

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE HOLY OBEDIENCE!

Mark Rotherham reflects on the life of the greatest justice & peace activist of all time



'Follow Me,' by A. D. Jones, used with permission.

The 'principalities and powers' that put Jesus to death are still with us and growing more destructive.

Climate change is the result of injustice on a global scale. The United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment is painful testimony to our abuse of the rivers, oceans, soil, and forests. For the primary benefit of an elite minority, underpinned by middle-class mass consumption, our political-economy exploits the majority poor while threatening to send half of all the world's animals and plants into oblivion. Never before in the history of the Earth, spanning some 4.5 billion years, has a mass extinction episode been caused by a single species. And, like the crucifixion of Jesus, this violence to the fabric of life is normative, routine, institutional, corporate, and perfectly legal under prevailing structures of authority. We should be clear on the context in which we address questions and expressions of concern regarding whether Christians should ever disobey the government; we are embroiled in a life or death planetary crisis.

One of the passages most frequently used to make a case for submission to authorities is contained in a letter from Paul: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" (Romans 13:1). Paul teaches that God established all existing authorities and that submitting to them acknowledges the legitimacy they derive from God. Beth Brockman was one of seven protestors arrested and convicted for trespassing and for resisting arrest in North Carolina, USA. She had participated in a re-enactment at Blackwater's Moyock headquarters of a shooting incident in Baghdad involving Blackwater security contractors in which 17 Iraqi civilians died. In her defence, Brockman stated: "There may be no court that can prosecute these killers. As Christians we have an obligation to stand in solidarity with the Iraqi people." Judge Russell Duke, citing Romans 13:1, responded: "I've always thought that if you're going to be a follower of Jesus...you can't select the portions that you like and

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disregard the rest."¹ In addition to his own selectivity, Judge Duke failed to note an important qualification. The submission to authority referred to by Paul is not unconditional. If an authority violates God's will it has violated its God-given mandate, and that action is illegitimate.

But who will hold authorities to account when they commit, or permit, an illegal or immoral act? It is clear from the New Testament that Jesus' followers did not blindly obey the governments under which they found themselves. Faithfulness to God came first. Only God's authority is absolute and all other authority is delegated. Jesus recognized this when interrogated by Pilate: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:11). Jesus knew that the political and economic structures of his society were fallen and that his words and actions would not only be provocative but also illegal. He knew that the price his followers would pay for protesting in his name would be, arrest, trial, and punishment: "You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them" (Mark 13:9). Civil disobedience and direct action, commissioned by Jesus, speaks truth to fallen power, obligates corporations and governments to account for their crimes, and calls them to their proper function of serving the Kingdom of God – Jesus' symbol for the domination-free order distinguished by peace, justice, and care for creation.

From his first public appearance – his electrifying rendition of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-22) – to his dramatic entry into Jerusalem and his

direct action at the Temple, Jesus was a walking force of nonviolent troublemaking in a kingdom of violence. Like Ghandi's salt march to the sea in nonviolent opposition to colonial rule, or Martin Luther King's march from Selma to Montgomery in nonviolent pursuit of civil rights for black Americans, Jesus' procession into Jerusalem delivers a striking symbolic statement that is politically explosive. The procession itself is a jubilant piece of street theatre that satirises the victory parades of empire. In contrast to the war horse, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey – a biblical symbol of peace – 'adusting' imperial glamour and 'culture-jamming' the prowess of violence. The true liberator is the humble peacemaker (the peace activist) who will counter the cult of death through the power of suffering love.

Jesus' political life reached its zenith with his prophetic 'teach-in' at Israel's pre-eminent institution – the Temple. Its immense utility as a fortress, and the Zionist belief that Yahweh himself would fight to defend it, made the Temple the perceived guarantor of Jewish sovereignty and placed it at the centre of resistance to imperial rule. (Nuclear weapons serve a parallel military and idolatrous function for the 'national security' of modern states). Into this loaded religio-militant arena: "Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers... he said [to everyone present] 'Is it not written: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?" But you have made it a "den of robbers" ' (Mark 11:15-17). The common interpretation that Jesus aimed his protest at commercial activity in the Temple obscures a greater truth. The word "robbers" is derived from the Hebrew word *parisim*, which, translated more accurately, means "violent ones"². Jesus was publicly denouncing a belief system that conflated holiness and violence.

Deposing holy war theology, the Temple, he said, should be "a house of prayer" promoting universal peace among "all nations" – a message underpinned by the

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manner of his entry into Jerusalem. Jesus had often been in trouble with the provincial authorities before, but his exorcism of the "violent ones" from the body politic, like pus from a septic wound, had drawn the dark heart of the dominant system. Vested interests in the religio-military complex now wanted Jesus dead: "the chief priests and the teachers of the law...plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him" (Luke 19:47) (Matt: 26:4).

