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Series: **Worship Workbench**

Issue: **Essay 183 + October, 2013**

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OBSEQUIOUS BEFORE THE EMPEROR Christians and War

1 All the major Western nations these days pay lip service to the independence of both church and state. The “separation of church and state” is taken more seriously in some states than others, but it’s generally recognized, in the West, that it’s a Bad Thing when governments have too large a role in the business of any established religion. And vice versa: When religious concerns have too much influence in State affairs.

2 Of course it’s still the Archbishop of Canterbury who crowns the King or Queen in the United Kingdom: a ceremony largely empty of any real meaning, still to many a charming but quaint holdout of Medievalism. And only in my own lifetime has the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden, for example, cut its ties officially with its own government. (But are Swedish parish clergy still expected to serve as record keepers for the Government in terms of local births, baptisms, marriages and deaths? I’m certain this was true 40 years ago. Does that Medieval symbiosis still pertain? I don’t know...)

3 I’ve cited to you in [Essay 73](#) – long before the issue of same-sex marriage ever arose to complicate the matter – that as a young pastor, I was from the moment of my ordination uncomfortable with the State requirement that I mail the details of any marriage I solemnized to City Hall. I am a servant of the Church, after all, not of the State. That official State record-keeping by Christian clergy seemed then – still seems! – an unwholesome crossing of boundaries.

4 Well then. How about Christians participating in their nation’s wars? That’s what I’m getting at in these paragraphs. And I’m arguing here that it’s long overdue for the Christian Churches to follow the pioneering example of the Quakers and Mennonites, and actually practice what Jesus preached: Non-violence.

5 You’ve heard the witness of the young Gandhi, when asked if the Christian faith was attractive to him as a Hindu? He replied something like this: “Oh yes. I love the message of Jesus. Now if I ever met a Christian...”

6 Actually to live out the Christian Gospel. That's what I'm advancing in this posting. To live as Jesus did, as a model of non-violence.

7 And, as I've argued before in these postings, notably [Essay 73](#), world history has long since left behind the 1700 year period I would describe as the Constantinian Era. That's the period between the mid-Fourth Century and the mid-Twentieth Century when the Christian Church enjoyed unseemly power, prestige, and privilege.

8 We don't live there anymore. Today we're living in what I would call a Post-Constantinian Era.

9 Some have described our times as "Post-Christian." I'd never use that term. The world will never be "Post Christian." There will always be a Christian witness, however enfeebled or marginalized. I'd be willing to agree we're at the end of "Christendom" today. But "Christendom" is simply another term for my "Constantinian Era."

10 And, as I argued in [Essay 73](#), the Constantinian Era – "Christendom," if you like – was itself a kind of Captivity for the Church, a time of unwholesome perversion of the Gospel of the Man who was Friend to the Poor. Summoning my title for this piece, we Christians during that Era were too Obsequious Before the Emperor.

11 Especially when it comes to Christians' participating in the Emperor's wars.

12 So I'm proposing for the Christian Church today a rejection of the Emperor's claims upon us. I'm proposing that the Christian Church revert to its previous, original – that is, Apostolic – stance of "over-against" the Emperor. I'm proposing that Christians never again blindly acquiesce to the Emperor's request for endorsements to the Empire's wars. Wars today are simply too horrible for Christians to endorse.

13 Even Augustine's Five Standards for a Just War (see [Essay 132](#)) belong to a long-past Constantinian Era. My argument in [Essay 132](#) is that Augustine specifically designed them for a just-emerging "Christendom."

14 And, risking the psychologizing of Augustine's motives – risking, that is, to shrink his head – I'd maintain he never expected *any* war to be justifiable, measured by his impossibly high Standards. I'm a fan of Augustine, and I want to cut him some slack. Even in wars when combatants were hacking at one another with broadswords, war was pretty horrible. Plenty *un*-justifiable!

15 Augustine knew that, but at the same time wanted to make a gesture towards answering the Emperor's claims, acquiescing to the Emperor's legitimacy.

16 But it's time now for Christians to turn our backs on the Emperor's claims to our allegiance. Time to admit we no longer live in a Constantinian Era. Time to follow the claims of Christ and resist obsequiousness before the Emperor. I see several implications of this conviction for those who follow Jesus; I list them below in increasing order of serious personal cost and consequence. And I offer a positive word in

conclusion.

