

# Exploring Peace and Violence: An Interview with Nonviolence Trainer Simon Moyle

By Matt Anslow

**Matt: Simon, you are a peace activist who has been especially active in resisting Australia's engagement in Afghanistan. How did you get involved in peace activism?**

Simon: I did my theological training in the early to mid 2000s. Having grown up in a well-off church in Melbourne's bible belt, but always found something lacking in the Christianity I was taught, stuff that just didn't add up, I was finally able to ask all the questions I wanted to ask and find some answers. One of the primary discoveries in this was looking at Christ through the lens of nonviolence. It was like the story of Jesus, which was previously blurry, suddenly came into focus.

So as my head sorted that stuff out, following Jesus suddenly became real, urgent and exciting rather than a rather dreary, restrictive, optional extra to 'salvation'. To make a long story short I ended up getting involved because my head told me that this is what discipleship looks like; challenging the powers of death as Jesus did, through the power of love, and so participating in his story or "fitting our life into Jesus' life" as Daniel Berrigan describes discipleship.

Even having discovered nonviolence I confess the last thing I wanted to do was peace work – it was too clichéd, and "world peace" is the quintessential unrealistic dream, associated with naïve, ditzy beauty queens. So I started out with Make Poverty History and Fair Trade, but soon realised that at the root of all of these problems – poverty, climate change, etc. – was domination. And the primary, visible, extreme form of domination is war. And if the antidote to domination is nonviolence, then I realised I'd better start teaching it. And once I started teaching it I realised I'd have no credibility unless I started doing it.

I remember after my first act of civil disobedience against war, I wrote to Fr. John Dear (who is a good friend, priest, and long time nonviolence activist) and explained how exciting and liberating it had been. His response was, "So you see! The gospel is true." Those seven words summed up the whole experience for me, and still do.

So I must say, I'm not a huge fan of the term 'peace activist', at least when it implies something separate to discipleship and to the gospel. Insofar as we who follow Jesus are all agents of reconciliation and ambassadors of God's love, I don't think we can be anything else.

**M: You say we cannot be anything but people of peace when we follow Jesus, but so many Christians support war and violence. I wonder if this is partly due to a lack of education, since it is often assumed by people that there are only two responses to violence, namely more violence or pacifism – fight or flight.**

**When people hear the term "nonviolence" they tend to associate it with pacifism. What is nonviolence? Is it the same as pacifism?**

S: Nonviolence is neither passivity nor merely the absence of violence, but *action* which is *nonviolent*. In fact, if someone allows violence or oppression to go unchallenged, they are not being nonviolent. I would go so far as to say that violence is not the opposite of nonviolence, passivity is. Even Gandhi said it is better to be violent in the face of oppression than to be passive (but always added that he had never seen a situation where nonviolence would not yield results superior to that of violence), because passivity is born of fear, and nonviolence is about love which overcomes fear.

Nonviolence is love in flesh and bone, what Christ calls “complete love” – for God, self, the cosmos, neighbour and enemy – everything!

Gandhi called nonviolence satyagraha – a word meaning holding/grasping truth. Nonviolence requires embodying your truth to such an extent that you live it out rather than forcing it on others. If I want to convince someone of my truth, then forcing them by threat of violence to think like I do is counterproductive. Being willing to suffer for one’s truth demonstrates a strength of conviction that makes something more likely to be true than a truth which depends on causing others to suffer. The dynamics of violence are fairly simple; you make the other person suffer more than they are prepared to so that they back down (or vice versa). It doesn’t win them over, they’re unlikely to agree with you as a result, they’ve just conformed to your behaviour out of a desire to avoid suffering.

Nonviolence is not about defeating your opponent (creating a win-lose scenario) but winning your opponent over (creating a win-win). Of course, that requires an openness to your opponent’s truth as well – because perhaps it’s you that’s wrong, and you’ll never find that out if you’ve killed your opponent.

Nonviolence insists that the means are the ends in seed form – that, as Gandhi put it, “the means are to the ends as a seed is to a tree.” In the same way that if you plant an acorn you get an oak tree, if you want to create a world that is safe for all and in which we handle our differences with forthrightness and grace, then we have to act in ways consistent with that.

