

What Belongs to God?

A Reflection on Christians, War Taxes and Nagasaki



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On August 6 and 9, 1945, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan killing an estimated one hundred thousand men, women, and children, and severely injuring many more.

The human suffering present in the stories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is painful and sobering for all who long for a peaceful world. For Christians, the story of Nagasaki carries an added tragic irony. Nagasaki was the site of the largest Christian community in Japan. Despite years of harsh persecution by imperial rule, thousands of Christians in Nagasaki lived and nurtured their faith in secret. Finally, in 1873 the persecution ended, and some 20,000 secret Christians emerged. These Christians built the St. Mary's Cathedral which became a landmark in their city. At the time it was the largest Christian church in Asia.

On August 9, 1945, a Christian U.S. bomber crew flew over the city, and dropped an atomic bomb. Within seconds, the large Christian community in Nagasaki was vaporized. What the imperial government could not accomplish in 200 years of harsh rule, American Christendom did in one summer morning.

Father George Zabelka was the chaplain for the bombing crew that dropped the bomb on Nagasaki. On the anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing in 1985, he offered these reflections on his role in the destruction of Nagasaki:

As a Catholic chaplain I watched as the Boxcar, piloted by a good Irish Catholic pilot, dropped the bomb on Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki, the center of Catholicism in Japan. I knew that St. Francis Xavier, centuries before, had brought the Catholic faith to Japan. I knew that schools, churches, and religious orders were annihilated. And yet I said nothing.

Now, brothers and sisters, on the anniversary of this terrible atrocity carried out by Christians, I must be the first to say that I made a terrible mistake. I was had by the father of lies. I participated in the big ecumenical lie of the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches. I wore the uniform. I was part of the system...All I can say today is that I was wrong.

Each one of us becomes responsible for the crime of war by cooperating in its preparation and in its execution. This includes the military. This includes the making of weapons. And it includes

paying for the weapons. There's no question about that. We've got to realize we all become responsible. Silence, doing nothing, can be one of the greatest sins.¹

World War II was the first war paid for by a massive income tax which incorporated millions of new Americans into the tax structure. Since then, American tax dollars have funded wars and military actions in a host of countries, including the current "war on terror" which continues in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries. These wars have yielded mixed results in terms of U.S. interests, while causing incalculable human pain and suffering across the decades.

The story of Nagasaki is haunting, and leads us to troubling questions. Through the payment of taxes for war and participation in military actions, what have U.S. Christians destroyed in places like Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Libya, Kuwait, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Palestine, Colombia and Afghanistan? Have we snuffed out communities of faith who would have longed for support and fellowship? What opportunities for Christian unity and witness have we shattered? What emerging visions for reconciliation around the world have yielded to bitterness and cynicism because U.S. Christians readily relinquish their dollars to fight America's wars? Have the seductive and violent powers of empire captured our ultimate allegiance?

Jesus and the disciples lived in a world of crucifixions, rebel uprisings and economic oppression. In this context, the question of ultimate allegiance came to Jesus one day in the form of a trick question. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" Rather than offer a simple "yes" or "no" answer, Jesus asked to see a coin. Once the crowd produced the coin and the image of Caesar was clearly shown, Jesus told his hearers that they had a decision to make: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's."(Lk.20:25)

As noted by Willard Swartley, "Jesus' reply pointed beyond the rights of Caesar to the rights of God. God's claim and Caesar's claims must never be put on the same level."² During these days of counting our coins and paying our taxes, let us also join the circle around Jesus and consider the things that belong to God:

- our work, our time, our dollars, our lives
- the call to feed "enemies" who are hungry
- the lives of all people in the Middle East caught up in a desperate struggle for life
- our commitment to love and support our sister churches in Colombia
- Christian and Muslim communities in Iraq and Afghanistan
- U.S. soldiers at home and around the globe
- all those whose lives and minds are broken by war

As we affirm that all these things surely belong to God, can we who follow Jesus willingly give our tax dollars for war and killing?

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¹ Father George Zabelka, from a speech at a Pax Christi Conference in 1985. Originally published by Bruderhof.com. Available at: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig6/zabelka1.html>

² Willard Swartley, *The Christian and the Payment of Taxes Used for War*, 1980, See: <http://peace.mennolink.org/articles/wartaxes.html>