

## **Religion: Catalyst for War or Peace?**

Colleen Turner, Ph.D.

### Abstract

Major religions are frequently viewed as holding a promise for peace on earth and the sacredness of life. Yet in reviewing the sacred texts of these same religions, one can frequently find divinely inspired justification for violence, especially against those who do not share the same belief system. If the texts justify violence, then how can they be a basis for peace? These two prominent ways of thinking about religions thus represent opposing outcomes. Eugene Taylor of Cambridge, Massachusetts has struggled to understand and resolve this paradox through the development of three distinctive streams of thought influenced by William James. Taylor is an internationally recognized scholar in the life and work of William James, a historian of psychology, a psychologist of religion with a background in Asian studies, and a philosopher of the martial arts.

A major focus of Taylor's scholarship has been on what William James called examples of lifetime spiritual practice, "the moral equivalent of war." By this phrase, James meant the development of both our inward spiritual nature, as well as the outward form of our personality in the natural environment. In considering the roots of violence to exist within the person, James called for the practice of spiritually oriented disciplines as a way to rechannel destructive impulses toward higher, more peaceful and enlightened ends. Taylor illustrates James's outward form of spiritual development within the context of groups. A number of well-known international figures who were inspired by this idea of James's and consequently developed a range of impressive responses are reviewed. Taylor then illustrates William James's phenomenology of the internal spiritual life of each person as described in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) through an investigation of a non-Western method of conflict negotiation drawing on the philosophy of Aikido. Aikido means "the way of harmony with energy". It is a non-violent Japanese martial art with the broad goal of universal disarmament in addition to self-defense that includes saving the attacker from injury. Taylor then turns his attention to James's call for a science of religions. By this James meant the exploration of spiritual states of consciousness across cultures in terms of how individuals experience them. Within this context, James focused on the resolution of conflict within each person since he viewed an individual's inner conflicts as a root cause of the outer manifestation of violence and war around the globe.

The convergence of these different streams of thinking about the issues surrounding religion, violence, and world peace suggest how Westerners can more effectively understand the religious voices of other cultures and appreciate their unique gifts. How this might be accomplished, Taylor suggests, begins with James's concept of overcoming the mind of discord within one's self and the cultivation of what the Buddhists call loving kindness towards others.

### Biography

*Colleen Turner is a management consultant and trainer specializing in communication for breakthrough results. Her client range includes Vista Disney, The California Endowment, the U.S. Army Tank Command, UCLA's interfaith University Religious Conference, and inner city gang members. She holds a Ph.D. from UCLA in Social Welfare and her research efforts have*

*included the California Task Force on Self-Esteem and Personal Responsibility, a major diversity project honoring the bi-centennial of the Bill of Rights, the U.S. Air Force's pilot empowerment program, and the cross-cultural exploration of spiritual experiences vs. madness.*

*In the sport of volleyball, she helped lead UCLA to its first national championship (#44 jersey retired) and was a member of the USA women's team. She is the author of a small book entitled Communication for Transforming "No Way" into "Way to Go!" that blends proven winning methods from a variety of arenas. A Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, she has recently served as a Senior Programs Advisor at the Space and Missile Systems Center in Los Angeles. She has served on the faculty of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the U.S. Air Force Academy and is currently being sponsored by the Institute of National Security Studies to research methods by which Americans might behave in ways that enhance their image around the globe. While serving in the Mediterranean during the TWA hostage crisis, she was responsible for developing and evaluating a comprehensive range of terrorist defense scenarios.*

## Introduction

Major religions are frequently viewed as holding a promise for peace on earth and the sacredness of life. Yet in reviewing the sacred texts of these same religions, one often finds divinely inspired justifications for violence, especially against those who do not share the same belief system. If the texts encourage violence, then how can they be a basis for world peace? These two prominent ways of thinking about religion thus represent opposing outcomes. Eugene Taylor, Ph.D. of Cambridge, Massachusetts, an internationally recognized scholar in the life and work of William James, has thoughtfully considered this conundrum.

Taylor is a historian of psychology, a psychologist of religion with a background in Asian studies, and a philosopher of the martial arts. He has struggled to understand and resolve this paradox regarding the role of religion primarily through the works of William James, the educator, psychologist, and philosopher who authored *The Variety of Religious Experience* (1902). James considered the roots of violence to exist within individuals and believed these innate tendencies need to be constructively channeled with a lifetime of spiritual practice in both individual and group contexts. Taylor examines this issue in three distinctive themes that emerge primarily from his research on William James's "Moral Equivalent of War." These themes include the development of the outward form of our personality in the natural environment, the development of our inward spiritual nature, and the resolution of conflict within each individual's psyche as an important contribution towards peace in the outer world.