Nonviolence requires enormous training, discipline and strength, because it means acting in ways which don’t depend on the actions of our opponent. In this way, we refuse to mirror what we oppose, and begin to create the kind of world we want to see.

**M: Many Christians support the theory of Just War, arguing that in some circumstances violence is necessary to end worse violence. What are your thoughts on Just War? Do you think warfare or violence is ever justified?**

S: Most Christians who support the theory of Just War don’t actually know what the theory is, they merely cite it as justification for waging any war with which they personally agree, or at the very least think there must be circumstances where war is justified, and as a result say they believe in Just War Theory. Just War theory is actually quite specific and strict. There hasn’t been a war that conforms to the theory in living memory, yet it is continually evoked as justification for them.

There are three aspects to the Just War theory – one which describes conditions for beginning a war (Jus ad bellum), another is the rules for how that war should be conducted (Jus in bello), and finally conditions for ending a war (Jus post bellum). For example, Jus Ad Bellum requires that there be Just Cause – that is, it cannot be used simply as punishment, but can only be used to rectify a wrong. That’s a very nuanced position, and certainly one that is rarely even contemplated let alone carried out.

Just War was a theory written at a time when you had armies which marched out to meet one another on a battlefield. Armies were easily distinguishable from civilians, and the weapons mostly involved hand to hand combat. That’s why you get the principle of ‘distinction’ in the Just War theory, which requires acts of war to only be directed towards enemy combatants. Such warmaking is impossible in practice today, given the types of weapons and warfare we employ. Wars are not conducted on battlefields anymore, they’re conducted in cities and towns, farms and villages, with

weapons which are indiscriminate in their nature, which leave unexploded ordinance and pollution for up to thousands of years into the future.

Basically the Just War theory is the best friend of warmakers because it's dragged out to raise questions in people's minds and then abandoned as soon as war begins (or sooner). And by the time war begins, national fervour simply doesn't allow serious questioning of the kind that could possibly stop it.

That's why you get the World Council of Churches at their Ecumenical Peace Convocation last year declaring Just War Theory to be "obsolete" and calling for Just Peace theory to be implemented by the church.

If there were any structures set up to police or even evaluate wars according to the Just War theory (let alone the political will), then it might have some credibility. As it is – completely toothless – it's worse than useless. What would it take to actually see to it that the strictures were applied, and there were sanctions when it was violated? What would it look like, for example, if the Catholic Church applied this theory in practice, and actually declared a war to be unjust? Would Catholic soldiers then have to conscientiously object? If people want to be serious about the Just War theory, that's the kind of work that needs to be done.

Having said all that, I don't think you can get to Just War theory from Jesus. But I'm sure I'll have an opportunity to talk about that later.

**M: Modern history classes at school are focused on major wars in the 19th and 20th centuries. We seem to assume that major movements in history are almost always dominated by violence. Can you tell us about major social change that occurred in recent centuries in which nonviolence was adopted?**

S: As Walter Wink observed, "In 1989, thirteen nations comprising 1,695,000,000 people experienced nonviolent revolutions that succeeded beyond anyone's wildest expectations ... If we add all the countries touched by major nonviolent actions in our century (Korea, the Philippines, South Africa ... the independence movement in India ...), the figure reaches 3,337,400,000, a staggering 65% of humanity! All this in the teeth of the assertion, endlessly repeated, that nonviolence doesn't work in the 'real' world." And this was before the Serbian movement that ousted Milosevic in 2000, the Colour Revolutions across Eastern Europe in the early 2000s, and the Arab Spring last year.

And they're just the mass movements. That's before you get into the millions of individual stories. Gandhi used to say that the reason people still exist on the earth is because everyday millions of people use nonviolence, without knowing it or naming it that way – people forgive, or are gracious, or stand up for themselves or others. If we really operated on an eye for an eye we'd all have killed one another by now.

