Martial Arts and Just War Theory

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese examines a Christian view of martial arts in view of the Just War Tradition.

When I was first asked to speak about Christianity and the Martial Arts I was a little skeptical that a Christian can practice Martial Arts in good conscience. The popular objections immediately came to mind: "Aren't the Martial Arts steeped in Zen Buddhist practice?" And, "Should a Christian really participate in something as violent as karate?" Christians commonly object to Martial Arts for such reasons, even vilifying them as something as bad as witchcraft.

Upon reflection, I realized that the practice of Martial Arts naturally corresponds to something I have thought long and hard about: Just War Tradition. A central principal of both Just War thinking and the Martial Arts is personal self–defense. Just War doctrine states that if a Christian is unjustly attacked or sees an innocent third party under attack and has the ability to either prevent the abuse or intervene, that he or she should do so. What's more, to fail to render such aid makes one equally culpable in the crime. In other words, inaction and apathy in the face of injustice is just as wrong as the injustice itself.

Just War thinking is usually applied to the relationships between governments and states in times of war. It helps Christians and societies decide if a war is morally acceptable or not and whether it is worthy of their participation. But there is no logical reason to prevent Christians from applying this principle at a personal level. After all, the police cannot possibly be available always and everywhere; we are sometimes forced to protect ourselves.

The Violence Objection

As Americans we naturally think that self–defense means owning a handgun. We live in a gun culture that accepts firearms as a God–given right protected by Law. Christians generally have no objections to gun ownership even though the potential for disaster is obvious. But when it comes to a safer alternative to guns, such as the Martial Arts, practitioners are met with a flurry of protests as if they are embracing some foreign religion. Now, to clear the air, I am entirely in favor of the Second Amendment right to bear arms. I am simply suggesting that those individuals who choose to practice the Martial Arts as a means of self–defense have chosen a safer alternative to gun ownership. (I assume that the discipline replaces gun ownership for them. From observation, gun owners and Martial Arts participants are generally not the same people.)

Guns are so easy to use that the potential for abuse and misuse is frightening and lethal. The Martial Arts, however, requires training, discipline and values related to peace and human dignity. One is taught self–control and respect for life that must accompany any notion of self–defense. Students are taught not to kill but rather to apply only the force necessary for a given situation.

One of the ironies of war states that the defender may become more powerful than the aggressor. This principle was clearly demonstrated in World War II when the Allies routed the Axis powers. At this point, if the defending party does not possess a system of values that imposes limited action out of respect for human life, then the defender becomes the aggressor by virtue of his advantage of power. Only a notion of justice tempered with mercy will prevent the just party from slipping into injustice and excessive aggression.

At the personal level, it is very difficult to achieve limited action that seeks to apply only the necessary force when it comes to using firearms. For example, various schools of

Martial Arts often teach restraint in kicking or punching, using only enough force to defend oneself. Bullets cannot be recalled and their results are almost always fatal or horribly injurious. On the other hand, Martial Arts techniques like karate are inherently limited in their effects—despite violence—filled popular Kung Fu movies. They are designed to apply only the force necessary to achieve the goal of self—defense without killing or permanently disabling the opponent. Kicks, chops and blocks will always prove less fatal or damaging than shooting someone at point blank range. The use of force is never ideal or welcome, but if given the choice between karate or a .357 magnum for self—defense, the former clearly comes closer to Christian notions of justice and mercy than the latter.

The Eastern Mysticism Objection

The second objection, that the Martial Arts are *necessarily* tied to Eastern mysticism and thus that any Christian practicing these Arts is betraying Christianity, is much easier to answer. The common misconception is that Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen, brought the Martial Arts from India to China in the Sixth Century AD with the spread of Zen Buddhism. Later, the practice spread to Japan. It is certainly true that the East has created a synthesis between the Martial Arts and mystical philosophy, but this creation represents a fairly modern innovation, especially in Japan with the rise of the Samurai warrior around 1300 AD. This is the most prominent symbol of the Martial Arts in the American mind. These Arts were practiced for millennia before the arrival of Zen in China or Japan and go as far back as 2000 BC in Mesopotamia. Historically speaking, there is no necessary connection between Zen and the Martial Arts.

Philosophically speaking, there is no necessary connection between Zen and the Martial Arts, either. Zen philosophy teaches a way of meditation or a means of achieving

enlightenment focused on the practical and tangible world as opposed to the spoken or written word. That is, it doesn't rely on sacred texts or traditional reason, but rather on intuitive experience. Zen adherents prefer practice and encounter with reality rather than simply talking about it. Since the Martial Arts are also very practical and physical, this makes Zen attractive to many Martial Artists, but this represents an incidental connection, not a logically necessary one. The connection between the two practices is a convenience. One no more has to be a Buddhist to practice the Martial Arts than one has to be a Christian to be an American. Simply put, just because Zen appeals to many Martial Artists doesn't mean the two go together essentially. One can do just fine without the other, and that's where Christians can reconcile doing Martial Arts with their faith.

