

Towards a theology of just peace through new conflict management practices

This article contains three parts:

- 1) A new reading of the Gospel emerges, starting from a Jesus who dares conflict without falling into the trap of violence.
- 2) The constructive management of conflicts offers new possibilities of getting out of violence.
- 3) These two contemporary dynamics offer the basis for a theology of just peace rather than the traditional doctrine on which just war is based.

1) A new reading of the Gospel

Since the fourth century, the Gospel of turning the other cheek has been unanimously understood as a call to not resist, to renounce one's own rights, to bear injustice patiently¹. For the past 70 years, Christian groups using non-violence in politics have proposed another interpretation²: "You have been told: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say, do not resist (*antistènai*)" (Mt 5:38-39a); ἀντιστῆναι / *antistènai* is a military term: to place oneself in front of someone in order to struggle, to stand against, to oppose, as the fronts of two armies facing each other.

I tell you not to play the game of the aggressor, not to let the aggressor lock you into a face-to-face confrontation. What I tell you is to resist, but not to retaliate, not to strike back, not to use the same weapons as the one who is doing you harm.

Three incisive examples follow in Matt 5: 39-41, subtly mixing the right use and the wrong use of power. In each case, Jesus proposes a confusing initiative that turns the unjust system against itself, thereby subverting it from within. In short, for the person who is the object of violence, turning the other cheek does not mean to let it happen, on the contrary, it means to prevent a second slap of the same kind (the back of the right hand on a right cheek in Jesus' time meant a slap that reduced the slave to his rank). When confronted with a face that is turned to the right, the superior is forced to use the inside of his hand to slap again, rather than the back of his hand; socially, the effect is to recognise the inferior as his equal; religiously, the effect - which is totally unacceptable - is to make oneself impure. When Jesus is slapped during his trial before Pilate, he shows how to turn the other cheek (the word used is "*allos*", not "*eteros*"): he establishes an otherness / alterity that touches the soldier's conscience.

Leaving my coat behind, when I am a poor, indebted person being pursued by the bailiff who is taking everything including my underwear, means dispossessing me of the only material thing that one is not allowed to take from me, and as a result leaves me naked: it is a reversal of shame, by which the unscrupulous rich man, who takes advantage of his economic right to claim goods, suddenly finds himself in the hot seat.

¹ I can affirm after a long Auslegungsgeschichte of the periscope Matt. 5:38-42 (historical study of its interpretation) and a thorough exegesis in my book, *Tends l'autre joue, ne rends pas coup pour coup, Matt. 5:38-42, Active non-violence and Tradition*, Edition Lumen Vitae, 2008.

² In my doctoral dissertation, *La non-violence évangélique et le défi de la sortie de la violence*, I determine quite precisely the beginning of this new interpretation: Lanza del Vasto returned from a visit to Gandhi's ashram, created the L'Arche community and wrote in 1951 *Gospel Commentary*, which provided for the first time in the French speaking world this new understanding of turning the cheek.

Taking a thousand steps more in the service of an occupying force who takes advantage of its political right of commandeering is an original way of lovingly contesting this right that the invader as arrogated to himself, by turning the situation around³: he can be blamed for having overstepped the marker (planted every thousand steps on the *Viae Romanae*)!

This interpretation honours the overall movement of "*You have heard that it was said (to the elders)... . But I say to you...*"; this refrain provides the cadence of the verses in Matt 5:21-48. The refrain is repeated six times, ending in the crescendo: the law says no to all forms of violence, from the nearest to the farthest away, to that which we inflict on others (murder, lies, concupiscence) to that which is inflicted on us (5th and 6th antitheses). Jesus fulfills the law; he holds it upright from its very root; he establishes it definitively in accordance with his own intention: "It has been said... but I, I give the fundamental meaning" in accordance with the justice of the Kingdom of Heaven (these are the 3 words that are recurring and central in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5, 6 and 7). That we are all his daughters and sons, and therefore brothers and sisters, radically changes the relationship between human beings... These six antitheses/roots, all maintain the same dynamic: "Not just murder... but also the judgments that demonize the other and the words of hate that lead to the judgments; not just the finality of justice: an eye for an eye - but also the importance of choosing ways other than violence; not only a just struggle, but also the means for a just peace.