But we often don't recognise or remember these stories because of the way we're socialised to value violence and domination over love and forgiveness. Our imagination is shaped not just by history books but by the films and television shows we watch, the games we play. Most of them reinforce the myth of redemptive violence – that it is violence which saves us, which makes us secure. Hence the need to tell the stories of nonviolence, which are often less spectacular, but give us the kind of world in which it is worth living.

**M: How do you respond to those who might suggest that nonviolence is too idealistic and that force or violence is at least sometimes necessary?**

S: Actually, the evidence suggests the opposite. It's not nonviolence which is too idealistic, but violence. Over ten years ago, we invaded Afghanistan, bent on inflicting whatever violence would achieve our political aims there; yet it has been almost a total failure despite several strategy changes. It is much the same in Iraq. Our blind faith in violence to achieve stated objectives is total.

The events of 2011 alone should have been reason to shake our faith in violence. While the nonviolent movements of the Arab Spring were largely effective, the West was in its tenth year of the quagmire in Afghanistan and made a total mess of Libya.

Of course, if nonviolence "doesn't work" (in the sense that it doesn't achieve the aims we set out for it to achieve within a given timeframe) it's not the strategy that is blamed, but nonviolence as a method. And usually we give it a much shorter timeframe to achieve the objectives than we would give violent tactics (if we give it a chance at all). On the other hand when violence "doesn't work" we don't tend to blame violence as a method, we blame the strategy employed, and simply seek out a different violent strategy. That's a double standard that should make the kind of blind faith I'm talking about a bit more visible.

The same double standard is applied to loss of life. If people employing nonviolence are killed by the opponent, it is seen as evidence of its failure. But if people are killed in violent action, that is seen as a necessary sacrifice.

A recent study of the last century found that major nonviolent campaigns achieved success 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for violent resistance campaigns, and that the nonviolent campaigns resulted in much less loss of life and vastly more democratic outcomes. So who are the idealists really?

That's not to say that nonviolence always "works". But then neither does violence. As Joan Baez often says, "Nonviolence is a flop. The only bigger flop is violence."

**M: People often cite Hitler as an example of a historical case where violence was necessary to end greater suffering. Is this true; was violence necessary to stop a person like Hitler? Could there have been another way?**

S: Hitler is too convenient a scapegoat I reckon. Now certainly, Hitler had some truly horrific ideas and did some terrible things. But Hitler was just one person. Average height, average weight, normal intelligence (some would say abnormal, but you know what I mean, he wasn't a supergenius). How is it that one man carries the weight for an entire regime, and the evil it unleashed?

Well partly because we like to have a simple scapegoat, because once we begin to unravel the myth of Hitler as the solely responsible evil agent it asks some uncomfortable questions about ourselves. Because let's face it, Hitler alone could not have been a murderous regime, started a war and killed six million Jews. He needed a whole bunch of people to help him. He also needed a whole bunch of people to stand passively by and do nothing to resist him.

But we have to understand the conditions which produced Hitler, which allowed him to be put into the position of Chancellor. And to do that we need to go back to World War 1 and the Treaty of Versailles and the way the Allies used it to crush Germany into the ground. It was the humiliation

and privation the German people were made to suffer that allowed Hitler to rise to power. Most of the West saw that as a great triumph – but in retrospect, it was a massive mistake.

So when we ask “what about Hitler?” we’re really asking, “what about the whole Third Reich?” or “What about all of the Axis countries?” We’re talking about millions of Germans, Italians, Japanese, and others, many of whom supported the regimes by manufacturing food or munitions, or sat passively by while their countries perpetuated terrible evils. Which means when we’re talking about contemporary evil, we have to not just ask, “What about Ahmedinejad?” or “What about Obama?” but “what about me?” That is, what am *I* doing about the contemporary evils around me that I’m currently silent or passive about and thereby allowing to continue? This is the question we don’t really want to ask, because it’s much easier to ask abstract hypotheticals about Hitler.

The irony, of course, is that those who advocate war as a response to Hitler do so on the pretense of saving life, ignoring the fact that war is designed for one thing only; to end life and destroy property. If it’s saving life you’re after, you’re going to want another strategy - one which doesn’t perpetuate the cycle of deadly violence, but interrupts and transforms it.