James supported the idea of steering individuals towards groups where their aggressive instincts could be channeled and guided by the practice of ideals higher than those reflected by war. He also promoted the idea of developing an inner spiritual consciousness about peacefully

dealing with conflict. Finally, he stressed the resolution of inner conflict that he considered a root cause of external manifestations.

Taylor's work illustrates James's focus on outward development by reviewing a number of well-known group examples of alternatives to war inspired by James. Taylor then illustrates James's focus on inner spiritual development by exploring Aikido, a non-violent Japanese martial art, the ultimate goal of which is universal disarmament and world peace. Finally, Taylor elaborates on how we might view the conflicts found in sacred texts through William James's emphasis on the importance of spiritual practice to resolve conflict and discord within oneself.

By viewing the inconsistencies of the spiritual texts of the world's religions as symbolic of conflicts within ourselves, we can use them to assist us in a process of inward spiritual resolution and subsequent transformation. This practice can then help to amplify peaceful practices around us. By ending the conflict within ourselves, we create a foundation within religion that provides a critical first step towards contributing to solutions to conflicts around the globe.

## Swords and the Sower 's Plowshares

While most of the world's major religions are often thought to stand for brotherly love, compassion, and peace on earth, one does not have to look very far within the sacred texts of these same religions to find justifications for violence and warfare.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike share the prophetic tradition of the scriptures of Isaiah: 2:4 that says “ ... and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Psalms: 34:14 says “Depart from evil, and do good, seek peace, and pursue it.” Yet in

Exodus 32:27 God tells Moses to rally the Levites to kill their brothers, companions, and neighbors and the book of Joshua describes the defeat of numerous foreign enemies.

In the *New Testament* book of Matthew 5:9, Jesus says “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” In a letter to the Hebrews 12:14, Paul writes “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” James 3:18 declares “And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.” Yet Matthew 10:34 finds Jesus also saying “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.”

The *Quran*’s Sura 8:61 (*Al-Anfaal*) or the Spoils of War on inclination to peace states “But if the enemy inclines towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, in Allah, for He is the One that heareth and knoweth (all things).” And Sura 2:256 declares “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” Yet in the same book it states “Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captives and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush” (Sura 9:5).

In the writings of Hinduism, the concept of *ahimsa* (avoiding harm to others) is prominent. One of the most sacred Hindu scriptures called the “*Bhagavad Gita*”, however, tells the story of Arjuna, who learns it is his duty to fight as a member of the soldier caste. In the story Arjuna overcomes his doubts and fights even though he knows it means killing some members of his own family. Strict rules for war are laid down, however, such as that the military may only fight the military while respecting the wounded, runaways, and civilians.

In Buddhism “Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world, it is appeased by love” (*Dhammapada*, I.5). Buddhism rejects violence, is clearly pacifistic in its teaching, and has a

notable record for non-violence. Buddhists even purport that it is better to be killed than to kill. Still there are still prominent examples of Buddhists taking up arms.

Even when scriptures unequivocally state a particular view, devout followers of that religion can interpret the text differently or simply ignore it altogether. In *Hadith* 4:29, a sacred supplement to the *Quran*, it states "Do not destroy yourselves. God is merciful to you, but he that does that through wickedness and injustice shall be burned in fire." Yet suicide bombers, armed with a radical interpretation of Islam have felt justified in sacrificing themselves to destroy others deemed as enemies. Christian fundamentalists also tend to be especially strong backers of the death penalty and America's current war efforts.

Emphasis of particular scriptures within most religions can be used to justify everything from Holy Wars and just wars to complete pacifism. And masses of devout followers of any religion tend to depend upon teachers for interpretations of sacred texts rather than studying the texts themselves.

The point made so far, albeit brief, is that every religion has its teachings or those who interpret its teachings in both peaceful and warlike directions. Thus, if peace or non-violence is a desired outcome of human conflict, something other than sacred texts are going to be needed. Given that mainstream religions seem to advocate both war and peace concurrently, how might we consider religion as a vehicle for the manifestation of the latter?

