

**The National Council of Churches in Australia
Faith and Unity Commission's studies for the
Decade to Overcome Violence**

This Decade began in 2001 so that the churches, ecumenical organizations and people of goodwill would:

- work together for peace, justice and reconciliation at all levels – local regional and global;
- embrace creative approaches to peace-building which are consonant with the Spirit of the Gospel, and to interact and collaborate with local communities, secular movements and people of other living faiths towards cultivating a culture of peace;
- empower people who are systematically oppressed by violence and act in solidarity with those struggling for peace, justice and the integrity of creation;
- provide opportunities for us to repent together for our complicity in violence;
- engage in theological reflection to overcome the spirit, logic and practice of violence.

In 2002, it was agreed that members of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) Faith and Unity Commission would discuss the theological implications of this decade from their own tradition, and in so doing contribute towards the development of a bibliography of theological publications. Not all writers provided references, but further research can be done by checking the websites of the various contributing members, and references are provided at the end of this article.

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The `absolute pacifism' of the Quakers¹ is illustrated in their assurance to King Charles II in 1660/1 that they would not take up arms against the King because of their commitment to their faith in Jesus Christ, the `universal Saviour, the Light that lightens everyone'. This assurance failed to protect the Quakers from repression and later discrimination, but English Quakers have continued their protest against war since that time. In the United States, the pacifist resolve of Quakers was tested by the American Civil War, primarily because the contributing cause was the emancipation of slaves. Over the centuries, Quakers have had to deal with the consequences of their pacifism especially when conscription was in place, and various forms of exemption or substitution had to be found. While the basis for Quaker pacifism remains the leading of the Holy Spirit, Quaker communities, as with other historic peace churches and Christian communities, discuss the various attributes and possible responses to recent acts of violence and declarations of war e.g. the September 11th 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, the American-led attacks on Afghanistan and invasion of Iraq. So the discussion of Christian faith, pacifism, international politics and participation in actions against war and invasion continue within Quaker circles, and Hauerwas was suggested as a resource for discussion on the Just War theory and Pacifism.²

The issue of language was identified by the Commission as very pertinent to discussions of this topic by Christians; the language of the Scriptures that affect our understanding of God, the language of worship and the language of our tradition.

In discussing the language of the Scriptures, it was noted³ that there is much violence, seen especially, but not only, in the conquering of the land narratives of the Old Testament.⁴ But in the New Testament also, the tone of language, especially when speaking of the Jews, is described as `promoting violence'⁵ and has certainly provided the justification for violence against the Jews throughout the centuries. But what of the

¹ Paper by Bill Jaggs, The Quaker Peace Testimony

² Hauerwas, Stanley, `Ten Years and Counting: Christianity and the end of war', abc.net.au/religion/articles. Also Hauerwas, Stanley, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the practice of non-violence*, 2004

³ Paper by the Rev Prof. Christiaan Mostert, `God and Violence'

⁴ Herman Hendrickx, *A Time for Peace: Reflections on the Meaning of Peace and Violence in the Bible*, London SPCK 1988

⁵ Michael Desjardines, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1997

nature of God? There are certainly incidents where God is deemed to have intervened to directly punish wrongdoers e.g. Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1-11) and judgement for those who do not respond positively to invitations to the wedding feast is eternal torment, with weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 22:1-14). Jesus himself is shown to demonstrate anger and violent behaviour towards the money-changers and merchants in the temple (Matt.21:12-3). The challenge to the Scripture-reader, however, is to read these texts Christologically and soteriologically, in the light of the Gospel and a God who “renounces power and becomes powerless in a world of political power, who in the person of the Son who allows himself to be pushed out of the world on a cross.”⁶ While Christians must continue to read the texts and weigh one against the other in the light of current events, the ultimate measure is the God who loves, who acts in love, the type of love expressed in a God who sends Jesus into the world, so that the world might have eternal life.

Language used in worship⁷ is also an important matter, as we usually sing and pray with less consideration than we give to the study of scripture. Often the words of hymns speak of incidents within the Testaments, - *Sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously! Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea!* (Exod.15:21) – but there can be no attempt at exegesis at this point. While language is described as shaping and forming our world, in worship it does more than make statements; it evokes emotion and enables commitments.⁸ Christian worship uses words rarely part of modern discourse, yet for the Christian they evoke meaning far beyond the words themselves e.g. shepherd, King and Lord. The hymn *Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before* may well evoke a ‘military’ feeling but it is known to be a hymn based on Scripture that encourages the Christian in their daily life to disciplined devotion. The challenge for the leader of liturgy and the Christian participant, whether reading the text or singing the hymn is to acknowledge that militaristic words are present, but the constant theme is that it is God present in weakness, and that our task, as with Jesus, is to be for the will of God in the world – to walk in God’s holy will and commandments.

