# Acting on Belief: Christian Perspectives on Suffering and Violence

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## *Contemporary Activism and Religious Ethics*

One of the major questions of the day in international relations is what type of ethics should guide our behavior in contemporary conflicts and crises. Over the past decade this issue has generated a tremendous surge of interest in the role of humanitarian action and norms, as well as in the practical question of what non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can and should do to help.[1] At the turn of the millennium, there is also a widespread sense, expressed especially in the media but also in scholarly work, that we should reexamine our Enlightenment worldviews in order to understand the influence of religion on world politics.[2] Scholarly work rarely brings concerns regarding humanitarian ethics and religion together, however, despite the fact that much contemporary activism to reduce suffering and conflict is inspired by religious belief.

This article examines two types of essentially Judeo-Christian perspectives that stress the imperative to act to relieve suffering and transcend violence: liberation theology and what I call religious humanitarianism. Both are recently

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[1] Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss, *Mercy Under Fire: War and the Global Humanitarian Community* (Boulder: Westview, 1995); Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Action in Times of War: A Handbook for Practitioners* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993); Thomas G. Weiss and Cindy Collins, *Humanitarian Challenges and Intervention: World Politics and the Dilemmas of Help* (Boulder: Westview, 1996); John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997); John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

[2] See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate*, with responses by Fouad Ajami et al. (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993); and for a more thoroughly researched perspective, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori, eds., *Transnational Religion and Fading States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

developed yet ongoing religious approaches to the problems of violence and suffering in the world, and each has both an activist and a theological component.

The liberation perspective formally dates from the 1968 Medellín conference of Latin American bishops. The resulting Medellín documents named "a situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence" and called for "bold innovations that will work profound changes" in political and social structures.[3] Liberationism begins with the fundamental premise that Christian commitment involves both reflection and action to transform class, race, and gender structures that perpetuate oppression, violence, poverty, and inequality (and therefore prevent the historical realization of God's kingdom). Liberationism, therefore, has always posited a tight relationship between theological thinking and action—most liberation theologians have also been activists, and many ordinary people have been encouraged, through the development of grassroots "base communities," to see themselves as engaging in new ways of doing theology.[4] Liberation theology developed to empower people who were viewed as both disempowered and oppressed to overcome these conditions in their own societies and rewrite "theology from the underside of history."[5] Since 1968 liberation theology has spread to include not only Roman Catholic but also other types of ecumenical Christian, feminist, gay, and interreligious perspectives in Africa, Asia, and North America. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, EATWOT, which was organized in 1976 and meets annually, represents the broad global network of liberation theologian activists.

The religious humanitarian perspective emanates from groups long involved in relief and emergency aid, but whose work and ethical thinking have become increasingly visible in the post–Cold War era. Church-based groups have developed a specifically religious perspective on humanitarian activism under the rubric of broader networks such as Action by Churches Together (ACT).[6] The

[3] Roberto Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," in Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., and Jon Sobrino, S.J., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 16.

[4] Robert McAfee Brown, "Preface: After Ten Years," in Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. vii–viii.

[5] Gutierrez, "Theology from the Underside of History," *The Power of the Poor in History*, chap. 7.

[6] ACT International is a network of churches and related agencies responding to emergencies around the globe. ACT members have been active in emergencies for several decades. In 1995 they decided to join forces formally and stress a coordinated approach. ACT is based in the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches offices in Geneva. From Action by Churches Together in 1996 and ACT Mission Statement, *http://www.wcc-coe.org/act/actfaq.htm*.

Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response (SCHR), a Geneva-based network of many of the most influential NGOs in humanitarian relief, also includes a preponderance of religious organizations, such as Caritas International, Catholic Relief Services, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Council of Churches (WCC).[7] Moreover, many secular humanitarian groups, including Médecins Sans Frontières and the umbrella SCHR, have been directed by religiously inspired activists. Religious humanitarianism can also be said to have a theological component through the WCC and the theology departments of individual religious humanitarian groups (for example, the Lutheran World Federation). The theology of humanitarianism emphasizes the duty "to respond to human need and suffering."[8]

Humanitarianism developed to serve those seen as less fortunate than oneself. It can be differentiated from liberation theology in that humanitarianism "goes elsewhere" to serve others, while liberation theology sees engagement in one's own society as a project of empowerment necessary to transcend oppression.

