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Book Review: Choosing Peace: The Catholic Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence

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***Choosing Peace: The Catholic Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence* by Marie Dennis, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. ISBN 9781626982703 (pbk), ISBN 9781608337361 (e-book).**

Abstract

Choosing Peace is an edited collection of essays, reflections, and testimonies of participants at the Conference on Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding and Commitment to Nonviolence, held in Rome between April 11 and 13, 2016.

The overarching theme of the book is nonviolence and just peace, their relationship to the gospel of nonviolence, and usefulness in the twenty-first century. A subtheme that refuses to go away, and the backdrop to the quest for nonviolence and just peace, is just war.

*These themes turn on four distinct but related views on war and peace historically associated with Christianity, and in this book, the Catholic Church, namely: Pacifism, Just War, Total War and World Community. While some of these approaches are not the central focus of this book, *Choosing Peace* is a rich and rewarding contribution to the current debate on just peace and just war.*

*Over the years, the Catholic Church has emphasized pacifism while also defending just war under the rubrics of last resort, legitimate defense, and humanitarian intervention, among others. *Choosing Peace* perceives just war tradition as failing to orient itself convincingly in relation to underlying causes and conspicuous effects of war and other forms of violence across the globe. This has led a number of contributors to challenge the dominance of just war tradition: to raise doubts not simply about its response to these causes and effects, to questions about its legitimacy today, but more importantly, about the very logic of just war tradition. In recent years, these doubts have extended to the idea of discipleship itself in the 21st century. In general, *Choosing Peace* is not convinced any violent conflict today legitimizes just war, under whichever rubric.*

Consequently, the book has attempted to redirect the attention of the Catholic Church away from just war to pacifist ideals characteristic of the life and teaching of Jesus, hence a sustained attempt to reinvigorate discipleship in accordance with the gospel nonviolence. However, it remains utopic in this quest, as demands of discipleship such as turning the other cheek might be unrealistic in the contexts sustained terrorist activity, to say the least. Moreover, its claim to spiritual and moral basis further complicates things.

The book opens in the Preamble with a message from Pope Francis urging abolition of war, while also rightly acknowledging the inevitability of just war. A part from chapter 10, which concerns itself with the Pope's World Day of Peace message 2017, others begin with a quote from Pope Francis's reflection on the topic, creating a false impression of monologue. The introduction briefly explains central concepts of nonviolence or active nonviolence and just peace but says nothing about just war. Not that such is required; however, a book that claims a paradigm shift might do well to define both paradigms to forestall any misunderstanding.

Chapter 1 makes the case for nonviolence and just peace. First, it questions the centrality of just war tradition as a Christian approach to war and peace because of challenges intrinsic to its theory,

language and practice. Importantly, it claims that just war is inconsistent with Jesus' unconditional love- love of enemies- that eschews any form of violence. Second, it points out that strategic nonviolent practices have proved effective in the past, and academic research corroborates this: "nonviolence resistance strategies are twice as effective as violent ones." Therefore, it appeals to the Catholic Church to recommit to the gospel of nonviolence modelled along Jesus' unconditional love. However, this vision also has its own challenges, namely: nonviolence has been misconstrued and misrepresented in terms of its concepts and practice, insufficient financial and human investment to develop effective practices for sociopolitical purposes. Additionally, the shift from just war to just peace framework is neither fully understood nor institutionalized, and its pastoral implications remain inaccessible to most Catholics. Moreover, it is not immune to abuse and there is no guarantee of success.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of violence across continents and helpfully examines its political and economic drivers. Chapter 3 reflects on cases of nonviolent strategies that foster human dignity, including dialogue, mediation and reconciliation. Chapter 4 discusses scriptural evidence of Jesus' practice of nonviolence, summed up in the Sermon on the Mount, and indicates the implication of that to the twenty-first century. Jesus was born into a society fraught with violence. The Jews had three responses: "flight, fight, or accommodate." One faction fled to the desert and secluded themselves from others. The priests and Herodians accommodated Roman rule, in turn, they practiced their religion, wielded some power and created wealth. The Pharisees resisted Roman rule and fought. Jesus proffered a fourth way- the way of the cross, with important ramifications to discipleship. That is, an inclusive community embracing adversarial others through nonviolent "loving, willing-to –risk suffering action" (Matt 5:44): "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He calls upon his followers to resist violence and make peace as he himself did without being violent. This is at the heart of the sermon of the Mount, the *Magna Carta* of Christian nonviolence.

Chapters 5 and 6 espouse Catholic understanding and practice of nonviolence. The Church professes commitment to nonviolence in its teaching and practice. Generally, Just Peace interprets this to imply a rejection of just war. However, that should not be the case. The purpose of just war is to "restrain" rather than "validate" war. Like nonviolence strategies, just war aims at sustainable peace. Therefore, there is no sharp distinction between the two approaches. Chapter 9 further buttresses this view. It endorses a "highly restrictive interpretation" of just war that allows use of force "for extraordinary strong reasons." This view has the merit of preserving the tradition while constantly developing appropriate nonviolent approaches to address new challenges. In Chapter 7, the book outlines the importance and effectiveness of nonviolence approaches in the past century, and acknowledges important contributions Gene sharp, Peter Ackerman, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Desmond Tutu, and several others and influential movements. Chapter 8 points out the importance of modelling Catholic just peace practice along the life of Jesus- the "Shalom incarnate" and elaborates ways it can be useful to peacebuilding- counterterrorism strategies, and interrogating the use of nuclear weapons, armed drones, civil war, among others. Positively it can influence a robust Catholic theology, theory and praxis. Chapter 10 reiterates commitment to the gospel of nonviolence by living it. The conclusion continues the conversation as it urges the Catholic Church to use its vast resources in developing and fostering nonviolent practices and

strategies, to provide leadership towards this end, collaborate with peace-building organizations, other Christian churches and faiths, and organizations in favor of nonviolence and just peace.

Choosing Peace is an engaging excursus on nonviolence and just peace, a rewarding reading of the gospel of nonviolence, and important contribution to nonviolence theory and practice. The chapters on nonviolence and just peace and their interaction with the gospel are particularly helpful. They do a thorough job corroborating their claims with Church documents and scriptural evidence. Inclusion of personal experiences vividly drive the point home but does not always work in favor of the central theme as some buttress the view that just war is simply unavoidable in certain situations. However, the last aspect, the twenty-first century, does not receive the desired attention despite being an important part of the theme. Additionally, only one chapter directly addresses just war, yet a number mention and imply it. In fact, if nonviolence /just peace is the protagonist, just war is the antagonist. Importantly, the claim to spiritual and moral roots makes the book appear more religious than it perhaps should. Overall, Choosing Peace is a rich and rewarding contribution to the current debate on just peace and just war, and is worth reading.

Reference

Fahey, Joseph J. (2018) "An Overview of Four Traditions on War and Peace in Christian History," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, 7-21

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