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Our image of God

John Dear | Jan. 9, 2007 On the Road to Peace

Just before Christmas, Daniel Berrigan and I spent an evening with Franciscan priest and teacher Richard Rohr at the new Catholic Worker house in Albuquerque, N.M. A blizzard swirled outside, and the conversation inside swirled nearly as briskly. Dan and I had spent the day touring Los Alamos. And we came away shocked by business as usual, an entire culture, a worldview, a way of being, built around the Bomb.

A culture of peace, on the other hand, rises from the Catholic Worker, and the conversation soon turned to the non-violent Jesus and the God of peace. Richard said he now thinks the church's ancient teaching of a theology of sacrifice has helped bring about our culture of violence. For eons, we've been told that God, out of some vague need, variously explained over the centuries, required Jesus to be killed in order to save us. The time has arrived, Richard said, for a new theology of non-violent atonement, a theology that upholds the non-violence of God and Jesus.

Richard has thought this through. He cites St. Paul's letters to the Philippians and Colossians, both of which poetically and accurately characterize Jesus as the "the image of the invisible God." If the portrait rings true, then all we've believed about divine violence proves false.

Jesus reveals a God of perfect non-violent love. Throughout his life, death, and resurrection, he manifested perfect love, compassion and non-violence. "Nothing changed on Calvary," Richard said. Jesus was non-violent before, during and after. After his death, he punished no one, condemned no one, sought revenge against no one. His life rises to the ultimate revelation of divine non-violence.

I heartily agree with Richard Rohr. The hallmark of the Gospel message is the summons to love God, neighbor -- and even our enemies. Surprisingly, Jesus commands us to love our enemies not because it is the right, the moral, or the practical thing to do. He commands it because God loves enemies. God lavishes love widely, promiscuously, universally.

Jesus says, do likewise "that you may be children of your heavenly God, for God makes the sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. So be perfect just as your heavenly God is perfect" (Mt. 5:45-8). Here is non-violence showered upon every human being. And Christians are called to follow suit.

The Gospel portrays Jesus' non-violence as the ultimate scandal. Even the disciples recoil. The scandal and recoiling go on. Today Christians support the war on Iraq, cheer the execution of the condemned, build nuclear weapons at Los Alamos. One concludes that the notion of a non-violent God is just too much to bear. We rarely

take a moment to ponder it. And to some degree we, all of us, pursue a false image of God. One that wishes to banish us to hell, that prefers us to suffer, that blesses injustice and war -- a god, so to speak, made in our own violent image. And thus we walk through life undisturbed by revenge, punishment, executions and war. At Los Alamos, we see it plain: We worship the false god of war.

But the Gospel holds up Jesus' non-violence in an honorific light. If he is indeed the image of the invisible God, then God is non-violent because Jesus was meticulously so. This is, in my view, the opening to mystery and divinity. St. Ignatius seems to have had similar notions. Jesuit spirituality long ago directed the seeker to reflect on his or her image of God. Ignatius knew it was critical to our lives, our spirituality, our faith, our future. Whom do we worship? What is our image of God? Is our God violent or non-violent?

Gandhi, too, drew attention to one's image of God and shed a measure of light on the social and political implications. Imagine God as violent, he suggested, and worship devolves into the countenancing of scapegoating and bloodletting, by our hand or in our name. Revenge and war proceed apace -- and us scarcely batting an eye. In such a time as this, we risk dooming ourselves to global annihilation.

But imagine God as non-violent, and worship takes on the fragrance of peace. We enter a deep mystery and bow our heads in awe and wonder and finally, ever so gradually, in imitation of the God of love, evolve into people of non-violence and peace.

The culture of war discounts all this. Its grumbling takes a form something like this: Such talk is tantamount to heresy. Let go of the vengeful image of God and what becomes of boundaries? What becomes of order? Worse, such talk amounts to flagrant defiance, stubborn nonconformity, perhaps an act of resistance punishable by law! It always tries to instruct us on the nature of God, the definition of sin and morality, the way to be Christian, even human. It knows only "sacred" violence and a god of thunderbolts and fury. And mushroom clouds.

Thus the task at hand: to envision the God of peace. For our souls and for the world. The more we envision and grasp the image of the God of peace, the more we'll fathom Jesus' teachings, comprehend how to be human, become a peacemaking church of all-inclusive love, and come upon a way or two to help disarm a world armed to the teeth.

Theology, say the professors, is "God talk," simply put, talking about God. Ignatius and Gandhi engaged in it. Richard, Daniel, and I, along with our Catholic Worker friends, engaged in it. And I hope we can all keep at that spiritual conversation, sharing our reflections on Jesus and the God of peace, so that we grow in faith and get drawn more and more into the mystery of divine non-violence.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*, will be published next month by Doubleday (and can be pre-ordered from Amazon.com). For further reflections on the image of a God of peace, see John's Doubleday book, *Living Peace*. Visit www.johndear.org [1].

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