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## Exploring the teachings of Jesus on peace and war in the classroom: Implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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### Abstract

Effective social studies teachers are willing to discuss controversial issues such as war and peace. This article examines how educators can specifically examine these issues in the context of Christianity. This paper focuses on how this can be taught in light of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Though studying various religions stance on war and peace may be helpful in the classroom, the focus Christianity in the U.S. or western context is particularly important both due to it being the largest religion and the most influential in policy decisions. Through understanding the actual teachings of Jesus on war and peace, teachers can help critique and problematize much of the militarism and nationalism in the larger society.

**Keywords:** War and peace, Christianity, Israel-Palestine, peace education

### Introduction

The social studies classroom often covers topics of historical and modern warfare. Oftentimes this can be done in a very factual and objective way, but there are also instances where teachers could explore the ethics and justifications behind war and conflict. A prime example of this would be a teacher examining the moral and ethical justifications of the Vietnam War or World War One. A similar analysis could be done with more recent wars including the US War on Terror, which encapsulated the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. One aspect that is often missing from the ethical analysis of war and conflict is the religious perspective on these issues. Especially in the United States classroom, there may be a hesitancy to deeply explore the relationship between religious beliefs, war, and conflict. Part of this is the over-hesitancy of teachers to teach about religion in general. This may also be due to the reticence to go against the nation or military. However, the contention of this article is that a thorough exploration of the relationship between religion, war, and peace is necessary. This is not just how modern religions relate to these themes but also how the original religious text speaks to these issues.

### Reasons for Studying Christianity and Peace

For this article, there is a specific focus on the Christian faith. There could be a similar exploration in other religions, but particularly in the US context, this focus on Christianity may be the most important for a number of reasons. First and foremost, Christianity is the largest religion in the United States and has the greatest impact on both domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, it is important for students to explore what the teachings of Christianity are on war and peace, whether they adhere to Christian beliefs or not, given the large impact of Christianity on society. For this same reason, the author (2020) wrote a related article on the teachings of immigration in the context of the Christian faith.

This focus also seems especially urgent given the more religious nature of the United States compared to the majority of other liberal Western democracies, particularly Europe (Fahmy 2018) <sup>[6]</sup>. However, there also seems to be a greater sense of militarism in the United States than in many other liberal democracies even though this seems to contradict some core Christian beliefs on war and peace. Beyond this, the Christian population, particularly more conservative evangelicals, tend to be the most militaristic in their views. For example, in the last major war that was fought by the U.S. in Iraq, those who identified as religious, particularly evangelicals, had higher support for the war (Newport, 2003) <sup>[14]</sup>.

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This can be seen in many different areas but is particularly relevant when it comes to the issues of war and conflict in Israel. At the time of this writing in early 2024, The United States is one of the few international nations that is actively supporting Israel and it's bombing of Gaza. While other nations are calling for a ceasefire and condemning the attacks, the US is seeking to give even more military aid. This support from the US government may not just be about geopolitical alignments but also about the religious motivations that caused many in the US particularly conservative evangelicals to support Israel.

This trend is also apparent in comments from people like 2024 Presidential candidate Nikki Haley who stated that Israel is blessed by God, so we should stand with them (Brunner, 2023) <sup>[1]</sup>. The U.S. Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, was even more direct and used religion as a reason to support the war in Israel (Farley, 2023) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Given the clear relationship between religious beliefs and U.S. foreign policy, it is deeply important for students to explore the teachings of Christianity on war and peace. This could be especially useful for many students who would adhere to Christian beliefs. Even though they may hold to these beliefs, they may not have actually deeply considered the implications of Christianity on war and peace. There are a number of reasons for this. For one, even though many people in the United States claim to be fervent Christians, the actual understanding of the teachings and beliefs of the faith are often minimal (What Americans Know About Religion, 2019) <sup>[15]</sup>. This is of course true at any age, but it is particularly true for students at the middle and high school level.

