous institution because its politics is hidden behind a rhetoric of selfless love.

In the last half century of scholarship, a clearer picture of the early church has emerged. The story is about a movement that tried to carry on the example and teaching of Jesus. As a movement with universal aspirations, it took on the trapping of a large organization. The first “churches” were household assemblies but the word was also used for the larger pattern of communities.38

The New Testament paints an idyllic portrait of the earliest community: “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they held everything in common….There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need” (Acts 4: 32-35). A worldwide organization with this economic system did not become established at that time or since. Nonetheless, the example of the early followers of Jesus did not get obliterated by the bad economic and political compromises of the later church.

The New Testament is more like the Declaration of Independence than the U.S. Constitution. That is, Jesus did not lay out a program for institutionalizing his message. He provided teaching in the form of parables and sayings which are richly meaningful but ambiguous in application to other times and places.

One theory maintains that Jesus’ teaching is irrelevant to today’s politics because it was premised on the belief that the world was about to end. Therefore, the teaching is not for ordinary people in their ordinary lives. Apparently some of his earliest followers did expect his imminent return as the judge of the world. The last book of the New
Testament, Revelation, describes an all-out cosmic battle and the final triumph of the Christ. Although the book of Revelation (or Apocalypse) is a favorite of fundamentalist Christians, it reflects a time of persecution and does not provide a complete Christian outlook.39

Jesus uses no military metaphors (Paul does).40 He looked toward the world-to-come which would happen through personal and social transformation of this world. Jesus taught his followers to pray “thy kingdom come,” which has a political edge; it is neither an “other-worldly” kingdom nor one kingdom among existing kingdoms. He predicted the impending end of “this age.” “For those who came to believe in him, under God he brought it about.”41

The early church was sporadically persecuted by Roman authorities. The fact that its three leaders, Paul, Peter, and James, were all executed in the decade of the 60s suggests that state officials grasped the political implications of the movement. But the early church probably could not have survived a comprehensive effort by the state to root it out.42 Instead, the church tried to be a cross-section of society that would give testimony to a more peaceful and just world.

There were a few disparaging comments in ancient authors that the early church was made up of “only slaves, women and little children.”43 But another author who was equally opposed to the movement says that it attracted “persons of every age, social rank, and both sexes.”44 Contemporary scholars side with the second view (though the number of women was probably disproportionately large).45 The belief that the early church was composed almost exclusively of slaves and poor people was supported by Marxist ideology but not by historians and social scientists.

The church from earliest times engaged in a quiet revolution of accepting existing governments while refusing to cooperate in their overtly violent activities. A key issue was whether Christians could serve as soldiers. The record on military service is not entirely clear. At least by the end of the second century there were Christian soldiers.46 Before then, there were probably a few soldiers who were exceptions.47 Although Jesus did not condemn the soldiers he met, church fathers, such as Justin and Tertullian, were against all military service.

The prohibition against Christians being soldiers was effective enough to draw criticism of the Christians as disloyal. As would later Christians who are opposed to war, Origen made the case that Christians were loyal citizens: “There is no one who fights better for the king than we. It is true that we do not go with him to battle, but we fight for him by forming an army of our own, an army of piety, through our prayers to the Godhead. Once all men have become Christians even the barbarians will be inclined to peace.”48

Origen’s pointing to an “army of piety” was unlikely to convince most defenders of the political order. Justin and Tertullian made a stronger case for the church contributing to the social order by creating peace internal to the empire.49 A social scientist writes that
“Christianity greatly mitigated relations among social classes at the very time when the gap between rich and poor was growing. The church did not preach that everyone could be or should become equal in terms of wealth and power in this life. But it did preach that all were equal in the eyes of God and that the more fortunate had a God-given responsibility to help those in need.” Max Weber’s “intention” as opposed to “responsibility” simply does not hold.

The early church, therefore, was not a hotbed of revolutionary action by proletarians. Neither did it simply conform to the profile of a “society” in the Roman Empire. It gave comfort in the present and hope for a better future. E.R. Dodds traced the spread of Christianity to the fact that “the Church provided the essentials of social security” which Dodds explained meant more than material benefits; it was a way of community marked by care.51

To the extent that the Jesus movement issued in communities of kindness and resistance to violence it provided a permanent example to future generations. When Constantine adopted Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century, it may have seemed like a Christian triumph. Eusebius, the historian of the early church, presents it as the virtual triumph of the “kingdom of Christ.” By the time of the emperor Theodosius at end of the fourth century, Christianity was the official religion of the empire.

Not all Christians of the time were convinced that the change was progress. The great biblical scholar, Jerome, said: “When the church came to the princes of the world, she grew in power and wealth but diminished in virtue.”52 Looking back today, it would seem that moving away from a community which exemplified a nonviolent way of life was too high a price to pay for the church’s gains in number and direct political influence.

Violence remains a danger for Christianity as it does for other religions in the contemporary world. Religion, however, can be a source of comfort in tragedy, inspiration for protests against violence, and the basis for meaning in life. Those who do not belong to any religion and want no part of religious beliefs have to distinguish between the qualities of religion that are not violent and the institutions encompassing religion that are prone to violence but can be reformed. Neither religion nor religions are likely to disappear. Indiscriminate attacks on religion do not accomplish reform. Both religious and secular people have a stake in seeing that a politics of violence and war is not supported by any of the religions and that each of the religions learns to distance itself from its record of violence by affirming a more genuine strand of its own history.


Leo Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions and Violence* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 64.


Adolph Von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (New York: Forgotten Books, 2009), 84: “Ultimately the kingdom is nothing but the treasure which the soul possesses in the eternal and merciful God.”


Lapide, *Sermon on the Mount*, 35, cites a rabbinic teaching: “All commandments are to be fulfilled when the right opportunity arrives. But not peace! Peace you must seek out and pursue.”

Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, 56.


Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 49.

Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 129.

Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 70: Yoder argues that the prescriptions of Jesus were in the context of the Jubilee year when debts were to be forgiven. Jesus opposed the weakening of the law whereby the forgiving was avoided.


Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 150.

Weber elsewhere agrees with this point; he says in *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 633, that Jesus’ message is “that the true religious mood is to be judged by its fruits, by its faithful demonstration.”

Weber, *Economy and Society*, 592: “This recognition [that violence begets violence] continued to evoke the most radical demands for the ethic of brotherly love, i.e., that evil should not be resisted by force, an injunction common to Buddhism and the preaching of Jesus.”


1Thess 5:8; 1Cor 9:6-7; 1Cor 6: 4-7; Phil 2:25; Eph 6:10-18; 1Tim 1:18.

48 Origen, *Contra Celsum*
50 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 188.
52 Quoted in Forest, *Ladder of the Beatitudes*, 141.