An Open Letter on a Hard Question to a Jewish Friend

Ted Koontz

Introduction

In January 1993 I traveled to Jerusalem for a conference sponsored by the Ethikon Institute on The Ethics of War andPeace. About 35 scholars from North America, Europe, and the Middle East attended the conference. My role was to be a respondent to Stanley Hauerwas. Together we were to represent "Christian Nonviolence," one of six traditions (along with Catholic natural law, Islam, Judaism, Political Realism, and Feminism) in a "dialogue conference." Each main presenter had prepared and circulated a paper in advance and each respondent had prepared a paper which was brought along to Jerusalem. The papers were to address seven key topics identified by the conference organizers: conceptions of war and peace, attitudes toward war and nonviolence, the grounds for war, resistance to political authority, motive or intention, the conduct of war, and morality in extremity. Each topic had a number of particular questions which further specified its meaning. At the conference itself each session was devoted to one of these topics. Sessions were opened with five-minute statements from representatives of each tradition outlining that tradition's perspectives on the particular topic, but most of our time was spent in free discussion and debate. The papers from the conference are to appear in a book tentatively titled *The Ethics of War and Peace*, edited by Terry Nardin, tentatively to be published by Princeton University Press.

I went to the conference with a lot of anticipation but also a lot of apprehension. I felt apprehensive because there were many "heavyweights" among the attenders and I felt entirely out of my league, because I knew Hauerwas and I would be alone in our position, because there I would be defending my pacifism on Christian confessional grounds in a pluralistic, largely irreligious and overwhelmingly nonpacifist context, and because I would be doing so in a full-blown way for the first time in front of one of my two most important intellectual mentors: my dissertation adviser, a secular Jew. My apprehension was not lessened when providentially I met Hauerwas on arrival at the airport in Jerusalem and he told me he was returning to the United States immediately to conduct the funeral of his father, nor when, a half hour before the first session, after a number of hours of frantically preparing notes with which to open the sessions (since I

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would now need to do so in Hauerwas' absence), my printer would not work!

Yet despite these fears, the conference turned out to be an amazing experience of God's grace for me. Though I felt totally unable to cope and knew I could not manage, I felt God's presence sustaining me through those days, enabling me to give reasons for the hope, the faith, that was in me. At least a few others, I believe, saw a bit of what the world looks like through the eyes of a Christian pacifist, even if they did not come to see the world the same way.

There were many hard questions that came my way as the sole defender of pacifism during those days, especially concerning what a pacifist would do about Somalia (the U.S. part of the U.N. military intervention there was less than a month old at the time) and about Bosnia. I had answers of sorts, of course. I have been in enough of these debates to know some of the stock questions, and the stock answers. I was, however, struck again by how much less convincing those stock answers sound in the context of a conference like that one in Jerusalem (the building we met in was right on the border dividing east and west Jerusalem, in what was no-man's-land from 1948-1967) than they do in my classroom at a Mennonite seminary in Elkhart. Nevertheless, I found things to say in response to the hard questions and came away feeling like I had at least not appeared to be a complete fool.

But there was one question from one person to which I confessed I had no answer. Though there were also stock answers to his form of a stock question, I could not give him such answers. So I could only answer him in humility and heartbrokenness, "I don't know." The question came in a personal conversation near the close of the conference. It came from a Jewish scholar, chair of the Institute of Jewish Studies at Hebrew University. It came from a man for whom I had come to have the deepest respect. I sensed him to be a man of deep integrity. I had learned that he had been a leader of the religiously-based opposition to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. I loved his way of making a point–telling a story, or a bit of history, and recounting varying interpretations given by commentators. I envied and delighted in his being absolutely unapologetic about speaking simply and directly from within his tradition. But there was more than respect and delight in his way of arguing. I had come to feel a special kinship to him during the group conversations those days even though we had not had previous personal conversations. I am not sure just why I felt that kinship, but I think it was partly because he really understood, as a Jew, what it means to be a minority in an alien and often hostile world and what it means to think as a minority in an alien, "cards stacked," framework. Even more, I believe I felt a kinship because I sensed in him a person who knew God, a person who took God seriously. I sensed that he was a man of faith. His question to me came gently, not belligerently. It was, "What would you do if you could kill a single Nazi guard and by so doing save 1,000 innocent Jews from death?" Not a new question, to be sure, but one which hit me with new force in that context.

