

9. Jesus' Third Way: Nonviolent Engagement

Human evolution has provided the species with two deeply instinctual responses to violence: flight or fight. Jesus offers a third way: nonviolent direct action.² The classic text is Matt. 5:38-42:

³⁸You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.³ (See also Luke 6:29-30.)

Christians have, on the whole, simply ignored this teaching. It has seemed impractical, masochistic, suicidal—an invitation to bullies and spouse-batterers to wipe up the floor with their supine Christian victims. Some who have tried to follow Jesus' words have understood it to mean nonresistance: let the oppressor perpetrate evil unopposed. Even scholars have swallowed the eat-humble-pie reading of this text: "It is better to surrender everything and go through life naked than to insist on one's legal rights," to cite only one of scores of these commentators from Augustine right up to the present.⁴ Interpreted thus, the passage has become the basis for systematic training in cowardice, as Christians are taught to acquiesce to evil.

Cowardice is scarcely a term one associates with Jesus. Either he failed to make himself clear, or we have misunderstood him. There is plenty of cause to believe the latter. Let us set aside for the moment the thesis statement (vv. 38-39a), and focus on the three practical examples he gives.

Jesus on Nonviolent Engagement

1. *Turn the Other Cheek.* "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Why the *right* cheek? A blow by the right fist in that right-handed

world would land on the *left* cheek of the opponent. An open-handed slap would also strike the left cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist would require using the left hand, but in that society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. Even to gesture with the left hand at Qumran carried the penalty of ten days' penance.⁵ The only way one could naturally strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the back of the hand. We are dealing here with insult, not a fistfight. The intention is clearly not to injure but to humiliate, to put someone in his or her place. One normally did not strike a peer thus, and if one did the fine was exorbitant. The mishnaic tractate *Baba Kamma* specifies the various fines for striking an equal: for slugging with a fist, 4 zuz (a zuz was a day's wage); for slapping, 200 zuz; but "if [he struck him] with the back of his hand he must pay him 400 zuz." But damages for indignity were not paid to slaves who were struck (8:1-7).⁶

A backhand slap was the usual way of admonishing inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews. *We have here a set of unequal relations, in each of which retaliation would invite retribution.* The only normal response would be cowering submission.

Part of the confusion surrounding these sayings arises from the failure to ask who Jesus' audience was. In all three of the examples in Matt. 5:39b-41, Jesus' listeners are not those who strike, initiate lawsuits, or impose forced labor, but their victims ("If anyone strikes *you* . . . wants to sue *you* . . . forces *you* to go one mile . . ."). There are among his hearers people who were subjected to these very indignities, forced to stifle outrage at their dehumanizing treatment by the hierarchical system of class, race, gender, age, and status, and as a result of imperial occupation.

Why then does he counsel these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Because this action robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, "Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me."

Such a response would create enormous difficulties for the striker. Purely logistically, how would he hit the other cheek now turned to him? He cannot backhand it with his right hand (one only need try this to see the problem).⁷ If he hits with a fist, he makes the other his equal, acknowledging him as a peer. But the point of the back of the hand is to reinforce institutionalized inequality. Even if the superior orders the person flogged for such "cheeky" behavior (this is certainly no way to *avoid* conflict!), the point has been irrevocably made. He has been given notice that this underling is in fact a human being. In that world of honor and shaming, he has been rendered impotent to instill shame in

a subordinate.⁸ He has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of noncooperation with everything humiliating."⁹

This very type of action had already been performed by Jesus' own contemporaries. Shortly after Pilate was appointed procurator in Judea (26 C.E.), he introduced into Jerusalem by night "the busts of the emperor that were attached to the military standards,"¹⁰ which Jews regarded as idols and thus a desecration of the holy city. Crowds of Jews rushed to Pilate's headquarters in Caesarea to implore him to remove the standards. When he refused, they fell prostrate and remained there for five days and nights. On the sixth day, Pilate summoned the multitude to the stadium on the pretext of giving them an answer. Instead, they found themselves surrounded by soldiers, three deep.

Pilate, after threatening to cut them down, if they refused to admit Caesar's images, signalled to the soldiers to draw their swords. Thereupon the Jews, as by concerted action, flung themselves in a body on the ground, extended their necks, and exclaimed that they were ready rather to die than to transgress the law. Overcome with astonishment at such intense religious zeal, Pilate gave orders for the immediate removal of the standards from Jerusalem.¹¹

Jesus was not, then, articulating a notion alien to his people, but elevating it from occasional and spontaneous use to a central element in the coming of God's Reign.

2. *Give the Undergarment.* The second example Jesus gives is set in a court of law. Someone is being sued for his outer garment. Who would do that, and under what circumstances? The Hebrew Scriptures provide the clues.

If you lend money to my people, *to the poor* among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If ever you take your neighbor's cloak (LXX, *himation*) in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing (*himation*) to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

(Exod. 22:25-27; LXX 22:24-26)

When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. You shall wait outside, while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. *If the person is poor*, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you. . . . You shall not . . . take a widow's garment (*himation*) in pledge.

