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Obama's Nobel war speech

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On the Road to Peace

President Obama?s speech last week in Oslo, where he received the Nobel Peace Prize, undermined the example of all the peacemakers of the ages. Standing before the world, he defended America?s military misadventures, dismissed nonviolence and endorsed the just-war theory as the way to peace.

The peacemakers Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. received particular attention. With a kind of rhetorical sleight of hand, Obama admired and scorned them at the same time, saying in effect: here are good men but, in our modern world, impractical men. With that, Obama undercut his own soaring campaign rhetoric espousing audacious hope. Hope withered on the moment. Here is yet another American president beating the drums of war in the name of peace. Nothing makes the heart sink like the notion, a very Orwellian nightmare: ?the way to peace is through war.? His speech was a veritable call to despair.

I leave it to others to comb through the speech?s details. I prefer to regard matters more broadly. Namely, Obama struck me as a modern-day Constantine who, in the fourth century, pulled off the unthinkable. He beguiled the early church into renouncing the nonviolence of Jesus. And he placed in the church?s hand something more ?practical?--the pagan Cicero?s justifications for war. Pure legerdemain.

Obama reminds me, moreover, of Augustine, who himself embraced Cicero?s notions and hoodwinked further with the idea that sometimes ?the best way to love an enemy is to kill him.? Just as Constantine banished the nonviolent Jesus, Obama has, in effect, banished Gandhi and King. And he did it oh so subtly, like a New York pick-pocket, giving with one hand and taking back with the other. His speech has been a big hit here in Washington, where I write this.

Obama cited an excerpt from King?s Nobel acceptance speech in 1964. ?Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem. It merely creates new and more complicated ones.? And he paid King due respect: ?As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King?s life?s work,? Obama said, ?I am living testimony to the moral force of nonviolence. I know there is nothing weak, nothing passive, nothing naive in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King.? But then Obama branded both as ineffectual and naïve. Nonviolence, he said, could ?not have halted Hitler?s armies? or convinced ?al-Qaida?s leaders to lay down their arms.? And my heart dropped when he concluded: ?Instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace.?

On both counts I disagree. King and Gandhi were not naïve. When actually put into practice, when enough of us do the hard work, nonviolence works. Hearts change and structures of injustice and war begin to unravel. From India to South Africa we have seen how nonviolent change happens.

I disagree on the second point, too, the point that says war makes for peace. The chief axiom of nonviolence says the very opposite. The ends lie within the means, just as the tree exists within the seed. How can the anguish of war -- destruction, displacement, hunger, terror, torture, martial law, summary executions, civilian

casualties, oceans of grief -- how can these ever favor us with peace? The only way to peace is through peaceful and loving means.

Obama has arrogantly overstepped his bounds. If Obama is right, then St. Francis and St. Clare were wrong. If Obama is right, then Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King, Dorothy Day, and Mother Teresa were wrong. If Obama is right, then the nonviolent Jesus is wrong. And we should put his memory aside.

But no, Obama is wrong. We as Jesus? followers need to insist on the Way of nonviolence. We need to practice and demand love for enemies. We need to renounce the just war theory. It?s inapplicable because no longer can its conditions be met, if they ever could. The fire power of modern warfare had made the theory obsolete. But even so, it is inadmissible because Jesus commanded otherwise.

I realize mine is a minority voice. Sarah Palin applauded Obama?s speech. So did Newt Gingrich. One wonders how many Catholic bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders did the same. To their minds nonviolence doesn?t work. Sometimes you must destroy a village to save it. Apply the right rhetoric and every war can be justified.

These are the notions of our times; they hang in the air. But I urge people not to believe the president?s war rhetoric. More, I urge church people to take up the work of making nonviolence more widely understood and accepted.

Ken Butigan, a teacher of nonviolence with the Franciscan group Pace e Bene (see www.paceebene.org) writes this week that Obama was able ?to discredit nonviolence -- and thus buttress his argument for war -- because there is no sturdy conviction in the mind of the larger public that nonviolence is anything but limited, weak, passive, utopian and ineffective.? The zeitgeist deprives our imaginations of alternatives to war.

We need, Ken says, to ?mainstream nonviolence.? That is, to launch a systematic campaign to educate. Only then will the stigma of nonviolence be lifted. ?Just as we have gradually mainstreamed the rule of law, human rights, and the vision of democracy,? he says, ?we have the opportunity to mainstream the power of creative nonviolence.?

Then would the world learn how nonviolent resistance, when put into practice, did indeed impede Nazis killing; how it brought down dictatorships in the Philippines, Chile and Serbia; how it led the Velvet Revolutions throughout Eastern Europe in 1989 and brought down the Soviet Union in 1991; how it informed successful movements in South Africa, Ukraine, Georgia, Indonesia, and East Timor.

Then we would all begin to become aware how people around the globe, this very day, are engaged in nonviolent movements. (See, for example, Eric Stoner?s daily Web page, www.wagingnonviolence.org.)

I agree with Ken. The world urgently needs good people to take up this ministry of teaching Gospel nonviolence. Ken?s program, ?Pace e Bene,? offers an excellent course on nonviolence that can be taken over a weekend or a semester; participants can later become facilitators to bring the course to their local communities.

If we are to widen the understanding and practice of creative nonviolence, many more people will have to teach it. We need to teach nonviolence -- its history, its methodology, its spirituality, its daily practicality -- widely. It needs to be taken into our schools, our churches, our libraries, our government offices, our workplace, our media, our prisons. And this ministry needs to be equal with every other church work, if not central.

Advent reminds us that the whole point of life is God, love, compassion, and peace. Each Advent, we hear eloquent speeches that contradict the president?s. The voices of Advent espouse the wisdom of nonviolence which bears good fruit. Isaiah speaks of a world where swords will be beaten into plowshares, where the study of war falls away, where everyone lives in peace. Mary of Nazareth, in her noble Magnificat, proclaims God?s

nonviolent transformation of the world. John the Baptist calls us to prepare a way for the God of peace. Angels appear, a heavenly choir, and sing during a brutal season of ?peace on earth.? Thank God for these Advent voices! Our true hope lies with them.

As Christmas approaches and I prepare to leave for Gaza, I pray that we will hear their voices, heed their words, and take hope from them. Let us embrace their message and give our lives anew to the nonviolent Jesus and his way, even if we do not understand it all.

The Baptist King and the Hindu Gandhi both walked the nonviolent path of the Gospel. As for Obama, he is set to go the way of all presidents. The lives of King and Gandhi, by contrast, still bear the fruit of peace. Their words and teachings are worth following for they point us back to the methodology and life of Jesus himself.

I hope we can reject the eloquent despair offered last week by President Obama and choose instead the hopeful examples of Gandhi, King and our Advent messengers. As we prepare for Christmas, we turn from war and empire, and look to the margins, among the poor and powerless, the humble and childlike. There we will discover the meaning, presence, wisdom and power of peace.

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John Dear?s latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, along with his recent autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, and his collection of essays, *Put Down the Sword*, and Patti Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For information, see: www.johndear.org.

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