

War, Peace and Faithfulness

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Introduction

I am writing at a time when decent people across the world are exercised as never before about the problem of war and the need for peace – people of all faiths and none. What I am about to say comes from a Christian standpoint. Since my audience in the Thomas Merton Society is largely Christian by background, as I am, I have allowed myself the luxury of writing from that perspective. I say ‘luxury’ because I am usually constrained by non-religious contexts and feel it is important to reach a wider audience and honour its diversity. I hope that the Christian framing of this paper will not prove an obstacle for non-Christian hearers or readers. My new book, *Rethinking War and Peace*,¹ is written in secular terms. The ethical and philosophical thinking that, in this paper, I have related to the teachings of Jesus may be arrived at in other ways; but I came to it, in the first instance, via him.

Equally, ‘faithfulness’ is not confined to those with religious beliefs. Commitment to values and ideals is not the prerogative of those who live their lives within a religious framework. I hope this paper will be accessible and acceptable to anyone who reads it.

When I began to consider the title I had chosen, I wondered whether the word ‘faithfulness’ had a kind of doggy quality – suggesting a commitment that had nothing to do with applying one’s God-given faculties of analysis and reason to life’s realities, but surrendering to blind obedience. That made me aware that I was making an assumption about ‘faith,’ or the kind of belief that gives hope and demands commitment – which is that it is valid only if it bears a rugged relationship to what really works in the world. It made me want to say right away that I believe Jesus was a realist and that if I didn’t think so I could not, in all conscience, be a follower of his. His teaching must stand up in its own right, not just because of his name. Belief that is

somehow chosen in denial of what at another level we know to be true is dishonest and self-deluding. (On the other hand, faith held onto in the face of doubt and disappointment is the only authentic kind that is likely to be available to us.)

War, violence and power

I will start my discussion of war, peace and faithfulness by characterising war. I see it as large scale and systematic armed violence, deployed by one group against another in pursuit of collective goals – or goals prescribed for collectives by their leaders. Wars take place within a culture (or cultures) that broadly speaking accepts them as justifiable, inevitable and effective, and thereby prepares people to fight. They are made possible by structures that maintain weapons systems and armies in readiness for use. They are supported by laws that take them for granted, while in theory aiming to limit and control them.

While wars consist of acts of violence, violence itself is not limited to wars. Johan Galtung has defined it as ‘avoidable insults to basic human needs’² – in other words, whatever deliberately disregards or violates the humanity of another, whether psychologically or physically. To deny people sustenance, dignity, care or liberty, when we have a choice, is to do them violence. The social, political and economic structures that do these things to people are also violent. Likewise the attitudes and assumptions that make it acceptable to do so.

Jesus was clear in his teaching against direct physical violence. He was also unequivocal in his teaching on our responsibility for each other and presented humanity as indivisible: inasmuch as we do things – or fail to do them – to each other, we do them to him. He follows in the line of the Hebrew prophets: ‘What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?’³ We are called to love others as we love ourselves, as we love Jesus, as we love God. This is in line with the Biblical understanding of human beings – as made in the image of God. Quakers talk about our calling to answer or respond to ‘that of God’ in everyone. In the gospel stories we see Jesus calling on this – challenging people to live up to their potential.

Jesus made it clear that there is no let-out clause in loving our neighbour as ourselves: ‘enemies’ are to be included, and ‘the least’ in society. We are not to visit people in prison on condition of their innocence or to forgive people only if they apologise. Jesus’ concern is

first and foremost for those who are ‘sinners.’ The requirement is unconditional. That is the power of his teaching: it gives us moral autonomy or independence, sets us free from conditionality.

Walter Wink, in his book *Jesus’ Third Way*,⁴ brilliantly characterises the energy of this approach in transforming relationships and empowering the person who follows it. That person takes the initiative, not in exercising power over another but in choosing a form of power that does not involve being powerful in any conventional sense. Rather, it is the power of powerlessness, which brings freedom. Jesus embodied that kind of power. It is what his life – and death – were about. It is power that not only transforms the one who exercises it but also revolutionises relationships and changes others. It is a model of power that could transform global politics.

