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# Christian Resources for Peacemaking in a World of Conflict

## Introduction

Is religion competent to work on the problems of the world? Ought religion to accept the world's statement of what its problems are? I shall answer these questions, but indirectly, since I have chosen to begin by defining a problem religiously first and only after that move step by step to an engagement with the world in which we live.

This paper on Christian resources for peacemaking in a world of conflict is in five parts. First, I state the Christian vision and follow it up in the second part with a religious diagnosis of the problem. The third part is an account of Christian action, followed by a discussion in part four of how action is judged by the vision. I conclude with some remarks on living the vision here and now.

If the religions have such bountiful resources of love, compassion, and mercy, why are the people starving? Perhaps it is because we have offered spiritual medicine without thoroughly investigating the illness. I contend that the main strength of religions is that they can give us an honest account of our spiritual plight. Thus, my paper will deal as much with the problem as with the solution.

## I. The Vision

The theme of these reflections is peace and I begin with the Christian vision of the kingdom of peace. Christians see themselves, all other human beings, and the whole of creation as having a divinely determined destiny. God creates out of love and wills that this creation be fulfilled in blessed communion with the Creator. This statement about origins and ends sets out the terms of our existence, but it is

silent regarding the conditions of our existence. For, the vision shows what ought to be rather than what is.

We find ourselves following false gods rather than serving the Lord of the Universe; we choose death rather than life; we kindle and give vent to wrath rather than love; we make swords to plunge and rip open the hot breast of the enemy rather than plowshares to open the bosom of the warm and fertile earth; we lord it over Nature rather than practise good stewardship; we endanger species rather than engender new forms of companionship among the myriad forms of creatures, animals as well as birds etc.

We have the vision: of singing praises to the Lord, of eating milk and honey, of reasoning together, of seeing the rivers and the mountains as signs of the Almighty, of trusting one another and calling no one our enemy, of—and this is even more fantastic—seeing the wolf lie side by side with the lamb. But it is a vision that we project from afar.

Nonetheless, this vision of a people of faith sets the terms for a religious exploration of the theme of peace. Are there also religious resources for understanding why peace is more yearned for rather than enjoyed?

## 2. Diagnosis of The Problem

The Christian religion does have such a resource in its teaching on sin. Christians contend with one another as to whether and in what sense sin is original, and to what extent humans are affected by it. But all parties agree that sin is ever present. Its consequences are all about us; and its tendencies are in us.

The Christian vision of a Kingdom of Peace is that, where all relationships are fulfilled. God and His people enjoy a mystical communion; persons are open to each other and to all dimensions of Creation. If peace is characterized by mutual openness, sinful conflict can be seen as being closed. When we are faithful we know that God gives the blessing of peace (Ps. 29:11) and that Christ is our peace (Eph. 2:14); we are in sin when we try to live as if God is not the ground and goal of our being.

Not being at peace with God may take the form of a declared war in which we openly defy God's rule over our lives. It may also take the form of a breakdown of relations whereby we refuse to welcome God's ambassadors and proceed to live as if He was not. Not being open to God, we tend to regard ourselves as the greatest of beings, or, if not that, at least as the judges of who and what is greatest.

The one who is closed to God is not thereby open to all others. We tend to regard our own ways of doing things as virtuous and those of others as evil or at least as being born out of ignorance and misguided. Of course, there are plenty of examples of vice and folly in the world and we are easily able to convince ourselves that we are not quite so bad as much of what we see or hear about. But when we begin to act as judge of virtue and holiness we seal ourselves off from others. We are no longer present to them as companions on the journey to the Kingdom. We have begun to change the line which can guide us all toward the Kingdom into a line which divides the human community into the children of the light and the children of the dark, into us and them. This insidious line runs through all of our relationships. It cuts us off from members of our own family; from others where we work or play or worship; from those whom we do not know first-hand but who look, dress, or eat differently from what we do; from those in other countries; from societies which organize their political and economic affairs differently from ours, etc.

We are usually not so foolish as to fancy ourselves the greatest beings in the universe, but we often give prime allegiance to what is superior to us but, nevertheless, far short of God. In our time, corporate entities, political or commercial, which give us a sense of pride, security, and well-being are the idols of the day. When the object of our corporate allegiance gives us our sense of identity we regard it as superior to all others and resist any challenge to it. If, for example, our nation is threatened militarily we will defend our nation partly because we cannot imagine our existence apart from the nation. Of course, there is a proper and healthy sense of self-defence. But we are in danger of passing over into idolatry when we insist on bringing our enemy to unconditional surrender or when we dismiss whole peoples as godless communists or when we adopt or fail to challenge such simplistic slogans as "Better Dead Than Red."

If our identity is bound up with our nation, there will be a tendency to idolatry even in the absence of military threat. We will see international relations in competitive terms who take great pride in counting metals, precious or manufactured, and medals, gold, silver, and bronze.

