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# Rachel Weeping: A Christian Pacifist Reluctantly Endorses Military Strikes Against ISIS

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# Rachel Weeping: A Christian Pacifist Reluctantly Endorses Military Strikes Against ISIS

## **Abstract**

I'm haunted these days by a scene from Matthew's Gospel. Herod, learning that an infant has been born in Bethlehem who will become "King of the Jews," orders the slaughter of the town's male children two years old and under. Matthew captures the deed's mind-numbing horror by imagining that Rachel, one of the traditional Hebrew matriarchs, "weeps and laments and refuses to be comforted, because her children are no more."

How, I ask myself, would Jesus's followers have acted could they've been in Bethlehem on that frenzied day? Would they have remained silent? Would they have shielded the infants with their own bodies, buying the victims a few more seconds of life? Or would they have picked up any makeshift weapon they could find to protect the innocents from cruel death? [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

ISIS, Middle East, pacifism, violence, Christianity

## **Disciplines**

Military and Veterans Studies | Peace and Conflict Studies | Philosophy

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## **Rachel Weeping: A Christian Pacifist Reluctantly Endorses Military Strikes Against ISIS**

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Jesus's disciples would've remembered his unequivocal command to turn the other cheek, to love one's enemies, and to forgive seventy times seven. But what kind of love is it which refuses to act when innocent people are being slaughtered? And what if the only thing that can save them is armed force? In these extreme situations, are followers of Jesus permitted - or perhaps even obliged -- to resort to violence?

These are questions with which today's Christians must wrestle, because Rachel weeps again, this time over ISIS's slaughter of the innocents. The entire Middle East is awash with the tears Rachel sheds and the blood ISIS spills.

From its obscure beginning in 1999, ISIS has mutated into a nightmarish oil slick of evil that now pollutes much of Syria and Iraq and is creeping ever outwards. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS's "caliph," has announced his intention to subjugate the entire globe.

This isn't just another example of over-the-top Arabic rhetoric. Al-Baghdadi means what he says. His well-armed and well-financed army has murdered, tortured, enslaved, sex-trafficked, and displaced tens of thousands of Christians, Yazidis, Shias, "heretical" Sunnis, and anyone else it finds objectionable. ISIS has more than demonstrated its willingness to behead and crucify all humankind in the name of its perverse brand of Islam.

How should Jesus's followers respond?

Back in the late 1930s, when faced with the evil of the Third Reich, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked himself precisely this question. He firmly believed that "the Church can never bless war," and that it is a sin for a follower of Christ to take up weapons. But given the suffering endured by innocents at the hands of Hitler's thugs, Bonhoeffer concluded that Christians had no choice but to resist the Nazis, and that doing so, under the circumstances, required armed force. He himself conspired to assassinate Hitler, and was executed when the plot unraveled.

Had Bonhoeffer been at Bethlehem when Herod's army came for the infants, it's clear how he would've acted. He would've seized a scythe to defend them, using only as much force as necessary. Afterwards, far from feeling triumphant or self-righteous, he would've thrown himself on the mercy of God and, with a genuine awareness of his sin, begged forgiveness.

It's time, I believe, for Christians to follow Bonhoeffer's example when it comes to ISIS. As a Christian pacifist for the last forty of my sixty years, I do not say this lightly or without grief. Like Bonhoeffer, I know I'll have to answer to God for my endorsement of violence, and I shudder at the thought. But given the cruel predation of ISIS and the thousands of innocents in urgent need of rescue, I see no other way. We Christians should pray for peace, we should support nonviolent relief work with money and sweat, and we should open our homes and communities to refugees. But armed resistance to ISIS -- now, not later -- is also imperative. (Readers who agree may wish to sign a [national petition](#) urging immediate action.)

Two things, however, are crucial. We Christians must be sure that our motive is compassion for victims rather than hatred of aggressors, and we must not allow our reluctant acceptance of war against ISIS to slip into a slippery slope into moral complacency about warfare in general. Current circumstances make seizing the sword a tragic necessity. But it's still a sin for which we Christians will be held accountable. It is our Cross to bear. It is the cost of saving innocents, and of drying Rachel's tears.

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