So far as I can see, there is probably nothing I say in this letter which

substantively goes beyond the "stock answers" which I could have given him at the time he asked the question. Perhaps it would have been better to let my original "I don't know" stand as my "final" answer. Perhaps by seeking to give another answer I revert to what felt like platitudes which I could not bring myself to utter in his presence that noon in Jerusalem. I hope not. But whether or not there is anything substantively new here, whether or not I move beyond platitudes, I know that I have wrestled with a hard question on a deeper level than I had before. Being called upon to do so was another grace from the conference.

I am grateful that Professor Ravitsky agreed to allow the letter to be published. This does not mean, of course, that he finds it a satisfactory answer to his question. But then, neither do I. It is, however, the best, the deepest, the most honest answer I can give now. I share it in the hope that sisters and brothers will help me find a better answer, in the hope that it will help stimulate the search for a better answer, in the hope that it will encourage us to live more fully the answers we already know. If we do so the question will arise less often in its various real, awful, concrete, present forms. It will become more and more a hypothetical question, a question from a dark past.

April 18,1993

Dear Professor Ravitsky:

I began this letter to you early in the morning of January 9, while I was still in Jerusalem. It was only early this morning when I got the additional "inspiration" to finish it. I wrote it in my journal, more for me than for you, but I have decided to pass it on to you. I want to share it with you partly to let you know that I did greatly appreciate your participation in the meeting in Jerusalem. I sensed an integrity and depth of spirit in you that I value very much. I also want you to know that I felt deeply the challenge you put to me, and that wrestling with your question has been helpful to me in probing much more seriously my own convictions and commitments. That was a good gift you gave to me. Now to my "journal letter."

January 9, 2:00 a.m.: My only serious "work" since you asked me your question four days ago has been to find a better answer to it. Your question was, "What would you do if you could kill a single Nazi guard and by doing so save 1,000 innocent Jews from death?" It is that question which was in my mind again when I woke an hour ago, and I knew I would not have any peace until I tried to give you a better answer than the one I gave you then. You deserve a better answer, or a serious attempt at one.

I also knew that no answer could come before I did the work of going to Yad Vashem [the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem]. That had already been my first priority for doing "tourist" things before the conference began. I knew I wanted to go, needed to go, this time. I remembered the resistance in me to going the only other time I had been in Jerusalem, in 1975. It was at the end of a study tour on the Middle East conflict organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Our group

spoke with all sorts of persons about possibilities for peace and views of the conflict in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and West Bank and Israel. And the group included some American Jews. I remember especially one young Jewish man with whom I roomed in Beirut. The hotel shook frequently as bombs went off within several blocks and, both there and during meetings with various Palestinian factions, we frequently heard machine gun fire as well, sometimes seeming very close indeed. It was impossible to drive to Damascus, as had been planned, because we were in the only "safe" part of the city. We finally got out by being dashed to the airport and put on a flight which did not normally accept any passengers in Beirut. I remember the unease about safety I felt those days. But I also remember that I did not feel a kind of terror in the pit of my stomach which I believe my Jewish roommate must have felt as he tossed through sleepless nights, as he tensed at each sound. The difference, I now see more clearly, was that he knew the bombs and guns, whoever they were physically aimed at, were really aimed at him as a Zionist Jew and I knew they were not really aimed at me as an American Christian.