At the beginning of his thesis on the doctrine of the just war (published in 1962), René Coste devotes a few lines to the Gospel, just enough to justify that such oblation love speaks to us of the Kingdom and that it is not really meant for earthly problems. He explains that for earthly problems only the light of natural law can illuminate us. In contrast, at the same time, Martin Luther King and other pastors gave the Gospel a central role again, understanding Evangelical non-violence as an act of political resistance. The life and preaching of Jesus were the very source of their non-violent struggle to overturn injustice. It is the foundation of a framework of thought that will soon give rise to a new theology of just peace. Jesus was not a politician and he rejects all political-religious messianism. But he does not shun conflict. He even creates confrontation. He is assertive, frank and combative⁴. The leaven of the Gospel took a few generations to subvert the Roman Empire but it revolutionised it! Jesus undermined the very foundations of the domination of one over another, of slavery, of political and economic oppression. In this sense, the resolutely determined Jesus is more revolutionary than the revolutionaries.

2) New practical resources to get out of violence

In my work as a trainer and coach in constructive conflict management, it is important to distinguish between conflicts of structure, those of experience and those of interests. These three types of blockages each have specific remedies⁵:

1) Deficient structures require the competence of a "Framework of Law" (abbreviated hereafter FL): a firm authority respects and enforces the rules. The power of law, through effectively binding sanctions, prevents the rule of the strongest and impunity.

³A reversal that Jesus is also skilled at in parables. See : Chomé Etienne, *Le jeu parabolique de Jésus, une étonnante stratégie non-violente*, Ed. Lumen Vitae, Coll. Connaître la Bible, n° 57, 2009.

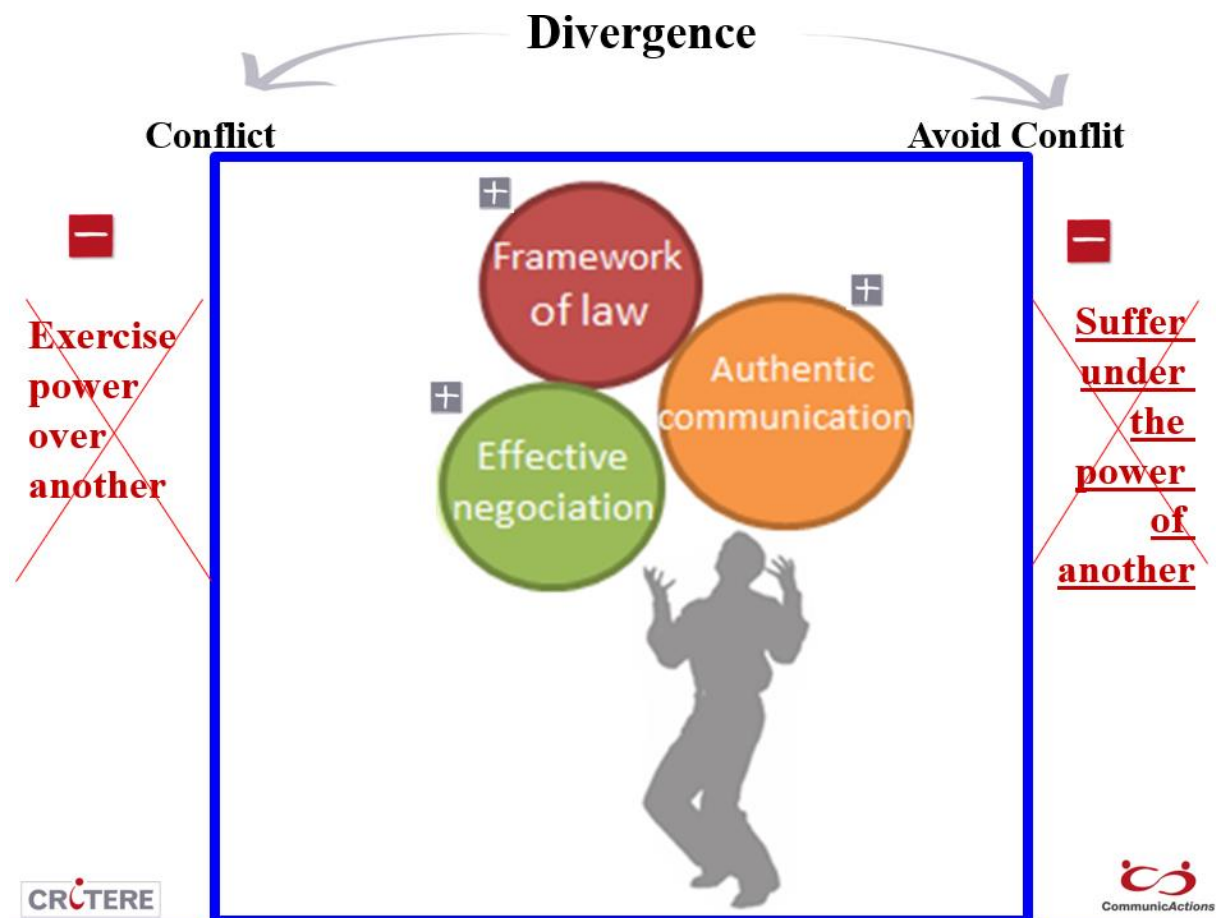
⁴ In my dissertation (see above) I also point it out in several passages other than Matt 5: 38-42.