It is easy to imagine the Scribes and Pharisees, who netted Jesus in constructs of law designed to prompt his arrest and haul him into court, doing the same today. The Terrorism Act of 2001 targets groups such as Greenpeace, CND, and nonviolent direct action such as that taken by the anti-GM movement, by including "damage to property" as part of the legal definition of terrorism. The primary purpose of the Act is to inhibit civil protest and safeguard profits for big business. Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the Temple and overturned their tables. That action according to the Terrorism Act would class as "violence against any person or property" which involved its "use or threat, for the purpose of advancing political, religious or ideological cause." The Acts definition of a "terrorist" is so vague that Jesus' direct action at the Temple would today class him as one. His disciples would be considered accessories to crime. Only Judas would escape any legal challenge, as he reported Jesus to the authorities and therefore correctly disclosed information. For those brought before a magistrate and charged, while the executive crimes against which they peacefully protest go unaccounted for, Jesus left a model statement: "Woe to you teachers of the law, you hypocrites! You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! You snakes! You brood of vipers!" (Matt 23:23 – 33)

Airbrushed out of view in Sunday School and Sunday sermons, the Gospel accounts tell us straight that the execution of Jesus was a political event. His crucifixion was institutional, systematic, public, and perfectly legal. He was arrested and brought before the Roman and Jewish authorities, accused of: "subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and

claims to be Messiah, a King" (Luke 23:2). Following his trial he suffered the same fate as other political revolutionaries in the empire – brutal torture and crucifixion. And he died on a cross, hung between two Zealot insurgents. If Jesus had walked his talk of 'conscientious objection' among people of the twentieth-century his public ministry would still have ended the way it did in the first-century. Whether the death penalty is delivered officially by firing squad, hanging, or crucifixion – or delivered covertly by having dissidents 'disappeared' or assassinated – the message of empire remains the same: peace is not an option!

The Domination System, a term introduced by theologian, Walter Wink, in his work on the Powers: "is characterised by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all."³ We should never forget that in Nazi Germany many thousands of employees and soldiers carried out instructions that resulted in mass-murder. Learning the lessons of history, from first century Palestine to the present, means being aware of how easily and quickly we can become captives of malign systems of thought and economics. A further characteristic of the Domination System, arising out of those identified by Wink, is abusive ecological relations. James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York, was the first scientist to warn the US Congress of the dangers of climate change. In a recent published article, he denounces the British government over the coal-burning Kingsnorth power plant: "The trains carrying coal to power plants are death trains. Coal-fired power plants are factories of death. When I testified against the proposed Kingsnorth power plant, I estimated that in its lifetime it would be responsible for the extermination of about 400 species"⁴. Citizens must judge authority to be illegitimate at some level before resorting to open principled disobedience. Polar Bear, Panda, Corn Bunting and Buff-Tailed Bumble Bee are just a few of the animals created through the self-surpassing power of God's

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love now threatened by human economic activity. Policies that result in the extermination of species – biocide – have no moral legitimacy and call for prophetic action to resist and redeem the state and corporate powers that set them in motion.

Jesus, today, is as passionate about ecology as he remains about peace and justice. The beauty and biodiversity of the Earth is sacred. Caring for the soil, the air and the water and widening our circle of love – our practice of peace and justice – to embrace all members of the Earth community is the very purpose for which we were created, and from which we have fallen. Climate change shows us that ordinary people, simply living their lives, doing their jobs, without any particular hostility, can become agents in a terrifying process of ecological holocaust. Far from following Jesus, if we are living comfortably amid the mass-destruction of God's Creation, then, like the disciples who denied knowing Jesus after his arrest, we are managing to keep a safe distance from him. Christians are called out of conformity to societal sin to a transformation of mind and spirit that extends to our institutions and systems. As the English scientist and novelist C.P. Snow once observed: "...you will find that far more, and far more hideous, crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion"⁵. Christians must, as a matter of urgency, resist crimes of obedience and oppose the violence embedded in systems of business and politics. We need to repent of our own violence, disguised in the energy we use, the things we buy, the way we travel, the way we farm and the food we eat. And for the love of Jesus, for the survival of our fellow species, for the sake of human generations not yet born, we are called to a new level of self-awakening and self-assertion. Civil disobedience is holy obedience when corporations and governments – today's principalities and powers – act in ways that violate the Earth and run counter to the Kingdom of God. ■

¹ Bill Sizemore. (24th Jan 2008). *Judge Releases Blackwater Protestors After Quiet Debate of the Issues*, The Virginian-Pilot.

² Marcus J. Borg. (1998). *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, New York: Trinity Press, International, 2nd Ed. p.185-189.

³ Walter Wink. (1998). *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, New York, Doubleday, p.39.

⁴ James Hansen. (15th Feb. 2009). *Coal-Fired Power Stations Are Death Factories. Close Them*, The Observer.

⁵ C. P. Snow. (27th Jan 1961). *The Moral Un-Neutrality of Science*, Science. p.255-259.

Scripture Quotations taken from the HOLY BIBLE, TODAY'S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, by International Bible Society, 2005.

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