(Deut. 24:10-13, 17)

They who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth . . . lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments (*himatia*) taken in pledge.

(Amos 2:7-8; see also Ezek. 18:5-9)

Only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but a garment to give as collateral for a loan. Jewish law strictly required its return every evening at sunset.¹²

Matthew and Luke disagree whether it is the outer garment (Luke) or the undergarment (Matthew) that is being seized. But the Jewish practice of giving the outer garment as a pledge (it alone would be useful as a blanket for sleeping) makes it clear that Luke's order is correct, even though he does not preserve the legal setting. In all Greek usage, according to Liddell-Scott, *himation* is "always an outer garment . . . worn above the *chitōn*," whereas the *chitōn* is a "garment worn next to the skin."¹³ S. Safrai and M. Stern describe normal Jewish dress: an outer garment or cloak of wool and an undergarment or tunic of linen.¹⁴ To avoid confusion I will simply refer to the "outer garment" and the "undergarment."

The situation Jesus speaks to is all too familiar to his hearers: the debtor has sunk ever deeper into poverty, the debt cannot be repaid, and his creditor has summoned him to court (*krithēnai*) to exact repayment by legal means.

Indebtedness was endemic in first-century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. Heavy debt was not, however, a natural calamity that had overtaken the incompetent. It was the direct consequence of Roman imperial policy. Emperors had taxed the wealthy so stringently to fund their wars that the rich began seeking nonliquid investments to secure their wealth. Land was best, but it was ancestrally owned and passed down over generations, and no peasant would voluntarily relinquish it. Exorbitant interest, however, could be used to drive landowners ever deeper into debt. And debt, coupled with the high taxation required by Herod Antipas to pay Rome tribute, created the economic leverage to pry Galilean peasants loose from their land. By the time of Jesus we see this process already far advanced: large estates owned by absentee landlords, managed by stewards, and worked by tenant farmers, day laborers, and slaves. It is no accident that the first act of the Jewish revolutionaries in 66 C.E. was to burn the Temple treasury, where the record of debts was kept.¹⁵

It is to this situation that Jesus speaks. His hearers are the poor ("if any one would sue *you*"). They share a rankling hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands, their goods, finally even their outer garments.

Why then does Jesus counsel them to give over their undergarments as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark

naked! Imagine the guffaws this saying must have evoked. There stands the creditor, covered with shame, the poor debtor's outer garment in the one hand, his undergarment in the other. The tables have suddenly been turned on the creditor. The debtor had no hope of winning the case; the law was entirely in the creditor's favor. But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him. He has risen above shame. At the same time he has registered a stunning protest against the system that created his debt. He has said in effect, "You want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?"

Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell less on the naked party than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Gen. 9:20-27).¹⁶ By stripping, the debtor has brought the creditor under the same prohibition that led to the curse of Canaan. And much as Isaiah had "walked naked and barefoot for three years" as a prophetic sign (Isa. 20:1-6), so the debtor parades his nakedness in prophetic protest against a system that has deliberately rendered him destitute. Imagine him leaving the court, naked. His friends and neighbors, aghast, inquire what happened. He explains. They join his growing procession, which now resembles a victory parade. The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a legitimate moneylender but a party to the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness, destitution, and abasement. This unmasking is not simply punitive, therefore; it offers the creditor a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life, what his practices cause, and to repent.

The Powers That Be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing depotentiates them faster than deft lampooning. By refusing to be awed by their power, the powerless are emboldened to seize the initiative, even where structural change is not immediately possible. This message, far from being a counsel to perfection unattainable in this life, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed, and it is being lived out all over the world today by powerless people ready to take their history into their own hands.

Jesus provides here a hint of how to take on the entire system by unmasking its essential cruelty and burlesquing its pretensions to justice. Here is a poor man who will no longer be treated as a sponge to be squeezed dry by the rich. He accepts the laws as they stand, pushes them to absurdity, and reveals them for what they have become. He strips naked, walks out before his fellows, and leaves this creditor, and the whole economic edifice that he represents, stark naked.

3. *Go the Second Mile*. "If one of the occupation troops forces (*angareusei*) you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles" (Matt. 5:41, TEV). Jesus'

third example is drawn from the relatively enlightened practice of limiting the amount of forced or impressed labor (*angareia*) that Roman soldiers could levy on subject peoples to a single mile.¹⁷ The term *angareia* is probably Persian, and became a loanword in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. Josephus mentions it in reference to the Seleucid ruler Demetrius, who, in order to enlist Jewish support for his bid to be king, promised, among other things, that “the Jews’ beasts of burden shall not be requisitioned (*angareuesthai*) for our army” (*Ant.* 13.52). More familiar is the passion narrative, where the soldiers “compel” (*angareuousin*) Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross (Mark 15:21//Matt. 27:32). Such forced service was a constant feature in Palestine from Persian to late Roman times, and whoever was found on the street could be compelled into service.¹⁸ Most cases of impressment involved the need of the postal service for animals and the need of soldiers for civilians to help carry their packs. The situation in Matthew is clearly the latter. It is not a matter of requisitioning animals but people.