So what we’re talking about here is not no response to Hitler but a nonviolent one. And that could have taken many forms, including the ones that Gene Sharp outlines in his taxonomy of 198 methods of nonviolent action.

When nonviolent resistance was used against the Nazis, it was often effective, and this without preparation, training or coordination.

Check out the stories of Hans and Sophie Scholl and the White Rose movement, Franz Jägerstätter, André and Magda Trocmé, the countries of Bulgaria, Norway and Denmark, all of whom engaged in nonviolent resistance to Nazism, albeit with mixed results (mostly positive). And no doubt there are many more instances of nonviolent resistance to Nazism which aren’t documented.

But the question I’m much more interested in is what are we doing about contemporary evils? What is the best thing to do right now?

**M: At the other extreme to the Hitler scenario, people often ask how you could be nonviolent if a person came into your home intending to do harm to you or your family (abuse, murder, rape etc.). How could a person possibly act nonviolently in such a situation?**

S: This is a hypothetical scenario that people ask about a lot. Unfortunately it’s a scenario which has so little detail or basis in reality that it functions as a blank canvas onto which people project their worst nightmares, even though their worst nightmares have no likelihood of coming true. When we’re thinking in that zone, we’re reacting totally out of fear rather than reason. So it’s a scenario which I like to walk through with people, to put faces feelings and flesh and onto it, to reduce that fear and think it through a little more rationally.

Firstly, who is this person who has come into your home? Certainly in the overwhelming majority of cases (up around 90%), people are not attacked by random strangers but by people they know. What this demonstrates is that usually there is a history and a reason behind why they’re attacking you – while it’s not justifiable that they do so, at least you a) have a sense of why they’re doing what they’re doing, b) an opportunity to treat your friends, family, etc. in ways that will reduce this possibility and c) have enough relationship with them to reason with them or call on their compassion. This increases the importance of nonviolence in your everyday relationships, in order to

prevent conflicts escalating in this way. Either way, it's not the random, sudden, anonymous threat the scenario envisages.

If it is the far less likely scenario of a random stranger, one possibility is that someone has invaded your home looking to steal things, and you or your family disturb them. In which case, the person is likely on edge, ready for such an eventuality and therefore a confrontation, but with no desire to have one. Giving them an opportunity to leave is far less likely to result in harm to anyone.

Or, let's look at it another way. If your opponent is stronger, larger, and more prepared than you, what could possibly be gained by forcing a violent confrontation? Your best option is not to contest them in the areas they are strongest, but to reduce their reason for attacking you or your family. At the very least, your best option is to be smarter, more creative, more human, not try to outdo them with violence.

So the remaining alternative is a scenario where a totally deranged person who you don't know who for no apparent reason has targeted you AND your family to harm or kill you, and is physically weaker and less prepared than you for a confrontation. This is such a farfetched scenario that I'm mystified as to why people even spend energy thinking about it. But let's explore the options anyway.

Let's assume the person is armed (because if they're unarmed, there's much better chance of you escaping unharmed). In this scenario, the person has a weapon and is ready to use it. Posing a threat to them in any way (such as reaching for a weapon) is not likely to end well for anyone.

So what can you do that's nonviolent? Well, the options are endless (that's the beauty of the creativity that opens up once we start thinking about it!). One friend of mine (Angie O'Gorman) asked an intruder for the time. This led to a conversation which humanised the other person to her, and vice versa (you can read a play of what happened here:

[http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=angie%20o'gorman&source=web&cd=30&ved=0CGgQFjAJOBQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.creducation.org%2Fresources%2FNonviolence\\_Playlets.doc&ei=71wWT\\_vbFuW1iQeVosHjAw&usq=AFQjCNFv0VU-jSMk0HNEDGR6dKh7slcz7Q](http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=angie%20o'gorman&source=web&cd=30&ved=0CGgQFjAJOBQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.creducation.org%2Fresources%2FNonviolence_Playlets.doc&ei=71wWT_vbFuW1iQeVosHjAw&usq=AFQjCNFv0VU-jSMk0HNEDGR6dKh7slcz7Q)).

