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Contemplative nonviolence should be a key to prayer

John Dear | Feb. 5, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Long ago, Daniel Berrigan told me a tragic story about being invited to speak to a packed church of cloistered nuns somewhere on the East Coast in 1965. They wanted him to read from his latest book of poetry. He did, but then began to quietly denounce the growing U.S. war in Vietnam. The congregation exploded. "How dare you attack our country?" they shouted. "If we don't kill those communists, they'll invade and take over," they said.

Dan was shocked. Here were holy contemplative women who spent seven hours a day in prayer and liturgy advocating death in another land by our country. How could this be? he thought. How is it that prayerful women can support the worst violence of our most violent men? Why do we compartmentalize our private spiritual life, even our communal prayer life, from our public work in the world and the evil that nations do? Shouldn't these North American contemplatives be the first to see the children of Vietnam as our sisters and brothers?

For decades now, Dan Berrigan and I have reflected on the shocking disconnect between prayer and peacemaking. We see it every day everywhere we turn, among every one of us, especially our religious leaders. I, too, could tell many stories about devout religious people who are gung-ho with the latest round of killing our nation's enemies. I'll share one other story.

Years ago, while making a retreat at a contemplative monastery, I met the former abbot and struck up a friendly conversation. He knew of my work for peace and how I had co-authored the Pax Christi "Vow of Nonviolence [1]" and proudly told me how he and three other monks had professed that vow of nonviolence at a liturgy in January 1991, just as the U.S. was embarking upon its first killing spree in Iraq. I was happy to hear this, but then I grew disturbed. "Only four monks professed the vow of nonviolence?" I asked. "What about the rest of the community (some 30 other monks)?" He put his head down and whispered sadly, "The rest of them were all in favor of the war. They are die-hard, patriotic Americans, and fully supported the killing of Iraqis, and I don't know what to do about it."

These extreme examples highlight our common disconnect between prayer and the spiritual life and our support for war and killing. It's an age-old problem -- from the devout Pharisees who fasted and prayed and were hell-bent on killing those who didn't meet their standards to those pious Christians who burned women at the stake and held slaves to the priests who say Mass at the Pentagon or bless nuclear weapons at Los Alamos, N.M. Each year before commencement, ROTC cadets gather at the Alumni Memorial Chapel at Loyola University in Baltimore to profess the U.S. military oath (in front of the Blessed Sacrament) in what I call a "Mass for War." Total blasphemy, as far as I'm concerned. They, on the other hand, are proud of their sacred devotion to America's military. I think they mock Christ and his Gospel.

How did we get this way? Why do we continue this centuries-old legacy of saying our prayers one moment and supporting war and killing the next? What can we do to reconnect our prayer and worship with the Gospel wisdom of peace and nonviolence?

I believe Jesus was perfectly nonviolent, and to claim to discipleship to him requires a new journey of nonviolence. That includes renouncing all violence from warfare to violent self-defense and practicing universal

love and creative nonviolent conflict resolution. It calls for an entirely new kind of prayer life, church life and public life in the world -- indeed, a new kind of church and Christianity, a church and a Christianity synonymous with loving nonviolence.

Thomas Merton is the one who has helped me understand that if we are serious about contemplative prayer, meditation and worship, sooner or later we have to accept the Gandhian/Kingian framework of nonviolence. As people of prayer, we realize and embrace the truth of reality that we are all one human family, one with all creatures, all creation and the Creator, and that our shared unity precludes violence and pushes us toward universal, compassionate, nonviolent love, the love shown by the nonviolent Jesus. Our prayer life imposes boundaries: We cannot be violent to ourselves or others ever again. And it sends us forth on a public mission of disarmament.

Prayer and contemplation are useless if they make us more violent, more supportive of war, more trusting in nuclear weapons for our national security, Merton taught. Indeed, any prayer that fans the flames of violence and war is not authentic prayer, if the prophets and the Gospels are to be believed. All prayer, meditation and contemplation begin and end with nonviolence. To turn to God in prayer is to turn to a Higher Power of Peace, to be disarmed, to be given Christ's resurrection gift of peace, to seek God's reign of nonviolence and to become a disarming presence in a world armed to the teeth. Going from prayer, we become as Jesus taught, "lambs sent into the midst of wolves," not "wolves sent into the midst of lambs."

