

REVIEWS

A Triple Combination for Proclaiming Peace

Chris Hedges. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: Public Affairs, 2002. 211 pp.

David Anderson and Andrew Bolton, *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship: A Diversity of Callings?* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2003), 86 pp.

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I GREW UP WITH TOY MACHINE GUNS, plastic army men, and John Wayne movies on a black and white television set. We read the Book of Mormon as a family every morning before school, and I remember organizing my friends and siblings for a mock Book of Mormon battle along the banks of our own River Sidon—a small creek winding through a nearby subdivision. Before anyone had contemplated prying a gun from the cold, dead hands of Charlton Heston, we all watched *Red Dawn* and imagined fighting a guerilla war to protect our homes from Soviet invaders. The Olympic hockey win at Lake Placid, the U.S. bombing of Libya, the invasion of Grenada, and the cinematic success of *Top Gun*—all reinvigorated a nation demoralized after military defeat in Vietnam. The Soviets

were our enemies—the Evil Empire—and we knew who we were as Americans because, as indicated in the title of Chris Hedges’s latest book, war was a force that gave us meaning.

Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and seasoned war correspondent for the *New York Times*, draws from his own experiences covering wars in the Balkans, Central America, and the Middle East to chronicle what he terms the “enduring attraction of war” (3)—the addictive fulfillment that warfare provides individuals and societies, along with the true costs of achieving that fulfillment. In doing so, Hedges examines the myths that we use to justify and build support for war, the ways nationalism is used to promote war, the destruction of truth that accompanies warfare, the seductive nature of war, the ways historic facts are manufactured and manipulated to provoke and sustain warfare, the sanctification of soldiers as martyrs for their cause, and the addictive lust for battle that fuels the commission of brutal atrocities.

While clearly and graphically reaffirming that “war is hell,” Hedges is not a pacifist. He believes that “the poison that is war does not free us from the ethics of responsibility” in the face of oppressive governments

and ethnic cleansing and that “there are times when we must take this poison—just as a person with cancer accepts chemotherapy to live” (16). Sometimes, “force wielded by one immoral faction must be countered by a faction that, while never moral, is perhaps less immoral” (16). However, by cataloguing the atrocities of war, Hedges disabuses us of the myth that war is glorious, moral, or good. As such, this book serves as a useful antidote to war and as “a call for repentance” (17) from our addiction to the spoils and ideology of war.

Hedges’s book is itself a peculiar illustration of our complicated relationship to war. His graphic depictions of atrocities and gross distortions of truth and emotions in war are both horrific and fascinating and, perhaps most troubling, surprisingly easy to read—reminding us that books and movies about war cannot adequately describe the true visceral experiences of those who experience war. At best they serve as pale warnings against war, while at their worst they seduce us with depictions of horrors making war more attractive.

Hedges echoes other writers in recounting the various ways that truth is distorted in times of war. Ironically, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* is itself a powerful witness to this fact, as critics have accused Hedges of plagiarizing a passage from Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms* and of willfully misrepresenting or distorting the facts in describing alleged Israeli war atrocities—making the case once again that

truth is the first casualty in war and, apparently, in writing about war.

For Latter-day Saint readers, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* helps dispel cultural myths and traditional readings of scripture that lead us to glamorize, justify, or accept war and disregard the scriptural injunction to “renounce war and proclaim peace” (D&C 98:16). Because warfare is prevalent in portions of the Book of Mormon, we may be tempted to interpret these scriptures from a modern nationalistic stance, leading us to see heroes and role models where the Book of Mormon depicts tragic figures, and glorious battles in place of dehumanizing horror and suffering. Perhaps Hedges’s book, by helping us see war for what it is, can help us rescue the Book of Mormon from our own cultural biases and reveal it as possibly the most powerful renunciation of war and proclamation of peace given to God’s children.

It is hard not to recall the machinations of a Zerahemnah or Amalickiah when Hedges writes that modern wars are not “the result of ancient ethnic hatreds” but rather “manufactured wars, born out of the collapse of civil societies, perpetuated by fear, greed, and paranoia, and they are run by gangsters, who rise up from the bottom of their own societies and terrorize all, including those they purport to protect” (20). The Book of Mormon exposes how apostates and traitors manufactured racial hatred to provoke attacks on the Nephites, and it is easy

to compare them with Yugoslavian or Central American warlords.

But Hedges would remind us that in warfare, both sides play the same games. In our own times, we often present ourselves as the embodiment of goodness and justify our own violence by reference to the sins of others. What aren't we justified in doing if we are the lone defenders of civilization and all that is decent and fair, while our enemies are dark and loathsome, two-dimensional, almost inhuman figures (like Laman and Lemuel)? As Hedges points out repeatedly, such rhetoric is always used to manipulate good people to perform horrible deeds. In early Nephite history, how much did their depictions of Lamanites as a "wild, and a ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness" (Enos 1:20) contribute to fueling the continuous rounds of warfare between these closely related lineages?