This forced labor was a cause of bitter resentment for all Roman subjects. “*Angareia* is like death,” complains one source.¹⁹ The sheer frequency, even into the late empire, of legislation proscribing the misuse of the *angareia* shows how regularly the practice was used and its regulations violated. An inscription of 49 C.E. from Egypt orders that Roman “soldiers of any degree when passing through the several districts are not to make any requisitions or to employ forced transport (*angareia*) unless they have the prefect’s written authority”²⁰—a rescript clearly made necessary by soldiers abusing their privileges. Another decree from Egypt in 133–137 C.E. documents this abuse: “Many soldiers without written requisition are travelling about in the country, demanding ships, beasts of burden, and men, beyond anything authorized, sometimes seizing things by force. . . to the point of *showing abuse and threats to private citizens*, the result is that the military is associated with arrogance and injustice.”²¹ In order to minimize resentment in the conquered lands, Rome made at least some effort to punish violators of the laws regarding impressment.

The Theodosian Code devotes an entire section to *angareia*.²² Among its ordinances are these:

If any person while making a journey should consider that he may abstract an ox that is not assigned to the public post but dedicated to the plow, he shall be *arrested with due force* by the rural police . . . and he shall be haled before the judge [normally the governor]. (8.5.1, 315 C.E.)

By this interdict We forbid that any person should deem that they may request packanimals and supplementary posthorses. But if any person should rashly act so presumptuously, *he shall be punished very severely*. (8.5.6, 354 C.E.)

When any *legion* is proceeding to its destination, it shall not hereafter attempt to appropriate more than two posthorses (*angariae*), and only for the sake of any who are sick. (8.5.11, 360 C.E., my emphasis throughout)

Late as these regulations are, they reflect a situation that had changed little since the time of the Persians. Armies had to move through countries with dispatch. Some legionnaires bought their own slaves to help carry their packs of sixty to eighty-five pounds (not including weapons).²³ The majority of the rank and file, however, had to depend on impressed civilians. There are vivid accounts of whole villages fleeing to avoid being forced to carry soldiers' baggage, and of richer towns prepared to pay large sums to escape having Roman soldiers billeted on them for winter.²⁴

With few exceptions, the commanding general of a legion personally administered justice in serious cases, and all other cases were left to the disciplinary control of his subordinates. Centurions (commanders of 100 men) had almost limitless authority in dealing with routine cases of discipline. This accounts for the curious fact that there is very little codified military law, and that which exists is late. Roman military historians are agreed, however, that military law changed very little in its essential character throughout the imperial period.²⁵ No account survives to us today of the penalties to be meted out to a soldier for forcing a civilian to carry his pack more than the permitted mile, but there are at least hints. "If in winter quarters, in camp, *or on the march*, either an officer or a soldier does injury to a civilian, and does not fully repair the same, he shall pay the damage twofold."²⁶ This is about as mild a penalty, however, as one can find. Josephus's comment is surely exaggerated, even if it states the popular impression: Roman military forces "have laws which punish with death not merely desertion of the ranks, but even a slight neglect of duty" (*War* 3.102–8). Between these extremes there was deprivation of pay, a ration of barley instead of wheat, reduction in rank, dishonorable discharge, being forced to camp outside the fortifications, or to stand all day before the general's tent holding a clod in one's hands, or to stand barefoot in public places. But the most frequent punishment by far was flogging.²⁷

The frequency with which decrees were issued to curb misuse of the *angareia* indicates how lax discipline on this point was. Perhaps the soldier might receive only a rebuke. But the point is that the soldier *does not know what will happen*.

It is in this context of Roman military occupation that Jesus speaks.²⁸ He does not counsel revolt. One does not "befriend" the soldier, draw him aside, and drive a knife into his ribs. Jesus was surely aware of the futility of armed insurrection against Roman imperial might; he certainly did nothing to encourage those whose hatred of Rome was near to flaming into violence.

But why carry his pack a second mile? Is this not to rebound to the opposite extreme of aiding and abetting the enemy?²⁹ Not at all. The question here, as in the two previous instances, is how the oppressed can recover the initiative and assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed. The rules are Caesar's, but how one responds to the rules is God's, and Caesar has no power over that.

Imagine then the soldier's surprise when, at the next mile marker, he reluctantly reaches to assume his pack, and the civilian says, "Oh no, let me carry it another mile." Why would he want to do that? What is he up to? Normally, soldiers have to coerce people to carry their packs, but this Jew does so cheerfully, and will not stop! Is this a provocation? Is he insulting the legionnaire's strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to violate the rules of impressment? Will this civilian file a complaint? Create trouble?