Each of these perspectives represents ethical positions that have influenced debates over the legitimacy of different types of intervention across borders, and each is incorporated into established and often well-funded faith-based nongovernmental organizations. Much contemporary transnational activism emanates from long-standing groups in largely Western-based Judeo-Christian traditions who have the financial and organizational resources to carry out their projects. This is not to say that all activism to relieve suffering and violence is religiously inspired, and many religious activists themselves credit the role of secular individuals and groups in their work.[9] However, because this essay assumes that religious motivation is understudied and hence focuses on the relationship between contemporary theological understandings and practice, these Christian religious perspectives dominate. In examining them, I focus on the following questions: (1) What are the ethical bases of action for contemporary activists and theologians in the liberation and religious humanitarian traditions, and have these changed with political circumstances? (2) Are there ethical and practical connections between contemporary religious humanitarianism and liberation

[7] The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response is an NGO network that was founded in 1972 "to improve coordination and cooperation among humanitarian agencies involved in disaster assistance." I wish to emphasize that the SCHR is not in itself a religious organization, but that many of its constituent members are. The SCHR sponsors the Sphere Project of Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response and, along with the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, authored the *Code of Conduct for NGOs in Disaster Relief*. The Sphere Project, 1998, *http://www.ifrc.org/pubs/sphere*.

[8] ACT Mission Statement.

[9] I am grateful to Joel McClellan for insisting on this point.

theology, and can they provide us with a coherent ethic of action to relieve suffering and reduce violence?

## *Belief Situated in World Politics*

Interviews with religious activists in Europe, Central America, Asia, and North America, visits to group web sites, trends in academic theology, and a recent workshop with religious activists provide interesting answers to these questions.[10] These sources indicate that belief and activism condition each other and, more particularly, that historical, theological, and political developments are deeply intertwined. As Gustavo Gutierrez, the prominent Peruvian liberation theologian, points out: "Theological reflection is always carried on in a context of specific historical processes. It is accordingly bound up with these processes."[11]

Historical processes have influenced three theological shifts in particular that affect the ethical bases of contemporary activists' work: the reconceptualization of evil as collective suffering, the increasing awareness of religious pluralism, and the uneasy boundaries between violence and nonviolence. To gain insight into the intersection between religious ethics and activism, the next sections of this essay probe each of these trends, their tensions, and their implications. The conclusion suggests possible points of intersection and assesses the potential for a coherent ethic of action to reduce suffering and violence.

### CONCEPTIONS OF EVIL, SIN, AND SUFFERING

The imperative to act to reduce suffering animates both liberation theology and religious humanitarianism. Social suffering, in the form of war, violence, and oppression, is the evil that each of these perspectives seeks to overcome. Yet this focus represents a significant change in Judeo-Christian thought from the conceptualization of "evil" and "sin" as individual phenomena to collective ones, in both their origins and their effects.

[10] The workshop was held at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs in New York, December 2–4, 1999. I wish to thank the Carnegie Council and the Social Science Research Council/MacArthur Foundation Program on International Research for providing funding. I also wish to thank the participants: David Little of Harvard Divinity School, Sulak Sivaraksa of the Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute in Thailand, Rebecca Larson of the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Joel McClellan of the Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response in Geneva, Suyapa Perez of the Universidad Centroamericana in El Salvador, Dan Wessner of the Mennonite College of Canada in Winnipeg, and R. Scott Appleby of Notre Dame University.

[11] Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p. 222.