Hedges reminds us that war requires us to sacrifice the physical and mental lives of our children, who perish as soldiers or return with emotional scars. His examples from modern wars can lead us to revisit the scriptural account of Helaman and the stripling warriors. What are we missing in our traditional reading of this story? We celebrate these young men as heroes because they "were exceedingly valiant for courage" (Alma 53:20) and, as a sign of their righteousness, they all survived the brutal hand-to-hand combat of the Lamanite wars. But do we ever ask what happened to these young men after they returned home with grave physical

and emotional scars? Fourteen years after the end of the war, many of the Ammonites emigrated to the land northward (Hel. 3:12) and twenty-three years later the missionary Nephi is totally rejected by the inhabitants of this land (Hel. 7:1-3). Could it be that the stripling warriors, after having been seduced into battle by a militaristic Nephite society, returned home jaded and eventually rejected Nephite society and the gospel embraced by their parents? And what are we to make of formerly militaristic parents who covenant to forsake violence but eventually send their children off to be sacrificed on the altar of war? Is this not a tragic example of faith faltering in the face of overwhelming cultural influences?

And what about Captain Moroni? For all his struggles to preserve his people, he returned home at war's end and was dead within five years. The peace he established did not last; and five years after his death, the Nephites were at war again. We admire Moroni's courage and laud his values, while excusing his violence as righteous indignation. When we read about the great slaughtering of Nephites and Lamanites during these wars, we tend to gloss over the horror, pain, death, depredations, and deceptions. But they are all there. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* helps us to see these passages again, to remember the dismemberings, bloodshed, slaughter, and cost in human life and hardening of souls—the stench and moldering mounds of human bodies. This book helps us re-

member that war is not a football game or Olympic hockey match between trained and disciplined athletes. As Hedges reiterates forcefully, no matter what cause is used for its justification, war is organized killing or murder.

Hedges shows us how we are a warlike people, which places us on the same moral ground as the Nephites. We seek to justify our wars, as the Nephites did, as necessary for our preservation. We reject the example of the recently converted Ammonites, who were willing to die for their cause without causing the death of others, and we embrace the values of acculturated Ammonites who narrowly avoided breaking their own covenants of nonviolence only by sending their own children into battle. We forget that the culture and ideology of warfare led to the destruction of the Nephites and fail to liken this scriptural cautionary tale unto ourselves (1 Ne. 19:23).

Perhaps unwittingly, the powerful message of *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* has caused me to revisit and appreciate the scriptures. In calling me to repentance, Hedges, with his master's of divinity from Harvard, has fulfilled the avowed purpose of this book. However, in viewing war as a necessary evil, he accepts its inevitability and is unable to provide an alternative to warfare. Fortunately, the Lord has revealed to Latter-day Saints an alternative, and Hedges's book can lead us to "remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon and the commandments which I have given them" (D&C 84:57)—commandments that would

have us establish a just and equitable society free from warfare—"fruit meet for [our] Father's kingdom" (D&C 84:58). Until we build that society, "there remaineth a scourge and judgment to be poured out upon the children of Zion" (D&C 84:58) as there is nowhere to flee for those who "will not take his sword against his neighbor" (D&C 45:68). If we are to avoid this condemnation (D&C 84:54-56), we must take on the difficult task of repenting of our warlike tendencies and follow the example of Jesus in renouncing war and proclaiming peace.

In doing so, Latter-day Saints might benefit from dialogue with their brothers and sisters in the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). In *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship: A Diversity of Callings?*, Community of Christ members David Anderson and Andrew Bolton invite Saints from both Community of Christ and LDS congregations to examine Christian responses to war against a shared restorationist tradition. Though written by and mostly for members of the Community of Christ, scriptural references are graciously given with both Community of Christ and LDS versification to facilitate LDS entry into the discussion.

For saints unfamiliar with the Community of Christ, *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship* is a valuable introduction to an alternative Mormon worldview. For over forty years, the Community of Christ has recognized a wide array of views in relation

to the use of military force and sanctions the rights of its members to either enter the armed forces or register as conscientious objectors. In England, future RLDS Apostle F. Henry Edwards was court-martialed and risked execution during World War I, then later became a prominent advocate of nonviolent resistance to militarism, even as RLDS President Frederick M. Smith encouraged Saints to serve their country in both world wars. In recent years, while recognizing a diversity of views among its members, the Community of Christ has sought closer ties with the peace church community—including Quakers and descendants of the Anabaptists (Hutterites, Amish, Mennonites, and Church of the Brethren). This institutional commitment to peace is reflected in the 1994 dedication of the Community of Christ Temple in Independence, Missouri, to the “pursuit of peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit” (5). As a part of this mission, the Peace and Justice Office of the Community of Christ has published *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship* as a workbook for use in congregations and study groups interested in exploring historic and contemporary Christian responses to war.