Jesus’ kind of power is power for and with others – the capacity to enhance and draw out goodness, to work co-operatively, alongside one other, for good. It is the only kind of power that can bring in the kingdom of God envisioned by Isaiah, where hurting and destroying are no longer the order of the day. This is the kind of power that provides the foundation for the kingdom that Jesus said was ‘at hand’: capable of being realised in the here and now, if only we would think again. It has nothing to do with war and cannot be achieved by it. That is why Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a war-horse.

War, on the other hand, is the apotheosis of a very different kind of power: one that has taken centre stage for thousands of years. It is the power of domination: power *over* others, the power to impose one’s will on another, to control and coerce. It is this model of power that has led people to see the exploitation of the earth as their right, to excuse the tyranny of leaders as ‘strength’ and to admire economic success regardless of its human cost.

War and masculinity

The dominatory model of power,⁵ which is so strong in our culture and structures and of which war is emblematic, is closely associated with the dominant model of masculinity. The apex of this model is the hero – a man who triumphs over something or someone, or dies in the attempt. The archetype of heroism is the warrior. Related, traditional female roles are subservient and instrumental to this: to encourage or support warriors, or to become a victim whose fate reinforces their power. It is not a coincidence or an unfortunate side effect of war that

women are raped. Sexual dominance is an important element in constructions of masculinity and rape is a deliberate assertion of the dominant masculinity of the perpetrator. It is also an emblem of his triumph over the men associated with the victim. The recent horrible mistreatment and humiliation of prisoners in Iraq has had a strong sexual element.

Jesus behaved in a way that presents a fundamental challenge to gendered thinking. He was, at different times, gentle and angry, tender and fierce, distressed and resolute. He showed no interest in 'manliness.' The very idea is irrelevant to how he was. His choice of the donkey to ride on was not simply the choice of a moment. It was part and parcel of his approach to power and of his identity as a human being – the opposite of all that is macho. He sought out the company of women, not as sex objects, nor as inferiors but as equals. He challenged prevailing attitudes to the relative moral responsibility of men and women. And when he wept over the future of Jerusalem and its children, he compared himself to a mother hen wanting to protect her chicks.

The contemporary relevance of Jesus: a radical critique of the war myth

How can we relate the radical challenges that Jesus made then in his own society to our current global context? If he cried then for Jerusalem, how would he have cried now, to see the suffering and destruction being wreaked in so many parts of the world, because we still do not know the things that make for peace?

While I believe that Jesus' teaching is particularly radical, the Hebrew prophets and those of other faiths also make clear demands on their adherents to respect and care for their fellow human beings, to forgive, and to eschew violence. The humanistic principles of 'the Enlightenment' point in the same direction. In the secular, academic literature of today, in international relations and related fields, the equivalent of what in the gospels is called 'the kingdom' is referred to as 'positive peace' (as against the 'negative peace' of the absence of war). It is described in terms of justice, democracy and human rights. These values are also seen as prerequisites for peace. Yet they are currently widely used and abused to justify war, which is their contradiction.

In the run-up to the war that was launched against Iraq in the spring of 2003, we were subjected, for months, to the daily question, 'Is war inevitable?' – as if we were dealing with an asteroid inexorably hurtling

towards us, quite out of our control, rather than a deliberate and resolute plan, made by politicians, to act in a certain way. It is true, historically, that leaders stumble into wars, trapping themselves in a dynamic that makes a change of direction very difficult. While we can, at a human level, understand this, it is clear that pride and other such personal motivations are no good reason for the slaughter of thousands.

Nonetheless, many people believe that war is sometimes *morally* inevitable – that war is what works, the 'means of last resort' – the one thing that we can rely on when all else fails. This is fundamental to what I see as the myth of war, which is based on three false assumptions. The first is that leaders are trying to do things that really need to be done: that the causes for which they go to war are just. The second is that they do really try everything else before going to war – that all alternatives are exhausted. And the third is that wars are effective in achieving the good goals claimed as their causes.

