

# The Bombing of Nagasaki August 9, 1945.

## Unwelcome Truths for Church and State

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*69 years ago an all-Christian bomber crew dropped "Fat Man", a plutonium bomb, on Nagasaki, Japan, instantly annihilating tens of thousands of innocent civilians, a disproportionate number of them Japanese Christians, and permanently or mortally wounding uncountable numbers of others.*

In 1945, the US was the most Christian nation in the world (that is, if you can label as Christian a nation whose churches overwhelmingly fail to sincerely teach or adhere to the ethics of Jesus as taught in the Sermon on the Mount).

Prior to the bomb exploding over St. Mary's Urakami Cathedral on 11:02 AM, Nagasaki was the most Christian city in Japan. The Nagasaki cathedral was the largest Christian cathedral in the Orient.

Those baptized and confirmed Christian airmen, following their wartime orders to the letter, did their job efficiently, and they accomplished the mission with military pride, albeit with any number of near-fatal glitches. Most of us Americans in 1945 would have done exactly the same if they had been in the shoes of the Bock's Car crew, and there would have been very little mental anguish later if we had also been treated as heroes.

Nevertheless, the use of that monstrous weapon of mass destruction to destroy a mainly civilian city like Nagasaki was, as defined later by the Nuremberg Tribunal, an international war crime and a crime against humanity.

Of course, there was no way that the crew members could have known that at the time. Some of the crew did admit that they had had some doubts about what they had participated in when the bomb actually detonated. Of course, none of them actually saw the horrific suffering of the victims up close and personal. "Orders are orders" and, in wartime, disobedience can be, and has been, legally punishable by summary execution of the soldier who might have had a conscience strong enough to convince him that killing another human, especially an unarmed one, was morally wrong.

### Making it Hard for Japan to Surrender

It had been only 3 days since the August 6th bomb had decimated Hiroshima. The August 9 bombing occurred amidst massive chaos and confusion in Tokyo, where the fascist military government, who knew – for months already- that they had lost the war, and therefore had been searching for ways to honorably surrender and end the war.

The only obstacle to surrender had been the Allied insistence on unconditional surrender, which meant that the Emperor Hirohito, whom the Japanese regarded as a deity, would be removed from his figurehead position in Japan and possibly subjected to war crimes trials. That was a deal-breaker, an intolerable demand for the Japanese that prolonged the war and prevented Japan from giving up months earlier.

The Russian army had declared war against Japan on August 8, hoping to regain territories lost to Japan in the humiliating (for Russia) Russo-Japanese war 40 years earlier, and Stalin's army was advancing across Manchuria. Russia's entry into the war represented a powerful incentive for Japan to end the war quickly since they much preferred surrendering to the US rather than to Russia. And, of course, the US did not want to divide any of the spoils of war with Russia, and it wanted to send an early cold war message to Russia that the US was the new planetary superpower.

Aiming at August 1, 1945 as the earliest deployment date for the first bomb, the Target Committee in Washington, D.C. developed a list of relatively un-damaged Japanese cities that were to be excluded from the conventional USAAF fire-bombing campaigns (that, during the first half of 1945, burned to the ground 60+ major, mostly defenseless Japanese cities).

The list of protected cities included Hiroshima, Niigata, Kokura, Kyoto and Nagasaki. Those five relatively undamaged cities were to be off-limits to the terror bombings. They were to be preserved as potential targets for the new "gimmick" weapon that had been researched and developed all across America during the two years of the Manhattan Project. Ironically, prior to August 6 and 9, the residents of those cities considered themselves lucky for not having been bombed as much as other cities. Little did they know why they were being spared from the carnage.

### The Trinity Test

The first and only field test of an atomic bomb had been blasphemously code-named "Trinity" (a distinctly Christian term). It had occurred 3 weeks earlier at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. The results were impressive, but the blast had just killed off a few hapless coyotes, rabbits, snakes and other desert varmints; had totally destroyed a bunch of cactuses and sagebrush and had obliterated a family of manikins that had been planted in homes that had been hastily built for the photographic portion of the experiment.

The Trinity test also unexpectedly produced huge amounts of a new test mineral that was later called "Trinitite", which was a molten lava rock that had been created from the intense heat (twice the temperature of the sun) of the above ground bomb blast.