From a situation of servile impressment, the oppressed have suddenly seized the initiative. They have taken back the power of choice. The soldier is thrown off balance by being deprived of the predictability of his victim's response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. Now he has been forced into making a decision for which nothing in his previous experience has prepared him. If he has enjoyed feeling superior to the vanquished, he will not enjoy it today. Imagine the situation of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew to give back his pack! The humor of this scene may have escaped us, but it could scarcely have been lost on Jesus' hearers, who must have been regaled at the prospect of thus discomfiting their oppressors.

Jesus does not encourage Jews to walk a second mile in order to build up merit in heaven, or to exercise a supererogatory piety, or to kill the soldier with kindness. He is helping an oppressed people find a way to protest and neutralize an onerous practice despised throughout the empire. He is not giving a non-political message of spiritual world-transcendence. He is formulating a worldly spirituality in which the people at the bottom of society or under the thumb of imperial power learn to recover their humanity.

One could easily misuse Jesus' advice vindictively; that is why it must not be separated from the command to love enemies, which is integrally connected with it in both Matthew and Luke. But love is not averse to taking the law and using its oppressive momentum to throw the soldier into a region of uncertainty and anxiety where he has never been before.

Such tactics can seldom be repeated. One can imagine that within days after the incidents that Jesus sought to provoke, the Powers That Be would pass new laws: penalties for nakedness in court, flogging for carrying a pack more than a mile! One must be creative, improvising new tactics to keep the opponent off balance.

To those whose lifelong pattern has been to cringe before their masters, Jesus offers a way to liberate themselves from servile actions and a servile mentality. And he asserts that they can do this *before* there is a revolution. There is no need to wait until Rome has been defeated, or peasants are landed and slaves freed. They can begin to behave with dignity and recovered humanity *now*, even under the unchanged conditions of the old order. Jesus' sense of divine immediacy has social implications. The reign of God is already breaking into the world, and it comes, not as an imposition from on high, but as the leaven slowly causing the dough to rise (Matt. 13:33//Luke 13:20-21). Jesus' teaching on nonviolence is thus of a piece with his proclamation of the dawning of the reign of God.

In the conditions of first-century Palestine, a political revolution against the Romans could only be catastrophic, as the events of 66–70 C.E. would prove. Jesus does not propose armed revolution. But he does lay the foundations for a social revolution, as Richard A. Horsley has pointed out. And a social revolution becomes political when it reaches a critical threshold of acceptance; this in fact did happen to the Roman Empire as the Christian church overcame it from below.³⁰

Nor were peasants and slaves in a position to transform the economic system by frontal assault. But they could begin to act from an already recovered dignity and freedom, and the ultimate consequences of such acts could only be revolutionary. To that end, Jesus spoke repeatedly of a voluntary remission of debts.³¹

It is entirely appropriate, then, that the saying on debts in Matt. 5:42//Luke 6:30//*Gos. Thom.* 95 has been added to this block of sayings. Jesus counsels his hearers not just to practice alms and to lend money, even to bad risks, but to lend without expecting interest or even the return of the principal.³² Such radical egalitarian sharing would be necessary to rescue impoverished Palestinian peasants from their plight; one need not posit an imminent end of history as the cause for such astonishing generosity. And yet none of this is new; Jesus is merely issuing a prophetic summons to Israel to observe the commandments pertaining to the sabbatical year enshrined in Torah, adapted to a new situation.³³

Such radical sharing would be necessary in order to restore true community. For the risky defiance of the Powers that Jesus advocates would inevitably issue in punitive economic sanctions and physical punishment against individuals. They would need economic support; Matthew's "Give to everyone who *asks* [*aitounti*—not necessarily *begs*] of you" may simply refer to this need for mutual sustenance. Staggering interest and taxes isolated peasants, who went under one by one. This was a standard tactic of imperial "divide and rule" strategy.³⁴

Jesus' solution was neither utopian nor apocalyptic. It was simple realism. Nothing less could halt or reverse the economic decline of Jewish peasants than a complete suspension of usury and debt and a restoration of economic equality through outright grants, a pattern actually implemented in the earliest Christian community, according to the Book of Acts.³⁵

Just on the grounds of sheer originality, the examples of unarmed direct action in Matt. 5:39b-41 would appear to have originated with Jesus. No one, not only in the first century but in all of human history, ever advocated defiance of oppressors by turning the cheek, stripping oneself naked in court, or jeopardizing a soldier by carrying his pack a second mile. For three centuries, the early church observed Jesus' command to nonviolence. But nowhere in the early church, to say nothing of the early fathers, do we find statements similar to these in their humor and originality. These sayings are, in fact, so radical, so unprecedented, and so threatening, that it has taken all these centuries just to begin to grasp their implications.