## War's Moral Equivalents

James's conviction was that the inclination towards war in humankind is a natural instinct, an instinct that must be consciously redirected to satisfy this urge. James considered the average person in a state of neurotic conflict with himself or herself, dealing with a war within.

Without denying the violent side of human nature, James worked to promote humankind's peaceful aspects

Ten years before he died in 1910, James began a project on the psychology of war that he hoped would lead to a greater understanding of how to harness our most aggressive impulses. In his essay *Will To Believe*, he asserted that one must intentionally choose the good so that evil will not come into being of its own accord. For James, both good and bad may be manifested and it rests with us to choose to empower one or the other.

Taylor reveals that James started to define what he later called the moral equivalent of war in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902. James said, "I have often thought in the old monkish poverty worship, in spite of the pedantry that infested it, there might be something like that moral equivalent of war we are seeking. May not voluntary accepted poverty be 'the strenuous life,' without the need of crushing weaker peoples?" By restraining one's material desires even when, perhaps especially when they are readily available, he was suggesting this practice represents an important means of character formation.

James probably intended to write a book about the psychology of war but due to other more pressing demands, he was diverted. However, a smaller composition of his did have a considerable impact on diverse developments related to this concept. He formally presented "The Moral Equivalent of War" at Stanford University in 1906.

Taylor's research on William James shows how the idea of channeling humankind's penchant for war in constructive rather than destructive directions prompted the development of an impressive number of group programs within which higher ideals could be developed. In this most widely known statement on the moral equivalent of war according to Taylor, James proposed a volunteer program for the conquest of nature, which later became one of the

inspirations for Vista and the Peace Corps. "To coal mines, forests, and skyscrapers would our guilded youth be drafted off," he said, "according to their choice...,"--a voluntary work service corps that would provide for development of courage, valor, and self-sacrifice that war-making produces in the military sphere. "What we need to discover in the social realm," he said, "is something equally heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself incompatible." According to James's plan, youth who participate in these programs would return to society with enhanced selves that would carry over to becoming better parents and teachers of the following generation.

Taylor discovered that a number of well-known international figures have been inspired by this idea of James's and consequently developed a range of impressive responses. Walter Cannon, physiologist who discovered the fight-flight reflex, championed rechannelling the war impulse through international Olympics; the social critic Walter Lippmann, reading James, advocated the rechanneling of violent conflict into the establishment of democratic political parties; Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound, read James and advocated wilderness experience as a way to build character; Eugen Rosenstock Huessey, a German social theorist and professor at Dartmouth, turned James's idea into the call for planetary service; Gandhi equated the Sanskrit term of *satyagraha*, (truth-grasping) with James's idea of non-violent moral action, and John F. Kennedy drew on James's idea for part of his inspiration for Vista and the Peace Corps.

To Western society at large, James, himself, proposed the idea of "restraint in the midst of wealth," as the moral equivalent of war. From secular to sacred, James's work on the moral equivalent of war motivated a number of movements including international athletic competition, democratically elected political parties, wilderness training for character development, energy

conservation, international pageants for peace, and non-violent, loving non-cooperation with evil.

## Aikido: A Martial Art of Non-Violence

Examples of lifetime personal spiritual practices as William James described them represented another major focus of Taylor's scholarship on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In exploring the roots of violence within the person, in addition to larger group programs, James called for the practice of personal, spiritually oriented disciplines as a way to rechannel destructive impulses toward higher, more peaceful and enlightened ends. Taylor illustrates this concept with an investigation of a non-Western method of conflict negotiation drawing on the philosophy of Aikido. Aikido is a non-violent Japanese martial art that shows the influence of Shinto, Zen, and other Japanese traditions such as O-moto-kyo. Besides protecting oneself from harm as well as saving the attacker from injury, it has the larger goal of universal disarmament and world peace. Aikido thus represents a unique way of considering James's focus on the phenomenology of the internal spiritual life as it relates to peace.

"Aikido" can be translated literally as the "way of harmony with energy." The *ki* of Aikido is the *chi* of Tai Chi. One is Japanese and the other Chinese but there is a great deal of affinity. They are both derived from the Chinese term *qi* which is a concept of an invisible life force taken for granted in most Asian countries today. The creator of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969), synthesized the art from a wide variety of other Japanese martial arts that use the sword, staff, and spear.

