

JESUS' PACIFISM: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

By Sangotunde Sunday O

Sangotunde Sunday O (Ph.D.), Department of Religious Studies, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Pacifism, which is a concept that covers a spectrum of views; believes that disputes should be peacefully resolved, and that an expression of opposition to any organization or society must be done with the rejection of the use of physical violence to obtain political, economic, religious and social goals. This paper assesses the pacifism of Jesus Christ as exemplified in his anti-warrism attitude and his unconditional rejection of all forms of warfare both by his teachings and lifestyle. Philosophical and theological approaches are adopted in this study. The paper therefore contextualizes Jesus' pacifism at the instances of almost unending religious violent attacks in some parts of our country Nigeria.

Introduction

The word pacifism, which is rendered in noun as pacifist, came to be known in English Language in 1905 from the French stem "*pacifiste*" (Douglas, 2010). Pacifism has been described by Encyclopedia as a commitment to peace and opposition to war (Stanford, 2010). As observed by Douglas (2010), pacifism, which is a family of the word pacific, means peacemaking and it is from the two Latin words "*pax*" meaning peace and "*ficus*" meaning making. According to Dombrowski (1991), the concept of pacifism in the western world appears to begin with Christianity and was initially based on the most famous expression of the concept as found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:9 where Jesus professed that "Blessed are the peace makers, for they will see God" .

Douglas (2010) observed that the distinction between various forms of pacifism borders on the concept and ideal that pacifism should be seen as a commitment to peace and peacefulness that is not strictly opposed to war and violence. It is defined as a more principled or absolute rejection of violence or war. Though, William James in 1910 used the term pacifism to describe his outright rejection of militarism (Stanford 2010). But recent use of the shorter term "pacifism" has become more common in English usage during the 20th century to describe a variety of views that are critical and skeptical of war and warism (Stanford 2010). Pacifism, which is defined as a commitment to peace-making, peace building process in a non-violence procedure is committed to avoiding, unjustified violence. This concept maybe extended to the idea of controlling the rough and intense emotions. This is because, like violence; pacifism leads us to the consideration of various definitions and concepts of the subject matter in this study to enrich our understanding and make a clarification of the form of pacifism that Jesus Christ lived for.

The Concept of Pacifism

In the ancient world, war was taken for granted as a necessary evil by many African traditional societies .Most African societies did not regard war as an evil because it was regarded as a way of exercising monarchical supremacy among the African traditional Kings. War was also a means of expanding their monarchical jurisdictions in African Traditional societies in the ancient World. The individuals various voices decrying the evils of war demanding absolute abstention from any act of violence against their fellow creatures came to be noticed after the introduction of Christianity to African Continent. The introduction of Christianity to Africa had influenced many African traditional rulers to definitely renounce war as a means of expanding their monarchical empires and exhibition of their monarchical supremacy .This is because Christianity with its evangelical message offered considerations in support of individual non violence as well as of collective peacefulness based on brotherly love and mutual understanding.

Generally, pacifism is thought to be a principled rejection of war and killing (Douglas, 2010). This term has occasionally been used by some Western philosophers and theologians to describe a pragmatic commitment to using war to create peace (Dombrowski, 1991). As observed by Dombrowsik (1991) some who called themselves "pacifists" during the first World War later supported war as a suitable means towards peace. He noticed further how Richard Nixon who once called himself a pacifist turned his back to later support the Vietnam War. This perverse use of the idea of pacifism was observed by Hauerwas (1984) to be connected to the way in which a term like

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“pacification” can be employed in military usage to describe a violent process of suppressing violence. Many modern pacifists believe that an enemy’s territory should be “pacified” by killing them in order to disable them. However, George Orwell and others have argued about such euphemistic descriptions of violence whereby the just war concept holds the belief that war can be a suitable means to bring about the much desired peace in a society(Douglas, 2010).

Most basically, pacifism is a concept that war is wrong because killing is wrong. Despite several complications, pacifism generally connotes the effort to make peace that is tied to a rejection of violent means for obtaining peace, development, freedom or political independence. Douglas (2010) has however observed that pacifism, as it is used in ordinary discourse today, includes a variety of commitment to nonviolence in all actions to a more focused or minimal sort of anti-warrism.

In contrast to “just war tradition”, Luban (1980) noticed that pacifism rejects war as an acceptable means for obtaining lasting peace. As observed by Luban (1980), this is accounted for the reasons why pacifists will often refuse to serve in the military and also refuse to support political and social systems that promote war by withholding their mandated taxes for war programmes in some developed countries.

Pacifism as a principle can be used to describe a commitment to nonviolence in one’s personal life that might include the attempt to cultivate pacific virtues such as religious and political pacific virtues of tolerance, patience, humility, mercy, forgiveness and love. Scholars like Luban (1980) opined that pacifism could also be extended to include nonviolence towards all sentient beings and thus result in a commitment to “reverence for life”.