The Thesis Statement: Do Not Mirror Evil

A more difficult problem is the meaning of *antistēnai* in Matt. 5:39a. It is translated "resist" in almost all versions (NRSV: "Do not resist an evildoer"). That meaning of the word is certainly well-attested, but its use in this passage is insupportable. Purely on logical grounds, "resist not" does not fit the aggressive nonviolent actions described in the three following examples. Since in these three instances Jesus provides strategies for resisting oppression, it is altogether inconsistent for him to counsel people in almost the same breath not to resist it. Has Matthew added the term, or has it been mistranslated?

Matthew 5:39a also seems to suggest false alternatives: one either resists evil, or resists not. Fight or flight. No other possibilities appear to exist; if Jesus commands us not to resist, then the only other choice would appear to be passivity, complicity in our own oppression, surrender. Submission to evil appears to be the will of God. *And this is precisely the way most Christians have interpreted this passage.* "Turn the other cheek" is understood as enjoining supine acquiescence when someone behaves violently toward us. "Give your undergarment as well" has encouraged people to go limp in the face of injustice and hand over the last thing they own. "Going the second mile" has been turned into a platitude meaning nothing more than "extend yourself." Rather than encouraging the oppressed to resist their oppressors, these revolutionary statements have been heard as injunctions to collude in one's own despoiling.

What the translators have not noted, however, is how frequently *anthistēmi* is used as a military term. Resistance implies “counteractive aggression,” a response to hostilities initiated by someone else. Liddell-Scott defines *anthistēmi* as to “set against esp. in battle, withstand.” Ephesians 6:13 is exemplary of its military usage: “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand [*antistēnai*, lit., to draw up battle ranks against the enemy] on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm [*stēnai*, lit., to close ranks and continue to fight].” The term is used in the LXX primarily for armed resistance in military encounters (44 out of 71 times). Josephus uses *anthistēmi* for violent struggle 15 out of 17 times, Philo 4 out of 10. As James W. Douglass notes, Jesus’ answer is set against the backdrop of the burning question of forcible resistance to Rome. In that context, “resistance” could have only one meaning: lethal violence.³⁶

In short, *antistēnai* means more in Matt. 5:39a than simply to “stand against” or “resist.”³⁷ It means to resist *violently*, to revolt or rebel, to engage in an insurrection. The logic of the text requires such a meaning: on the one hand, do not continue to be supine and complicit in your oppression; but on the other hand, do not react violently to it either. Rather, find a third way, a way that is neither submission nor assault, neither flight nor fight, a way that can secure your human dignity and begin to change the power equation, even now, before the revolution. Turn your cheek, thus indicating to the one who backhands you that his attempts to shame you into servility have failed. Strip naked and parade out of court, thus taking the momentum of the law and the whole debt economy and flipping them, jujitsu-like, in a burlesque of legality. Walk a second mile, surprising the occupation troops with a sudden challenge to their control. These are, of course, not rules to be followed legalistically, but examples to spark an infinite variety of creative responses in new and changed circumstances. They break the cycle of humiliation with humor and even ridicule, exposing the injustice of the System. They recover for the poor a modicum of initiative that can force the oppressor to see them in a new light.

There is good reason to suspect that the original form of this saying about resistance is best preserved in the New Testament epistles. In Romans 12 we find more allusions to Jesus’ teaching than anywhere else in all Paul’s letters. Among them are:

12:14—“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them”; cf. Matt. 5:44//Luke 6:28.

12:15—“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”; cf. Matt. 5:4, 12//Luke 6:21, 23.

12:17—“Do not repay anyone evil for evil” and 12:21—“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”; cf. Matt. 5:39a.

Both 1 Thess. 5:15 (“See that none of you repays evil for evil”) and 1 Pet. 3:9 (“Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing”) preserve the same saying as Rom. 12:17. We appear to have here an extremely early fixed catechetical tradition, predating even the earliest preserved epistle.³⁸ The teaching on nonviolence thus clearly antedates the Jewish War and was not a reaction to it.

The expression “Repay no one evil for evil” conveys precisely the sense we were driven to for Matt. 5:39a: Do not mirror evil. The examples that follow in 5:39b-41 in fact presuppose some such sense. Could this ancient catechetical tradition have originally stood, then, in Matthew’s tradition? If “Do not repay evil for evil” and “Do not forcibly resist evil” have equivalent meanings, could they simply be different versions of the same tradition?

