

The 77th Anniversary of the Bombing of Nagasaki. Unwelcome Truths for Church and State

By [Dr. Gary G. Kohls](#)

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78 years ago (August 9, 1945) an all-Christian bomber crew dropped an experimental plutonium bomb on Nagasaki City, Japan, instantly incinerating, asphyxiating and/or vaporizing tens of thousands of innocent civilians, mostly women and children. Very few Japanese soldiers were killed by the bombs.

Japan’s major religions are Shintoism and Buddhism, but a disproportionate number of the dead at Nagasaki were Christian. The bomb also wounded uncounted tens of thousands of other victims who suffered the blast trauma, the intense heat and/or the radiation sickness that killed and maimed so many of the survivors.

Image on the right: Another Irradiated and Charred Victim of the Nagasaki Bomb



In 1945, the US regarded itself as the most Christian nation in the world and the bomber crew reflected that reality. The small United States Army Air Force (USAAF) unit that was charged with dropping the atomic bombs (the 509th Composite Group) even had two Christian military chaplains assigned to it. They all were products of the type of Christianity that failed to teach what Jesus taught concerning homicidal violence (ie, that it was forbidden to his followers).

Of course, ignoring the powerful pacifist teachings of Jesus has been the norm for the vast majority of Christian theologians, clergy and lay-leaders for the past 1700 years. Indeed, it is often said that the only group that doesn't know that Jesus was a pacifist is that group known as Christian. And the church's leadership is most responsible for that erroneous stance.

Nagasaki was the most Christian city in Japan, and the city's massive Urakami Cathedral was the largest Christian church in the orient – both in membership and physical structure. The cathedral was so large that it was visible at 31,000 feet, making it an easy aiming point for the Nagasaki bombardier.

Using Atomic Weapons Against a Civilian Population is an International War Crime and a Crime Against Humanity

Using the most lethal weapon of mass slaughter in the history of warfare was soon to be defined by the Nuremberg Tribunal as an international war crime and a crime against humanity.

Of course, there was no way that the 509th Composite Group crew members could have known anything about what constituted a war crime at the time of the mission. Later on, some of the crew did admit that they had had some doubts about what they had participated in. But none of them actually witnessed the unspeakable suffering of the tens of thousands of their victims on the ground. "Orders are orders" in times of war and must be obeyed by subordinates. According to the laws of war, disobeying lawful orders in wartime is considered treason, and such an act can be punished by summary execution. So, the bomber crew had no alternative but to obey the orders. Even the two chaplains had few doubts about the morality of the bomb until long after the war.

Making it Hard for Japan to Surrender

When Nagasaki was bombed, it had been only 3 days since Hiroshima had been destroyed. There was chaos and confusion in Tokyo, where the military command was meeting with the Emperor Hirohito to discuss how to surrender with honor. The military leadership (of both nations) had known for months that Japan had already lost the war.

The only obstacle to ending the war months earlier had been the Allied Powers insistence on unconditional surrender (which meant that the emperor could be removed from his figurehead position in Japan and perhaps even brought before a war crimes tribunal). That demand was intolerable for Japan's military leaders, who regarded the emperor as a deity.

The USSR had declared war against Japan two days after Hiroshima was bombed on August 6. The USSR was hoping to regain some of the territories that had been lost to Japan in the Russo-Japanese War 40 years earlier. Stalin's army had already begun advancing across Manchuria. Russia's entry into the war had been encouraged by President Truman before he

knew of the success of the atom bomb test in New Mexico on July 16.

But now, knowing how powerful the “Gimmick bomb” was, Truman and his strategists knew that they could force Japan’s surrender without Stalin’s help. So, not wanting to divide any of the spoils of war with the USSR, and because the US wanted to send an early cold war message to the USSR (that the US was the new planetary superpower because it was the only nation that had such powerful weapons), Truman ordered bomber command to deploy the two atomic bombs “as soon as they became available”.

The Decision to Target Nagasaki

August 1, 1945 was determined to be the earliest deployment date for the atomic missions, and over the previous months, the Target Committee in Washington, D.C. had developed a short list of relatively un-damaged Japanese cities that were to be excluded from the conventional terror-bombing campaigns that, during the first half of 1945, had been using only napalm bombs (jellied gasoline) and high explosives, that had burned to the ground over 60 essentially defenseless Japanese cities – and their civilian populations).

The list of protected cities included Niigata, Kokura, Kyoto, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The intent was to preserve them as potential large population targets for the new weapon that had been developed in labs and manufacturing plants all across America under the auspices of the Manhattan Project.