Yet despite rooming with him, and traveling with other American Jews, the trip impressed on me most the injustices suffered by the Palestinians. My *feeling* was that whatever Jews have suffered, it is past, and now they have become the oppressors and the Palestinians their victims. My *feeling* was, "How can Jews, who know oppression so well, so easily accept a simple reversal of roles, rather than a changed relationship?" My heart was full of the suffering of the Palestinian refugees and exiles we met–and full of anger at those who caused their suffering: my country's leaders, but also and first, Jewish people who supported Israel's policies. There was no room in my heart to *feel* the suffering of the Jews. The repeated references to it which I heard from Jews in our tour group, and in our briefings in Israel, seemed simply like excuses for injustice.

And so when we were in Israel I did not go to Yad Vashem. We were busy, of course, and I had other priorities for our limited free time. So, despite the encouragement of Jews in our group, many of us did not go to Yad Vashem. I did not go. And I see now that I did not go because there was no time. I did not go because my heart was too small, too small to hold the suffering of Jews alongside the suffering of Palestinians, to love the Jews and to love the Palestinians. And so I did not go to Yad Vashem. I am ashamed I did not go to Yad Vashem. I cannot imagine how I could have been so cruel to my Jewish roommate. Why could I not give him that small sign of caring, a tiny sign that his suffering mattered to me too? His heart was large enough to spend three weeks–three weeks of danger–hearing and feeling the suffering of Palestinians, absorbing their anger. And my heart was too small to spend several hours at Yad Vashem. By refusing to do so I surely contributed to the sense of many Jews that no one really cares about *us*, a sense which feeds insecurity and justifies dominating others so they don't dominate–and exterminate–us. So I am ashamed that I did not go to Yad Vashem. It was a betrayal of the peacemaking commitment I believed I held.

My heart has grown slightly larger since 1975. I have not forgotten the Palestinians–I am spending these days with friends in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and hearing again of their sufferings. But my heart has grown large enough that it longed to go to Yad Vashem, even though I knew going would not be easy. I knew it would not be easy because I knew I would feel in a tiny way–but a way which would still pierce me–the suffering of the Jewish people. I knew I would feel what I had felt in Cambodia as I visited the school turned prison where the Pol Pot regime tortured and then killed its own people–seeing the thousands of photos which the torturers systematically took of their bruised and battered victims, the map of the country made from the skulls of victims. I knew I would feel what I felt when I stood in one of the "killing fields" with pits all around me in which I could still see bones and bits of clothes and with a glass tower filled with skulls looming above our guide–with whom we had already spent a week–as he told of the killings of the members of his family and of his own survival. That is not a feeling I enjoy. Yet I longed to go to Yad Vashem because, I suppose, I felt intuitively that I needed to have myself pierced so that my heart could grow larger, so that I could enter a bit more into the suffering of the Jewish people. And after your question I knew I had to go in order to prepare myself to speak to it.

So I spent yesterday at Yad Vashem. I was pierced, broken, as I had expected. I especially will not ever forget the memorial to the children, perhaps partly because I am father to three school-aged children. The candles, the quiet broken only by the slow listing of names and countries of child victims, the coolness, the antiseptic lifelessness of the place, the mirrors, the sense of disorientation, 1.5 million points of reflected candle light, one for each child. When I came out into the bright sun, on the edge of the hill, I looked at the city of Jerusalem for many minutes through eyes blurred with tears, feeling simply overwhelmed with sadness, shame, anger–pain. I remembered Jesus crying over the city and saying "If only you knew the things that make for peace!" I remembered how small my heart is compared to his, compared to God's. And I wondered at the pain he must have felt and must feel as he witnessed the murder of his people, the Jews, murder often carried out by those who called themselves "Christian" after him.