We can now, for the first time, answer a cautious yes to that question. George Howard has recently discovered what he regards as an early Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew, which reads at 5:39a, “But I say to you, *do not repay evil for evil*.”³⁹ If this remarkable find is indeed as ancient as Howard argues, it reinforces our suspicion that Matt. 5:39a and the catechetical saying in Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15; and 1 Pet. 3:9 are indeed derived from the same tradition.⁴⁰ And even if this text is not as early as Howard thinks, its very existence, from *any* period, proves that at least one Hebrew version regarded “Do not repay evil for evil” as the proper way to read Matt. 5:39a.⁴¹

If this line of argument is correct, then the original version of v. 39a was something closer to “Do not repay evil for evil.” This is the sense that vv. 39b-42 require. The logic of Jesus’ examples in Matt. 5:39b-42 goes beyond both inaction and overreaction, capitulation and murderous counterviolence, to a new response, fired in the crucible of love, that promises to liberate the oppressed from evil even as it frees the oppressor from sin. “Do not react violently to evil, do not counter evil in kind, do not let evil dictate the terms of your opposition, do not let violence draw you into mimetic rivalry”—this is the revolutionary principle, recognized from earliest times,⁴² that Jesus articulates as the basis for nonviolently engaging the Powers.

Perhaps the alternatives we are discussing can be more graphically presented by a chart:

Jesus’ Third Way

- Seize the moral initiative
- Find a creative alternative to violence
- Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person
- Meet force with ridicule or humor
- Break the cycle of humiliation

- Refuse to submit to or to accept the inferior position
- Expose the injustice of the system
- Take control of the power dynamic
- Shame the oppressor into repentance
- Stand your ground
- Make the Powers make decisions for which they are not prepared
- Recognize your own power
- Be willing to suffer rather than retaliate
- Force the oppressor to see you in a new light
- Deprive the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective
- Be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws
- Die to fear of the old order and its rules
- Seek the oppressor's transformation

Flight
 Submission
 Passivity
 Withdrawal
 Surrender

Fight
 Armed revolt
 Violent rebellion
 Direct retaliation
 Revenge

Gandhi insisted that no one join him who was not willing to take up arms to fight for independence. They could not freely renounce what they had not entertained. One cannot pass directly from "Flight" to "Jesus' Third Way." One needs to pass through the "Fight" stage, if only to discover one's own inner strength and capacity for violence (see fig. 1). One need not actually become violent, but one does need to own one's fury at injustice and care enough to be willing to fight and, if necessary, die for its eradication. Only then can such a person freely renounce violence and embrace active nonviolence.

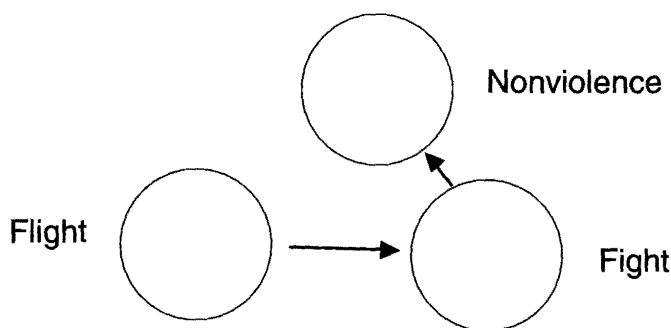


Fig. 1

It is dangerous to be engaged in nonviolent struggle beside people who have not yet learned about their inner violence.⁴³

Jesus' third way did not arise out of a vacuum. It was a logical development of Israel's idealized concept of the holy war. One line of Israel's development can be seen as the movement from (1) submission, to (2) holy war, to (3) prophetic peacemaking. As Paul Valliere observes, the Genesis creation narratives are extraordinary, compared with other creation accounts from that time and area, precisely because of their refusal to count war as part of the nature of things. War is not the means used to subdue the cosmos, as in Hesiod's *Theogony* or the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. Peace is the norm of the cosmos from the beginning. "Holy war" enters the narrative as God's sovereign act of liberating the Hebrew slaves from Egypt without their striking a blow. God, and God alone, fought on their behalf. God would drive out the inhabitants of Canaan by means of hornets, terror, panic, or pestilence, not the sword (Exod. 23:28; Deut. 7:20; Josh. 24:12). Jericho's walls collapsed after ritual, not military, action (though the mopping-up operation was carried out by Hebrew warriors—Joshua 6), and God overcame the Midianites by means of three hundred men armed only with torches and trumpets (Judges 7). Even the "ban," the practice of "devoting" booty to God by destroying it, can be seen as the imposition of extremely ascetical limits on the enjoyment of the fruits of war. (It also reveals the depth to which the myth of redemptive violence had penetrated Israel's theology and politics.) At least one strand of Israelite reflection regarded holy war, not as a war fought for or in the name of God, but as *a war that God alone fights*.