Prior to the twentieth century, evil in most Christian thought emanated from an individually personified devil. This took the form of the Antichrist for Christians at the turn of the first millennium, and the Pope/Anabaptist/Jew in the time of Martin Luther 500 years later. During this period and beyond, the devil was seen as not only nefarious, but also subtle.[12] He had power precisely because he could trick the believer into thinking he embodied the good. Christians had to beware of following the devil down false paths in the interests of their own salvation.[13]

Twentieth-century Christian social thought concerns itself less with the consequences of evil for individuals than with collective suffering in the form of famine and war, evils that can be transcended, at least in particular instances.[14] Likewise, the perpetrator of evil has changed from an individually personified devil to structurally organized "social sin" today.[15]

The Social Gospel reformers at the turn of the century embody this transition in the conceptualization of sin and evil. Trying to address the poverty and suffering bred by rapid industrialization, the legacy of slavery, and the First World War, Social Gospel adherents reflected the recognition of social dislocations and the belief in improvement characteristic of the Progressive era.[16] In the 1930s, Reinhold Niebuhr and others redirected the concept of collective sin to the institutional failings embodied in an "immoral society." In Niebuhr's ethics, the world is an imperfect place first and foremost for structural reasons—society can never be held to the same ethical standards as the individual, and while Christians have a duty to try to lessen the effects of war and greed, they cannot eliminate societal imperfections. Rather, they must reckon, realistically, with the world as it is in their attempts to grapple with suffering and violence.[17]

Liberation theologians in the 1960s and 1970s again reconceptualized this understanding of sin and evil. They reinforced the notion of sin as a collective phenomenon, but one perpetrated (especially for liberation theologians in

[12] Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). I am also indebted to Susan Schreiner on this point.

[13] For example, Cotton Mather and arguments in favor of slavery from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.

[14] Bernard McGinn, *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994).

[15] Here I refer to general trends in Christian theology, since at any given historical moment it is possible to construe evil as embodied by individuals (for example, Adolf Hitler) rather than social structures, and vice versa.

[16] On the Social Gospel, see Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

[17] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribners, 1932); and *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribners, 1953).

Latin America) by unequal and oppressive class structures rather than an a priori immoral society. Gutierrez writes:

> In the liberation approach sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality—asserted just enough to necessitate a "spiritual" redemption which does not challenge the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact. . . . When it is considered in this way, the collective dimensions of sin are rediscovered. . . . Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes.[18]

Thus it became both possible and necessary to work to transcend these structures "within history," to liberate the poor and oppressed in this world, as opposed to outside or beyond it.[19]

Contemporary faith-based humanitarian activists are also preoccupied with social suffering in the form of ethnic violence and civil war. Humanitarians must jump from crisis to crisis, and civil war to civil war, in carrying out their work in emergency assistance. Thus in the post–Cold War era especially, efforts to overcome the "poison that is violence" dominate relief and reconstruction efforts rather than attempts to end class-based oppression within particular societies.[20] This is why, for example, faith-based groups emphasize the theme of "reconciliation" in their work in violence-racked societies.

Both religious humanitarianism and liberation theology, then, are motivated at least in part by the duty to ameliorate or overcome the manifestations of social sin in the form of group suffering. Yet there remains a fundamental difference between solidarity with the suffering or oppressed and the pragmatic policy of humanitarian activists to remain nonpolitical in providing assistance. The religious humanitarian is charged with entering into a situation of tension, crisis, and suffering and trying to provide relief to all who are affected, regardless of political, religious, or other affiliation. This means being as apolitical as possible—a far cry from the role of the liberation activist/theologian, who sees belief as motivating and legitimizing political action on behalf of the oppressed classes or segments of society.

Nevertheless, there are points of potential intersection between liberation theology and religious humanitarianism in their responses to suffering.

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[18] Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation, History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 175.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Comments during Carnegie Council workshop, New York City, December 4, 1999.

Liberation theology has long promoted the dignity of the poor, that is, their right to be seen and heard rather than be shunted aside as "nonpersons."[21] Moreover, the "second wave" of liberation theology in Latin America (after the end of the civil wars) emphasizes "solidarity for the long haul" in postconflict situations, rather than the immediacy of liberation from violent oppression.[22] Similarly, religious humanitarians are currently developing a new understanding of the purpose of their work, moving from an ethic of "mercy" or "charity" to a more "creationist" ethic of the "right to life *with dignity*" (emphasis added).[23] This right is enshrined in the Humanitarian Charter, a project initiated in 1997 by emergency aid groups "to develop a set of universal minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian assistance."[24] The addition of the words "with dignity," according to activists, was a topic of much discussion and debate. It also has interesting philosophical reverberations, in that activists acknowledge that the gradual move from charity to dignity is a rights-based change that reflects the globalization of contemporary human rights discourses.[25] This change also provides, for religious activists, a potential means to develop an ethic that spans secular as well as religious motivation.[26] Apart from its resonance with contemporary human rights discourses, however, this shift in meaning potentially brings humanitarianism and liberationism more into line with each other.