⁵ Cf Chomé Etienne, *Le nouveau paradigme de non-violence + La méthode C-R-I-T-E-R-E pour mieux gérer nos conflits*. Presses universitaires d Louvain PUL, 2009.

2) Devalued experiences are healed by the competence of "Authentic Communication" (abbreviated below as AC): emotional intelligence respects people. Understanding their fundamental beliefs (concerns, needs, motivations, intentions and values) improves the quality of human relationships.

3) Divergent interests, provoking competition and rivalry, are well managed by the skill of "Effective Negotiation" (abbreviated below as EN): Rational intelligence respects the interests at stake. Creativity invents *Win-Win* solutions that optimise agreement.

Conflict is deadlocked, at an impasse, when the domains of these three areas are confused. Conflict is well managed when they are clearly distinguished and then correctly articulated. Each aspect of the conflict requires the use of the appropriate skills:

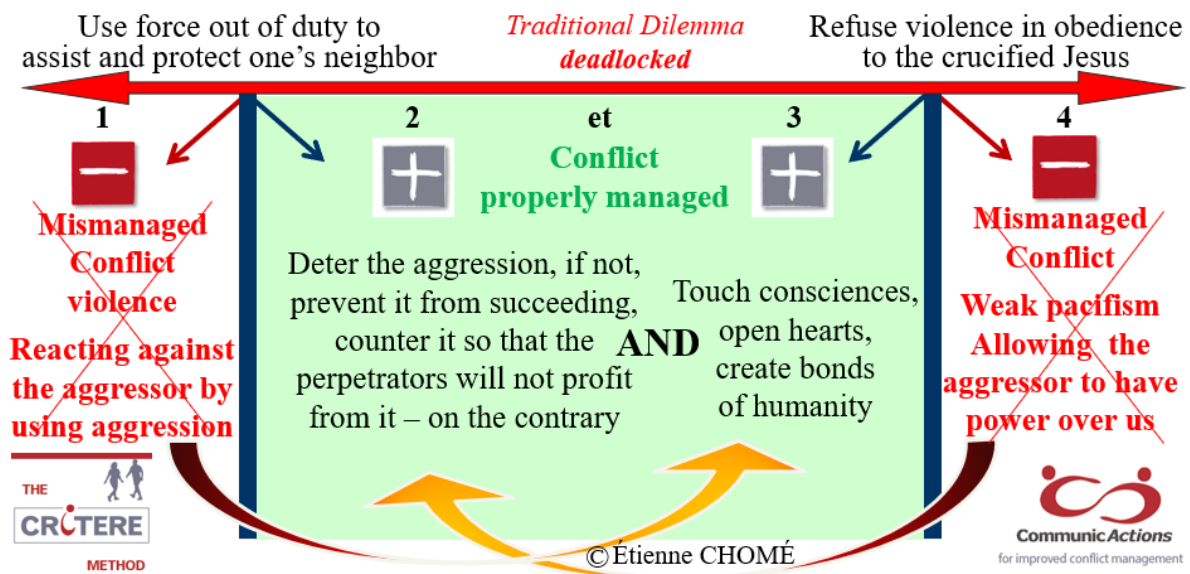


conflict in order to remove the injustices from which it suffers. In order to say goodbye to war, it is not enough to say hello to peace. The challenge is to wage a courageous battle against injustice, through a general mobilisation of means and people, and to do so before violence breaks out. Creating conflict in the public space (EN) with a view to more justice (FL) but also with a view to a more reciprocal relationships between the actors (AC), leads to relationships that are based on respect for the dignity of each person. Be careful to avoid the trap of personalising the struggle, for it is not a struggle against someone but against an injustice. The resolute fight against injustice and the deep respect for people are two aspects that should not be confused. Do not sacrifice one for the other. Managing social conflict well means involving all parties in the process of change and reducing the gap between "them" and "us"; it is to struggle against the process of the demonization of one side or the other. All parties can understand that sooner or later, in one way or another, too much inequality and injustice compromises social peace. It is in everyone's interest to be able to live in peace (AC) and this can only exist when there is sufficient justice (FL), through a process that leads to a satisfactory agreement for all parties (EN - a Win-Win process). It is therefore a question of taking the necessary time with each other in order to learn that the result of such a programme is growth and enrichment, with no winners or losers. The strategy of non-violence is the art of waging war on injustice without waging war on those who are benefiting the most from it.

Certainly, to take responsibility at the heart of this violent world is to assume a part of the struggle that requires strength. Love without power is powerlessness. Authority without sanctions is laissez-faire. The passivity of the majority is the breeding ground for the domination of the less scrupulous, impunity is the breeding ground for their abuse of power. To love someone is not to let them do harm. However, at the other end of the spectrum, how many 'holy' angers and wars are corrupted by the very evil they claim to fight? Constructive conflict management lies in the art of **exercising force without violence**. In my thesis, I show that 'violence' is a very recent operative concept, used within a human group to push back the limits of the 'lesser evil' that is tolerated, by the progressive outlawing of practices that have lost respectability, legitimacy and necessity.

3) **Some points in the *aggiornamento* of the Christian doctrine on just war**

In the IV century, St Ambrose of Milan, expressed the traditional conflict of duties: either the Christian will observe the precept according to which he must abstain from all violence, but in so doing, will fail in his obligation to come to the aid of the victim of unjust aggression, and thus become an accomplice of the unjust aggressor; or he will place his force at the disposal of the victim of injustice and will fail in the precept of non-violence contained in the Gospel. In light of the current resources of conflict management we have the means today to get out of this dilemma deadlocked:



