

PEACE IS POSSIBLE  
The Politics of the Sermon on the Mount  
By Franz Alt, Schocken Books, 1985

Franz Alt is (or was?) a German political journalist. He says he didn't want to write a theological book, but I think he did. At the same time he is practical and down to earth. He writes before the reunification of Germany and his main concern is the nuclear arms race. (Note – the book was published in 1985 which was after the SALT I and II agreements between the U.S. and the USSR, but before START I and II.) Until he had a “Damascus experience” in 1981, he says “I believed NATO had to keep up the arms race. Today I consider it lethal” (and insane).

Is peace possible? What does the Sermon on the Mount say? Is the Sermon political? Was Martin Luther right *when he distinguished between personal and political ethics, between “the Christian person and the secular person? A ruler can be a Christian, but he does not have to rule as a Christian, and by virtue of ruling, he is a ruler, not a Christian. The person is Christian; but his office or rulership does not concern Christianity.” This is the double standard that most Christians still observe in politics. In theory, of course, one has to accept the Sermon on the Mount as an integral New Testament text. In practice, people look for excuses and ease their bad consciences by saying, ‘One can’t govern with the Sermon on the Mount.’* p. 19-20. Alt disagrees and explains why in this book.

On abuse of the Sermon on the Mount: *In 1975, a “Catholic catechism” appeared in Switzerland. It says, “Are the instructions in the Sermon on the Mount to be taken literally? The instructions in the Sermon on the Mount are not to be taken literally, because that would create unendurable conditions in both private and public life.” Here in a Catholic catechism Jesus is declared a fool -- in the name of Christianity.*

The worst schism in Christendom was not the Reformation but the separation of religion and politics. p. 3. (One might question this today with what is going on in the Middle East in the name of Islam. And I'm sure Alt does favor the separation of church and state which is a different matter.) *The Sermon on the Mount offers a chance to change the world. But the world can be changed only if we change our hearts and our ways. p. 21 Fear has always been a condition of war. An intelligent policy would aim at lessening the opponent's fears. “Love thy enemy” is another term for intelligent politics. Why does a rational policy of peace and disarmament still not have a prayer? Most people put up with this madness because they are uninformed. “Today's sin is to be uninformed” according to Margaret Mead. Both East and West have a potential for annihilation that is one million times as strong as what destroyed Hiroshima. p. 30-31. “I saw that Hiroshima disappeared,” said a history professor from Hiroshima on the day of the explosion. The professor's experience on August 6, 1945, can be mankind's experience tomorrow. Except that after the global holocaust, no life would be left on earth, just deadly silence everywhere, complete nothingness. Have we lived with nuclear weapons so long that we seldom give them a thought? We live as if we knew*

*nothing. But can a society be considered mentally sound if it closes its eyes to the possibility of its own annihilation? p. 53*

After discussing “The Old Politics”, Part III of the book is about “The New Politics.” Alt begins with values. *The West needs to be weaned away from materialism. The atomic bomb is the zenith of our one-sided materialism. The issue today is not liberation from powerlessness, but liberation from military and economic superiority. The world will hardly become more human with today’s destructive, macho, revolutionary values; it can become more human with the life-preserving, female, evolutionary virtues. . . . My impression is that men have a harder time dealing with the Sermon on the Mount than women do. Women know more about love. p. 75*

Step one is Stop the Arms Buildup. *Someone has to start to stop; otherwise, the armaments madness will never stop. Thus, I am not suggesting a one-sided disarmament. My first goal is a one-sided nuclear freeze. p. 92* (It is my understanding that periodic nuclear freezes have occurred since the book was written, and if I’m not mistaken talks leading to further reductions were initiated by Pres. Obama and negotiations were underway when the revolution in Ukraine halted them.)

Step two is No Arms Exports. *The U. S. once armed Vietnam and Iran to the teeth. Today both nations are its enemies. p. 95* (Now weapons in Iraq too.) *There is no guarantee that the Soviets (or our enemies whoever they may be) will stop their arms buildup if we stop ours. . . . There is no love and no hope without risks, and there is also no peace without risks. . . . The first step toward disarming is a step toward life and away from death. The path of the Sermon on the Mount is the road to life. p. 97*

Interesting to note that the E. German Evangelical Church moved closer to the pacifist positions of the Sermon on the Mount than the W. German Evangelical Church did. p. 99

*It is a historical truth that war has always been a means of politics. The new truth is that war can never again be a means of politics. In the old politics, there may have been “just wars.” In the new politics, there are neither just nor unjust wars, but only annihilation unless so-called national sovereignty is turned into a relative value. P. 112-113* *The Sermon on the Mount is the Magna Carta of a total and integral peace for all peoples in all times. . . . In 1965, Pope Paul VI told a plenary session of the U.N., “If you wish to be brothers, then put down your arms. One cannot love with assault weapons in ones’ hands!” p. 104* Indeed. How apt for our world today. And loving enemies is not as difficult for me now after learning yesterday in Sunday School that “you don’t need to LIKE someone to LOVE them.”

*The Sermon on the Mount is a call: Decide against the law of violence and retaliation and in favor of the law of love and forgiveness. . . . If we all work together toward healing and saving the world, then we will understand and experience the same thing: Peace is possible. p. 117*

This book although with a narrower focus has much in common with *War No More* by David Swanson. Both authors arrive at similar conclusions from different starting points.  
Ray Kauffman, August 25, 2014