I will never forget when I was teaching global world history in deeply Christian South Carolina, and my students were shocked when we were going over the section on Christianity, and I mentioned the verse about turning the other cheek. One of the students said but the Bible says an eye for an eye. I am sure he was not alone in not understanding that there was a new ethic that Jesus had created. The teachings of Jesus on war and peace have also been obscured by a deep justification and even reverence for militarism in American Society. Part of this may be due to the national myths we have around the American Revolution which justifies violence (Author, 2019). Part of this also may be due to having the largest military in the world and being such a strong part of the American Society. Those who would not adhere to Christian beliefs would also gain something from this study as the impact of these beliefs also have had historical implications for those outside of the Christian faith, for example how intently Gandhi drew upon the teachings of Jesus in his movement of non-violence. This study would also help students from all or no religious background better understand the current motivations and perhaps distortions of religion for certain geopolitical goals.

### **The Teachings of Jesus on War and Peace**

These issues have been arranged so that they can be taught together over several days or class periods. However, the majority of these sections could be taught separately and discussed by the teacher in one class period. For those in a religious setting, they could turn this into a weekly study where each individual passage or topic is examined.

#### **Day 1: Historical Background**

In order to adequately understand the teachings of Jesus on

war and peace, students must become better accustomed to the geopolitical situation in Israel in the 1st century. The teachings of Jesus were not just given in a vacuum nor are they just about uncomplicated individual morality. It may be easy in the 21st Century to distill Jesus's teachings on loving your enemies to being nice to the rude neighbor down the street, but in the First Century, these types of teachings would have had a much greater implication.

The Roman world was extremely cruel. This was not just a form of colonialism like the British had towards the American colonists or even like the British had against the Indian population. This was much more brutal and complete with no concern at all for human rights. There were, of course, many people who resisted this, including the zealots. A good resource that teachers could use on this point of describing who the zealots were can be found in the work of Denova (2022) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Some possible questions that teachers could use in regard to this overall theme could be.

1. If a foreign country controlled your land, at what point do you think violence would be justified?
2. Are there examples of zealot groups across the world today? How is religion often used in these movements?
3. What are some other examples of brutal colonialism throughout history, how did the colonized or oppressed people respond? What were the results?

It is also relevant for students to understand that this was not just any form of political oppression. This was also done to a nation that saw themselves as chosen by God and being oppressed by what they saw as a pagan nation. This made the sense of oppression even worse. A tragic example of this was when one of the emperors sacrificed a pig on their altar (Weitzman, 2004) <sup>[21]</sup>. There was obviously deep outrage at such cruelty and mockery. There are many examples that teachers could use for how people react when they feel like their faith is being mocked or ridiculed. One of the most prominent examples in modern history was when an artist in France tried to draw paintings that were seen as being against the Prophet Mohammed. There were protests around the world; some of which even turned violent (Chrisafis, 2011) <sup>[2]</sup>. Some discussion questions related to this theme could include.

1. How do you respond when you, your family, or your community are mocked?
2. What are some historical examples of when nations or groups fight over pride and their perceived loss of dignity?
3. How does violence in the face of mockery or oppression usually affect the religious group itself?

### **Helpful Resources**

Faith Magazine- "Who were the Zealots"?

El Pais-Feed them to the lions! How Ancient Rome demonstrated its brutality and power

#### **Day 2: Jesus' Relationship to the Romans**

Cruel Roman occupation was the situation that Jesus was surrounded with in the 1st century. There were many, of course, who wanted him to side with the zealots and go against those they saw as cooperating with or using the Romans for their own political goals and gain. Jesus instead took a separate path where he neither praised the Roman occupation nor blessed it, but neither did he choose

violence. There are several passages that can be used to look at how Jesus took this stance of non-allegiance to the Roman Empire. One of the stories was when Jesus healed a man and sent the demons (which called themselves Legion with obvious ties to the Roman military) into the pigs (Matthew 8: 28-34). This would have been an area that was controlled by the Roman Empire, symbolizing a rejection of Roman rule. Also, the very fact that Jesus was called the Son of God would have been seen as very anti-imperialist at that time as Caesar was seen as the son of God (Lampe, 2017)<sup>[11]</sup>. Another example of this was the nuance that Jesus had when he was asked if the Jewish people should pay taxes to Caesar. He does not call for open rebellion against paying taxes, but he does make it clear to give to God what is gods and to Caesars what is Caesars (Mark 12:17), clearly rejecting how Caesar saw himself. Jesus also referred to the local ruler who was being propped up by Rome as a fox (Luke 13:32), which was not something that would have been done for those who were seeking to keep their loyalty to Rome.