## THE FACT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

Contemporary religious activism to reduce suffering and violence also has to contend with the existence of other types of belief. During the twentieth century, Judeo-Christian ethics has developed responses to at least the following types of beliefs: secular (the dialogue with modernity); differing interpretations of Christianity (the intrafaith and ecumenical dialogues); and, especially in the contemporary era, non-Christian faiths (the interreligious dialogue). Each of these perspectives has influenced both theological reflection and activism.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian/activist of the German Confessing Church, for example, grappled in the 1930s with how to speak of God "in a world

[21] Ellacuria and Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*; Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

[22] Interview with Dean Brackley, S.J., San Salvador, May 1998.

[23] I am indebted to Rebecca Larson for the term "creationist," which denotes an ethic that attempts to include the ecological and gender concerns that have become significant issues for many involved in emergency relief.

[24] *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* (Geneva: The Sphere Project, 1998 and 1999).

[25] Carnegie Council workshop comments, December 4, 1999.

[26] Ibid.

come of age" or "an adult world."[27] By this he meant how to act out specifically Christian religious ethics in the modern world with its legacy of Enlightenment, and hence, secularism. Although Bonhoeffer grants "government," "governance," and even "the state" an autonomous authority and respect, ultimately "faith," and for him an especially Christological understanding of ethics, cannot be relegated to "the sphere of the 'personal'," but must be enacted within the public sphere.[28] For Bonhoeffer, Christ was at the center of all action, and following "the way of the cross" led to his own involvement in the plot to eliminate Hitler (for which he was imprisoned and executed). Yet the question of how to relate to a world seemingly dominated by lack of faith remained a fundamental problem.

Liberation theology challenged the Enlightenment legacy even more radically than had Bonhoeffer. For example, both Ignacio Ellacuria and Pablo Richard reject the liberal, Kantian understanding of the Christian concept of transcendence that identifies it with separateness from the world. "It is thus assumed that historical transcendence is separate from history," Ellacuria writes. But: "There are not two histories, a history of God and a human history, a sacred and a profane history. Rather there is a single historical reality in which both God and human beings intervene."[29] For his part, Richard insists: "For the poor, then, transcendence is critically important because the transcendent God is the God who delivers from all oppression. . . . This liberated life is a life *in this history*."[30] This reconceptualization of transcendence was no accident, given the forces liberation theology opposed. The problem for activists in the liberation tradition in Latin America was not how to act in a secular world, but how to act in a world in which the official structures of violence were controlled by those professing the same beliefs in the same denomination, namely, Roman Catholicism.[31] As in South Africa during the same period, interpretations of Christianity engendered both oppression and resistance. Thus, Richard deals with the problem of differential interpretation of the same doctrines in Latin America by calling the actions of the conquistadors and military dictators "basically idolatrous," though carried out in the name of Christianity.[32]

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[27] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers From Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: MacMillan, 1971), pp. 326–29; see also Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, chap. 8, pp. 222–29.

[28] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1995); Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, p. 344.

[29] Ignacio Ellacuria, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," in Ellacuria and Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, p. 254.

[30] Pablo Richard, "Theology in the Theology of Liberation," in Ellacuria and Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, p. 161.

[31] Ibid., pp. 154–55; also comments of Suyapa Perez during Carnegie Council workshop, December 3, 1999.

[32] Richard, "Theology in the Theology of Liberation," p. 155.