Prior to August 6 and 9, the residents of those five cities had considered themselves fortunate for not having been fire-bombed as had the other large cities. Little did the residents of the doomed cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki know that they were only temporarily being spared a fate far worse than simply being burned to death.

The Trinity Test

A plutonium bomb similar to the one dropped on Nagasaki had been field tested at Alamogordo, New Mexico a few weeks earlier (on July 16, 1945). It had been blasphemously code-named “Trinity” (a distinctly Christian term) and had been detonated in secrecy with impressive results. Although the blast had just killed a bunch of hapless coyotes, rabbits, snakes and other desert varmints, it had done a tremendous amount of blast and heat damage to the inanimate surroundings. Part of the experiment was to discover what the effects of bomb radiation would have on soldiers, so dozens of American “atomic soldier” guinea pigs were told to advance towards Ground Zero within minutes of the detonation. The results of that human experiment on radioactivity was not to be fully appreciated until much later.

Image below: Bock’s Car, the B-29 Superfortress That Bombed Nagasaki



Trinity had produced large amounts of an entirely new type of geological specimen that was later called “Trinitite”, a man-made molten lava rock that had been created from the intense heat that was estimated to be greater than the temperature of the sun. Samples of it still exist in the desert at Alamogordo. The rock still contains radioactive isotopes of plutonium, uranium, cobalt and barium.

The Mission

At 3 am on the morning of August 9, 1945 a B-29 Superfortress named Bock’s Car (after the pilot who usually flew the plane on conventional bombing missions) took off from Tinian Island, with the prayers and blessings of the crew’s two chaplains.

Barely making it off the runway before the heavily loaded plane almost crash-landed in the Pacific Ocean, Bock’s Car flew north for Kokura, Japan, the primary target. The 10,000 pound plutonium bomb in the hold was code-named “Fat Man,” partly because of its shape and partly to honor the rotund British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The slenderer uranium bomb that had been dropped on Hiroshima 3 days earlier was code-named “Little Boy” after first being called “Thin Man” (after the recently deceased President Roosevelt).

Japan’s War Council was Considering Surrender Terms as Nagasaki was Being Incinerated

Japan’s Supreme War Council in Tokyo was scheduled to convene at 11 am on August 9. The fascist leaders, half of them military leaders, had no comprehension of what had just happened at Hiroshima. So, the members had no real sense of urgency about any new threats. On August 9, the council was mostly concerned about Russia’s declaration of war that had been issued the day before.

But it was already too late. Not having access to any of the information that they needed to make wise decisions, there was no chance for the Japanese leadership to accurately assess the situation.

Bock’s Car – flying under radio silence – was already approaching the southern islands of Japan, heading for Kokura, the primary target. The crew was hoping to beat a predicted typhoon and the approaching storm clouds that could have adversely affected the mission. They knew that they had to drop the bomb somewhere, given the fact that it would be unwise – indeed impossible – to land the B-29 with a 5-ton atomic bomb on board.

The Bock's Car crew had instructions to drop the bomb only on visual sighting. But Kokura was clouded over. After making three bomb runs looking for a break in the clouds – and using up valuable fuel all the while – the plane belatedly headed for its secondary target, Nagasaki.

The History of Nagasaki Christianity

Nagasaki is famous in the history of Japanese Christianity. The city had the largest concentration of Christians in all of Japan. St. Mary's Urakami Cathedral was the megachurch of its day, with 12,000 baptized members.

Nagasaki was the community where the legendary Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier planted a mission church in 1549. The Catholic community at Nagasaki grew and eventually prospered over the next few decades. However, it gradually became clear to the Japanese leadership that Portuguese and Spanish commercial interests (with their Catholic priests that were attempting to "Christianize" Japan) were exploiting Japan's resources and its people. It didn't take very long before all Europeans were expelled from the country – along with their strange religion. Japanese Christians who refused to recant of their faith suffered severe persecutions, which culminated on February 5, 1597 when Paul Miki and 25 other Christian martyrs were tortured and crucified simultaneously in Nagasaki.

The reign of terror stopped when it appeared to all observers that Japanese Christianity was dead, and from 1600 until 1850, being a Christian in Japan was punishable by death.

However, 250 years later, after the gunboat diplomacy of US Commodore Matthew Perry forced open an offshore island close to Nagasaki for American trade purposes, it was discovered that there were thousands of baptized Christians in the Nagasaki area, practicing their faith in secret. The Christian community was completely unknown to the government.

