

What is the contribution of Christian faith to the struggle for social justice?

1. Christian faith strengthens both the inclination to seek the neighbor's good and the contrite awareness that we are not inclined to do this.

2. Christian faith preserves a certain distance between its sanctities and the ambiguities of politics, underscoring that politics in the name of God is of the devil.

3. Christian faith functions to make us recall both that in all political struggles there are no saints but only sinners fighting each other and that, nevertheless, history from our perspective, rather than God's, is constituted by significant distinctions between types and degrees of sin.

4. Christian faith reminds us both that we always live in a deeper dimension than the realm in which the political struggle takes place and that we can never simply flee the world of political contention into a realm of mystic eternity or moralistic illusion.

5. Christian faith calls for a pragmatic approach to politics, which develops it as the art of the possible, cautious always not to fall into new and worse forms of injustice in the effort to eliminate old ones. (According to such a pragmatic approach, power and self-interest are used, beguiled, harnessed, and deflected for the ultimate end of establishing the highest and most inclusive possible community of justice and order [= peace]. Also, we must have a pragmatic approach toward every institution of property and of government, recognizing that none of them is as sacrosanct as is usually supposed, that all are subject to corruption, and that their abolition is also subject to corruption.)

6. Christian faith gives us a place from which we can operate in history, working at our historic tasks without illusions and without despair.

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To what extent is the distinction between "oppressed" and "oppressors" open to the corruption that follows upon assuming that social conflicts are between "saints" and "sinners," instead of between contending groups of sinners?

1. Certainly the oppressed are sinners as surely as the oppressors. And the church's ministry of reconciliation to the oppressed is to bring the deepest insights of Christian faith to bear on their situation—not counseling them against violence, but dissuading them from hatred, or setting their problem in a perspective such that their hatred is mitigated by the recognition that the sin of the capitalist is not peculiar to the capitalist and that therefore the destruction of capitalism will not remove sin from the world. To the objection that such mitigation of self-righteousness weakens the fury and wrath necessary to the success of the oppressed's cause, the response is that, on the most pragmatic level, this may very well not be true, because fury and wrath may only increase the size of the enemy's ranks and strengthen the righteousness of his cause.

2. At the same time, stress on humility cannot be allowed to rob the political struggle of its seriousness by implying that all human causes are equally just or unjust.

Theses on social violence (war) in response to the criticism that my position is excessively pessimistic:

1. There can be no fruitful discussion of "social violence" unless we take care to clarify what we mean by the phrase. To this end, I propose that we understand "violence" to mean the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on persons or damage to property, and so any action or conduct involving such exercise.

2. Discussion of social violence is bound to be fruitless unless we take account of the many different forms and kinds of social violence, as evidenced by such distinctions as those between *systemic* and *insurrectionary* violence; *institutional* and *revolutionary* violence; *repressive* and *subversive* violence; *hidden* and *open* violence; *direct* and *indirect* violence; *conscious* and *unconscious* violence.

3. We are all always involved in social violence of one form or another, either as perpetrators or as victims, and, most commonly, both.

4. *Should* this be so? Of course, not. *Should* social violence be eliminated. Of course, it should. But *can* it be eliminated? In principle, yes; but in fact, no.

5. It can be eliminated in principle both because we are not created sinners and because the saving grace of God is ever-present, notwithstanding the fact of our universal sinfulness, overcoming the deepest root of social violence in our anxious distrust of God and our consequent disloyalty to God—as well as to all to whom God is loyal. Since it is this underlying distrust and disloyalty that leads to all our strategies of trying to secure our existence, and thus to self-aggrandizement and injustice toward others, social violence can in principle be eliminated because, notwithstanding our tendency to sin, we have a capacity to act justly to the extent that God's grace is effective in freeing us from ourselves.

6. But if our capacity for justice means that social violence can be eliminated in principle, our tendency to sin and thus toward injustice means

that it cannot be completely eliminated in fact. It is simply a fact that not all persons, or even any person all of the time, will so respond to the presence of God's saving grace in their lives as in fact to be saved from their tendency to sin and thus to injustice and violence.

7. This position, however, is not properly described as pessimism. It is more fairly characterized simply as realism, in the strict sense of seeing things as they really are, in distinction from how they appear to be or how we would like them to be—and this in both of the relevant respects: with respect both to the universal reality of human sinfulness and with respect to the all-encompassing reality, notwithstanding sin, of God's saving grace.

8. Meanwhile, or along the way, we can and should act so as to minimize social violence of all forms and kinds, including eliminating any form or kind that can be eliminated as well as containing and reducing all forms or kinds that cannot. In thus acting for justice, however, we have no alternative but to use the only tools available to us that are adapted to our end, including physical force, even though we must always act so as to minimize all forms and kinds of violence, including our own.