Perhaps my main "answer" to your question is already implicit in what I've written so far. I do not know what I *would* do, nor do I know all of what I *should* do, but I *do* know I should not leave those thousand Jews to die alone. I should not "do nothing" as pacifists are often (too often rightly) accused of doing. I should seek to save them first of all. Do I have a gun? Am I a good shot? If I am a good enough shot to kill him, perhaps I can disable him, or distract him, allowing the thousand Jews to overpower him and escape. Or perhaps I can cause his attention to focus on me and enable them to escape. In real life, I believe, there are as likely to be such options as the sole option of being able to kill (but not otherwise disarm) him. One trap to avoid, from a pacifist point of view, is the trap of assuming there are no *good* solutions to hard situations, that we must simply choose between bad options. Perhaps another trap to avoid is thinking that doing this one act of

violence will in fact result in the good outcome desired. If it is hard to imagine a situation in which there is no option which can work other than killing a guard it also is hard to imagine realistically a situation where even killing him–a single guard–would surely enable their escape. Most likely they would simply be recaptured. On this level of discussion I'd recommend John Yoder's little book *What Would You Do?* which seeks to address just the sort of question you put to me.

April 18, 2:30 a.m.: I do believe that such options are *almost* always available. But pursuing them requires both imagination and courage. I pray that I may have those characteristics. I pray that the world will look for and seek to create such options, so that the kind of tragic choices you posed for me become more rare. I pray for a world filled with people and villages like that one described by Philip Hallie in his book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, a French Protestant village led by a pacifist pastor which sheltered and saved thousands of Jews during the war. I especially pray that our Christian pacifist communities become more like that one–communities which have integrity because they put their lives on the line to save victims, rather than stand by in safety, washing (or wringing) their hands. If there had been ten thousand villages such as Hallie describes, instead of one or a handful, the Holocaust would not have happened. And, if I may be so bold, the fear and sense of abandonment to a hostile world which has driven Jews to policies which have created another victim people could also have been avoided. But we Christians were unfaithful–here and in many other cases–to our costly, risky, peacemaking, neighbor-stranger-enemy-loving calling.

It seems to me that the first task of Christian pacifists, in the context of the sort of question you posed to me, is to create communities like the one Hallie describes–communities which are ready to risk much, all, to keep victims from getting to the death camps of the world. Learning to risk our lives, to give our lives, in order to save others is the first task. If we learn to do that, even much less often than now will we need to snuff out some lives in order to save other lives.

Nevertheless, your question, while hypothetical and highly unlikely to happen (a situation in which *no* other options would save the Jews, but killing the guard would do so, rather than also failing to save them–this latter is the most likely situation often) is still painfully relevant. It is relevant because I do not believe we live in a world where tragedy, on a human level, is always avoidable. This is something with which I wrestle. Some of my Christian pacifist friends tell me, if I understand them right, that because God is good and God is powerful there can never be a real tragedy. (Maybe moral dilemma is a better term–I am not sure of the best language to use. What I mean is a situation where there is no solution which does not require sacrificing either a good outcome–saving innocent Jews–or sacrificing a right moral principle–not killing). From this perspective it is *always only* our lack of moral imagination or our lack of courage which prevents us from avoiding the tragedy. As I have said, I believe this is *almost* always true. I am *sure* that *very* often we could avoid apparent tragedies by exercising more moral imagination and living with greater courage (the "distracting the guard" option

would be an example of this–it is more imaginative than doing nothing or simply killing him–and it requires far more courage, because doing so would make *me* his target, something which would not be true if I did nothing or if I killed him).

But I simply do not believe that tragedies are *always* avoidable. There are real dilemmas that tear us apart. Or to say it more specifically, I do not believe that it is *always* possible both to save the Jews and to avoid killing the guard, or that it can *never* happen that the *only* possible way to save the Jews is by killing the guard. However highly unlikely your scenario, I accept the challenge it implies, because I do not believe that it is impossible for there to be situations like you described.

So I come at long last to answering your question. I do not know what I *would* do–my courage and/or imagination may well fail me. But I know what I believe I should do. I should not abandon those Jews. I should do whatever I can to enable them to escape–short of shooting the guard. This means that I accept the *possibility* that my refusing to kill the guard might mean one thousand innocent Jews, whom I could have saved, going to the gas chamber.