So I think the question we need to be asking isn't, "Is it ever OK to be violent?" Rather the question is, "Am I going to be equipped with the right tools that will be most likely to keep me safe?" And the majority of people have only one tool in their toolbox, and it's the one that is least likely to keep them safe.

**M: All this talk about nonviolence is good and all, but for Christians the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, seems to portray God as rather violent. Such divine violence has been attacked, even ridiculed, by contemporary atheists who label Christianity as a violent and undesirable religion. How do you deal with the Old Testament accounts of YHWH seemingly acting violently? How do you reconcile these accounts with the Gospels' image of Jesus as peaceful and nonviolent?**

S: This is where broad brushstrokes are not very helpful; you really need to do a proper, detailed exegesis of particular texts. Yes, the OT has been used to justify all sorts of horrific things.

Yet Gandhi insisted (and I agree) that Jesus was the most active practitioner of nonviolence in history – and the only people who don't know it are Christians. If Jesus is the image of God, the embodiment of God, as his followers insist that he is, then we need to look at all claims about God in that light, including biblical claims.

I do think the Bible is more of a conversation – or even an argument – than an encyclopedia. That's what makes it a living word, and is far more exciting and challenging than taking every word literally (as if that were possible or even desirable through our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western lenses). So part of that 'argument' is the question of what God is like, a question which is at least partially settled by the Incarnation.

At the centre of it all stands the cross – what God does with our sin and shame and violence and domination. And it turns out he doesn't destroy us, or punish us, or even hate us – he takes it all on himself, and exposes it for the sham that it is. More than that, he dies forgiving. But that's not even the end! Christ's victory is completed in resurrection – God's triumph over our death-dealing and domination, not by greater violence or greater domination, but by love, life and vulnerability being stronger than the worst we can do. That's pretty good news!

Of course, as people who call themselves Christians we haven't done a very good job of following Christ – more often mirroring the world with a religious veneer. I think with the end of Christendom we stand a better chance of posing the kind of radical alternative to which God is constantly calling us, because we're finally re-learning to separate what is Christ-like from the dominant culture.

**M: You talk about how Christians should follow Christ in living out a radical alternative to the dominant culture. That raises an important question – can a Christian serve in the armed forces?**

S: The question to me is, "Can I be unChristlike and be a Christian?" The answer, of course is yes and no – yes because of course none of us are entirely like Christ. But presumably if we're committed to becoming like Christ we're working by God's grace to change that, so the answer is 'no' if we're going to willfully persist in refusing to be like Christ, to love like Christ. Why would you want to call yourself a Christian if you're going to ignore what Christ was like, what he said and did? This is the guy who defines discipleship by a cross, by the willingness to take suffering upon oneself rather than to defend oneself with violence (a choice vindicated in resurrection). Whose last message to the church before his death was, "Put down your sword." Whose central teaching was the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest teaching on nonviolence in history. Who after defining discipleship as taking up our cross (rather than our sword/gun/Hellfire missile), says, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake or the sake of the Kingdom will gain it." Can you love your enemies while killing them or threatening their life?

The word 'Christian' isn't an abstract identity. It's a discipleship process, a lived out practice, an orientation in the world, based on a very concrete person in Jesus Christ. I ask my brothers and sisters keep me accountable to being Christlike in the same ways when I fall short.

**M: So far you have mentioned and quoted Gandhi, and that raises a worthwhile question. Everyone has heard of people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., 20th Century icons who brought about significant social change and who were influenced by the nonviolent teachings of Jesus Christ. But to most people these figures seem legendary, almost superhuman; what have their legacies got to do with us, in our lives?**

S: Hagiography has a lot to answer for in setting up Gandhi and MLK Jr. as unattainable ideals. You really need to read their stories to learn their struggles and failures. MLK was a notorious philanderer and adulterer who spent much of his life in depression and self-doubt. I mean, the civil rights movement was often a mess of egos, backstabbing and embarrassing failure. Gandhi was often a terrible father and husband – his eldest son ended up dying young and homeless. To some people these failings invalidate their work and witness – but to me it humanises them, makes their

example more compelling. If they were able to achieve everything they achieved despite their brokenness, perhaps I have something to offer too.