When the secret congregation was discovered, the government started another persecution but because of international pressure, the persecutions stopped and Nagasaki Christianity came up from the underground. And by 1917, with no financial help from the government, the re-vitalized Christian community built the massive cathedral in Nagasaki's Urakami River district.

Christians Killing Christians in the Name of Christ

So, it was the height of irony that the huge Cathedral – one of only two Nagasaki landmarks that could be positively identified from 31,000 feet up – became Ground Zero for the Bock's Car's crew. (The other identifiable aiming point from that altitude was the Mitsubishi armaments factory complex – which had run out of raw materials because of the successful Allied naval blockade that had stopped production of war materiel.)

When the atomic bomb exploded over Nagasaki at 11:02 am on August 9, 1945, an unknown number of Nagasaki Christians attending mass were evaporated, carbonized or otherwise disappeared in a scorching, radioactive fireball that exploded 500 meters above the cathedral. The "black rain" that soon came down from the mushroom cloud contained the mingled cellular remains of many Nagasaki Christians as well as many more nearby Shintoists and Buddhists. The theological implications of Nagasaki's Black Rain ingredients should boggle the minds of theologians of all religions.

The Nagasaki Christian Body Count

Most Nagasaki Christians did not survive the blast. It is estimated that 6,000 of them died instantly, including all who were at the church that morning. Of the 12,000 members of St Mary's congregation, 8,500 of them died as a result of the bomb. Many of the survivors were seriously sickened with an entirely new, highly lethal disease for which there was as yet no name: radiation sickness.

Located near the cathedral were three orders of nuns and a Catholic girl's school. They all disappeared into black smoke, black rain or became black chunks of charcoal. Tens of thousands of other innocent non-combatant neighbors also died instantly, but many more were mortally wounded and/or incurably sickened. Some of the original victims (including their progeny) are still suffering to this very day from the trans-generational malignancies and immune deficiencies caused by their exposure to deadly radioactive isotopes that were produced by the bomb.

And here is one of the most important ironies: *What the Japanese Imperial government could not do in 250 years of persecution (ie, to destroy Japanese Christianity) American Christians did in mere seconds.*

Even after the American bomb wiped out Nagasaki Christianity, a slow revival of some Japanese churches has risen to only a tiny fraction of 1% of the general population, with the average attendance at worship services across the nation reported to be only 30 per Sunday. The decimation at Nagasaki crippled what at one time had been a vibrant church.

George Zabelka, the Catholic Chaplain for the 509th Composite Group

Father George Zabelka was the Roman Catholic chaplain for the 509th Composite Group (the 1500 man group whose only mission was to deliver the atomic bombs to Japanese urban targets). He was one of the few post-World War II clergypersons that eventually came to recognize the serious contradictions between what his modern church had taught him about war and what the first 300 years of Christianity had been committed to: homicidal violence was forbidden to its members.

Several decades after Zabelka was discharged from his military chaplaincy, he finally came to the conclusion that both he and the Roman Catholic church had made serious ethical and theological errors in religiously legitimatizing the organized mass slaughter that is modern war. He had slowly come to understand that "the enemy of me and the enemy of my nation is not an enemy of God. Rather my enemy and my nation's enemy are children of God who are loved by God and who therefore are to be loved by me as a follower of that loving God."

Father Zabelka's gradual conversion away from homicidal violence-tolerant Christianity totally changed his Detroit, Michigan inner city ministry. His absolute commitment to the truth of gospel nonviolence – just like Martin Luther King's commitment – inspired him to devote the remaining decades of his life and work to speaking out against violence in all its forms, including the violence of militarism, racism and economic exploitation. Zabelka travelled to Nagasaki on the 50th anniversary of the bombing, tearfully repenting and asking for forgiveness for the part he had played in the crime.

Likewise, the Lutheran chaplain for the 509th, Pastor William Downey (formerly of Hope

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN), in his counseling of soldiers who had become troubled by their participation in making murder for the state, later denounced all killing, whether by a single bullet or by a weapon of mass destruction.

Why Should Combat Veterans Embrace a Religion that Blessed the Wars that Ruined Their Souls?

In Daniel Hallock's important book, *Hell, Healing and Resistance*, the author described a 1997 Buddhist retreat that was led by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. The retreat involved a number of combat-traumatized Vietnam War veterans who had abandoned the Christianity of their youth. The veterans had responded positively to the monk's ministrations. Hallock wrote, *"Clearly, Buddhism offers something that cannot be found in institutional Christianity. But then why should veterans embrace a religion that has blessed the wars that ruined their souls? It is no wonder that they turn to a gentle Buddhist monk to hear what are, in large part, the truths of Christ."*

Hallock's incisive comment should be a sobering wake-up call to Christian leaders who seem to regard as essential to the church both the recruitment of new members and the retention of old ones. The fact that the US is a highly militarized nation makes the truths of gospel nonviolence difficult to teach and preach, especially to military veterans (particularly the ones that are un-employed, homeless, psychologically tormented, spiritually-depleted, malnourished, over-medicated, over-vaccinated, depressed and/or suicidal) who may have lost their faith because of the horrors they experienced on the battlefield.