17 First and most important, be certain to regard all combatants in war with the same compassion and pity that you extend to war's victims. War brutalizes those on both ends of the gun. Those military personnel who return from conflict will be bearing terrible wounds, physical, emotional, and psychological. Be prepared to accept the burdens of caring for them with dignity, humanity and compassion as long as they live. You need not endorse or celebrate what combatants have done in war. That's precisely what the Emperor and his minions in the media want. [Essay 132](#) again. But you owe it to them, to yourself, and to your Gospel to treat them with compassion, lovingkindness, and pity...

18 Resist all efforts to accept a "good guys – bad guys" view of any conflict. There will be more than enough blame to be distributed on all parties to any war. Read Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke* (Simon and Schuster 2008) ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-6784-4....

19 Be aware of the pernicious role the media play in beating the drum for the Emperor's unholy enterprises. The Fourth Estate – newspaper, radio, TV – has been notoriously reluctant through the ages to criticize or to challenge the Emperor's designs...

20 Be aware further of the strings that are pulling the Emperor himself in decisions made and postures adopted. The military-industrial complex is most often behind the scenes in all human warfare: an adversary's resources to be plundered, an enemy's positions to be toppled. War is good for business. You can be certain that many multi-national corporations are making a bundle whenever human blood is spilled in war...

21 Consider with some soul-searching the baleful influence of today's team sports and video games in fostering a violent approach to conflict among today's youth. Hockey and football in particular strike me as promoting an unnecessary and dehumanizing violent mindset among young people...

22 Be prepared, if necessary, to quit your job in any industry that manufactures weapons of human destruction. And in any industry in their supply chain. Be prepared to withdraw and redirect any investments you might have in such industries...

23 Refuse to serve in your nation's military. Insist on conscientious objection to all future wars. Resist serving even in a non-combatant role that nevertheless supports a war effort...

24 You ask: What about a response to the violence of a Hitler, a Stalin, a Ho Chi Minh? My answer to violent evil would be the same as the Quakers', who speak of a Third Way. A) You do not resist violence with violence. B) Neither do you simply capitulate to violence. C) You seek – and find – a Third Way. There is always – always – a Third Way. If our statesmen and diplomats cannot find that Third Way, they have simply failed us...

25 But be sure to note: That life-affirming, non-violent Third Way can be very costly indeed. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. – and Jesus of Nazareth! – all paid for their principles with their lives...

26 Refuse, like Quakers and Mennonites, to allow your church body to provide chaplains for the military. Despite heroic efforts by conscientious individual Chaplains, Christian-sponsored chaplaincies in the military run the risk of obscuring the strict church-state distinctions that concern me here. Are chaplains serving on behalf of the Church? Or on behalf of the State, the Emperor? It is surely legitimate at least to pose the question...

27 Refuse to pay that portion of income tax devoted to supporting a war effort. The United States alone produces forty percent of all the world's military materiel. Forty percent of all the bombs dropped on innocent populations in the last two generations bear the legend "Made in America by Christians." Canadians are not exempt from this charge. There was a time in the not-too-distant past when Canadian armed forces were admired world wide for their role as peace-keepers. No longer...

28 Aside: Your government will find ways of taking any money you withhold, in spite of your intentions, you can be sure. Perhaps it's prudent to put all such tax monies you withhold in some kind of escrow account...

29 Now for a more positive word. Violence infects contemporary civilizations, East and West, at all levels: in our homes, in our neighbourhoods, in our international relations. As a "sickness unto death." Walter Brueggemann suggests a positive response to violence, citing what I have called Eschatological Prolepsis ([Essay 30](#)), in a splendid quotation in his *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Fortress Press 1988) ISBN 0-8006-2044-5. I'll quote it in full from page 164:

30 "[A] simple but guiding principle [is] to start doing the thing you think should be done, and to start being what you think society should become. Do you believe in freedom of speech? Then speak freely. Do you love the truth? Then tell it. Do you believe in an open society? Then act in the open. Do you believe in a decent and humane society? Then behave decently and humanely."

31 To which I add: "Do you believe in peace and non-violence? Then refuse to act violently; refuse to bear arms." Only when Christians begin to take their vocation seriously will we see any change in human affairs.

32 People can change. We are not prisoners of our past. It's surely time for Christians to heed the words and examples of our finest teachers: Mahatma ("Great Soul") Gandhi, Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr.

33 And Jesus of Nazareth.

34 A final wonderful quote from Gandhi: Reporters asked him at the conclusion of his tour of the USA, "Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western Civilization?" Gandhi's

reply: "I think it would be a good idea."

35 Hah!

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