There is something radically wrong if we are spending time in prayer, going to church on Sundays, reading the Bible, and at the same time hurting others, supporting war, even actively working for war and weapons manufacturers. Contemplative prayer, as Merton taught, leads us to the God of peace, which means it leads us out of the culture of war to the point that it starts to disarm the roots of war within our own broken hearts.

The contemplative life, therefore, is first and foremost a life of *contemplative nonviolence*. Contemplative prayer helps us see beyond the lies of the culture of war to recognize every human being on the planet as our sister and brother and to deepen that communion of peace that was given to us by the God of peace. Contemplatives, therefore, are by their very nature peacemakers, not war-makers.

Contemplative prayer, according to Merton, has political consequences. It's a prayer situated in God's peace that leads to one's ongoing inner disarmament and nonviolent living then pushes us to speak and act for disarmament, justice and peace in the world, as we see in Merton's own unfolding journey.

Merton invited us to practice contemplative nonviolence, but if he was calling us to be people of contemplative nonviolence, that's because we had become people of contemplative violence. Usually, in our prayer, instead of listening in silence, we do all the talking. This narcissistic prayer confirms our illusions and helps us avoid opening our hearts to a mystical, intimate relationship with our creator. We then compartmentalize our lives and blindly go along with the culture of war, supporting its wars through our patriotism and ignorance. But because we are not developing a relationship with the God of peace, we are clueless about God.

Contemplative nonviolence calls for the opposite. Instead of talking, we listen. Instead of making demands on God, God makes demands upon us. Through contemplative nonviolence, we focus on the nonviolent Jesus, and in doing so, begin our own conversion to nonviolence, a beginning that occurs every time we pray. In this contemplative practice, we deal with our inner violence and surrender ourselves to the God of peace, even if we do not want to or understand why we should. We then undergo a cold-turkey withdrawal from violence, much like a drug addict getting off heroin. It's painful and uncomfortable and literally our salvation. In the process, we break down the walls of compartmentalization, start connecting the dots between our lives and the whole human family, see how our violence is linked with the world's violence, integrate everything together in the God of peace, and go forward on the narrow path of nonviolent, compassionate love for ourselves, all humanity and God. By then, we are no longer living a separate "spiritual" life; it's just life -- and life to the fullest.

Contemplative nonviolence means recognizing and studying our inner violence, but not beating ourselves up for it. In prayer, we learn to have compassion toward ourselves and move ahead with nonviolent alternatives so we can have compassion on everyone.

In our contemplative prayer, we enter the presence of the God of peace, and in that loving presence, we are disarmed, literally and figuratively. This inner disarmament cannot be measured. In that prayer, we feel the infinite love of God and are stirred to love ourselves and others, even our enemies. We give God our inner violence and resentments, our hurts and anger, our pain and wounds, our bitterness and vengeance. We grant clemency and forgiveness toward those who have hurt us and move from anger, vengeance and violence to compassion, mercy and nonviolence.

Contemplative nonviolence is a long haul, growing awareness of the depths of the violence within us, our need for the God of peace, letting go of violence, practicing nonviolence, loving others and working publicly for an end to war, poverty, violence and nuclear weapons. We may face opposition and even violence, but this will give us the chance to test our nonviolence, practice the nonviolence of Jesus and forgive those who hurt us.

The quiet, uneventful experience of daily prayer transforms us into peacemakers. If we make contemplative nonviolence a daily practice, over years and decades, we can, like Merton and the saints, begin to offer the gift of Christ's peace. If we go as deep as Merton, we will stand up publicly and speak against war and witness for peace with a new kind of authority, based in the word and presence of the God of peace. Together, then, we can help our communities, churches and church leaders make the connection between prayer and worship, and violence and war, so we might all become people of contemplative nonviolence, help the church reclaim its vocation to be a community of peacemakers, and get on with the work of abolishing war, violence, poverty and nuclear weapons.

Let us pray.

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John Dear will lead a retreat [2] on nonviolence with Roshi Joan Halifax on Feb. 15-17 at the Upaya Zen Monastery in Santa Fe, N.M., and will speak for the abolition of nuclear weapons with Martin Sheen at an international anti-nuclear conference March 2-5 in Oslo, Norway. He will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker [3]," April 5-7 in East Stroudsburg, Pa. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [4]. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* [5]. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [6] explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [7]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [8] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [9], *Put Down Your Sword* [10] and *A Persistent Peace*

[11], are available from Amazon.com.

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