While there was certainly resistance from Jesus to the idea that the Romans had the right to act, however, they wanted to with the Jewish people, Jesus refused to let his followers choose the way of violence. There are numerous passages that make this point very clear. The most famous passage comes from the Sermon on the Mount. One passage, which might be especially interesting to students was when Jesus told his followers that if a soldier asked them to carry their equipment for one mile (or whatever the equivalent would have been in that day and time) they should carry it for two (Matthew 5:41). Some questions that teachers could ask regarding this are.

1. How do you think that the Jewish audience would have responded to these ideas from Jesus, especially the ones that essentially told them not to resist and even help the Roman soldiers who were coming to oppress them?
2. What would be a modern equivalent of going the extra mile with the soldiers?
3. How is it possible to take the path of neither supporting nor acting in open rebellion against unjust authorities? What might be some other examples of this in history?

### Helpful Resources

Kurt Willems-The Roman Empire during the Time of Jesus  
The Collector-Rome and Jerusalem: The Historical Context of Jesus Christ.

### Day 3: Jesus' Broad Teachings on War and Peace

Teachers could spend a significant amount time looking specifically at Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, starting with the Beatitudes where he tells his followers that the meek and peacemakers would be blessed, not the warriors, zealots, or freedom fighters. Follow-up questions could be used after reading these beatitudes including.

1. Why does the meek inheriting the earth seem counter-intuitive? How do you think the people of his day would have responded?
2. What would have been the significance of being called the children of God? What does this show about the priority of Jesus around the idea of peacemaking?
3. What do you think the view towards peacemaking in today's modern society?

Jesus goes on to be even more explicit in how his followers should act in light of the violence towards others. In Matthew 5 he states that when someone slaps them on one cheek, they should turn the other. He also tells them to pray for their enemies and do good to those who hate them. Again, though these enemies could have been the cousins who had robbed them of their inheritance or the friends who had refused to repay a loan, but it also goes beyond just the personal slights to the enemies who oppressed and even killed them. The same goes for the teaching about turning the other cheek. This is not just an argument between neighbors that suddenly leads to a shameful slap. It is also figurative with the Romans who were slapping and abusing the Jewish people every day. Some questions that teachers could use as a follow-up to this include.

1. What is the natural reaction when an individual (or a nation-state) commits violence against you?
2. During the Civil Rights Movement groups like SNCC intentionally practiced not responding to violence done against them. Why would this type of "practice" be necessary?
3. What is the relevance of Jesus' teaching when a nation is attacked today? How should they respond?

### Helpful Resources

Brian Zahnd-The Sermon on the Mount and Caesar's Sword  
Wood Green Mennonite Church-The Sermon on the Mount: An Anabaptist Understanding

### Day 4: Jesus' Final Week: The Donkey and Weeping Over Jerusalem

Jesus' final week is an important source of teaching on the issues of war and peace. One passage that might be sometimes overlooked is when Jesus comes into Jerusalem riding on a colt or donkey (Matthew, 21). Though this was done in order to fulfill a prophecy, it was also in strong contrast to the war horses that most kings or rulers would enter in on (Meier, 2019)<sup>[13]</sup>. Though the palm branches were seen as a sign against the Roman Empire (Farmer, 1952)<sup>[8]</sup>, Jesus was not going to take the path of war.

Another point that the students could examine is how Jesus saw war and violence is the scene where he is weeping over the city of Jerusalem because they did not know what would lead to peace (Luke 19:41-44) and weeping because their city would soon be destroyed. The teacher could have the students read this without giving the background context and ask them to interpret what Jesus meant by this passage.

1. What were the Jewish people doing that was not leading to peace?
2. What did he mean by it being destroyed?

The teachers could then guide the students through the events of AD 70 with the destruction of the temple, the subsequent expulsion of the Jewish people to other parts of the Roman Empire, and the essential extinction of the State of Israel for the next 2000 years. Some resources on these themes are available from Elazar (1991)<sup>[4]</sup> and Lohnes (2018)<sup>[12]</sup>. Some overarching questions could include.