The problem for religious humanitarians today is how to reaffirm the motivations that led them to engage in relief work in the first place while respecting the norms and cultures of societies that do not share the same beliefs. Contemporary theologians grapple with questions of religious pluralism and multiculturalism, while religious activists from the West plunge into situations of famine, conflict, refugee resettlement, and postwar reconstruction in parts of the world with very different cultural and religious norms. Humanitarians appear to be cognizant of working in areas in which primarily Western religious beliefs confront other belief systems (and produce a troubled history). Indeed, in the background of any contemporary activist's or theologian's involvement in issues of war and crisis is the knowledge of his or her own tradition's complicity in past oppression. Theo Tschuy, for example, argues that "the Christian Churches (to speak only of them) must be helped to face frankly their historical responsibility for the incendiary and often messianic fanaticism which they have implanted within society and whose cultural and political after-effects remain alive."[33] In this spirit, the World Council of Churches recently undertook a four-year study of "gospel and culture" that, among other goals, "brought a new awareness in the churches of the negative aspects of missionary expansion in close association with colonial expansion."[34]

Contemporary activists also display a heightened awareness of religious pluralism and discourses of multiculturalism. For example, while some still view well-known theologians of the 1930s such as Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr as providing useful guides for the present, others see them as too limited and unconcerned with non-Christian beliefs to provide theological guides to contemporary politics.[35] On a practical level, religious humanitarian organizations in Geneva have reached out to include others (primarily African Muslim groups) in their lobbying vis-à-vis the UN.[36] This increased sensitivity to other cultures is also reflected in the Code of Conduct developed by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response to guide disaster relief efforts. The code forbids proselytizing and calls for respect for "the culture, structures, and customs" of the

[33] Tschuy includes in this reexamination the history of persecution of Christian heretics, Jews, and witches. Theo Tschuy, *Ethnic Conflict and Religion, Challenge to the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), p. 140.

[34] S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing Discussion within the Ecumenical Movement*, Pamphlet 1 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), pp. xii, 2–3.

[35] Carnegie Council workshop discussion, December 3, 1999.

[36] The list of organizations involved in the Geneva-based International Council of Voluntary Agencies, for example, includes the International Islamic Relief Organization and the Islamic African Relief Agency. *http://www.icva.ch/member.htm.*

communities and countries assisted.[37] Yet humanitarian activists still acknowledge problems with the churches' attempts to respect other faith traditions. Moreover, as Paul Griffiths points out:

> Most interreligious dialogue has until now been initiated by Christians. This may change. . . . But there is little doubt that one of the things that Christians—both theologians and ordinary non-intellectual Christians—need to understand better is the images of Christ, Christians, and Christianity that non-Christians have and use. Christians have said a great deal about how they see Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims, and about what place they are prepared to allot the members of these communities in God's plan for human salvation; they have as yet not learned to listen very carefully to what members of these communities have said and are saying about them.[38]

Many theologian-activists who continue to develop the liberation tradition in Third World cultures not dominated by Christianity must also cope with the history of colonialism and missionary expansion in very personal ways.[39] Mercy Oduyoye, a contemporary Ghanian theologian, for example, states: "I belong to the Methodist family [which came to the coastal strip in Ghana in 1835] and hence, to the group of churches described . . . as Western churches, a brand of Christianity that participates in the Euro-American ethos." She has chosen to maintain her Methodism, however, and consequently the Western churches in Africa are the primary target of her "call to social awareness." Yet her beliefs, writing, and activism are also deeply conditioned by her "matrilineal Akan roots" and the patrilineal Yoruba culture she came into contact with through marriage.[40] Chung Hyun-Kyung, a Korean theologian, goes further in

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[37] "Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief," 1994, sponsored by Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Save the Children Alliance, the Lutheran World Federation, Oxfam, and the World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1998, also ACT (Action by Churches Together) Mission Statement, 1998. See especially point 3, "Notwithstanding the right of NGHAs to espouse particular political or religious opinions, we affirm that assistance will not be dependent on the adherence of the recipients to those opinions. We will not tie the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to the embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed," and point 5, "We shall respect culture and custom."

[38] Paul J. Griffiths, *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 3.