This three-fold war myth is so firmly established that it is hardly ever subjected to serious scrutiny. The propaganda machines work overtime to perpetuate it and, because it is so complex and deep-seated, it is hard to deconstruct. However, if we are ever to escape from its hold on us and from the grip of war as a system, it must be taken apart and shown to be hollow – and deadly poisonous. Unless we can free ourselves from it we shall never be able to pursue peace in any consistent way. (If, on the other hand, it is not a myth but true, the Christian faith would indeed be a doggy one, requiring its adherents to avoid rather than shoulder human responsibility. Its founder would appear to have been deluded.)

I would argue that the published intentions of leaders for going to war are largely spurious, and that even when they are not they disregard the rights and needs of those who will be maimed, displaced and killed on either side. I would also argue that real alternatives are often scarcely thought about, let alone exhaustively tried. And I would suggest that war as a method is fundamentally unsuited to achieving the good things claimed as 'just causes,' being a complete contradiction of them: ethnic tolerance, for instance, or democracy, or self-determination, or human rights.

Given all we have seen so far of the 'War on Terror,' I seem, tragically, to be batting on an easy wicket here. The reasons for the brutal and massive assaults on Afghanistan and Iraq were so patently 'trumped up,' other means of dealing with the problems posited so clearly brushed aside and the effects so disastrous that the case hardly needs

to be made. But what about Kosovo? Surely that was a necessary war – morally inevitable? It has certainly been pointed to, constantly, as a prime example of the need for the ‘international community’ to ‘intervene’ (read ‘a few powerful countries’ to ‘go to war’ and impose their ‘solution’).

Yet why was that war fought? How come the same powers have ignored situations that are arguably far worse? Do the four big new military bases established in Kosovo by the US have nothing to do with it? Were not the real reasons the desire not to be seen again as powerless; to assert regional hegemony and establish a military presence in a region that has always been regarded as a strategic link between East and West? (Hence the past prosperity of Yugoslavia, courted by both.)

Why was President Milosevic confirmed in power at the time of the Dayton Agreement and why was the future of Kosovo not provided for in that agreement? What was done to support the ten-year campaign of the Albanian population there to use non-violent means to defend their rights? And how can we say that all alternatives were exhausted when the woefully small but nonetheless relatively effective presence of monitors was brought to an end; when Milosevic was painted into a corner from which he could not escape without humiliation and when the Rambouillet talks were so easily abandoned; when no-one tried offering to alleviate the economic plight of Serbia or helping with its massive refugee problem in return for movement in relation to human rights and a degree of self-determination in Kosovo?

What has been the result of the war and its aftermath? The terrible excess of violence and mass exodus whose images haunt us still were not prevented by the war but were in fact triggered by it. (How quickly was this concealed and history rewritten!) In the mayhem that followed, columns of refugees were bombed and terrible destruction and pollution were caused in Serbia. The economic impact of the war was devastating. The River Danube was blocked as bridges were bombed, with disastrous effects on several struggling economies in the region. No compensation was ever paid. ‘Ethnic cleansing’ of Serbs and many other groups has followed, the economy of Kosovo has been destroyed, crime is endemic, human trafficking a social nightmare and widespread violence a constant possibility. The status of the territory remains unresolved and the tolerant democracy that was promised is a disconnected dream. The majority population, once so grateful, has become embittered and hostile.

We should not be surprised at this. As Jesus said, ‘Can you harvest figs from thistles?’ War is the very antithesis of democracy and consists of human rights violations. Execution without trial is what happens to soldiers killed in battle and the deaths of citizens are subsumed in the category of ‘collateral damage.’ Inhumane and degrading treatment and torture are not confined to the aberrations of individual soldiers who guard prisoners, nor even of deviant systems. They are what war is made of. Human beings (and all kinds of other beings), in unimaginable numbers but real nonetheless, are blown to pieces or incur horrific injuries, simply because they live where they do.

