

A Faith Perspective on the Geneva Conventions

A sermon-in-the-marketplace by Dennis Rivers -- August, 2008
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What does Jesus want of me in relation to the conduct of war and the practice of torture? It is tempting to discuss the issues of war and torture in sweeping terms that apply to everyone. And that is in fact just how the Geneva Conventions discuss these issues. But when we turn to the spiritual side of life, I think we have to use a different approach than finding a logically compelling set of arguments that force other people to see the issue from our angle. Law is about arguing and requiring, but the spiritual life is about inviting and inspiring. Perhaps this contrast will help us understand why the Geneva Conventions have had such limited success in restraining the violence of war. In the long run, it seems to me, what we do not inspire in people, I doubt that we will ever succeed in requiring of them.

So rather than focusing today on what the Bible orders me to do, I want to focus on some of the ways that Jesus inspires me. It's interesting to me that Henri Dunant, the principal founder of both the Geneva Conventions movement and the Red Cross, was not an attorney. His mother was a devout Protestant committed to works of mercy, and she took her little son along with her. I imagine that she empowered him in this way to feel himself capable of being an agent of mercy. I know there's a long tradition of thinking you can change people's minds and behavior by ordering them around, but I don't trust that tradition. I don't see any evidence to support it. So I want to focus on the inspiration side of things, poetically, inspiration as letting in and living in the spirit.

The saying of Jesus that means the most to me is "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" When I try to enter into the deepest meaning of that statement, I can't imagine justifying any war. I know that Christian philosophers and theologians for centuries have tried to carve out exceptions that would allow for "just" wars. But I think they were barking up the wrong tree. Why is it that for centuries our greatest minds have devoted themselves to justifying war, rather than exploring alternatives to it?

There's an amazing story from the Cuban missile crisis that bears on this point. During the Cuban missile crisis, the Joint Chiefs of Staff came to President Kennedy with a plan to obliterate the Soviet Union with a massive first strike of nuclear weapons. There were fierce arguments in the inner circle of the administration, and at one point in the crisis Robert F. Kennedy is reported to have said, "If we can't think of an alternative to nuclear war, we are not thinking hard enough." In the end, the Kennedys opted for secret diplomacy with the Soviet Union rather than nuclear war, and most of us are here in

this room today directly as a result of the decision they made.

I agree that "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" is an extremely demanding teaching. But rather than trying to find loopholes or rationalizations that would excuse our half-trillion-dollar-a-year violence habit, I think we might take it instead as a challenge to go beyond our present thinking and feeling. To stay pilgrims on the long road toward compassion, rather than thinking of exemptions that too quickly resolve the tension between that beautiful teaching and the way the world works today. To me, that tension is *the* Cross of discipleship. Nothing we do to mend this world will work as well as we would like it to, but a great love calls to us, and gives us the energy to go on where ordinarily we would have given up. I believe that the love that calls us today to do the impossible, empowered Henri Dunant in 1859 to care for the thousands of wounded soldiers left to die on a battlefield uncared for (the first moment of what would become the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions).

Continuing with the words of Jesus, two sayings are directly related to the Geneva Conventions' mission of mercy: "*Love your enemies.*" and "*Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.*" What these say to me is that the measure of my devotion to Jesus, is how well I treat the people I don't like. The Geneva Conventions ask us to treat the people we *really* don't like with restraint and respect. So you can see that the practice of torture and humiliation of detainees is on a collision course with the popular conservative idea that America is a Christian nation. Whom would Jesus torture? When I think about "*do unto others as you would have them do unto you,*" and "*love one another as I have loved you,*" and "*whatever you do to the least of these you do to me,*" I can't imagine that Jesus would torture anyone, or consent to our doing so. From my perspective of trying to follow Jesus, it seems to me that the Geneva Conventions are trying to bring the Golden Rule into the middle of a violent world. They have not succeeded as much as anyone would like, but then, war is old, and the Geneva Conventions and their sister treaties are relatively new.

Another teaching of Jesus that I find deeply worth contemplating, is "*whatsoever a man soweth, that also shall he reap.*" and its parallel, "*those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.*" One of the problems of human violence is that it is self-exacerbating, so that both fights and wars tend to spiral out of control and consume everyone involved in them. The Geneva Conventions represent an effort to steadily edge back from the brink of self-amplifying insanity. There are deep elements of insanity lurking in all war, torture, nuclear weapons, land mines, laser blinding weapons, poison gas, bloated military budgets, and so on. Yet inside of many people, even people at war, there is a margin of sanity and a capacity for mercy: they have not yet been totally engulfed

and consumed by the madness in which they are participating. That margin of sanity is so important. Our survival depends on it. For example, after World War I, most of the nations of the world decided to give up the use of poison gas. The experience of making war with poison gas was so horrifying and disgusting that even people committed to wars and armies could not tolerate the practice. The Geneva Conventions movement has appealed again and again to that margin of sanity and capacity for mercy in people. And it seems to me, that is the same part of us Jesus is addressing in his “*whatsoever a man soweth*” teaching.

