

Opinion

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The Pope's message of peace

by Chibli Mallat

How many tank divisions does the Pope have?" It would be difficult to forget the most famous quote by Joseph Djougachvili Stalin, allegedly said to a western head of state who, towards the end of the second World War, mentioned the Vatican as a factor that Stalin should take into account.

Fifty years later, and a tank-less Vatican has won against the Stalin legacy.

The United States, of course, was the backbone of the resistance to Soviet expansionism, but what the Vatican stood for, and still stands for, is key to understanding the collapse, without a single shot being fired, of the most powerful dictatorship in the twentieth century.

For years the Vatican slowly built up, without the shedding of a single "enemy life", the patient network of ideas and men – and sometimes women – that brought the walls down, first in Gdansk and then all the way to Moscow.

If indeed the history of international relations in the 20th century is dominated by the Cold War, then the question, which to my knowledge has not yet been properly posed let alone answered, should be stated as follows: How, despite its lack of tank divisions, could the Vatican have won against the most armoured power on earth?

There is, of course, no ready-made answer. Important people like Madeleine Albright, American secretary of state, in what I believe is her only book as an academic, looked into the role of the press behind the Iron Curtain, and examined, as good historians do, the details of the mechanisms of resistance through the *samizdat* which used words to stand up to dictatorship.

A thorough Lebanese political scientist, Dr George Irani, has just published an updated translation of *The Papacy and the Middle East*, an excellent book examining the role of the Vatican in three key issues for the Near East: the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jerusalem, and the Lebanese war.*

The book deserves more than the present passing reference, but its message, like that put forward by Albright, encourages a belief in the victory of ideas over brute force.

What are the mechanisms which allow an Idea, or what Irani calls the "force of symbol", to succeed over the force of tanks?

Beyond institutionalised – the Catholic Church, the Holy See – or semi-institutionalised – oppositional underground press – instruments, as analysed in books like Madeleine Albright's and George Irani's, there is the Hegelian Idea.

What Hegel saw in 1804 in the shape of Napoleon in Jena, one can perhaps see in the frail figure of the Pope and Mother Teresa at the turn of the 21st century.

Instead of Napoleon's brute force as translated in Hegel's Idea, there is the fullness of the Idea of a violence-free Holy See. But what is the Idea?

For Lebanon, for Iraq, for the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Idea may simply be embedded in the concept of non-violence.

The Idea, in Hegel's words, is in and of itself, *an sich and für sich*. It must be self-sufficient to fulfil the future history of this region.

The mechanisms of its truth for tomorrow's

structive episode of that same battle: a battle where means and ends merge by way of the Idea. Thus, the belief in a Lebanon (and in the Middle East) where the only way forward is in an accordance with goals and means fused into one Idea.

This Idea can only be non-violence.

The Vatican has no tanks; that is the heart of its definition. One does not need tanks. In the same way that the Soviet Union was defeated without tanks, this visit appears to respond to a pervasive vindication, in Lebanon and in the region, of non-violence as means as well as ends. Saving Jerusalem from bowing to one religious colour, similarly saving Lebanon from losing its multiple colours, will only be achieved by shunning violence as a means to an end.

There is a consistency to the Vatican in this respect, and this is illustrated, in Irani's book, in the diffidence it manifested, in the more difficult years of the Lebanese wars, towards the

more extreme message, sometimes put forward by isolated monks, sometimes by a mediocre Christian leadership, against the Maronite patriarchs' consistent message of tolerance and peace.

This message has therefore been there, all through the dark years. It may be re-activated today, but a dogged and systematic consistency is needed for non-violence to bear

fruit. There is no possible division of peace, and no possible truncation of non-violence. It must be absolute, like God's word.

To put it bluntly, it is not by killing two miserable Syrian workers on a moonless night, or by throwing a bomb into a crowded Tel-Aviv market, that the wall will come down; nor is it even by paying lip service to the denunciation of violence against the enemy, whilst rejoicing in one's heart because of frustration or otherwise. Non-violence must move from the heart. Only a consistent, passionate belief in non-violence as a means for change will save Lebanon and solve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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His latest book is *The Middle East into the 21st Century*.

*George Irani, *The papacy and the Middle East*, Notre Dame Press, 1989, translated and updated to 1994 in the Arabic version, which has just been released by Malaffat Press.

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Middle East are not essentially different from those which have presided over the most important event in the twentieth century: the collapse of the Berlin wall. These mechanisms are first and foremost determined by a strategy, and tactic, of non-violence.

Let me try to be more specific about the concept of non-violence: the Vatican, through encyclicals, papal bulls, synods, and the church network, redrew its message into the trans-national presence (*hadira*, in Arabic) where means equal ends.

Means and ends have therefore merged into the Idea. This fusion means that tactics and strategy are one and the same thing, and that peace can only be achieved through peace.

This is the essence of non-violence, and, in Hegelian parlance, its negation.

Reflecting on Selim Abou's seminal speech at the annual meeting of the St Joseph University, I had mentioned Vercors' *Silence of the Sea* as the verbal, literary response to the stultification of Lebanon since 1990.

The papal visit seems to me another con-