1. How did the Jewish people rejecting the way of peace lead to the destruction of their nation?
2. Are there times that what we think will keep us secure (weapons, war, etc.) oftentimes put us in more danger?

### Helpful Resources

Chris McNeal-The War Horse of Pilate; the Peace Donkey of Jesus Christ Jerusalem Peace Institute-Weeping for Jerusalem

### Day 5: Jesus' Final Week: Peter, Judas, and Barabbas

The stories of three people who played a key role in Jesus' final week, Peter, Judas, and Barabbas, could also be analyzed in relation to the ideas of war and peace. Peter's story perhaps is the most straightforward, where less background knowledge is needed. The students can examine the story of when Jesus was arrested and Peter drew his sword to fight them off, which led to one of the soldier's ears being cut off (Matthew 26:47-52). Jesus rebuked Peter and told him that those who live by the sword would die by it. Some questions the teacher could ask include.

1. Why do you think this violence was Peter's response even after Jesus' teachings about war and peace?
2. How do you think Peter felt to be rebuked by Jesus after he was seeking to "save him"?
3. What are some examples of this idea of living and dying by the sword in the modern world?

The other central figure in this story of course is Judas. Teachers could explore a little bit about Judas. Though many may believe Judas' central motivation for turning on Jesus was greed, some scholars point to the fact that Judas likely had ties to the Zealots and was either tired of Jesus' non-violence stance or seeking to cause a rebellion or uprising in the light of Jesus' arrest. When he realized that this plan did not lead to an overthrowing of the Romans but rather to Jesus' execution, he hung himself. (Russell, 2020). Some follow-up questions that teachers could ask on this point include.

1. Why would Judas have been impatient or even opposed to Jesus' tactics?
2. How do the events of AD 70 show how even an uprising would have been futile?
3. Why do you think Judas was both drawn to Jesus and also repelled by him?

A third figure that could be analyzed was Barabbas, who was the person chosen to be spared by Pontius Pilate. Sometimes in history, Barabbas is portrayed as just a criminal or thief, but Barabbas was also a zealot, so much so that it was going to lead to his brutal death. The crowd decided that they wanted him to be free. This is perhaps not only because many had turned against Jesus, but also because Barabbas was a type of hero to them—a freedom fighter. In the end, Barabbas is freed, and Jesus is crucified. For the students, the teacher could discuss the significance of the contrast between Barabbas and Jesus.

1. What were the contrasts between Jesus' and Barabbas' missions and their views on war and peace for the Jewish people against the Romans?
2. How do they think Jesus Christ and Barabbas would be viewed in the modern context in the face of such a brutal empire? Who would be the more heroic figure?

### Helpful Resources

Christianity Today-The Story of Barabbas is no Mere Prisoner Swap  
Experimental Theology-Put Away the Sword: Tragedy and Eschatology

### Additional Optional Lesson 1: Teachings on the End Times and Israel

Another aspect that teachers could explore if they have enough time is the teaching about the end times. Though many Christian scholars and historians point correctly to the fact that Revelation was largely a critique of the Roman Empire using symbolic and apocalyptic language (Thompson, 1990) <sup>[20]</sup>, there are Christians who have taken the book in a much more literal fashion and portrayed it as a foretelling of future event that would take place in the modern world. The broad implication of this way of viewing the world is that peace is not only difficult, but also impossible. Therefore, the works of peace organizations and international governance through groups like the United Nations should be looked upon with suspicion at best. At worst, they should be outwardly rejected as they signal the movement that will give rise to the Antichrist. This type of narrative can be found throughout much of evangelical teaching in the United States and is especially seen in the books and films of the famous Left Behind series.

This will obviously be a sensitive topic for teachers in the public-school setting, and they may not feel prepared to critique and push back on the theology that has become so popularized in the United States' setting. It will also take some more research and planning for most teachers. However, some possible broad questions that could be asked of students include:

1. What are the implications of seeing a hopeful future for the world vs a more destructive future?
2. How have you ever learned about the book of Revelation? If so, have you ever heard about it in the historical context of the Roman Empire? If not, why do you think that is the case?