However, the notion of Chi ["chee"], or life–force, in the Martial Arts presents a serious obstacle to many Christians. This underlying idea states that one must align his or her Chi in order to be an effective practitioner. Since Chi clearly represents a pantheist philosophy, a suitable Christian–theist substitute should replace it. Chi is really nothing more than right attitude, enthusiasm and concentration; it signifies the power of the focused mind rather than a mystical supernatural energy we can draw from. As in all sports and disciplines of any kind, one must focus the mind. This is no different for the Martial Artist than for the marksman who must aim at a target or a ball player who must kick or hit a ball. The body follows the mind.

As Christians legitimately concerned with the compromise of faith with Eastern mysticism or a violent culture, a conceptual union of Just War thinking and the Martial Arts creates an excellent theological and practical tool to reconcile both currents in American society. So, if after considering this perspective your conscience is clear, enjoy the Martial Arts for the sport, discipline and art form that

they can be.

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Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Have you ever been cheated or mistreated? Got any lingering grudges you're holding onto? Is there any "unclear air" between you and a family member, neighbor, or coworker regarding a dispute, a slight, an offense? Could those situations use some forgiveness?

More and more medical doctors and social scientists are extolling the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation, benefits both to individuals and to society. This article examines some of these benefits and presents several inspiring case studies, stories of forgiveness in action.

Would you believe that forgiveness can be good for your health? Lingering anger, stress, or high blood pressure could indicate that you need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself). Many religions—including, of course, the Christian faith—have long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. Now secular research supports its value.{1}

In the early 1980s, Kansas pschologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harnden searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the academic digest *Psychological Abstracts*. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar

“Campaign for Forgiveness Research” (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu have been among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harnden says forgiveness “releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses.”{2}

He’s big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, a while back, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

George Washington University medical professor Christina Puchalski cites forgiveness benefits supported by research studies. Writing in *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, she says, “The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others.” {3}

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies. If offense leads to resentment and bitterness, then anger, explosion, and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation, and restoration can follow.

Startling Contrition

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society’s conflicts, “almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring

people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing."{4}

The year 2006 brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime. During the 1980s, racial conflict there boiled.

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ten years earlier in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film.{5} I had tickets to see "Cry Freedom" in Pretoria the night it opened, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You can imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok's 2006 attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president's office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15)." That biblical reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture.{6}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time "to go to my neighbor, to the person that I've wronged." He says he and his compatriots should "climb down from the

throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, 'Look, I'm sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism . . . my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.'"{7}

Startling contrition, indeed.

Strength to Forgive

Have you ever unexpectedly encountered someone who has wronged you? There you are, suddenly face-to-face with your nemesis. How do you feel? Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, "Our bodies react as if we're in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. . . . You're feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes . . . breathing gets shallow."{8}

Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

In 1947 in a Munich church, she told a German audience that God forgives. "When we confess our sins," she explained, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."{9} After her presentation, she recognized a man approaching her, a guard from Ravensbruck, before whom she had had to walk naked. Chilling memories flooded back.

"A fine message, *Fraulein*!" said the man. "How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" He extended his hand in greeting.

Corrie recalled, "I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me. . . . But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze."

The man continued: “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. . . . I was a guard there. . . . But since that time . . . I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein*.” He extended his hand again. “Will you forgive me?”

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeance raged inside her, she remembered Jesus’ death for this man. How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a “healing warmth” flooding her body. “I forgive you, brother!” she cried, “With all my heart.”

“And so,” Corrie later recalled, “I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on [God’s]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

“My Father, the Town Alcoholic”

When Stanford education and psychology professor Carl Thoresen and his colleagues began recruiting adult subjects for the Stanford Forgiveness Project, they had trouble signing up males. When they started using the terms “grudge” and “grudge management” in the recruiting, the men came. Thoresen thinks some men felt “forgiveness” was a feminine activity, but a “grudge” was something they probably should deal with.{10}

Consider a guy who had a longstanding grudge involving a family member. And aren’t family conflicts often causes of intense stress?

As a teenager on the family farm, Josh McDowell loved his mother but despised his father “more than anyone else in the world.”{11} His friends would joke about his dad being drunk.

It tore him up inside. “I hated my father for the embarrassment and shame his alcoholism caused my family,” McDowell relates. “I also resented what it caused him to do to my mother. I’d go out in the barn and see my mother beaten so badly she couldn’t get up, lying in the manure behind the cows.” Eventually his mother lost the will to live and died, Josh says, “of a broken heart.”

In college, Josh met some followers of Jesus whom he liked. Skeptical about Christianity’s validity, he accepted their challenge to examine evidence regarding Jesus’ claims and found it convincing.{12} He thanked Jesus for dying for him, admitted his flaws to God, and asked Christ to enter his life and take over. Soon he realized he no longer hated his father.

Josh says, “I had confessed to God my feelings for my dad, asked God to forgive me, and prayed that I could forgive. And it happened as quickly as I asked. No longer was my dad a drunk to be hated. Now I saw him as a man who had helped give me life. I called him and told him two things I had never told him before: ‘Dad, I’ve become a Christian and . . . I love you.'”