But, though this would likely not comfort them, or most of them, and may even add to the bitterness of some of them, they would be joined in their walk to the chamber by one heartbroken, yet, I would hope, ultimately hopeful Christian. I would be driven into the chamber with them because of my resistance to the evil of the guard–of the system–as Jesus was taken to the cross. I would be heartbroken because they were being forced into the chamber and I had been unable to save them. I would, no doubt, be afraid and sad to be facing my own death. But I would hope that I could still be hopeful because I would be participating in releasing God's power into the world. That power, in my view, is a power which cannot partake of destroying God's human creations. But it is one which, in giving its own life, breaks apart the webs of hate and fear which create gas chambers, terrorism, repression. It does so by loving, by caring enough to resist to the point of death, all cruelty, all hatred, all gas chambers. But to love consistently, to break the web, it cannot kill even the guard.

All of this is reflective of the heart of my faith, a Christian faith. God was incarnate in Jesus, God there showed us God's loving power. This is a love most vividly demonstrated on the cross–God here bearing the wounds of the world, walking with me, and those Jews, into the gas chamber. It is a power over evil also manifest in the cross, precisely in being unwilling to submit to evil or to participate in it. And the fact (according to my faith it is a fact) is that this is *God's* power, the ultimate power, a fact testified to in the resurrection. This resurrection fact, this symbol, means that death and evil do not have the last word.

If I could speak to a few of those Jews before we died together in the gas chamber I would want to say something like this. "I am heartbroken that my efforts to enable your escape failed. I am sorry. But I am glad that I tried, and that I am here with you, rather than having done nothing and gone home. I am glad that I am here with you because it is the clearest way for me to say to you that you are not abandoned and unloved. You are, to my great shame, abandoned and

unloved–even viciously hated–by some of my fellow so-called Christians. But they misunderstand our Christian Jesus. They do not know the meaning of Christian faith. They do not know our shared God. They do not know that Jesus died in a gas chamber–rather than putting his enemies in one. They do not know that in killing you they are again killing the one they call savior and Lord. They do not know that they kill God again, for God is enfleshed again in you.

"What I want to say is that you are not alone. God is here, bearing the suffering in you. And through these sufferings God is working redemption. Death is not the last word. Love is, for *God* is love. And God conquers death, taking us who bear his mark with him in that conquest."

You asked me a short, hard, and depressing question. I have given you a long, hard, depressing, and yet unbelievably idealistic answer. Actually, I hear two questions in your question, and I have sought to speak to both. One is straightforward–what would I do in a hard moral case. But the other seems to me to lie under the spoken words of the question. It is the question which Jesus put to Peter three times at the end of the Book of John. It is the question "Do you love me?" It is a question which Jews have every reason to ask Christians, and it is a question to which Jews have every reason to disbelieve a positive answer from Christians. Perhaps my refusal to kill the guard, finally, despite everything I say, means that I, like so many other Christians, do not love you. Perhaps, it means that I, like Peter, betray my Lord. But I want to say with Peter, "Yes, you know that I love you," and I want it to be true. And I know that it can only be true as I live Jesus' response to Peter, "Feed my sheep." I pray that I will have both wisdom and courage to do so.

I cannot imagine what this letter will "say" to you. I hope it at least is not hurtful to you. But I thank you again for who you were to me at the conference and for the question you left with me. It was not a new question, but because of you I had to wrestle with it more deeply than I had before. And because I have done so, I think I understand my faith and my self more deeply. That is a good gift you gave me.

Thank you,
Ted Koontz

P.S. to readers of *The Conrad Grebel Review*: Though this is the hardest question of its kind, emotionally, spiritually, I have yet addressed, answering it is far easier than loving Jesus in ordinary life. Imagining heroic responses in extreme situations (perhaps even really living those responses in a single, dramatic moment?) is easier than living gracefully in the mundane. At least it is the mundane which humbles me most. Dealing gently with my children, writing another letter about another political detainee in the Philippines, welcoming a student who comes too often and talks too much, responding nondefensively to a critic–these are the tests, day in and day out, of my love of Jesus. Christ, have mercy.