The best possible defence is not counter-aggression or passivity, but the mobilisation of our best forces, capable of regulating the violence of individuals by using force of a nature other than violence. "Renouncing the use of force" is an inadequate formula that creates a dilemma between force (implied to be violent) or non-force (implied to be non-violent - in fact, passivity). The challenge is to optimise the deployment of social, economic, cultural, political, etc. forces that will effectively push back the threshold of violence which is legitimised as a last resort. It is in the realm of "yes to non-violence as much as possible, but as a last resort, violence can be a necessity" that just war theologians have created exceptions, have studied the legitimacy of war in certain cases, with the intention of using morality to limit the abuses of "Powers". It is in the very different movement of "not only the just end but also using means that are not traps of violence" that the bearers of the new paradigm on just peace are interested in unlocking the potential for creativity of people when they exclude violent means. Their intention is to open up possibilities and invent alternatives that effectively push back the fatal threshold of conflict which can tip into violence without return. While the former were interested in the exceptions of legitimate violence, which one must accept in this world corrupted by sin (the just end justifying violent means as the lesser evil), the latter underline with Gandhi the coherence between ends and means. They are interested in the opposite mechanism, in the way that unjust means corrupt the end and finally make the end unjust. Since the end is worth what the means are worth, they focus on the consequences necessarily implied by the very use of the means employed, and above all, they learn how to avoid the diabolical traps of violence, which are as slippery as a soap-board and whose steep slope irresistibly sends the belligerent towards an ever more indiscriminate response. So many battles are gangrenous with the evil they claim to fight. So much violence is justified as being a "lesser evil", but in fact, it is just an evil added on to the first – a "double evil".

Understanding the Gospel as a call to not resist violence is at the root of many of the difficulties in the articulation of the Gospel and a necessary political realism. For example, the Viennese Cardinal Christoph Schönborn (1945-) wrote in 2003: "The policeman who stands in the way of a bank robber does not have the right to turn the other cheek. He must stop him, if necessary with his gun. I have the right to defend myself by lawful means against

a wrong done to me. But the question of Jesus is aimed at our heart: do you claim your rightful response with feelings of revenge⁶?”

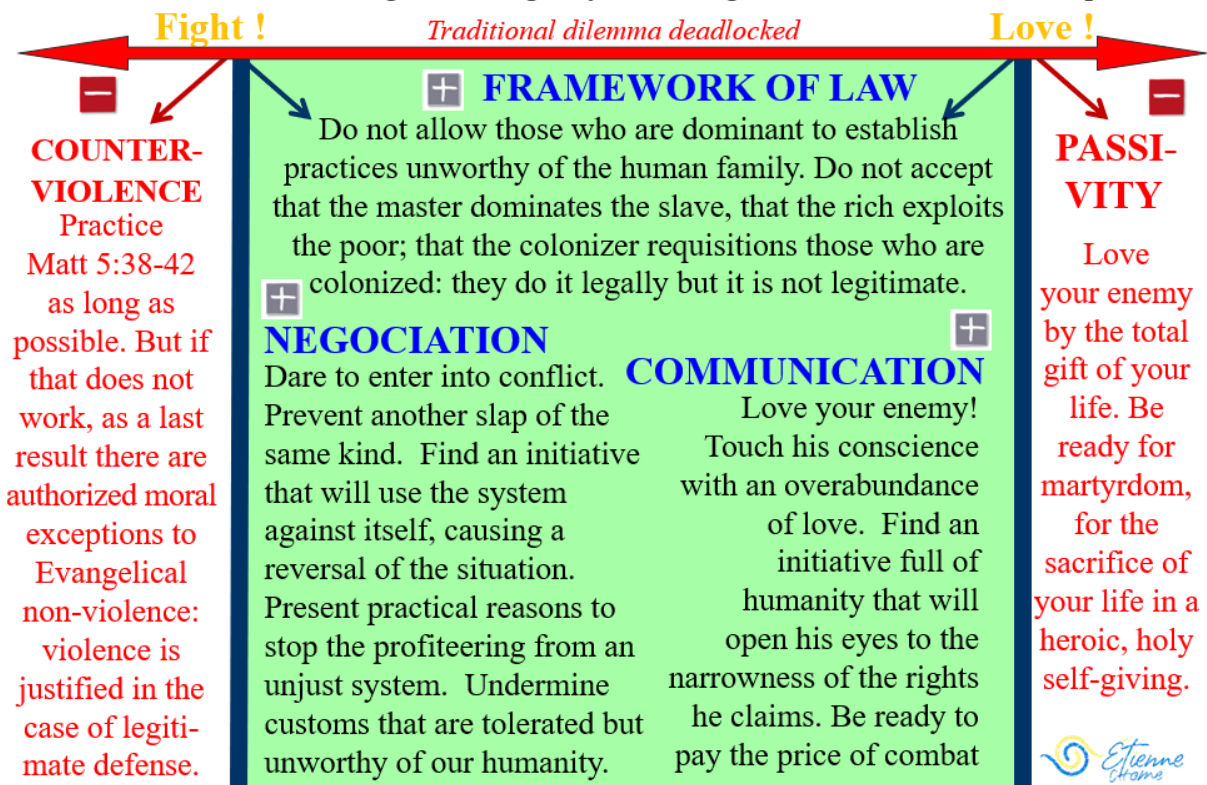
His comment is typically Augustinian: the gospel of the outstretched cheek calls for non-violence of the heart, which orients the spirit and inspires, but does not lead to non-violent action. In some situations, one must be violent but with the right intention and without a sense of revenge. Such is the thinking of a police force in contradiction to the outstretched cheek, because it understands the gospel as self-sacrificing, oblationary love. It therefore creates a large gap between the two.