[39] See, for example, Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986); and Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology, Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

[40] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 5–6.

developing a "survival liberation-centered syncretism" to cope with the legacies of colonialism and missionary activity. Chung speaks out against the three traditional Christian ways of understanding "the encounter between Christianity and other religions and cultures of the world": exclusivism (the position that salvation lies only within Christianity); inclusivism (the position that traditional cultures and religions have value, but only in the context of "the supremacy of salvation by Christ"); and pluralism (the acceptance of other religions and ways of salvation as equal but different from the Christian identity). She argues that her own beliefs are an inseparable mixture of shamanist, Confucian, Buddhist, and Christian and that the legacy of missionary activity for Asian Christians means that "we are not living in the neatly arranged pluralism of Western academia, but are living out different religions within ourselves. . . . That is why any serious Asian person needs archaeological exploration of many layers of spiritual self and community."[41]

## THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE

The problem of violence permeates twentieth-century understandings of social evil and increases the urgency of attempts to address it. But arguments about the legitimacy of the use of force and the boundary between violence and nonviolence have remained contentious throughout the century. In the 1930s, these arguments took the form of the pacifist–just war debate. Pacifists argued that any use of force could only breed more violence, while just war advocates maintained that the only way to overcome the violence of Nazism was through military means. Yet even those who passionately argued for either position recognized that absolutism could be problematic. Mahatma Gandhi, who inspired many of the Christian pacifists of the 1920s and 1930s, asserted: "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence."[42] On the other side, many religious figures who supported military means to stop Nazism after 1939 in the United States and Britain did so uneasily, and with constant exhortations to governments to look for opportunities to end the war without concern for "total victory."[43]

[41] Chung Hyun-Kyung, "The Wisdom of Mothers Knows No Boundaries," in *Women's Perspectives, Articulating the Liberating Power of the Gospel,* Pamphlet 14 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), pp. 30–33.

[42] Raghavan Iyer, *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 237.

[43] Cecelia Lynch, *Beyond Appeasement: Interpreting Interwar Peace Movements in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

In the past several decades, both liberation theology and religious humanitarianism have blurred the distinction between violence and nonviolence in slightly different ways, even while each remains divided over the legitimacy of force. Twenty years ago, liberation theology, influenced by dependency and Marxist theory, revolutionized (Christian) religious thinking on violence and helped to shape the course of political struggles in Latin America as well as U.S. foreign-policy debates about the appropriateness of intervention. Liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino, Leonardo Boff, and Gustavo Gutierrez actively participated in political struggles, and political-religious activists in Latin America (and North America) used theologies of liberation to justify and guide their forms of action against economic and military oppression and U.S. intervention.

Liberation perspectives, along with the situations of violent repression in which they arose, reconfigured the pacifist–just war debate. Some religious leaders, like Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, consistently maintained a stance in favor of nonviolent action against oppression.[44] Others either refused to pass judgment on those who adopted force or took up arms themselves.[45] They did so in the belief that "the time is already past for accomplishing [fundamental socioeconomic change] by purely nonviolent means."[46] But the predominant sentiment and de facto solution adopted by many in Latin America during the civil wars was that because of the pervasiveness and ruthlessness of oppression, the line between violence and nonviolence had become almost impossible to assess. Judgment on whether to use violent means of resistance thus became a very personal matter that was not up for general assessment or doctrinal regulation. The pacifists recognized the need for ever more "active" forms of resistance short of violence, while those who used force saw their cause as fitting within notions of just war that legitimized resistance to oppression.

The religious humanitarian is also caught between the use of force and nonviolence. In crisis situations, "intervention" in the form of emergency assistance across borders has lost its formerly pejorative connotations. Relief groups have at times encouraged "intervention" in cooperation with governments and international agencies. Religious-based groups, through their work in humanitarian relief operations around the world, draw attention to the plight of peoples caught in the

[44] Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

[45] Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), especially chap. 4, "Enter: The Voice of the Third World."

[46] "Latin America: A Continent of Violence," in *Between Honesty and Hope: Documents from and about the Church in Latin America*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: N.Y.: Maryknoll Publications, 1970), cited in Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 126, fn. 41; see also John Gerassi, ed., *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Writings & Messages of Camilo Torres* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

middle of contemporary conflicts, form ties with indigenous groups to create channels of communication with local populations, work out mechanisms with national and international agencies and organizations to ensure delivery of relief supplies, and actively participate in both national (for example, U.S. State Department) and international (UN) forums to advocate, plan, and carry out various forms of intervention in situations of crisis. In an era in which the great powers can no longer define their national interest in clearly oppositional terms, decisions about whether, when, and how to intervene are therefore opened up to a wider variety of criteria.