“But how . . . how can you love a father like me?” Josh’s dad asked on another occasion. Josh explained how to place his faith in Christ and his father made that decision, too. About fourteen months later, his alcohol-ravaged body gave out and he died. But the changed life of the town alcoholic influenced scores of people to place their lives in God’s hands. “My dad’s life was brand new those last 14 months,” recalls Josh. “His relationship with me and with God were both reconciled. Jesus Christ is a peacemaker.”

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Secular research supports the value of forgiveness, a concept at the core of Christian faith. You might wonder, “How does all this relate to me personally?” May I offer some

suggestions?

As a starting point, *become forgiven yourself.* The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote, "Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven."{13} Josh McDowell says once he was forgiven by God, he could forgive his alcoholic father. If you've never known for sure that God is your friend, I encourage you to ask Him to forgive you. You might say something like this to Him right now:

> *Jesus, I need you. Thanks for dying for my flaws and rising again. I ask you to forgive me and enter my life. Please help me to become good friends with you.*

If you asked Jesus to forgive you and enter your life, He did. Tell another believer about your decision. Contact this radio station or the Web site Probe.org and ask how you can grow in your faith.

If you've already come to faith in Christ, *keep short accounts with God*. One early follower of Jesus wrote, "If we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."{14} The proverbial country preacher said, "I 'fesses 'em as I does 'em."

Ask God to give you the strength to forgive others and love them as He does. Lewis Smedes mentions three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even. . . . Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer . . . that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. . . . And third, we wish our wrongdoer well."

Contact the person you've wronge‐or who has wronged you—and seek to make peace if appropriate and possible. The biblical prescription is that the offender and the offended should run into each other as each is en route to contact the other.{15} Of course, not everyone will want to reconcile, but

you can try.

Realize that forgiving may take time. Shortly before his death, Oxford and Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think I have *at last* forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it."{16}

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be contagious. They can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today,* January 10, 2000, 38-45.
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Christina M. Puchalski, M.D., "Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications," *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine,* September 17, 2002; http://tinyurl.com/yw45eo; accessed January 27, 2007.
4. Thomas, loc. cit.
5. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
6. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
7. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; http://tinyurl.com/2ruu2l; accessed October 4, 2006.
8. Joan O'C. Hamilton, "Peace Work," *Stanford Magazine,* May/June 2001, 78; http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/forgiveness.html.

9. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," *Worldwide Challenge,* July/August 1994, 35-36. Quotations from and details of this encounter as related in this section are from this source.
10. Hamilton, loc. cit., 77.
11. Josh McDowell, "Forgiving My Father," *Worldwide Challenge,* July/August 1994, 37-38. Quotations from and details of McDowell's story as related in this section are from this source.
12. To examine some of the evidence for Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-really.com and www.probe.org.
13. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," *Christianity Today,* December 3, 2001, 73; http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html. Quotations and concepts from Smedes cited in this section are from this source.
14. 1 John 1:9 NLT.
15. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17.
16. Smedes, loc. cit.; emphasis in the quotation is without attribution.

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South African Apartheid Leaders Apology for Racial Sins

Could the world use a bit more contrition, forgiveness and reconciliation?

Recent international news reports brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister

under South Africa's apartheid regime.

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can being people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing." {1}

Here's an exception.

During the 1980s, conflict raged between South Africa's white minority Afrikaner government and the black majority opposition. One former African National Congress operative—now a government official—told me over breakfast in Cape Town that his responsibilities back then had been "to create chaos." Mutual hostility and animosity often reigned.

Bombing Campaign

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film. {2}

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against you, please forgive me (John 13:15)."

An Example to Follow?

That biblical reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet. The inscription's words echo those of the Prodigal Son who in the famous biblical story returns home after squandering his inheritance, hopes his father will accept him as a hired hand, and says, "I have sinned against heaven and against you." {3} The father rejoices over his return, warmly receives him as son, and throws a welcome celebration.

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Forgiveness Components

The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes stressed three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even…. Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer…that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us…. And third, we wish our wrongdoer well." {6}

Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson has quipped that those in

Washington, DC traveling “the high road of humility” won’t encounter “heavy traffic.” {7} Too often the same holds in workplaces, neighborhoods and families. Could Vlok’s example inspire some changes?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, “The Forgiveness Factor,” Christianity Today, January 10, 2000, 38.
2. “Botha implicated in Church bombing,” BBC News online, July 21, 1998; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
3. Luke 15:21 NIV.
4. “Feet washed in apartheid apology,” BBC News online, 28 August 2006; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
5. “Minister atones for race sins,” BBC News video, 3 September 2006; http://tinyurl.com/g899l; accessed October 4, 2006.
6. Lewis B. Smedes, “Keys to Forgiving,” Christianity Today, December 3, 2001, 73; www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html.
7. Harry Kreisler, “Let ‘er Rip! Reflections of a Rocky Mountain Senator: Conversation with Alan K. Simpson, Former U.S. Senator, Wyoming,” Conversations with History, Institute of International Studies, University of California-Berkeley, September 17, 1997; globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Simpson/simpson1.html; accessed October 2, 2006.

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