On the other hand, once turning the other cheek is understood as an invitation to be timely and creative in stopping a burglary, seeking the most just and good outcome possible, the opposition between realistic conflict management and the gospel disappears; both are mutually enriching, in the delicate search for the best way to effectively stop the robbery. The gospel brings a 'plus' in deconstructing false power patterns, by going to the root of the blockages in the way the enemy is viewed. "Turn the other cheek" means: look at him as a brother, reach out to him at the heart of his humanity, find the gestures and the words that will open up his conscience, establish contact with his soul, do not lock him up in your judgements, do not give yourself the right to punish him. A policeman who believes he has a divine mandate to repress the bad guys will fuel the escalation of violence. He will get better results if he learns to intervene in the spirit of protecting the victims rather than suppressing the aggressor, and even to use the same protective energies concerning the aggressor.

Another belief that needs to be questioned is that we feel strong because of our weapon, that our strength comes from it, that we place our trust in it. The truth is that most of the time we brandish and wave a weapon more out of fear, or stress, than out of a well thought out strategy. And what good does it do to threaten a perpetrator who is more violent and more committed to use his weapon than we are? Stress leads to a loss of faculties and the negative aggression that results does not serve us well. We need to be taught how to deal with emotions. To the policeman who has to deal with aggression, Jesus has much to say concerning true strength that occurs first of all in the benevolence of the heart, in the inventiveness of the imagination, in the light of the soul anchored in fundamental confidence and in the quiet strength of one who knows that he is a beloved child of the Father-Creator of all. In the form of a diagram:

⁶ Cf my dissertation cited above, p. 260, available at <https://etiennechome.site/theologie/>.

Matt 5:39-41 = turn the right cheek, give your coat, go with them a thousand steps more



For 1600 years, the following reasoning prevailed: 1) Jesus said in the Gospel, and he practiced at the hour of his death, an oblation of love which renounces its personal rights, which offers itself more than it defends injustice. 2) This non-violence, however, is socially and politically impracticable. 3) Therefore, it is logical and wise to deny the collective and obligatory character of these Gospel words and to limit their socio-political scope. If Evangelical non-violence is reduced to non-resistance, it is wise to make it an intimate choice of conscience, a personal option left to the discretion of each believer.

On the other hand, if it is understood as a politically committed resistance, it is a realistic and responsible invitation, as true on a personal level as on a collective scale, with real socio-political relevance. On the strategic level, political non-violence is based on the mobilization of the power of large numbers, seeking to reach a critical mass of citizens in concentric circles, because it is a force that is all the more irresistible when it wins over a whole people. To be effective this must be a collective choice, much more so than military defence. Properly understood, isn't this non-violence which has nothing to be ashamed of before the hawks of Realpolitik? And is it not also a fundamental requirement of Christianity, inscribed at the heart of the Gospel?

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