We adopt a zero sum attitude toward life with others. That is, if you win I must lose. There is no vision of full mutuality in which we are vulnerable to each other and bear one another's burdens. It might appear that in economics and the exchange of goods we are developing a world order. But too often the developing societies that are invited to become partners in development, to use the title of an influential book of the early 70s,<sup>1</sup> are required to play a game for which the rules and strategies have already been set by the powerful. A country is a potential partner if it has a raw material which can be manufactured. A few in such a country may become wealthy, but the well-established industrial countries maintain the upper hand. "I win you lose" has become "you win and I win big." My winning and winning as big as possible is the ruling factor of our relationship.

We can be closed to God, to others, and, as well, to our own potential. That is, we can be so satisfied with a way of doing things that we become complacent. Our spiritual vocation should make us continually restless with any level of achievement. We should see that every aspect of our life is infinitely perfectible. But we become proud or tired or just careless. To take an example from contemporary life, consider our fascination, with fitness and the body beautiful. People claim that running has become their religion. They follow its disciplines, go to its shrines, organize their social lives around it, liken its highs to mystical experience, and become insistent proselytizers and givers of testimony. When I view this phenomenon, I am reminded of Hegel's withering remark in the "Preface" to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* about some movements of his time: "The Spirit shows itself as so impoverished that, like a wanderer in the desert craving for a mere mouthful of water, it seems to crave for its refreshment only the bare

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1. *Partners in Development*, report of the Commission on International Development, Lester B. Pearson, Chairman (New York : Praeger Publishers, 1969).

feeling of the divine in general. By the little which now satisfies Spirit, we can measure the extent of its loss."<sup>2</sup>

This definition of the problem has shown some of the principal ways in which we fall short of the Christian vision. We have seen, as well, how the Christian tradition has resources for naming and confronting our failure, our sin.

### 3. The Call To Action

The vision of the Kingdom also includes a call to action, a challenge to be converted into peacemakers. Where, according to Christians, should the process begin? It is to begin in the heart with humble repentance. We all have contributed to the strife and pain in the world and we do not sufficiently resist the present consequences of previous sinful acts. Thus, we must first confess our guilt and ask to be purified and transformed. It is not that religion is just a matter of the heart, with no concern for the so-called outside world. But that only persons who have been humbled and cleansed and delivered from self-righteousness are fit to set about bringing the world into line with the vision of peace. As a participant in demonstrations over civil rights and the Vietnam war 15 years ago, I saw that some among us were attempting to save their souls by acting in the streets while others were on the streets because of a prior cleansing and transformation. The latter had a great deal of self-understanding and seemed to be trustworthy. The former often seemed to be on an adventure, precise destination unknown.

The resources for penance and purification are well-known. Prayer, meditation on Scripture, retreats, and exercises of mortification are among the classical forms. It is worth remembering that many of the famous peacemaking actions of our time, such as those led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Berrigans, were preceded by periods of intense spiritual training.

The Christian who has become reconciled to God and to self then moves out to become an agent of reconciliation. Christians are called

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2 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 5.

to settle differences with their neighbours before coming to the table of the Lord. They are expected to be not overbearing but forbearing, understanding of the weaknesses of others. The bottom line is not victory and gain, but justice and mercy. The reconciler will look for common ground, will seek compromises among contending interests.

But it may be asked whether the Christian will seek to make peace at any cost. Will it always be acceptable to find a compromise which requires each party to give a little? Is there a guiding principle? Yes, there is. The Christian is to act on behalf of the weak and helpless, the little ones of the world. The Church is, in the language current in Latin America, to make an option for the poor.

Christians as peacemakers will over time develop new attitudes, a new way of being in the world. What at first must be a conscious effort fearfully begun, can become ingrained. With practice, noble acts can become second nature, that is, virtues which can be counted on. We can move from not being able to trust to our reactions to threats, to the point where our immediate responses will be predictably pacific. Those who are unsure of themselves and fearful will be likely to act in such a way as to perpetuate the obstacles between people. Those for whom love has cast out fear will have the strength to be bridge builders.

The model for the Christian's action is Jesus. Jesus is the man for others, the one who gave his life so that others might have life abundant. When his enemies came to take him he did not resort to violence. His words and his actions proclaim that it is better to die than to do violence to others. Rene Girard, the French literary critic and thinker, holds that more clearly in Jesus than in any other instance in history the cycle of violence is broken.<sup>3</sup>

What does this mean for the follower of Jesus? It means that personal survival is not an ultimate value. Peacemaking in the name of Christ may lead to sacrifice. For those who have already died to themselves and who are living in and for Christ, there is something worse than death. What is worse than death is to be unfaithful to

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3. See his books, *Violence and the Sacred*, *Des choses cachees depuis la fondation du monde*, and *Le bouc emissaire*.

the one who is the giver of life. What is worse than death is to kill out of hate or for one's own advantage.