The complication in the understanding of the concept of pacifism sets in when the word is considered as a broad commitment to making peace. This is because peace is a family resemblance term with many varieties of its meanings and usages. But in Yoruba language; peace which is “*Alaafia*” is easiest to define dialectically as the opposite of war or violence. This is why pacifism has been described simply as anti-warrism or as commitment to nonviolence in all ramifications by scholars like Luban, Douglas and a few others. However, pacifism is not a philosophical situation to submit oneself to evil or unjust violence and intimidation. Pacifism is not passive-ism. Scholars like Martin Luther King Jr., claimed that pacifism involves actively, but nonviolently; resisting evil (Luther, 1984).

The Concept of Jesus’ Pacifism in the Context of Matthew 5:9.

The substance of this discourse is known as "Sermon on the Mount" and it is also recorded in Luke 6. The mountain upon which this sermon was delivered was not particularly mentioned but could be located to be somewhere in the vicinity of the ancient city of Capernaum. The phrase "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God" "*μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί, ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ Θεοῦ κληθήσονται*" in Matthew 5:9 is a reference to those who strive to prevent contention, violence and war (Barnes, 2012). The passage expresses the fact that everybody should do more to promote peace. Clark (2012) observed that a peacemaker is a man who, being endowed with a generous public spirit, labours for the public good, and feels his own interest promoted in promoting that of others. Therefore, instead of fanning the fire of strife, he uses his influence and wisdom to reconcile the contending parties, adjust their differences, and restore them to a state of unity. This is why Jesus termed the peacemakers "children of God" "*αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ Θεοῦ*"²². This is because God is the father of peace, and those who promote it are reputed as his children (Clark, 2012).

The direct, instructions given by Jesus in the discourse of the Sermon on the Mount is a compelling aspect of pacifism. This teaching clearly supports nonviolence for the attainment of civil rights and even political freedom. The teaching should also be seen as Jesus' concept about a principled pacifism that is intended for all persons at all times. Though, Hays (1996:217) opines that Jesus offered the ethical commandment of nonviolence to the specific audience of Israelites who were actively in support of rebellion against the Roman imperial leadership under whose authority they were governed at the time of the Sermon on the Mount. Hays (1996:221) believed that Jesus preached this unique sermon to his fellow Israelites as the chosen people of God who should see themselves as the light of the world who must conduct their revolution in a manner that is contrary to the methods and expectations of the corrupt world. However, Wright (1996) opines that the Sermon on the Mount; particularly the commandments of Jesus Christ on absolute pacifism was not only for a particular Israelites audience but to the church who are followers of Christ and the new Israel. Thus, the church should not hesitate to subject herself to the rigorous demand of Jesus in the Sermon and particularly his demand of absolute anti-warrism. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., no stranger to conflict, said in no uncertain terms that the reason you love your enemies, even if they are the worst persons you have ever encountered, is because that is what God does (Carson, 2003). This is why Kenneth (2009) asserts that love, reconciliation and mediation are the characteristics of Judeo-Christian model of peacemaking. This differs from what is commonly taught by some religions and from other models of belief systems because the foundation of the entire process in Christianity as taught by Jesus

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and his Apostles is love and not justice or retaliation even as indispensable as justice is to peace. This means that God as Love is always willing to embrace hostile humanity, which He exemplified in the teachings and life of Jesus Christ as the foundation, that makes peace with God and fellow human being possible. The implication is that Jesus lived for God's love as an expression of God's unconditional love to all despite people's rebellion against Him. As Kenneth (2009) has observed further, God is infinite in His essence, and love is the eternal essence of God. This also means that even before the process of peacemaking begins, despite the hurt and pain, each offended party must have the will to find peace with the other side based on their ability to love.

Scholars like Thames (2008) however agreed with Hays (1996) that Jesus spoke exclusively to the nation of Israel in specific relevance to its first century imperial situation whereby Israel was governed by Roman leadership. He further sees the statement in Mathew 5:9 as a particular reference to caution the people of Israel on their revolutionary aspirations against the Roman Empire which continued to rule them even till the period of Jesus' trial, crucifixion and resurrection. He noted that Jesus gave the pacifism advice because he noticed that Israel was one among many dissatisfied nations who sought to achieve independence through violence. The thrust of the matter is that if we follow this line of argument, we are left with the opinion that Jesus, in fact, did not call for absolute nonviolence, anti-warrism attitudes or pacifism for all people at all times. Hays (1996 ,223) vehemently offers a non-general reading of the beatitudes so that we could be enabled to see the fundamental goal of projecting the ideas that Jesus did not call his followers to dogmatic sorts of pacifism. But he opines asserts that Jesus will not probably disallow his followers from seeking a right theology regarding violence and war that is considered from a right understanding of his messages of love which is supposed to equally applicable to all people and nations at all times.

The forcible expulsion by Jesus of those that were buying and selling inside the Temple at Jerusalem in Mark 11:15 was revolutionary act which many critics of Jesus' pacifism usually refer to. The fact however remains that Jesus did this because the Temple courts were not the proper places for merchandise because the transactions were often dishonest on the account of avarice and covetousness of the religious leaders and no fire arm was adopted and no life was taken during this action.