In my practice of holistic, preventive and non-drug mental health care, I dealt with hundreds of psychologically traumatized patients (including combat-traumatized war veterans and their secondarily traumatized partners and children), and I know that violence, in all of its forms, can seriously, sometimes irretrievably, damage the mind, body, brain, spirit and soul. But the fact that the combat-traumatized type of PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) is totally preventable – while simultaneously being nearly impossible to cure – makes prevention work of ultimate importance.

An ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure when it comes to combat-induced PTSD. Simply refusing to join any organization like the military that engages in homicidal violence is- of course – the key preventive measure. And where Christian churches should and could be instrumental in the prevention of the soul-destroying combat-type of PTSD is by counseling their members to simply adhere to the ethical message of the nonviolent Jesus and refuse to participate in the killing professions – which, of course, should be a no-brainer if one considers what guided the Christian church's active, nonviolent resistance to killing) in the first 3 centuries of its existence.

Experiencing violence, whether as victim or victimizer, can be deadly to the soul and psyche, and it runs in families (or a society) like a contagious disease. In my career as healer, I have treated untold numbers of people that have asked my professional help to alleviate their emotional suffering.

Tragically, the victims of those trauma-induced realities are far too commonly mis-diagnosed as having a "mental illness of unknown cause" – to the detriment of the traumatized patient who will then be mis-treated with cocktails of neurotoxic psychoactive drugs (which are commonly brain-damaging and well as being addictive) rather than with compassionate psychotherapy that could curatively deal with the root causes of the

traumatic stress.

I have often seen the essentially contagious nature of traumatic stress as it spreads through the generations of both military and non-military families – even involving the 3rd and 4th generations following the initial combat trauma. And that contagion has been the experience of the long-suffering atomic bomb survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki who call themselves the “hibakusha”, whose progeny even suffer radiation- and trauma-related disease. Combat-induced PTSD inevitably also haunts the progeny of the warriors who participated in the homicidal realities of war.

What Should be the Church’s Role in the Organized Mass Slaughter That is War?

Years ago I came across an unpublished Veteran’s Administration research study that showed that, whereas most Vietnam War-era soldiers were active members of Christian churches before they were sent off to war, if they came home with PTSD, the percentage that returned to their faith community approached zero. Daniel Hallock’s sobering message above helps explain why that is so.

Therefore, the church – by its silence on the ethical issues of killing in war and even in war preparation – is actually failing to teach what Jesus taught about violence and what the primitive church understood was one of the core teachings of Jesus, who preached, in effect, that “violence is forbidden for those who wish to follow me”.

Therefore, by refraining from warning their adolescent members about the faith- and soul-destroying realities of war, the church is directly undermining the “retention” strategies in which all churches engage. The hidden history of Nagasaki thus has valuable lessons for American Christianity.

The church leadership in the first few centuries of Christianity knew the teachings and actions of Jesus best and they rejected the nationalist, racist and militarist agendas of whatever passed for governmental and military authority 2000 years ago. And Sermon on the Mount-type Christians of yesteryear as well as the remnants that remain today both reject the homicidal agendas of the national security state, the military-industrial-congressional complex, the war-profiteering corporations, the militarism-complicit major media and the eye-for-an-eye retaliatory church doctrines that have, over the past 1700 years, enabled baptized and confirmed Christians, if ordered to do so, to willingly kill other Christians in the name of Christ.

If the church is sincere when it promises to “never again” allow its government to use atomic weapons, slaughter enemy civilians or torture enemy combatants, it needs to take seriously the radical message of gospel nonviolence so clearly taught 2000 years ago.

Learning the lessons from the bombing of Nagasaki would be a good place to start.

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Dr Gary G. Kohls is a retired rural family physician from Duluth, Minnesota. Since his

retirement in 2008, Dr Kohls has written a weekly column, titled Duty to Warn, which has been re-published and archived at websites around the world.

He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization. [Consult his archive here](#)

Featured image: An irradiated crucifix lies in the ruins of the Urakami Cathedral Following the Atomic Bombing of Nagasaki (Source: Dr. Gary G. Kohls)

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