Yet, if Christian theological thought of the 1930s appears too unconcerned with other faiths for contemporary activists, new forms of the tensions between nonviolent and just war perspectives rife in that era continue to exist. The solution adopted during the period of civil wars in Latin America—to suspend judgment on the use of violence while opposing intervention by particular governments—is no longer available in an era in which those same governments have become partners in humanitarian intervention rather than opponents. For religious activists, nevertheless, the problems of drawing the line between violence and nonviolence, and of deciding which forms of intervention to legitimate—bombing in Kosovo, military resistance in Rwanda, or an international force in Somalia—remain. For example, a large part of international-relations discourse and ethics is currently dominated by the notion of "good" humanitarian (military) intervention, but a number of the activists who have long been involved in humanitarian relief find this label disturbing.[47] Pragmatic as well as just war considerations (and perhaps the residue from the 1930s) have encouraged some established religious organizations and churches to take explicitly nonpacifist stands, including Catholic Relief Services and the Presbyterian Church, yet many others long involved in emergency relief belong to pacifist sects.[48] These groups must and do work together and try to subordinate individual views in favor of broader consensus. Nevertheless, while arguments in favor of using military force often take center stage in public debate, persuasive reasons in favor of nonviolent methods of intervention are also easy to find for pacifists: one activist has pointed out that the NATO bombing in Kosovo, carried out with the encouragement of some humanitarian groups, has made it more difficult to persuade Congolese officials that relief workers are indeed apolitical agents who will act independently of Western governments in providing

[47] Comments made by workshop participants, December 4, 1999.

[48] These include the Quaker World Service, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, among others.

relief services.[49] Thus the degree to which military action to accomplish humanitarian goals can be sanctioned remains a thorny problem for religious activists.

## *Conclusions: Continuing Tensions or a Coherent Ethic?*

Given the preponderance of organizational resources as well as the strength of the commitment to alleviate suffering and violence, Christian activism throughout the world will continue to influence ethical debates about intervention. But do the developments and tensions outlined above abet or prevent the development of a clearer religious ethic of action for situations of war and crisis?

Each tension is potentially productive. For example, regarding the question of how to confront enormous social suffering, shared conceptions of dignity and solidarity may provide an ethical meeting point for activists in both the liberation and religious humanitarian traditions. Yet developing such an ethic to its full potential could well entail a more politicized stance than an ethic of mercy or charity requires, jeopardizing humanitarians' attempts to preserve an apolitical identity. Thus the question remains as to how politically engaged activism to reduce suffering can legitimately become.[50]

Both liberation theology and religious humanitarianism have made great strides in their recognition and respect for other types of belief. Yet disagreement remains in both traditions between syncretism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Nevertheless, the awareness of both the troubled history of Christianity and the need to accord respect to other cultures provides a promising foundation for future dialogue.

Finally, regarding the use of force, both liberation and humanitarian activists demonstrate an increasing desire to overcome the traditional pacifist/nonpacifist dichotomy. But there appears to be little chance of doing so completely in contemporary situations in which religious activists in either tradition must decide almost daily whether or not to support military means of intervention on the part of national governments and international organizations. Yet the significance of the religious contribution to this debate may be expressed less by the debate's ultimate resolution than by the role religious activists play in constantly questioning both the ethics and utility of force in

[49] Comments during workshop, December 4, 1999.

[50] Moreover, given the liberal bent of most human rights discourses, such an ethic, depending on the way in which it is developed, can be open to the same criticisms leveled at these discourses—that they inevitably cover some forms of domination in an effort to expose others.

given situations. Governments rarely engage in such a self-reflective ethical function, while the tensions between activists' motivations and work often require it. Thus, understanding the way in which religious belief conditions action in the world (and how confronting difficult historical situations modifies belief) is important for gaining insight into ethical positions on war and crisis. Yet even within and between what might be called "progressive" transnational Christian theologies of liberationism and humanitarianism, tensions over the "right" course of action regarding intervention expose both the critical role of religious belief as a motivating force for the development of ethical stances in policy debates and the difficulty of arriving at generalizable standards applicable to all situations of war and crisis. These tensions can be productive if they are recognized as such and if they serve as catalysts for continual reflection and critique of the means used by all actors in the world to reduce suffering and violence.