

Understanding our faith
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Pacifism is a faith conviction

Commentary

Teaching

Is pacifism an “absolute” for Christians?

A challenge often presented to Christian pacifists is the assertion that simply having strong feelings about our position is not a persuasive reason for others to accept them. While we may have clarity based on our own feelings, like all feelings they are nonetheless personal and subjective—people with other points of view have equally strong feelings.

In response to such a challenge, I would begin by saying that we are not talking so much about “faith based *feelings*” as about what I would call personal faith *convictions*. When I talk about pacifism I am not talking about my feelings,

I am talking about the convictions that shape my entire being.

These convictions are very much based on reason, on experience, on

biblical study, on observation, on my understanding of reality outside myself. They have to do with my awareness of the objective God (that exists outside of my subjectivity and projection) and God’s will, not my own feelings.

I believe there is a significant difference between saying that a conviction is “personal” and saying that it is “subjective.” To me, “personal” connotes that I am involved in the knowledge, that my perceptions and commitments and values shape what I know. By definition, I think all faith-knowledge and all moral-knowledge are personal.

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That faith-knowledge is personal does make conversation difficult. Certainly we cannot simply impose our faith-knowledge on others and unerringly prove its absolute truthfulness. However, I do not believe that that difficulty means that all personal knowledge is purely subjective. That is, personal knowledge is not simply relativistic, nor do we each simply define truth only for our own individual selves.

I believe we can talk about genuine truth and a hierarchy of values that exist outside of our subjectivity. However, because faith-oriented and moral truths are personal, we can not say they are strictly objective.

In thinking about an issue such as pacifism and love of enemies, we can and, in fact, must, think not only in terms of our personal experiences and opinions, but we also must struggle with “public” information. For example, the teachings of the Bible may be diverse and complicated, but they are not inscrutable or hopelessly self-contradictory. Likewise, neither the teachings and experiences of our faith tradition nor the findings of science (broadly defined) are inscrutable nor hopelessly self-contradictory. Biblical teaching, tradition and science all offer us crucial data for ascertaining the truthfulness of pacifism.

Our big challenge is to find ways to transcend the either/or of either authoritarianism (where we impose our views on others) or relativism (which denies any objectivity). We need to struggle to find ways to accept the reality of truth without closing the conversation or making the discernment process less open.

I believe that a commitment to pacifism can help one in this struggle, since genuine pacifism can never be coercive when it advocates for truth.