At 3 am on the morning of August 9, 1945, a B-29 Superfortress (that had been "christened" Bock's Car) took off from Tinian Island in the South Pacific, with the prayers and blessings of its Lutheran and Catholic chaplains. Barely making it off the runway before the plane went into the drink (because of the 10,000 bomb in its hold), it headed north for Kokura, the primary target. Bock's Car's plutonium bomb was code-named "Fat Man," after Winston Churchill. Little Boy, first called Thin Man (after President Roosevelt) was the bomb that had incinerated Hiroshima three days earlier.

Bomb Two was Being Delivered While Japan's War Council was Meeting to Discuss Surrender

The reality of what had happened at Hiroshima was not understood by Japan's Supreme War

Council in Tokyo. So there was no way for Japan's Supreme War Council to make rational decisions about the issue of surrendering.

But it was already too late, because by the time the War Council was meeting, Bock's Car – flying under radio silence – was already approaching the southern islands of Japan, hoping to beat the typhoons and clouds that would have caused the mission to be delayed for another week.

The Bock's Car crew had instructions to drop the bomb only with visual sighting. But Kokura was clouded over. So after making three failed bomb runs over the clouded-over city all the while running dangerously low on fuel, the plane headed for its secondary target, Nagasaki.

### The History of Nagasaki Christianity

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

Nagasaki was where the legendary Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier, established a mission church in 1549. The Catholic community at Nagasaki grew and eventually prospered over the next several generations. However it eventually became clear to the Japanese rulers that the Portuguese and Spanish commercial interests were exploiting Japan; and soon all Europeans – and their foreign religion – were expelled from the country.

From 1600 until 1850, being a Christian was a capital crime in Japan. In the early 1600s, those Japanese Christians who refused to recant of their new faith were subject to unspeakable tortures – including crucifixion. After the reign of terror was over, it appeared to all observers that Japanese Christianity was extinct.

However, 250 years later, after the gunboat diplomacy of Commodore Matthew Perry forced open an offshore island for American trade purposes, it was discovered that there were thousands of baptized Christians in Nagasaki, living their faith in a catacomb existence, completely unknown to the government.

With this humiliating revelation, the Japanese government started another purge; but because of international pressure, the persecutions were stopped, and Nagasaki Christianity came up from the underground. And by 1917, with no help from the government, the revitalized Christian community had built the massive St. Mary's Cathedral, in the Urakami River district of Nagasaki.

So it was the height of irony that the massive Cathedral – one of only two Nagasaki landmarks that could be positively identified from 31,000 feet up (the other one was the Mitsubishi armaments factory complex) became Ground Zero for the infamous bomb. The Bock's Car bombardier identified the landmarks through a break in the clouds and ordered the drop.

At 11:02 am, during Thursday morning mass, hundreds of Nagasaki Christians were boiled, 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 surely contained the mingled remains of many Nagasaki Shintoists, Buddhists and Christians. The theological implications of Nagasaki's Black Rain surely should boggle the minds of theologians of all denominations.

## The Nagasaki Christian Death Count

Most Nagasaki Christians did not survive the blast. 6,000 of them died instantly, including all who were at confession. Of the 12,000 church members, 8,500 of them eventually died as a result of the bomb. Many of the others were seriously sickened.

Three orders of nuns and a Christian girl's school disappeared into black smoke or became chunks of charcoal. Tens of thousands of non-combatant Shinto and Buddhist Japanese also died instantly, and many more were mortally wounded or incurably damaged. Some of the victim's progeny are still in the process of dying from the trans-generational malignancies and immune deficiencies caused by the deadly plutonium and other radioactive isotopes produced by the bomb..

And here is one of the important points of this article: What the Japanese Imperial government could not do in over 200 years of persecution (destroy Japanese Christianity) American Christians did in 9 seconds.

Even after a slow revival of Christianity over the decades since WWII, membership in Japanese churches still represent a small fraction of 1% of the general population, and the average attendance at Christian worship services has been reported to be only 30. Surely the decimation of Nagasaki at the end of the war crippled what at one time was a vibrant church.