15-18 April 1999

Corrigendum ad 1, which should be reformulated as follows;

1. There can be no fruitful discussion of "social violence" unless we take care to clarify what we mean by the phrase. To this end, I propose that we understand "violence" in general to mean the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on persons or damage to property, and so any action or conduct involving such exercise. By "*social* violence" in particular, then, I suggest that we understand such violence in this sense as is inevitably involved in what Reinhold Niebuhr speaks of as the "social struggle" to achieve "social cohesion," as the mean between anarchy, on the one hand, and tyranny, on the other.

Concerning social violence:

José Miguez-Bonino

"[W]hether Christians or not, we are always actively involved in violence—repressive, subversive, systemic, insurrectional, open, or hidden. I say actively involved because our militancy or lack of it, our daily use of the machinery of the society in which we live, our ethical decisions or our refusal to make decisions make us actors in this drama."

"[I]n a continent where thousands die every day as victims of various forms of violence, no neutral standpoint exists. *My* violence is direct or indirect, institutional or revolutionary, conscious or unconscious. But it is violence My violence is either obedience to or betrayal of Jesus Christ."

Reinhold Niebuhr

"[T]he political strategies by which the world achieves a precarious justice . . . invariably involve the balancing of power with power; and they never completely escape the peril of tyranny, on the one hand, and the peril of anarchy, on the other."

"[B]ecause men are sinners . . . justice can be achieved only by a certain degree of coercion, on the one hand, and by resistance to coercion and tyranny, on the other hand. The political life of man must constantly steer between the Scylla of anarchy and the Charybdis of tyranny. "

"[E]ven the seemingly most stable justice degenerates periodically into either tyranny or anarchy."

"[T]he tensions of [a balance of power] may become overt; and overt tensions may degenerate into conflict. The center of power, which has the function of preventing this anarchy of conflict, may also degenerate into tyranny. There is no perfectly adequate method of preventing either anarchy or tyranny."

"[T]he kind of justice [achieved in democratic societies] approximates the harmony of love more than either anarchy or tyranny."

"Human egotism makes large-scale co-operation upon a purely voluntary basis impossible. Governments must coerce. Yet . . . this coercion . . . is always in danger of serving the purposes of the coercing power rather than the general weal."

"The overt conflicts of human history are periods of judgment when what has been hidden becomes revealed."

"[T]he ideal of love is not merely a principle of indiscriminate criticism upon all approximations of justice. It is also a principle of discriminate criticism between forms of justice."

"The Christian is freed by [the grace of God] to act in history; to give [her or] his devotion to the highest values [she or] he knows; to defend those citadels of civilization of which necessity and destiny have made [her or] him the defender; and [she or] he is persuaded by that grace to remember the ambiguity of even [her or] his best actions."

Schubert M. Ogden (following Reinhold Niebuhr)

1. What the law of love calls for is not nonviolent resistance, but non-resistance.

2. The distinction between violent and nonviolent resistance is not absolute. (If it were absolute, one would have to give moral preference to the nonviolent power wielded by a propagandist over the kind of violent power wielded by a general.)

3. The differences between violence and nonviolence are pragmatic, not intrinsic or absolute, the differences between their social consequences being differences in degree, not in kind. (Both place restraint upon the freedom of others, and both may injure or kill persons and damage or destroy property.)

4. Once pure pacifism has been abandoned, and the principle of resistance and coercion has been accepted as necessary to the social struggle ^{for} and social cohesion, the differences between violence and nonviolence lose their absolute significance, although they remain important.

5. Only if one adopts the principle that it is better to suffer injustice than to resort to force can one wholly disavow the use of force.

6. A responsible relationship to the political order makes an unqualified disavowal of violence impossible.

“The civil rights movement is usually remembered as a case in which nonviolence worked. You seem to want to counter that view, and you draw on Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology in noting that the power structure in Oxford[, NC] responded to racism only when power was brought to bear on it and parts of town were torched.”

“The distinction between Niebuhr’s theology and the civil rights movement is somewhat artificial. The difference between burning an unoccupied warehouse and refusing to surrender a seat at a segregated lunch counter is significant, but both actions are designed to exert economic pressure. Nonviolent direct action at its most effective was surely Niebuhrian in that it operated as political coercion, not moral appeal. King called nonviolence ‘merely a Niebuhrian strategem of power.’

“The armies of nonviolence descended on Birmingham in 1963 determined to create intolerable tension in the community, to inflict an unbearable economic price, to shame the U. S. in the eyes of the world and undermine its claim to be a beacon of democracy, and to force the national government to intervene. Popular memory casts nonviolence as an appeal to the better angels of our nature, but this is sugar-coated nonsense.

“Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and life taught Dr. King that power without love may be bankrupt, but that love without power is saccharine and vacant; that to have justice we must harness power in the service of love, and always remember, as we pursue justice, that we are no angels ourselves.”

—From an interview with Timothy Tyson, author of *Blood Done Sign My Name* (Three Rivers Press), in the *Christian Century*, 123, 4 (February 24, 2006): 30-32.