With its defection to monarchy, however, Israel began waging political wars that the false prophets tried to legitimate as holy. Israel came to trust in military might rather than God (Hos. 10:13); yet God continued to offer to save the people, but not "by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen" (Hos. 1:7; see also Zech. 4:6). The unique contribution of the true prophets was their refusal to turn holy war into political war. This led them at times to declare that God was waging holy war *against* faithless Israel.⁴⁴ They recognized the impossibility of maintaining a standing army and concluding treaties with foreign powers while still preserving Israel's utter reliance on God alone to fight for them. The prophets turned to a kind of "prophetic pacifism." Holy war came to be seen as a contest fought not with the sword but with the divine word: truth against power. In a new twist on the warrior asceticism of old, the Hebrew prophets waged solitary moral combat against virtually an entire people who were convinced that wars of national defense, liberation, or conquest were their only hope of salvation. Israel had succumbed to the myth of redemptive violence,

but the prophets had discovered that the word of God was a mighty sword that cut both ways, for and against God's people (cf. Heb. 4:12).⁴⁵

Out of the heart of that prophetic tradition, Jesus engaged the Domination System in both its outer and spiritual manifestations. His teaching on nonviolence forms the charter for a way of being in the world that breaks the spiral of violence. Jesus here reveals a way to fight evil with all our power without being transformed into the very evil we fight. It is a way—the only way possible—of not becoming what we hate. “Do not counter evil in kind”—this insight is the distilled essence, stated with sublime simplicity, of the experience of those Jews who had, in Jesus' very lifetime, so courageously and effectively practiced nonviolent direct action against Rome.⁴⁶

Jesus, in short, abhors both passivity and violence. He articulates, out of the history of his own people's struggles, a way by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored, the oppressor resisted without being emulated, and the enemy neutralized without being destroyed. Those who have lived by Jesus' words—Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, César Chavez, Adolpho Pérez Esquivel—point us to a new way of confronting evil whose potential for personal and social transformation we are only beginning to grasp today.⁴⁷

Making Jesus' Teaching Operational

Nothing is deadlier to the spirit of Jesus' teaching on nonviolence than regarding it legalistically. Women beaten by their husbands are told to “turn the other cheek” and let the man continue to brutalize them, with no reference to Jesus' actual intention. If we reenter the freedom Jesus sought to establish in these sayings, we would rather counsel the battered to seize the initiative, force her husband to recognize her rights, expose his behavior publicly, and break the vicious cycle of humiliation, guilt, and bruising.

In the American legal context, according to the social workers I have consulted, the most loving thing a battered wife could do might be to have her husband arrested. This would bring the issue out into the open, put him under a court injunction that would mean jail if the violence continues, position him so that his self-interest is served by joining a therapy group for batterers, and thus potentially begin a process that would not only deliver the woman from being battered, but free the man from battering as well. I cite this suggestion because it is at the antipodes to our sentimental notions of what love entails. Perhaps there are better ways; but they will certainly involve tough love, not the limp collusion that so often masquerades as Christian.

To require a boy who is being bullied at school literally to “turn the other cheek” can simply encourage cowardice. Of course, a nonviolent solution would

be preferable, and one can usually be found.⁴⁸ But it is a fundamental rule of the life of the spirit that people cannot sacrifice something they do not have. Jesus did not invite slaves to abandon their sense of dignity as a way of mortifying the ego; their egos had been mortified a thousand times, so much so that the vast majority had internalized a sense of their inferiority. They could not give up their self-esteem for the sake of God; they had been robbed of it long since by the very structure of servitude. It was precisely to restore that dignity and self-esteem that Jesus counseled nonviolent assertiveness.

If, then, a boy is willing and able to fight, even at the cost of great pain, then one might have a right to encourage him to renounce violence and seek a third way. But to duck violence under cover of the gospel, without having found the inner strength to fight for one's own rights, is both dishonest and craven.

Gandhi was adamant that nothing could be done with a coward, but that from a violent person one could make a nonviolent one. "I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. . . . But I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence."⁴⁹ "At every meeting I repeated the warning that unless they felt that in non-violence they had come into possession of a force infinitely superior to the one they had and in the use of which they were adept, they should have nothing to do with non-violence and resume the arms they possessed before."⁵⁰

Early on, before he had become fully committed to satyagraha, Gandhi so despaired of teaching his people the art of courageous nonviolence that he even proposed that they enlist in the army, reasoning that men who had risked their lives on the battlefield would be better prepared to risk their lives in a nonviolent struggle.⁵¹ Something of the same militancy can be seen in Jesus' call to a potential disciple in Luke 9:60, where discipleship is comparable to the conscripting of recruits for a holy war. In normal circumstances, no grounds exist that justify flouting the filial obligation to bury one's father; but if the issue is war or something even more urgent (the reign of God), there is no time for normal obligations.

What looks to all the world like passivity may in fact be the third way. When Jackie Robinson became the first black player in major league baseball, Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers pressed this intensely competitive athlete to agree that for three years he would take whatever abuse was heaped on him without a word. Robinson finally said, "Mr. Rickey, are you looking for a negro who is afraid to fight back?" Rickey replied, "I'm looking for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back."⁵²

Humor and wit can help preserve the humanity of all parties in a conflict. Once, a squatter community in South Africa found its shelter infested with lice. When the authorities refused to fumigate it, the leadership committee took bags

full of lice-infested blankets to the administrator's office and dumped them on his floor. They got immediate action.⁵³

A black woman was walking on a South African street with her children, when a white man, passing, spat in her face. She stopped and said, "Thank you, and now for the children." He was so nonplused he was unable to respond.