It is important to know the hidden history of Nagasaki Christianity and the attempted annihilation of it by American Christians. The Bock's Car bomber crew, as are most soldier grunts in any war, was at the bottom of a long complex anonymous chain of command. They had only "pulled the trigger" of the weapon which was manufactured by corporations, but which was put in their hands by others, none of whom claimed sole responsibility for doing the satanic deed. As in all wars, the WWII grunts and trigger-pullers - and chaplains - at the bottom of the chain of command didn't know exactly who they were killing - or even why.

### George Zabelka, the Catholic Chaplain for the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group

Father George Zabelka was the Catholic chaplain for the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group (the 1500 man United States Army Air Force group whose only mission was to successfully deliver the atomic bombs to their targets). Zabelka was one of the few Christian leaders who eventually came to recognize the contradictions between what his modern church had taught him about war and what the early pacifist church had taught about homicidal violence.

Several decades after Zabelka was discharged from the military chaplaincy, he finally concluded that both he and his church had made serious ethical and theological errors in religiously legitimating the organized mass slaughter that is modern war. He had eventually come to understand that, as he articulated it, the enemies of his nation were not, according to New Testament ethics, the enemies of God, but were rather fellow children of God who were loved by God and who therefore were not to be killed by God's followers.

Father Zabelka's conversion away from the standardized violence-tolerant Christianity turned his Detroit, Michigan ministry around 180 degrees. His absolute commitment to the truth of gospel nonviolence - just like Martin Luther King - inspired him to devote the remaining decades of his life to speaking out against violence in all its forms, including the violence of militarism, racism and economic exploitation. Zabelka even travelled to

Nagasaki on the 50<sup>th</sup> 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 weapons 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 talks about a 1997 Buddhist retreat led by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. That retreat attempted to deal with the hellish post-war existence of combat-traumatized Vietnam War veterans. 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 they turn to a gentle Buddhist monk to hear what are, in large part, the truths of Christ."

The truth of Hallock's comment should be a sobering wake-up call to Christian leaders who seem to regard as equally important 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 and their patriotic families (particularly the impoverished and homeless ones) who may have lost their faith because of past events on the battlefield.

I am a retired physician who has dealt with hundreds of psychologically traumatized patients (especially combat-traumatized war veterans), and I know that violence, in all its forms, can irretrievably damage the mind, body, brain, and spirit; but the fact that the combat-traumatized type is totally preventable – as well as, for the most serious cases, virtually impossible to cure – makes prevention work so important. And that is where Christian churches should and could be instrumental. An ounce of prevention is indeed worth a pound of cure.

These traumas are deadly and sometimes even contagious. I have seen violence, neglect, abuse and the resultant traumatic illnesses spread through families – even involving the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generations after the initial victimization or perpetration, similar to the experience of the progeny of the atomic bomb victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the warrior-perpetrator/victims who trained for and experienced the acts of killing in any war, not just WWII.

### What Should be the Christian Church's Role in the Mass Slaughter of War?

Years ago I saw an unpublished Veteran's Administration study that showed that, whereas most Vietnam War-era soldiers were active members of Christian churches, if they came home with PTSD, the percentage returning to the faith community approached zero. Daniel Hallock's sobering message noted above explains why that is so.

Therefore the church seems to be promoting (perhaps inadvertently and/or by its silence on the topic of violence) anti-gospel homicidal violence by failing to teach what the primitive church understood about the ministry of Jesus, who said, in effect, that "violence is

forbidden for those who wish to follow me". Therefore, by refraining from warning their adolescent members about the satanic realities of war (and the faith-destroying combat-induced PTSD) the church is directly undermining the "retention" strategies in which all churches engage.

Hopefully this essay will promote discussions in this so-called "Christian" nation about the ethics of making murder for the state (and its corporations) while simultaneously – and illogically – professing allegiance to the teachings of the nonviolent Jesus.

The early church leaders who knew the teachings of Jesus best rejected the nationalist, racist and militarist agendas of all national security agencies, the military-industrial complex, the war-profiteering corporations and the pre-Christian eye-for-an-eye retaliation doctrines that have, over the past 1700 years, enabled Christians to willingly kill other Christians in the name of Christ.

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