We also have to realise that MLK and Gandhi alone – just like Hitler alone – couldn't really achieve much at all. They were made to look good by the people who surrounded them – the ones who did the hard yards out of the public eye, going to gaol, being beaten. Certainly those people no doubt learned from the Gandhis and MLKs and looked up to them but did just as heroic things without the glory.

I guess it comes back to what you practice for, the stories in which you are formed. John Dear taught me to stop reading the newspapers, and just read the stories of nonviolence heroes – people who lived this stuff. Immerse yourself in it. That's the kind of dedication it takes to untrain the myths we're fed through the dominant culture, and learn the alternatives. Gandhi and MLK aren't perfect, but their lives have much to teach us, as do the lives of those who surrounded them and have since lived out of their example.

**M: Changing track a little bit, you mentioned before how your discipleship journey led you from addressing issues like poverty and climate change to advocating for peace. How is violence and warfare connected with other global issues, such as poverty?**

S: Most warfare is perpetuated in order to gain or maintain domination over various national interests, usually resources and geopolitical space, and usually by the rich (who have or control the weapons) over the poor (who are often too preoccupied with survival to provide sufficient resistance to stop it). That's the context of many recent wars (despite the humanitarian rhetoric used to justify them).

Development simply can't happen under the kinds of insecure conditions that result from war. Shops shut because supplies are scarce or inaccessible, people don't or can't access the services they need, and all effort goes into survival instead of building the kind of interactions that will build civil society and stabilise the situation. This means countries in conflict are under a double disadvantage – not only are they starting behind, but also they're going backwards because there's no stability from which to build.

War destroys every condition under which human life flourishes – in particular the trusting relationships necessary to build the kind of stable civil society that characterises healthy communities. Families, friends, communities are torn apart and traumatised for generations. For example, countless generations of farming expertise in Afghanistan are gone because one generation of men with the knowledge and skills have gone to war and never returned.

Add to that instability the clumsiness of what is often highly militarised aid and you've created a recipe for corruption. Corruption breeds cartels and militias, fuelling the internal conflict. The way aid is distributed is often poorly thought out, tied to military objectives, or the result of siloed thinking by people with no idea of local culture or customs, and the flow on effect is more damaging. For example, in Afghanistan at the moment, the more insecure a province is, the more aid money it gets. So there's actually incentivised insecurity, while the places in a position to develop receive nothing. Billions of dollars in aid have been poured into Afghanistan in the last ten years, but very little of it has reached the people – much of it has been wasted on corrupt warlords or bribes and payouts, even to the Taliban, who we're supposed to be fighting. There are good organisations there doing wonderful work, which are well worth supporting – mostly organisations that are Afghan-led or have been there a long time and thus know the culture. But around conflicts like this the culture

of corruption is allowed to breed, and people become dependant on handouts. There are some in Afghanistan now calling not just for an end to the war, but an end to aid as well.

I'm not saying don't give aid, but I am saying that when it's combined with military objectives, lacks accountability and is not locally driven, it complicates the situation in a myriad of ways.

On a broader level, the sheer amount of money and other resources (and in particular I include the amazing creativity and imagination of human beings) that is poured into violence is both unjust and counterproductive. The United States alone spends just shy of a staggering \$1 trillion per year on the military – 43% of the world's military spending, and six times the budget of its nearest rival. Even in Australia we spend around \$70m a day. Now bear in mind this money goes mostly towards machines whose sole purpose is to destroy life and property. And this in a world where billions of people can't afford the basic necessities – food, shelter, sanitation, medicine – and who die in enormous numbers as a result. Just a tiny, insignificant fraction would meet all of the Millennium Development Goals – all of them – and another small fraction would solve world poverty. So this money represents a double theft – both from the poor and from the lives of those on whom we unleash these weapons.