Sometimes the wit can have a barb, as when Bishop Desmond Tutu was walking by a construction site on a temporary sidewalk the width of one person. A white man appeared at the other end, recognized Tutu, and said, "I don't give way to gorillas." At which Tutu stepped aside, made a deep sweeping gesture, and said, "Ah yes, but I do."

Ridicule even has a role in shocking people awake to the meaning of their acts. One of the world's most peaceful peoples, the Mbuti, hunter-gatherers of northeast Zaïre, defuse anger through laughter. If a group of children making noise wake a man from his nap, who then shouts at or slaps a child, all the children come rushing together and play the adult role, shouting and slapping each other. The adult, seeing himself ridiculed this way, must either retreat or join the laughter in his own self-ridicule.⁵⁴

Similarly, Chinese students, forbidden to demonstrate against government policy, donned masks of the communist leadership and carried signs: "Support Martial Law," "Support Dictatorship," "Support Inflation."

During the struggle of Solidarity in Poland, one group dressed in Santa Claus outfits distributed scarce sanitary napkins to women as a way of dramatizing the difficulty of obtaining essentials. When these Santas were arrested, other Santas showed up at jail insisting that the others were frauds, that they were the *real* Santas.

Gandhi spoke of entering jail as a bridegroom enters his bride's chamber, as a way of stressing the importance of being fearless of the government's punishment. So when he was arrested during the civil disobedience campaign of 1930, a mass meeting was organized to *congratulate* the government for arresting him. It is difficult for a government to arrest well-wishers!⁵⁵

Jesus does not proclaim a nonviolence for the perfect, but for the violent. His is a practical, achievable nonviolence that can be performed by ordinary people. The beatitude about the meek can be translated as "Blessed are the *nonviolent*, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5).⁵⁶ Jesus' way is not individualistic, but collective; it usually involves the actions of organizations, communities, social classes, or racial groups. Not just young men of war-making age, but all sectors of the population can participate, from babies to the elderly. "Tradition here is for the men to keep the women in their houses," said Murabak Awad during the Palestinian *Intifada*. "But now husbands are allowing their wives out, to engage in political activity. The women are pouring all their energy

into it. Nonviolent action can draw all of the population together and create a powerful unity.”⁵⁷

Nor is Jesus’ third way averse to using coercion. His way aims at converting the opponent; failing that, it hopes for accommodation, where the opponent is willing to make some changes simply to get the protesters off his back. But if that too fails, nonviolence entails coercion: the opponent is forced to make a change rather than suffer the loss of power, even though he remains hostile.⁵⁸ But Jesus’ way does not employ *violent* coercion.

As Barbara Deming puts it, in nonviolence one “exerts force upon the other, not tearing him away from himself but tearing from him only that which is not properly his own, the strength which has been loaned to him by all those who have been giving him obedience.”⁵⁹ The civil rights marchers who crossed the bridge in Selma, Alabama, without a parade permit forced the authorities to decide between two courses, either of which would damage their position: either they allowed the blacks to march, thus recognizing the legitimacy of their protest; or they forcibly stopped it, thus exposing their own endemic violence for all the world to see. The choice of violence proved to be catastrophic for white supremacy and a major victory for the marchers, despite the injuries incurred.

Finally, nonviolence must not be misconstrued as a way of avoiding conflict. The “peace” that the gospel brings is never the absence of conflict, but an ineffable divine reassurance within the heart of conflict: a peace that passes understanding. Christians have all too often called for “nonviolence” when they really meant tranquility. Nonviolence, in fact, seeks out conflict, elicits conflict, exacerbates conflict, in order to bring it out into the open and lance its poisonous sores. It is not idealistic or sentimental about evil; it does not coddle or cajole aggressors, but moves against perceived injustice proactively, with the same alacrity as the most hawkish militarist.

As Eisler reminds us, a partnership society is not a society devoid of conflict. It values conflict as the inevitable price of freedom. But it handles conflict nonviolently. The Domination System, by contrast, deals with conflict by suppressing it.⁶⁰ Democracy is a state of perpetual low-level conflict—severe enough to agitate citizens into action, and mild enough to prevent that action from boiling over into violence.

The programmatic task of what we might call the “Jesus project” in the decades ahead will require moving from largely reactive, episodic, and occasional nonviolent actions to an aggressive, sustained movement. Our goal must be the training of millions of nonviolent activists who are ready, at a moment’s notice, to swing into action on behalf of the humanizing purposes of God.

That struggle is not the sole preserve of Christians, of course; some of the greatest exponents of nonviolence have been non-Christian: the Hindu Gandhi,

the Muslim Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. These exponents of nonviolence have helped awaken us to its centrality in our own tradition.

And the world, and the church, are waking up! What an exciting prospect! What an auspicious opportunity! What a time to be alive!