The discussion begins with a preface from the First Presidency of the Community of Christ, recommending the book “to members and friends of the church” to “stimulate discussion and raise awareness” of the “issues of discipleship and the use of violent force” (5). In the introduction, Anderson and Bolton invite readers to join in

pursuing “peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit” while revealing their own disparate approaches to the topic. Anderson, a colonel in the U.S. Air Force, “believes that at times the use of force is unfortunate but necessary to protect the innocent and achieve justice,” while Bolton, coordinator of the Peace and Justice Ministries for the Community of Christ, “is committed to the nonviolent pursuit of justice” (6).

An even greater diversity of views within the Community of Christ is represented in the first section of the book, which consists of testimonies and personal experiences from eight Saints with different backgrounds and perspectives. These range from troubled combat veterans, to career military officers, and conscientious objectors. These testimonies, while expressing divergent opinions about the necessary use of force, represent faithful attempts by each member to best follow the teachings of Christ as revealed in the New Testament and modern revelations. As befitting its role as a workbook, the testimonies are introduced with questions inviting the reader and class members to examine and seek an appreciation and understanding of each perspective.

The second section of *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship* is an exploration of five traditional Christian responses to war—patriotic obedience, nonviolent action, just war, holy war, and Christian realism. The history and main arguments of each view are articulated and compared with RLDS

scriptures, statements, and practices. Thoughtful study questions lead readers to examine each of these positions from their own experience and understanding of Christ's teachings. The authors note that, while patriotic obedience is perhaps the most common perspective within the restoration tradition, it has only tenuous support from biblical scripture. They also make strong claims that Jesus advocated a nonviolent position and trace the origins of just-war traditions to the teachings of Ambrose and Augustine after Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century.

Anderson and Bolton see the origins of holy war in Maccabean and later Christian crusader reenactments of the biblical story of the Israelite conquest of the promised land. Christian realism, a twentieth-century position outlined by Reinhold Niebuhr, considers violence a necessary evil that we must embrace while simultaneously seeking forgiveness from God.

After reviewing the tenets of each position, Anderson and Bolton invite us to evaluate these views in terms of the worth of souls revealed in the Doctrine and Covenants—our peace-making goals and strategies should honor the worth of both “good people” and “sinners, those who need to repent, that need to change” (64). The authors then conclude with essays sharing their personal testimonies and positions. As a career military officer, Anderson argues that “the profession of arms is compatible with Christian living” (66).

Bolton claims that the Christian cross is an indictment of oppression and violence, disclosing “how evil works by persecuting and oppressing the innocent” (75), and symbolizing the Savior's invitation to become his disciples in seeking a path of nonviolence.

The authors also suggest seven books for further reading and provide additional study questions and class exercises as appendices.

As a course manual, it is interesting to compare *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship* with official course materials produced by the LDS Church. Readers of this Community of Christ workbook are encouraged to read, ponder, reflect, and seek to understand divergent views. Suggested questions are specific and address current and historic political conflicts. This approach stands in stark contrast to that found in recent LDS course manuals—which steer clear of specific political issues and present a unified and correlated perspective on gospel principles, which individuals are encouraged to adopt in their personal and family lives. I see *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship* as providing a useful model for gospel study and discussion, one that illustrates the value of respectful dialogue in addressing important issues upon which individual Saints may hold a diversity of opinions.

Indeed, for Anderson and Bolton, Saints need to engage in these discussions if both denominations are to achieve their shared injunction to establish Zion, a “peaceable kingdom . . .

where swords are hammered into plowshares and where lions lie down with lambs and every little child is safe to play” (77). For Anderson and Bolton, this “peaceable kingdom” is a community seeking to embody Christ’s nonviolent teachings—a community where disciples of all denominations and views on war dwell together, seek joint understanding, and eventually work out their differences with mutual respect. By engaging in the activities and discussions outlined in *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship*, Saints and their friends can start bridging the gaps between their various traditions and take additional steps away from a world where “war is a

force that gives us meaning” and toward the world depicted in the official seal of the Community of Christ, where a lion, lamb, and little child share a circle with the simple, yet illusive, gospel fruit—peace.

In conclusion, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* shows us where we are, the Book of Mormon shows us where we could end up if our society continues on that course, and *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship* provides a path towards a more peaceful alternative. Together, this triple combination gives us cause to ponder our choices—and our future.