

The Book of the Is: A book on bridges (2013)

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"Don't ask'em what it was, tell'em what it is."

Phish

Excerpt from Chapter 2 Monotheism

(Or, What to do when a religion doesn't respect its messiah)

Sections 11-14

11

Romans 7:21 - *"So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me."*

That's the issue with morals, the values that humans create - they keep showing up, don't they? Paul means all action is complicated. One person's patriot or freedom fighter is another person's rebel or insurgent. Paul knew it: that's why he tended toward peaceful resolutions and not war. Our question gets clearer - the one about respecting your messiah: what is missing from Jesus' message that war can be so readily accepted by his followers? How is a messenger of peace used by adherents to support the imposition of democracy and freedom through violent means (war)?

It is possible to attack people and say, "We bring you peace." I understand we used this approach on the aborigine - this is an American book - and it looks like we are going global now. Wouldn't you think a Jesus-inspired (based) international relations policy would focus on peaceful resolutions and not warfare? A Jesus-inspired policy might call for things like biannual peace conferences. Do we really think Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Bush, along with their staffs, do we really think we can't outthink an opposition? The dead, if they could, they would demand that we try. I mean, think of the troops and what we ask them to risk, and then think what Paul and Sun Tzu might have counseled, and you begin to see a different analysis enter your thoughts: we think quickly of war and not so quickly of peace.

That's a good combination - Paul and Sun Tzu - the peace preacher and the artist of war. Recall Sun Tzu's first maxim on Offensive Strategy: one shouldn't put a premium on killing. Unless Paul is a total pacifist (not likely), Sun Tzu's counsel might be something he would consider, well, reasonable.

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Americans are seekers of meaning and not of what Is. Pursuing meaning (however defined) they find it doesn't last. The senses dull, age takes over, and we become habits. Our senses have been made dull by use. Perhaps it is the waiting, the waiting in faith, which has dulled the peace sense in America's form of Christianity (there are over 600 denominations in the US). It was dull with me, dull enough that I joined the Army and

learned about war. It felt good to serve. The Army helped me in lots of ways. It honed my senses and helped me over some fears. If I summed up my Army experiences, I would call them good.

War adds meaning to life in ways peace doesn't (and *vice versa*). The sense of death, how it feels to humans and its meaning, has an advantage of time over peace. Death's impact is immediate and lasting; the impact from peace is mediated and fleeting. I wonder if that is part of the problem – the impact of each. Remember that Jesus said he would return. The disciples thought so and didn't think it would take this long. Christians keep his return as an article of faith. The farmers I grew up around – Christians mind you – well, they had this phrase about Jesus and his return. They'd see something slow – like someone running slow to first base during a ball game – and they'd say he was: "*slower than the second coming of Christ.*" I didn't get it much then, but the quip is interesting. Maybe this is one of those dilemmas, this waiting for his return and the day of Judgement, which lead or bridge to meaning limited by a past, present or future, and not the Is. The Is, simply put, is a bridging mechanism to human value. Whatever we do, we do; meaning comes next. We'd do better by thinking through our options and possibilities rather than our limits.

In Sun Tzu's section on Offensive Strategy, he uses experience as a teacher and points to five circumstances in which victory may be predicted. The way to victory is:

- by knowing when to fight and when not to;
- by understanding the use of both large and small forces;
- when your ranks are united in purpose;
- when you are prudent and your enemy is not;
- and when generals are not interfered with.

Notice how victory is a thing within human influence. That's important.

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We treat politics like the weather: something to talk about but something we can't do anything about. We treat it like a happening and not an act. Energy wasted on objects, be it flag-flying or flag-burning, the Wailing Wall or the Haram al-Sharif, the World Trade Center or the mountains of Afghanistan, all point to *non-relationships*; we are discussing *things* and not *the relationships people have to them*. This is important. When people are reduced to things, we get phrases like collateral damage. To wit, if the World Trade Center had been empty on September 11th, it would have made a difference. Losing empty buildings is no big symbolic loss. Who cares? What matters from September 11th is the loss of life. Reducing death to collateral damage, one seemingly has little thought of another's life, be they friend or foe.

Tens of thousands died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki moments – remember those? – and we called it victory and won a war. Or this: from 28 September 2000 to 5 October 2001, 670 Palestinians and 182 Israelis died in their war. You see, we talk often of things, of objects, and not people and their relationships. A dead New Yorker, a dead Afghani, a dead Iraqi, and a dead anyone: the body dies and the relationship is missed, be it father, mother, child, sibling, lover or mate. The God of monotheism told Moses, "*Thou shalt not*

kill." It doesn't get much clearer than that: commandment #6. God didn't say Thou shalt not kill unless the accused has had a fair trial; or Thou shalt not kill unless you really think it will do some good; or Thou shalt not kill unless you feel threatened. Thou shalt not kill: this isn't Animal Farm.

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I joined the US Army through ROTC at the University of Illinois and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in 1986. My eight years as a supply (Quartermaster) officer were unexceptional; I served and most of it was reserve time. I was on active duty for training, plus a couple weeks in Germany and the five months in Saudi Arabia. Even though, during the 1980s, we were all trained to fight the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries, the Army prepares you for change. All soldiering is contingent on something else - the mission or other soldiers most often. Thus, with the end of the Cold War, I found myself volunteering for a tour in support of Desert Storm. I spent five months in Saudi Arabia after the conclusion of major conflict. At the time, July-November of 1991, Desert Storm was winding down and Iraq had been thrown out of Kuwait. Our mission was to process the Army out of the country and bring it home.

There were no bombings during my time in Saudi Arabia. We weren't even armed with M-16s or pistols. We were issued gas masks and had to carry them around in case Hussein lobbed some Scud missiles at us. While in country, for most of my time I lived in the Khobar Towers, a large housing complex just outside of Dhahran and the US airbase that was there. In one of those early signs of trouble, the Khobar Towers were truck-bombed in 1996. We lost 19 in that bombing.

War is part of the Is as "contested values" are political: there are alternatives. Possibility doesn't equal necessity though; if something is necessary, then the possible has already been contained. In the US we've made fear necessary. Our entertainment-news sources play on this. They are not wicked, the media, as they are only obeying the rules of the market, just like most of us do every day. The possible and capitalism go well together; they both know how to commodify, which generates supply and demand, scarcity and excess. It wasn't until capitalism slogged through the industrial age that it really began to hit its stride. Now and in the future technology will expand what the possible can mean, as well as what it Is.

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