A Christian tradition that has militaristic language in the forefront is the Salvation Army.⁹ established in a militaristic and imperialistic age, but with a specific focus to attack the sin of the world that left people hungry, in poverty, imprisoned and without a knowledge and love of God in Christ. At its best, the Salvation Army uses militaristic language to encourage people in their ‘campaign for Christ’, and, it is argued, reminds people that while they are engaged in work for God’s kingdom it is an ‘already, but not yet’ dimension. While Salvationists also would be involved in the ‘making peace’ activities of the 21st century, it is believed Christians – and the Church – need to be aware that we still live in a world where there is much antagonism to those of the Christian faith and the fight against the consequences of sin remain.

Another historical perspective was highlighted¹⁰ in a paper discussing ‘public’ or ‘canonical’ penance, practiced between the 4th and 8th century, and the chief characteristics being excommunication, penance and reconciliation. This rite was developed as a sort of second baptism, and like baptism, could only be received once. This rite was exercised as a result of ‘serious’ sin (apostasy, murder, adultery) and the practice was developed and formalized within communities, and regulated by synods or councils. Whether the sin was public or unknown, the request to undertake the penance was taken by the sinner to the Bishop and the sinner added to the list of penitents. While the process could be undertaken over many years – or even a lifetime, the significance is that the penitent was acknowledging their sin, and although they may be excluded from certain parts of the liturgy while going through the penance process, was still very much part of the community. The practice died out in the 8th century, probably because for some they remained ‘inferior’ Christians, and were unable to hold civil office. This interesting model from the past that took seriously the social consequences of sin, would probably be unable to be exercised today because we, in general, have lost the sense of being a member of a close community – but it does raise the question of how the church better shapes its rituals to not only acknowledge sin but strengthen forgiveness and reconciliation.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Prayers from Prison*, London, Collins, 1953

⁷ Paper by The Revd Charles Sherlock, ‘Military Language – promoting violence?’

⁸ A. Thistleton, *Language, Liturgy and Meaning*, Grove Liturgical Series 2

⁹ Paper by Major Jim Weymouth, ‘A Salvation Army Perspective’

¹⁰ Paper by The Revd. Dr. Gerard Kelly, ‘The Church’s Practice of Penance’

Moving from the specifics of Christian traditions, the Commission received a paper focusing on violence and religious response.¹¹ Girard, in noting that violence is generated by mimetic (characterised by, exhibiting, or of the nature of mimicry or imitation) desire, suggests that religious prohibitions and rituals make the most sense when undertaken to prevent mimetic rivalry from spreading or spiralling out of control. The ritual of sacrifice (the scapegoat effect) is believed to resolve the mimetic crisis by collective murder or expulsion – the sacrificial victim receives the violence that otherwise would be enacted on members of the community.¹² For the sacrifice to be effective and not merely murder/ slaughter, it must be framed by ritual, laws that govern and control the process. Modern Western society has tended to replace ritualized sacrifice with a judicial system - a sovereign authority replacing private vengeance. The biblical text also opens up alternatives to sacrifice, but continuing to name violence as such. In the teachings of Jesus we not only have a non-violent life, but a re-emphasising of the words of Hosea: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Matt 9:13). This challenges those who consider the death of Christ as a sacrifice, a death required by a violent God – the Christ of the Gospels dies against sacrifice, and through his death, he reveals its nature and origin by making sacrifice unworkable.¹³ The cause of the death of Jesus is love of one's neighbour lived out, Jesus refusing to compromise with violence so that his death comes at the hands of violent human beings – not at the hand of a vengeful God. This paper concludes: Gospel logic demands that there be no hesitation in giving one's life in order not to kill, in order that the circle of murder and death might be broken.

This collection of papers reflects various theological views, and are provided as a resource for further study as Christians in 21st century Australia continue to further the discussion and work for peace, acknowledging violence in our history, texts and liturgy. For further reading and reflection see below,¹⁴ and references cited by the authors of papers.¹⁵

As at June 2012

¹¹ Paper by Dr. Merryl Blair, 'Rene Girard – Violence and the Sacred'

¹² Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore/London, John Hopkins University Press, 1977

¹³ Rene Girard, "Mimesis and violence, perspectives in cultural criticism", *Berkshire Review*, 1979, **14**, pp 9-19

¹⁴ The website of the World Council of Churches, www.oikoumene.org, and more specifically www.overcomingviolence.org/en/resources-dov/wcc-resources.html

¹⁵ References cited by authors include:

- Walter Burkett, Rene Girard and Jonathan Smith, *Violent Origins*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987
- Rene Girard, *The Girard Reader*, (James G. Williams ed) New York, Crossroad, 1996
- Rene Girard, 'Mimesis and violence: perspectives in cultural criticism' *Berkshire Review*, 1979, **14**, pp 9-19
- Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1986
- Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992
- Brian Wren 'Onward Christian Rambos? The Case against Battle Symbolism in Hymns', *Journal of the Hymn Society of America*, 1987
- Brian Wren *What language shall I borrow*, London SCM, 1989
- Hans Kung, *Global responsibility: In search of a New World*, London SCM (New York Continuum) 1991
- WCC Faith and Order team, 'Nurturing Peace, Overcoming Violence: In the way of Christ for the sake of the world' WCC 2003,
- Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 'Religions and Violence: An Analytical Synthesis', *Current Dialogue*, Issue 37, WCC June 2001