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Peace Be With You: Monastic Wisdom for a Terror-Filled World

David Carlson
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The typical responses of Americans following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, were anger and hatred toward those who would commit such heinous acts. But if Christians are supposed to love everyone—even their enemies—what should have been their reaction? David Carlson decided to search for such answers in places that are considered to be bastions of love and peace—monastic communities. Surely abbots, monks, and nuns would be able to provide a reasoned, peaceful perspective on such tragic events.

Carlson, a professor and the Charles B. and Kathleen O. Van Nuys Deans Fellow in Religious Studies at Franklin College, seeks to understand the seeming contradiction of screams for vengeance when Jesus spoke so often and forcefully about loving others, including enemies. The intolerance, retaliation, and hatred displayed would undoubtedly create confusion among believers and non-believers alike as they grapple to determine just what an appropriate response to such horror should be. Was patriotism superseding Christians' theological beliefs? Isn't God on America's side? Didn't we have a responsibility to rid the world of such evil? Such questions confounded the mainstream public, so Carlson headed for monastic communities across America to see how people devoted to peaceful living based in Christ's teachings were coping with the effects of terrorism.

As he interviewed over thirty monastics, Carlson began to realize that one of the main concepts that Christians tended to overlook was the sacredness of every human life. The Bible clearly states that all men are created in God's image—not just Americans. Everyone lives in a hurting world and their life experiences, abundance or lack of opportunities, and so many other factors affect the development of their beliefs and principles. For example, Carlson notes that both the Muslim terrorists and the Americans believed they were doing God's will. In a situation where Christians had a great opportunity to extend compassion and offer the message of hope and love modeled by Jesus, they chose to see enemies that needed to be taught a lesson in American justice.

Peace Be With You accomplishes Carlson's goal—to get Christians to seriously consider the basic principles of their faith and how they apply them. Answers to deep questions concerning forgiveness, defending a homeland, and interacting with those of different cultures and beliefs are very complex, but Carlson's thought-provoking insights create strong starting points for discussion. Perhaps a peek inside monastic thinking can challenge Christians to likewise contemplate the peaceful teachings of Jesus.
JEFF FRIEND (June 29, 2011)

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