Blending rather than clashing, moving with the attacker rather than against him or her, lies at the very heart of the art of Aikido. Rather than meeting force with force head on, through

a particular posture, balance, motion, and breathing, one learns to blend one's force with that of the would-be attacker, thereby taking control of the force and direction of the attack and making these a part of the unfolding technique. In this way, both persons come into harmony with the universe.

This emphasis on blending rather than confrontation is also reflected in the way one learns, practices, and describes Aikido. There are only partners, rather than "combatants" or "competitors." Although one partner might deliver an attack with a great deal of force, and the other might in turn respond with an equally powerful and effective execution of the technique, it is never a competition. At any given moment, each partner understands his or her role in practicing the technique at hand. Such a cooperative spirit in training allows beginners to learn the proper movements without becoming caught up in trying to "win" or "beat" their partner. Approaching practice as a competition not only impedes one's progress in learning Aikido, but it can also cause injuries, an indication of underachievement. "Winning," Mr. Ueshiba wrote, "means winning over the mind of discord within oneself."

The lack of competition as well as the emphasis on blending with an attack rather than meeting force with force gradually helps one adopt a less antagonistic attitude towards situations of conflict, whether physical or emotional. More has been written on this aspect of Aikido, both in Japan and abroad, than on any other aspect of this martial art. Yet for the founder these aspects were part of a profoundly spiritual religious worldview. However, those who practice Aikido are not called upon to embrace the tenets of any particular religion. In fact, the practice of Aikido over time invariably spills over into the way one views conflict in every day life. Even without formal training in the martial art, exposure to the concepts of Aikido can influence a person's thinking about conflict in a new and less violent manner.

## Global Peace Through Resolution of Inner Conflict

While individual and group practices of spirituality and moral development can clearly contribute to peace on earth in important ways, the appeal of these practices compared to war and violence as a method of dealing with conflict has just as clearly proved insufficient. Whether real or fictitious, war and violence dominate our media and history is replete with examples of how well violence works to achieve goals. And non-violent methods based on spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and dialogue can look weak to warmongers convinced of the power of the cannon to deal with conflict. So what more can peaceful warriors do to enhance non-violence around the globe?

Taylor's focus on William James also provides a way of looking at this issue by considering that the armies "out there" are a reflection of spiritual work that needs to be done within. World conflict is viewed as a mirror of conflict within the heart and mind of each person who is not committed to self-actualization. Development of a generic spirituality within the person transcends religious boundaries and violent conflict. The cultivation of spirituality by actualizing one's highest potential thus serves as the basis of world peace. Therefore, according to Taylor's research on William James, the promise of religion to realize peace on earth depends upon the commitment of every individual to develop their own peaceful nature to the greatest degree possible.

According to Taylor's reading of James, the exploration of one's own subconscious provides a doorway to ultimately transforming experiences of a mystical kind that bring an end to violence within oneself. Their truths are tested not by where they come from but by their fruits, how well they allow us to get along with others. Taylor suggests that by developing a cross-cultural psychology of mystical states to understand these experiences from culture to

culture, we can derive the best religion offers for actualizing peace. The first step is winning over the heart and mind of discord within oneself. Ending the conflict within ourselves first creates a foundation and provides a critical first step in contributing solutions to outer conflicts. Our attention needs to be focused within and towards those most near to us to create and enhance a synergy of non-violence that ultimately envelops the globe.

Finally, in returning to the issue of how to address sacred texts, we can consider them as symbolic of conflict within each of us. The resolution of this conflict and a reduction in the tendencies it prompts towards violent and war-life behaviors can thus be ultimately realized by a commitment by each of us to *be* the peace we seek.

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Eugene Taylor, PhD, is the author of *William James on Exceptional Mental States* (1983); *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (1996), and w/ Robert Wozniak, (eds). *Pure experience: The response to William James* (1996) and *William James and the spiritual roots of American Pragmatism* (2002). He was the 1983 William James Lecturer on The Varieties of Religious Experience at Harvard Divinity School. He is an Executive Faculty member at Saybrook Graduate School, a Lecturer on Psychiatry at Harvard University, and chief instructor for the Harvard Aikido Club, Yondon (4<sup>th</sup> degree black belt), Shidoin, and instructor for the U.S. Aikido Federation. In his role as a historian and philosopher of psychology, he is working on a book about concepts of personality and consciousness in the classical psychologies of Asia. He can be contacted at etaylor@saybrook.edu