Part of this teaching, as I read it, is Jesus appealing to us to grow up, and to develop an attention span long enough to connect the sowing with the reaping. While it's tempting to hold all evil the people who justify and commit torture, or spend their lives making machines of death, I think it is more helpful to see them as suffering from very short attention spans. They are not thinking about the implications of what they are doing. They are not thinking about what it will be like when others do these things back to us. When the United States, as the supposed leader and standard setter of the world, makes loopholes for itself so that it does not have to comply with the Geneva Conventions, the United States puts its own soldiers in danger of being tortured and executed. When we use cluster bombs that injure civilians and claim that military necessity justifies it, we are, with our behavior, inviting our enemies to injure more civilians, including us.

If Jesus were here with us in the flesh today, I think he would look at us with eyes full of sorrow, and counsel us that we cannot shoot, bomb or torture our way to a safer place in the world. Our sowing is completely at odds with what we hope to reap. For example, torture wounds everyone involved in it: those who suffer it, those who inflict it, those who allow it or acquiesce to its practice, those who will be injured at some time in the future to avenge its practice. Torture is based on the fantasy and illusion that you can injure others without being injured yourself, and it is just such dangerous fantasies and illusions that I believe Jesus is calling on us to outgrow. The torturer will never forget the cries of his victims. The torturer's life has been permanently injured just as surely as the victim's life has been injured, only in a different way. And we who turned away in silence, unable to face the ugliness of what was being done in our name, are not free of the process. We will have a lifetime to consider what we lost as persons by turning away.

Violence can and will beget more violence, but mercy and self-restraint can set the stage for more mercy and more self-restraint. It is not a sure thing, it is an act of faith, just as every planting of seeds is an act of faith. The Geneva Conventions approach has been to take the most

outrageous excesses of war one at a time, such as torture, or killing of the wounded, and try to systematically inch away from the self-inflaming brutality of what is going on. For the sake of children around the world, to give a current example, we need to stop using cluster weapons that lie unexploded across the countryside waiting for children to pick them up, or step on them, and be injured or killed. And if one such outrage can be abandoned, then another can be abandoned, and still another after that.

I would agree quickly with anyone who argued that these efforts to restrain the ugliest aspects of war are not sufficient. The ordinary deaths of soldiers in war, not covered by the Geneva Conventions, are senseless tragedies that cry out for us to change the way we run our country and relate to the world. But meanwhile, for the sake of the innocents who are suffering this very day, I believe we need to continue the effort represented by the Geneva Conventions. And again, for the sake of our own spiritual, moral and physical survival, I believe we need to continue the effort represented by the Geneva Conventions, that by our self-restraint and mercy, we might de-escalate the conflicts we are a part of, rather than perpetuating them.

I find that it is in working for these humble changes, that I keep alive my hope that bigger changes are possible, that human beings are not doomed to exterminate one another. The Geneva Conventions, in changing anything about war, give us both hope and example that war can be further changed. The moral force of the Geneva Conventions/International Humanitarian Law movement is fragile and ambiguous, growing uniquely out of this forward momentum, an intense desire to *keep on shrinking the boundaries of what is acceptable* in the violent conduct of nations and in the violent conduct of individuals acting on behalf of those nations. You can see this momentum in the recent treaties against land mines and against cluster weapons (treaties, I am sad to say, my country has not yet joined). In the long run, to put limits on the conduct of war can only make sense in the context ongoing strong efforts to outgrow war as a way of dealing with conflicting needs, and to develop instead a global culture of cooperation and reconciliation. Otherwise, banning some forms of violence can be quickly construed as allowing or being indifferent to all the other forms, in their gruesome variety.

In Matthew, Chapter 5, Jesus says “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*” This verse suggests to me very clearly that Jesus understood the difference between forbidding hatred and inspiring love. The rhetoric of prohibition was well understood at that time, but he chose not to use it, pointing the way instead toward something really different. Before you dismiss this pointing toward

love as hopelessly unrealistic, consider for a moment that it might be the only way that people will ever be able to break out of the endless spirals of attack and revenge that form the bulk of human history. Everything we do, teaches and encourages others to do that very thing. I think Jesus would ask us, “By your actions, what are you teaching, what are you feeding, what are growing in this garden of life?”

What does Jesus want of me? I am inspired by his life toward the practice of awareness and mercy, which I seek to embody with every breath; toward facing the truth and telling the truth, as gently as I can; and toward continually remembering the transformative power of love that I and those of my time may have forgotten.

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Citation information for online article:

Please cite this article as follows:

APA-style:

Rivers, D. (2008). A Faith Perspective on the Geneva Conventions.
From http://www.SupportGenevaConventions.info/faith_perspective.pdf

MLA-style:

Rivers, Dennis. A Faith Perspective on the Geneva Conventions.
Citizens' Interfaith Coalition to Reaffirm and Extend the Geneva Conventions.
August 15, 2008.
<http://www.SupportGenevaConventions.info/faith_perspective.pdf>