One of the best descriptions of the Book of Revelation that I have heard is that of a political cartoon. Pastor Brian Zahnd compares it to how a generation 2000 years from now might interpret a political cartoon from the United States of a donkey and an elephant fighting over a budget proposal. Though these symbols would be very clear to modern audiences in the United States, without the historical understanding of these symbols they would make little sense to a future audience and could be interpreted in many erroneous ways. From this point, the teacher could ask broader questions about religion including:

1. What are some of the problems for religious faiths to only look at their holy texts and not understand the historical context of the text? What kind of misunderstandings can this lead to?
2. Are there other examples in historical texts where misunderstanding the context and history is quite easy? How would this apply to documents like the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution?
3. Do you think most people believe peace is actually possible? Did Jesus?

**Teachings on Israel:** In this way of viewing the Bible, there is a much more violent view of the world. Also in this view, Israel plays a central role. Because of this, the church is seen as needing to support Israel regardless of what actions it takes, because it is the nation blessed by God. This belief also comes from verses in the Hebrew scriptures about God blessing the nations that bless Israel (Schnabel, 2002) <sup>[18]</sup>, and the ancient nation of Israel is automatically associated



with the modern one.

This has led many Christians to take much more militant stances than other groups around these topics and themes. This is at the center of much of the conflict currently in the Middle East with many Christians, especially American evangelicals saying that Israel has the right to do what they want because of their status as God's chosen people (Gabbatt, 2023) <sup>[9]</sup>. Though this conversation should be conducted in a sensitive manner and be prefaced with the need to reject any type of anti-Semitism, it is important for teachers to also explore the ways Jesus himself viewed Israeli nationalism.

Jesus' teachings and life seem to deeply defy the teachings of many modern Christians, particularly in the United States, to the nation of Israel. There are many examples that one could point to, but one of the most intriguing is the words of the cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist, who when people were essentially claiming that they had special privileges because they were Jewish, told them that God could turn the stones into sons of Abraham, and that they did not have special privileges before God (Matthew 3:9).

The first time Jesus was almost killed was described in Luke 4 when he seemingly purposefully sought to provoke some of the religious leaders by undermining their sense of superiority because they were Jewish. He gave examples from the Old Testament about how many of the foreigners had more faith than the Jewish people. He provided the examples of Rahab and the widow who helped Elijah. This enraged the religious leaders so much that they almost threw Jesus off a cliff. Another example of Jesus challenging some of the Jewish sense of superiority was when the Roman Centurion's servant was healed, and Jesus said that he had had more faith than he had seen in all of Israel (Matthew 8: 5-13).

These teachings could be distorted to cause Christians to become anti-Semitic, and unfortunately, there's a deep history of this that must be acknowledged in Christian history, including by reformers such as Martin Luther. Nevertheless, oftentimes the pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, and the extreme that has taken place now has put the Jewish nation-state as aligned with Christian values and vision even if they act in ways opposed to Jesus. This is a somewhat ironic stance since Jesus spent much of his time undermining this nationalism by the Jewish leaders of his day. Some broader questions that teachers could use as a source of discussion include.

1. Why do you think Jesus was often so critical of people from his own nation?
2. Are there examples in the present where religious or political leaders have stood against the ideas of their nation? How were they treated?
3. How do you think Jesus' view on the ancient nation of Israel relates to the realities of the modern state of Israel?

### Helpful Resources

Sojourners-Evangelical Support for Israel is Supported by Apocalyptic Hopes.

The Dispatch-Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem.

### Additional Option Lesson 2: Christian Militarism and the American Revolution

This could be covered in more depth later in the course, but these discussions could lead to the broader discussion of

where Christian militarism comes from. It could be interesting at this point, especially in the US context, to ask why is that Christians, especially those who would claim to hold to the more literal interpretations of the Bible, have more militaristic views when it seems to go so clearly against the actual message of Jesus. A 2003 Gallup Poll that teachers could analyze explains this phenomenon with more support for militarism among Christian groups in the context of the Iraq War (Newport, 2003) <sup>[14]</sup>. Some questions that could follow this analysis include.

1. What leads to Christians, especially Protestant and Evangelical Christians, having more militaristic and violent views than non-Christians?
2. What do you think are some factors that have led to this shift as compared to the early church?

