The Relationship Between War, Religious Expansion

When I attended a community Remembrance Day service, I placed a wreath on behalf of our church. It was an important event in the life of our community. I take these opportunities in ministry seriously because I value and honor all those who have given the ultimate sacrifice. They bring to mind the sacrifice of our Lord.

As a practicing ethicist, however, I continue to reflect on the relationship between war and the advancement of religion. Perhaps it’s my background as a historian when I read the original accounts of the Crusades and other wars in which my own religious tradition has been heavily engaged. Or maybe it’s the result of my reading the numerous accounts and interpretations of the role of religions in the recent Balkan, Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Let me be bold: There is a connection between militarism and religious expansionism.

Protestants and Evangelicals talk about world evangelism and Roman Catholics speak of global evangelization. That’s part of what Christians in general see as their fidelity to the Great Commission of Jesus. As a vocabulary of global cultural forces, these terms can describe the same objective: territorial expansion of a religious tradition.

If attached to international regional idealism as a “carrier,” a religious tradition can grow exponentially through militarism.
For ten centuries, the West has been associated with Christian civilization. Recent writers like Philip Jenkins (“The Lost History of Christianity,” 2008) have clearly and painfully shown how Christianity in the East in the same time frame slid into obscurity and has been almost completely overtaken by Islam. Huge territorial losses have occurred in the virtual motherlands of Christianity.

In the West, however, Christianity has diversified itself and developed institutions and aggressive forms of propagation and territorial conquest. In North America, Canada and the United States are referred to as historically and predominantly “Christian” nations with clear evangelical ideological overtones.

In Latin America, the majority of nations are considered “Catholic” in religious and political orientation and that privileged status is carefully safeguarded.

Together, Protestants, Evangelicals and Catholic Christians “own” a huge ideological land mass.

We are loath to allow any significant interference in the West, let alone any invasion of a non-Christian religious tradition. The tragedy of 9/11 and the recent flare-up over the potential placement of a mosque near Ground Zero in New York City both uniquely illustrate this hemispheric protectionism.

There is a troubling debate over whether it was a band of al Qaida extremists or Islam that brought down the World Trade Center.

Islam is also a missionary religion. From its earliest development, Islam calls upon individuals to submit to God and seeks those who will follow the five pillars. Collectively, Islamic tribal and military leaders swept across the medieval Middle East and North Africa organizing Muslim states. Later, modern nation states were shaped around the principles of Islam. Today, Islam is the fastest growing major religion globally, where, in some cases like Turkey, there is a gradual shift from a multi-religious state to a hegemonic Islamic religious political state.

Next door, parachuting a new Christian presence in Baghdad by the Coalition of
the Willing is thus seen as a serious offense to Islamic supremacy in one of its heartlands.

Try to imagine what Christian expansionism via military occupation looks like from within the Islamic world. The launching and sustaining of Western wars in predominantly non-Christian regions like Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan is not easily separated from the perception of Christian proselytism.

What the Christian West has not been permitted to accomplish by crusades and United Nations protectorates can be accomplished in an expedited way by military “liberation” from oppressive dictatorships and the long-term Western military occupation of non-Christian nations.

As Muslim clerics see it, with the forward advance of contemporary Western armies comes a triumphalist ideological victory. The presence of thousands of NATO troops and thousands more support personnel and institutions, requiring religious support for their well-being, creates the real possibility of conversion to Christianity. A climate of fear and resistance to Western ideals, and Christianity in particular, emerges.

Toleration of Christian minorities gives way to persecution.

Politically moderate Islamic nations like Jordan and Egypt have been forced to make huge cultural concessions to accommodate the defeat of neighboring rogue regimes. Their desire to maintain ties with the West has often been costly, as in Lebanon. The push-back from suppressed sectarian Islamic groups from Gaza to Pakistan has been significant: roadside bombs, destruction of religious sites and assassinations of religious moderates.

Can this cycle be broken?

Can Christians begin to comprehend how their core values are compromised by close identification with national or regional regimes? Must the Gospel of Peace be complicit in militarism?
We need a new paradigm of interfaith relationships.

The answer may lie with a re-thinking of religious toleration. In today’s world, if Western Christians, particularly Baptists, are serious about genuine religious peace as a Christian virtue and a basic human right, we must develop what I call a “non-Christian sensitivity.”

Our long-cherished principle of religious toleration must move from a grudging patience with other religions to in-depth mutual understanding, interfaith engagement and cooperation in projects of ethical concern.

We really have to separate supposed national security objectives from the core tenets of Jesus’ teaching. We must recognize that in a world in which wars of choice and global terrorism can be seen as counter-expressions of religious expansionism, Jesus never taught violence as a means of pleasing God or extending God’s reign.

Furthermore, the early church was no ally of Roman imperialism. That’s our heritage as a spiritual counterculture.

Even more, within the Christian West, Christian leaders must not tolerate the warping of Jesus’ teachings to fit national or hemispheric geo-political/military objectives. If we are truly to realize our identity as “Christian” citizens, we must hold our leaders accountable with an authentic understanding of Christianity.

I do not believe Christians should be passive while their governments over-extend themselves and behave like military “super powers.” It is immoral and theologically abusive to think that God’s blessing lies upon anything like ideological expansionism of any kind.

War and the gospel of peace are incompatible.

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