Therefore, love, which is unbiased as preached by Jesus Christ, is the basis of his pacifism. This is because only true love like the one pictured in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is capable of assessing injustice with discrimination and still act mercifully without the adoption of violence. However, scholars like Hays (1996, 224) observed earlier that

at times for the reason of self-defense or the third party or other humanitarian concerns one may adopt or involve violence or war. This study, which is researched to align with profound opinions on this issue, believes that cautions should be made to avoid abusive war mongering, by limiting the unchecked entrances into even justifiable wars. This is why Thames (2008: 76) opines that the principle of Christian love, reduces the feasibility of aggressive humanitarian wars, which are considered morally dubious.

Conversely, pacifists will clearly disagree with those who claim that wars maybe fought in pursuit of the ideal of a just social order. The proponents of humanitarian intervention such as Thames maintain that war is not a suitable means for attaining the goal of respect for human rights and satisfaction of human needs. Therefore, pacifists have always been vehement in their advocacy for only non-violent means as the coherent teachings of Jesus Christ as exemplified by his mission and ministry in the world.

Jesus' Pacifism: A Philosophical Discourse

Anscombe (1981) sees pacifism as consisting of a wide variety of ideas that can be gathered under the general idea that war and violence are morally wrong. These are ideas when critically examined present clearly their contradictions and distinctions which sometimes always overlap. The distinctions are clearly observable when we are confronted with different answers and reactions of scholars as well as the opinions of diverse religious adherents for example; Christianity and Islamic religion; to the question of how obligated are we to reject or accept violence and war?

As noted by Anscombe (1981), absolute pacifism which is based on the principle of maximal and universal rejection of violence and war also holds that this is so because moral principles are eternal, unchanging and admits no exceptions. The thrust of the matter is therefore that war and violence are always wrong and can never be right either in defense or otherwise. The proponents of contingent pacifism say that the rejection of a particular military system or policies is allowed. This means wars could be permitted for the reasons of defense or other circumstances, it could be rejected. Merton (1971, 209) observed that absolute pacifism of the western world is often derived from the Christian ideal of nonresistance to evil as required by Jesus' pronouncements about nonresistance in the Sermon on the Mount in Mathew 5:9, his several teachings on retaliation or revenge and his total submission to torture during his trial and crucifixion. Jesus taught his followers that absolute pacifism is tied to the idea that there is merit in suffering violence without retaliating, because by doing so one becomes a true son of his

father in heaven. This is the reason why scholars like Dombrowski (1991) hold the opinion that pacifism is often to be a professional obligation of certain religious vocations that is based on a choice of personal conscience that is not universally required.

This position sees a particular war or military policy as prudentially unwise and it should be resisted and considers some as necessary, reasonable, required and inevitable for the attainment of a long lasting peace in our world⁴¹. This study therefore advocates for pacifism that is aiming at the transformation of our psychological, cultural, social and moral sensibility away from possible acceptance of war and violence. This is the form of pacifism that articulates a broad frame work of cultural criticism with the inclusion of efforts to reform Nigerian's educational, religious and cultural practices that lead to support the transformation agenda of the Nigerian society. This type of pacifism will make Nigeria a society in which war and violence appear to be archaic and those who advocate and promote conflict, violence and war are summarily regarded as uncivilized and uninformed personalities.

The traditional values of the African people are such that holds tenacious to the dignity of human life and it should not be taken or seized careless at will. This version of pacifism had been entrenched in the African tradition even before the advent of Christianity. For example, Jesus articulated a re-evaluation of values from the standpoint of a more pacific understanding of God's commandments in his teachings at different occasions in the Bible. Instead of retaliation which was an old commandment from Moses of "an eye for an eye". Nigeria and the rest of the world should hold tenaciously to pacifism that stresses the spiritual unity of all people, which is guided by brotherly love, and a sense of respect for life and human dignity.

Conclusion

This study has looked at various opinions on pacifism and considers a subtle version of these arguments as been articulated by Jesus Christ in his life and teachings as the ideal that is recommended. The study has also unveiled the various forms of pacifism. The study concludes by seeing pacifism as a principled standpoint that is unwilling to use violence to defend against aggression because of respect for life and persons. The study also addressed the contradiction, which may occur in the full implementation of pacifism that still sees nothing wrong in pacifists who defend themselves against aggression and injustice. Other issues related to nonviolence principle as a means of maintaining peace, tranquility, social order and production of social change are advocated for in this study. The idea that nonviolence means is ineffective of producing social change at times are

clearly refuted. But the importance of dialogue and negotiations that is rooted in sincerity cannot be undermined. Some scholars share opinion with Obama who though expressed respect for pacifist such as Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr., but also opined succinctly as follows:

“.....there is nothing weak, nothing passive,
nothing naïve in the creed and lives
of Gandhi and King. But a nonviolent
movement could not halter Hitler’s armies.
Negotiation can not convince al-Qaeda’s
Leaders to lay down their arms”.

Finally, this study has also pointed out that the long-term goal of a transformation expected in the society may not be effective with the use of war and violence because no development is visible in the absence of peace. This is why this study suggests that negotiation and dialogue are the veritable tools for effective, remarkable progress, growth and development. If war is necessary, it is usually an expression of human folly and weakness.

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