What do you say to an Afghan mother who can't afford to feed her children, when the missiles you destroy her village with cost \$58,000 each?

Think about the creativity and innovation required to make a UAV, or unmanned aerial vehicle, or any other modern weapon. What if that kind of creativity was directed towards solving climate change – which is the greatest threat to humankind – or even something like poverty? As Gandhi said, "We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamed-of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence." Let's hope so.

**M: Simon, in 2011 you travelled to Afghanistan to see for yourself how the war there is playing out. In your experience what do the poor and marginalised have to say about warfare and violence in countries such as Afghanistan where wars are currently occurring?**

S: The day I left for Afghanistan the Red Cross, a fairly conservative organisation, released a report declaring human life in Afghanistan to be 'untenable'. Afghanistan is the second poorest country in the world; it is the most food insecure country, with two thirds of the population unable to feed themselves year round. It is (according to Save the Children) the worst country in which to be born, to be a mother, and to be a child. While I was there I met one of the World Health Organisation workers who was responsible for sanitation – he said (in Kabul, the most developed place in the country) there was nothing separating the sewerage from the water supply.

What is more, a survey in December 2010 demonstrated that 93% of Afghans were not aware of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. One girl I talked to asked why the richest, most powerful military in the world were taking more than ten years to defeat a ragtag bunch of militants armed with fertilizer and some 30 year old AK-47s.

Afghans have a saying, "Blood cannot wash away blood." That's wisdom borne of thousands of years of interethnic rivalries, power grabs, conflict and bloodshed.

It's only a very small percentage of people who gain from war, and that's mostly those already in positions of power and privilege. In the context of Afghanistan, it's the warlords, the weapons manufacturers, the politicians and the generals. The rest are the victims – the ones terrorised as expelled Afghan Parliamentarian Malalai Joya puts it "between two enemies – one from the sky and

one from the ground". I'm talking about soldiers as well as civilians – US soldiers are committing suicide at the rate of 18 a day, and that's before we get into deaths and injuries from combat.

My friends in Afghanistan are delighted by the Occupy movement because it tallies with their experience – a recognition that the 1% maintain their wealth and power by subjugating the 99%. That's what war is – it's the 1% getting the 99% to suffer and die for the profit of the 1%. The 1% don't send their children off to fight and die, let alone go themselves. They get the poor to do that for them.

There is a lot of fear around a return of the Taliban (who the U.S. are currently negotiating a settlement with), but primarily what I'm hearing, particularly from Afghans outside of Kabul, is that there is no security for them anyway – in fact, the international presence makes them less secure because it is fuelling the insurgency and causing further instability and danger.

The concept of waging a war for security would be laughable if it weren't so serious. What is more insecure than war? One Afghan friend describes it as being like a house fire – you can't go about your ordinary business while it's happening, you have to put all your energy into putting it out. And even once it's out, you then need to spend your time rebuilding.

**M: Thanks so much for your time Simon. I'm sure your experience and reflections about peace and violence will provide readers with a helpful and challenging perspective. In wrapping up, what message do you have for Christians who seek to faithfully follow Jesus along the journey of nonviolence?**

S: Keep it up! Really, it's the most exciting life, much better than anything offered by our culture. It's certainly not easy, unlearning the dominant culture's priorities and values, going against the grain and sometimes embracing difficulty and pain. When Jesus says he's come to bring "life to the full" I don't think he meant avoiding all difficulty, but it's more than worth it.

I would also want to say that any commitment to nonviolence must emerge out of response to the love of God revealed in Jesus. Otherwise nonviolence either becomes a deadening legalism, a graceless drivenness, or a moral superiority, all of which are motivated more by how we look in the eyes of others than of God, and none of which are sustainable, life-giving or transformative.

And where possible, don't do it alone! Have a community (it could be just one other person) with whom you can journey and act and be of mutual support and assistance. Don't wait until you're perfect or have it all worked out before acting – experiment, be gracious and forgiving with yourself (as God is) and take time to reflect and evaluate afterwards. And have fun!