It seems to me that holding life lightly, being committed to something greater than survival, is the Christian's greatest resource for solving the problem of violent conflict. Individuals with no greater allegiance than to themselves will be willing to kill in order to save their lives or possessions. Families, ethnic groups, and nations will not hesitate to kill in order to survive. I do not mean to suggest that persons and groups without religious faith will always kill or that they will never submit to superior force. But they will always act in their self-interest. In deciding what to do, the Christian ought to have consideration for the welfare of the other.

Now a Christian in the modern world is always also a citizen. This means that there may be instances in which one's duties as a citizen will be in conflict with one's duties as a Christian. It is to the credit of the Church that both before and after it became closely linked with temporal power it recognized the legitimacy of refusing to participate in war. Without having made pacifism the rule for faith, except in a few instances, the Church has made room for the pacifist option. This has put it in the position of being able to criticize the policies and actions of civil authorities.

#### **4. Action Judged by the Vision**

The need for repentance and the struggle with temptation are never overcome. Thus the Christian will be a critic not only of the violence of worldly powers but also of many things that are done by oneself and others in the name of Christ. In fact, today, perhaps the most urgent issues occur among Christians. We find Christians on both sides of every important conflict, whether it be nuclear arms policy, territorial disputes, human rights, or the world economic order. When Christians divide the world into two camps and identify Christ with one of them and not the other, then the basic meaning of the faith is being perverted. The God in Christ is the God of all the world and cannot be co-opted for any one party. So all human action, even that done in the name of Christ, is to be judged by the transcendent vision of faith.

At a recent meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, President Reagan said that the United States is great and good and that the Soviet Union is the principal force of evil in the modern world.<sup>4</sup> He implied that God is on the side of America and criticized those religious leaders who refuse to line up on that side. According to him, those who refuse to choose sides in the nuclear confrontation are with a sense of pride, attempting to take a superior and detached view. In contrast, those critics of the arms race, such as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the USA who affirm the sovereignty of God and the dignity of the human person, are staying closer to concrete reality. Those who would insist that Christians make categorical choices between contending worldly powers, especially when the continuation of the human species and the created order are possibly at stake, may be letting the President be the President but they surely are not letting God be God. This is certainly a self-serving use of Christianity.

Over the centuries people of biblical faith have produced powerful and refined resources for combating idolatry. Revelations of Scripture to the prophets and poets have been elaborated into theological doctrines of God, human nature, and the orders of creation. They have also led to moral theories for guiding conduct. It is important today to care for the Christian education of the faithful so that they will be able to distinguish the authentic Word from the unauthentic and to challenge those powers who claim supremacy. A properly formed Christian spirit will not allow the differences between us to define our relationship; rather, our differences will set the agenda for how we will contrive to live together. Differences will serve as starters not stoppers.

The inter-religious situation has not been an explicit theme of this paper, but it has qualified the whole of it. It has been prepared with the knowledge that it would be presented to a non-Christian world also, given to them, expecting their response. I have come to believe that that is the proper way to go about theology and religious scholarship.

The same resources of revelation and faithful reflection that are useful in intramural Christian discussion can be employed with reference

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4. Reported by Francis X. Clines in the *New York Times*, March 9, 1983.

to the other religions of the world. Just as sound faith knows that God must not be identified with anything less than God, so it also knows by implication that God cannot be regarded as separated from anything that has existence, including non-Christians. I cannot explore here the relation between Christian and other thinking on war and peace, but it seems to me that the position I have presented can be religiously ecumenical in two ways. First, if the dignity of the human person must always be respected, then no persons should ever be devalued or harmed because of their religion. Second, nothing in the Christian view of peacemaking would prevent others from following their own spiritual paths. Another essay could show the great degree of convergence among the religions on this matter. One point, however, seems to be in order here. Just as for Christians the unruly spirit is pacified by the continual process of repentance, forgiveness, and sanctification, for Muslims the real *Jihad* or holy war is waged in the heart of the servant of Allah.

### **5. Conclusion: Living the Vision Now**

In conclusion I want to say something about Christian resources for maintaining peacemakers throughout a lifetime. I have presented peacemaking as a task undertaken in a broken and hostile world. The Kingdom is to be realized in the world, but only tiny step by tiny step. Peace is possible, but not guaranteed. Failures and setbacks are to be expected. Does the Kingdom, then, remain only an ideal, a far-off vision? No, for Christ is our peace and the Spirit is our Comforter. We participate in the Kingdom with each gift of grace and the Kingdom comes with each small triumph for peace. The faithful community is called out of the world to the altar. There the wounded find the elements of bread and wine drawn from the world. The bread is broken and the wine is poured out, but in such a way that wounds are healed. The mystical communion achieved in the Sacrament presents a wholeness in which the faithful participate. They then return to the world, renewed and able to see possibilities for prolonging the wholeness and peace that they have experienced in the Sacrament. Christians, then, can and must be peacemakers; they need not kill or seek advantage, because victory is to be found elsewhere.