**American Revolution.** One issue that could be explored in this lesson is how the American Revolution has often been sanctified and even glorified by many American Christians. The author (2022) has written some on this topic and why it is important to problematize the narratives of the American Revolution. Oftentimes there are narratives used about how the United States was founded as a Christian nation, based on Biblical values. This could be an important time for teachers to explore this topic in more depth, and perhaps discuss with students about the ways the American Revolution actually aligned with or negated the message of Jesus. Some broad questions to start the conversation include.

1. What were the similarities and differences between the teachings of Jesus and the rationale for the American Revolution?
2. Why did groups like the Quakers who focused more intently on the teachings of Jesus stand against the war? How were they treated by other Christians as a result?
3. How did the British oppression of the colonists compare to that of the Romans to the Jewish audience?

This last question is crucial to highlight as the oppression of the Romans was obviously much greater than the reclamations of taxation without representation, being unable to move westwards to obtain native land, and being forced to buy British tea. Examining the American Revolution in light of the teachings of Jesus may be controversial, but it could help to explain a lot of the justification of militarism and violence by Christians particularly in the US context.

### Helpful Resources

Fidei et Veritatis-Radicals in the Revolution: The Persecution of Christians During the Revolutionary War  
Time-The Roots of Christian Nationalism Go Back Further Than You Think.

### Additional Optional Lesson 3: Jesus' Teachings Lived Out

Another follow-up area that teachers could examine with their students is how these teachings of Jesus have been lived out in the modern world. The most famous examples of course are Gandhi and Martin Luther King who drew their ideas of nonviolent civil disobedience from Jesus. Another less well-known figure was the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, who in the midst of a brutal military government told the soldiers to put down their

weapons and that they should follow Christ over the government. Just like King and Gandhi, this also led to his assassination in the middle of giving mass.

Unfortunately, these perspectives have also often been dismissed by those on both the political right and political left as unrealistic. However, it's important for students to understand how much power these movements had in liberating India from the reign of Great Britain and lead to more civil rights in the American South. Some questions that students could discuss.

1. Why have King and Gandhi's examples often been dismissed by many in modern society?
2. How do King and Gandhi show how Jesus' example is not just idealistic but can work in society? Why did non-violence work toward their advantage?
3. Why do you think many leaders who chose this type of approach (King, Gandhi, Romero) were ultimately killed?

### Helpful Resources

Gandhi Research Foundation-Mahatma Gandhi and the Sermon on the Mount.

Kellogg Institute-Archbishop Oscar Romero.

### Considerations for the Study

This kind of study was originally designed to be used in a secular high school setting, but it could be used in a Christian setting like a Bible study or youth group. In both contexts, it is important to make these issues and discussions relevant for all students, whether the students believe in Christianity themselves or they see it merely as another religion.

It is essential for all students to understand what the actual teachings of Christianity are on these topics related to war and peace and how they relate to the realities in the 21st Century. These are topics that are going to be naturally controversial, especially in the context of the Middle East or wars that the US might be involved with. It also might conflict with some of the notions that students have about war and violence, but it is important to at least give the students a chance to truly wrestle with these ideas, as they are often not given this chance in modern American society. The fact that the message of Jesus, which was clearly on the side of nonviolence and against war, is being so distorted as to be used as a rallying cry for war is hard to comprehend. As was once said, a lot of people have enough religion to hate, but not actually enough to love (Swift, 1755) <sup>[19]</sup>. Is important for both Christian and non-Christian students to understand the message of Jesus in regard to these topics and how they relate to our modern world.

### Conclusion

The study of war and peace from a Christian perspective, particularly focusing on the teachings of Jesus, holds significant relevance in today's society, especially in the United States. Understanding the ethical implications of conflicts, both historical and contemporary, through the lens of Christian teachings provides invaluable insights into the complex intersections of religion, politics, and morality. By delving into the religious roots of militarism and exploring alternative narratives of nonviolence exemplified by figures like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero, students gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of peacebuilding in a world marked by strife.

This study not only challenges prevailing notions of Christian militarism but also fosters critical thinking and empathy, equipping students with the tools to engage constructively with global conflicts and pursue paths of reconciliation and justice.

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