

RE: RESISTING EVILDOERS

By Michael Ventura

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It's already ancient history -- Madison Square Garden, October 20: Richard Gere booed off the stage by Ground Zero's firefighters and police officers for suggesting that Americans view September 11 with "love, compassion, and understanding." Both his live audience and those who criticized Gere during the ensuing commotion viewed him as a preposterous figure saying something outrageously inappropriate to the wrong people at the wrong time. I wonder what the reaction would have been if poor Richard had expressed the same thoughts in these words: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also ... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:38-45, New Revised Standard Version).

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same ... But love your enemies, do good ... expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:32-36).

Had Richard Gere read those words ... well, it would have been quite a moment. Would those (mostly Christian) firefighters and police have booed him anyway? Perhaps. Would the (mostly Christian) commentators have been as vicious? Maybe. But they would have found themselves confronting a dilemma that they were not honest enough to admit in their reaction to Gere's own words -- words which, after all, meant the same thing. Had Gere quoted Jesus, his audience would have had to face the gap between their need for defense, security, and revenge, and the clear uncompromising instruction of Jesus.

War puts a Christian culture in an impossible position, unique among the religions of the world. Islam was founded by the warrior-prophet Mohammed. Central to Judaism are Moses, Joshua, and King David -- holy men who were also generals and warriors. The Hindu and Voudon pantheons include gods and goddesses who battle. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Voudons, can invoke their most sacred founding texts in self-defense. But the founding documents of Christianity, the Gospels, have no such figure, no one to lead Christians to military victory -- no one who even cares about such a victory.

Jesus says he has come not to bring peace but a sword -- he knows very well that his teachings will cause violent conflict. But the only weapon he supplies for that conflict is faith in God as expressed in three unsullied words: "Love one another" (John 13:34). At his angriest, Jesus merely kicks over some tables. Betrayed by Judas, he utters no accusation or protest. When he's being arrested, one of his friends draws a sword and cuts off an attacker's ear; Jesus says, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). He refuses to defend himself and refuses to let his followers defend themselves. Even as he dies he prays for his murderers: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). It is a troubling

paradox: Jesus calls his followers to the most dangerous possible confrontation with their adversaries -- then tells them not to fight. He couldn't be plainer: "Do not resist an evildoer." He makes no exceptions.

Again and again Jesus shows a disturbing disregard for our physical welfare: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25). "What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). His words and actions make clear that "what is prized" includes even one's survival.

A Muslim may believe that to die in combat for God is to attain Paradise. A Jew may read the psalms of the warrior-priest David, who constantly calls upon the Lord to vanquish his enemies. But a Christian must go back to the Old Testament for justification in war, or cling to some phrase in the Epistles or Revelations; the explicit teachings of Jesus must be avoided if not rejected outright. His greatest sermon must be ignored.

People who believe in Jesus only when it's convenient and safe ... well, that can hardly be called "belief," can it? In God we trust, but which God? Not the God that Jesus preached. God bless America, but which God? Not the God that gives rain both to the just and the unjust. (Jesus spoke that metaphor in a desert country where nothing was more important than rain.)

I don't write to say that we shouldn't fight and win this war, and I am certainly not trying to put Jesus in the wrong -- he is enormously important to me. Rather I'm writing to recognize a fact that also tortured our greatest war president, Abraham Lincoln: Unlike Muslims, Jews, Voudons, or Hindus, when Christians fight a war they put themselves at a great distance from the founder and central figure of their faith -- the one who said, "What does it profit you to gain the whole world but lose your soul?"

Juggle and fudge as you might, the words and behavior of Jesus can in no way be construed as condoning lethal violence of any kind, for any reason. And this creates a terrible and largely unadmitted conflict in the individual and collective soul of a Christian society: To defend themselves from their enemies they must distance themselves from their God.

Once it goes to war, a Christian society is godless -- Jesus-less. Whatever God is invoked and prayed to, Jesus is not there. Do not resist an evildoer. Turn the other cheek. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. Love one another -- no matter what. As other prophets were sometimes extremists of violence, Jesus was an extremist of peace. He makes no exceptions. To those who want to weasel out of his instruction he says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and do not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46). No amount of patriotic rhetoric can change that. Which means that at the center of a Christian society at war, there is a terrible and fundamental loneliness: Jesus does not accompany us. And we may assume that in times of war Jesus too is horribly lonely. For when it comes to war, few Christians believe in Jesus. Of all the public figures in America, only one, a mere actor, has said what Jesus would say -- and he was booed off the stage by the very people we rightly call our heroes.

We who wear the Cross around our necks when we go into battle, we're unable to hear Jesus weep in Luke 19:42: "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." Jesus sought to make us vulnerable. What else could all those disarming instructions possibly amount to? We'd rather not be vulnerable just now. And who can blame us? Well ... Jesus, that's who.

There is no counting the ways that each of us distances from God. The utter vulnerability of faith is usually too much to bear. But this is precisely what Jesus wanted of us: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed" (Luke 9:23-26).

A Christian society at war cannot afford to think of such things. "Kill them all, and let God sort it out" -- is a sign that someone put at Ground Zero a day or two after the attack. And there are commentators now advocating torture in the interrogation of suspected terrorists -- though America's primary religious figure died by torture.

Hey. We're only human. Attacked, we attack back. It is too difficult to admit that those firefighters and cops who booed "love, compassion, and understanding," were booing the very Cross they wear around their necks. But part of the bafflement in America's eyes now ... part of the confusion, the fear that we've been deserted by destiny ... is our unspoken admission, in our actions, that Jesus is not what we need just now. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Well. We can't. We maybe shouldn't. And whether or not we should, we won't. We've been trespassed against, and we mean to make somebody pay. But we do so without the blessing of the God the vast majority of Americans claim to worship. The Sermon on the Mount is being spoken even now on the pages of our Bibles, but Jesus is alone on that hill, as he has been alone so very many times, speaking to the air and to stones.

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