The Just War Theory seems to ignore what is this very nature of war. All wars are a crime against humanity. The power they model is not the power of the people expressed in democracy but that of simple brutality, used as a means of control or coercion. The only lesson it teaches is that ‘might is right’: that the one with the most power to inflict destruction and carnage is the one who wins the day. This is the logic that motivates countries to manufacture or obtain weapons of mass destruction, the logic of the arms race in which the UK is such a committed participant following, in its own smaller way, the gigantic example of the US.

That is not to say that war entails no acts of courage or self-sacrifice. I have no doubt that there are many, many such acts. But it was striking that, in recent interviews with survivors of the D-Day landings, the predominant feelings expressed by those men, sixty years on, are of being haunted by the loss of life they witnessed and sadness that the war-free world they dreamed of seems more distant than ever.

It is often argued that we are doomed by human nature to carnage and slaughter. But war is, in terms of the length of human existence, a recent phenomenon: one that dates, in some parts of the world, from as recently as two thousand years ago – almost nowhere longer ago than ten.⁶ Even today we manage our daily lives without killing – though of course not without conflict. Although aggression and counter-aggression are normal human responses, human beings have to be trained to overcome their moral instincts in order to violate and kill each other in an organised way.⁷ A conscientious objector told how it was done in the US army:

In the first week we shoot at black circles, learn how to aim, how to breathe, and the next week there are shoulders added and then torsos

and then they become pop up targets, but all the time they're targets, not people, and shooting them is a reflex.

You do stuff till you're blue in the face, till you're sick of it and then you don't question it. When you're training they have you chanting while you run, things like, "Training to kill, kill we will," or "Ooh ah I wanna kill somebody" or the sergeant shouts, "What makes the grass grow?" and you shout, "Blood, blood, blood!" If you don't yell loud enough then you get to strengthen your upper body. I can still do a lot of push ups.⁸

When we resort to organised violence of this kind we become 'inhumane' and violate the very heart of our humanity.

But surely there are times when war is necessary – when the violence of injustice or tyranny simply has to be stopped? Surely it is morally repugnant simply to stand by and watch? Is this what radical pacifism means? And did Jesus call his followers to abject passivity? Far from it. In his discussion of Christ's teaching, Wink explains just how radically empowering were his specific examples – to turn the other cheek, let them take your coat as well as your shirt and go the second mile with the soldier who tried to coerce your services. (Turning the other cheek meant obliging the one who had struck you to hit you with his open hand, as an equal, if he struck you again. Taking off your shirt would put your opponent in the wrong as having caused you to abandon decency, and choosing to go the extra mile was putting yourself in the position of benefactor rather than subject.) These are examples of actions that uphold the dignity and autonomy of the one who responds to violence and injustice not by counter-violence or passivity but by taking a positive initiative and reframing the relationship, creating an entirely new dynamic.

I will give just three examples of modern day equivalents. A friend of mine was attacked and about to be raped. She took her assailant's face in her hands and said to him, 'Do you have no-one to love you?' He broke down in tears. Another friend, a timid, sensitive man, was walking along a dark street and noticed that he was being followed by two much younger men. He was frightened, but turned and went back to them and asked them to help him find the railway station – which they did. At the end of World War II the father of a friend of mine, living in Vienna, knew that Russian soldiers were sacking houses and raping women. When they came to his house he asked his wife and daughters to go into the cellar, opened the door and welcomed the

young men outside, inviting them to leave their guns at the door and come in to share a meal with his family. This is what happened. It is not magic. It is human. It does not take away our human vulnerability. But it does suggest that there are more creative ways of dealing with it than by pitting our capacity for violence against that of another person. For those of us who are not physically strong and do not carry firearms or other weapons, these other ways, in any case, make more sense.

Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu, drew on the teachings of Jesus to develop his own radical thinking about the principles and power of non-violence, with its twin principles of *ahimsa* or non-harm and *satyagraha* or truth force. He said that to be a faithful follower of the way of non-violence required even more courage than to be a soldier and that 'To recognise evil and not to oppose it is to surrender your humanity. To recognise evil and to oppose it with the weapons of the evil-doer is to enter into your humanity. To recognise evil and to oppose it with the weapons of God is to enter into your divinity'.⁹ He and his followers brought an end to British colonial rule, with remarkably few deaths. (By comparison, the Algerians, for instance, who fought a bloody liberation war against the French achieved their liberation in a slightly shorter time but at terrible human cost.)

Martin Luther King followed in the footsteps of Jesus, and of Gandhi as his interpreter, in his campaign of non-violence for African-American civil rights in the US. The dignity and courage of that campaign, together with King's passionate eloquence, inspired the world. Yet it seemed we were left for many years with just these two stories to go on – the liberation of India from British rule and the winning of the legal battle for civil rights in the US. It was as if that was all we had to weigh against the whole weight of the history and culture of militarism.

Then came the overthrow of the despotic President Marcos of the Philippines, in a stunning display of 'people power'. Remember the nuns stopping the tanks in the streets of Manila and giving flowers to the soldiers? And still our thinking did not fundamentally change. When, not very long after, the Soviet Empire began to collapse, and the different pieces went down like dominoes, we were all amazed. Yet in spite of so much evidence to the contrary the argument seems to remain unchanged: that only wars can end dictatorships. What would it take for the world to see that even tyrants cannot maintain their grip on peoples without their consent? Gene Sharp and others have laid out for us the wide range of options for non-violent action to resist invasion

or remove dictators, emphasising the need for the kind of serious analysis, strategy and preparation that goes into the waging of wars and violent revolutions.¹⁰ The list of actions of all kinds that we could take in different situations is potentially boundless, limited only by our imagination – and preparedness.

Can we not understand that even dictators die and that regimes are transient, like everything else in human experience? Can we not see that the only thing worth building is the capacity of humanity for caring and for living the life it is given to the full? Can we not digest the enormity of the crime of squandering our wealth and abilities and the earth's precious resources on preparations for murder on a grand scale? Can we not recognise that this is a crime against life itself and the spirit of love and creativity from which it springs? 'When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and did nothing for you?'¹¹ When we were too busy creating a planet so packed with destructive power that we could destroy it altogether. When we thought that the only good news was that security could be bought at this terrible price – a delusion in itself and true grounds for despair.

It is not necessary to be a Christian to see these things. Many people of other faiths and of none are quite clear about them, and unstinting in their commitment to opposing war and upholding the values of peace and justice. Those who want to be followers of Jesus are called explicitly and unequivocally to be peacemakers, to be the 'salt of the earth,' not to water down his teachings, to let them fade into insipidness or pervert them and collude with the powers that be. If we cannot be faithful to our calling, at least in our intention, we might as well forget it. We contribute nothing of any significance to the wellbeing of human society or to the planet that until now has nurtured it. When we fail to honour the most fundamental principles of our calling as human beings – let alone as Christians – we remove the very basis of coexistence. To uphold them is essential – what Kant refers to as the 'categorical imperative'.¹²

I want to argue, then, for faithfulness – in rejecting the thinking, behaviour and institutions of militarism; in upholding the values of love and respect in all things; in committing ourselves to removing the structures of violence and injustice, and in overcoming direct violence in all its forms through non-violent means. Above all, I want to urge the importance of rejecting the logic that justifies militarism and war and to work to transform the culture of violence to a culture of peace.

This is the UN decade for doing so. It is also, within the World Council of Churches and beyond, a Decade for Overcoming Violence.

Even more importantly, it is a time when millions of so-called 'ordinary people' across the world are aware as never before of the need to change the habit of far too many lifetimes and remove the scourge of war. In the words of Dr Robert Muller, former assistant secretary general of the United Nations, now Chancellor emeritus of the University of Peace in Costa Rica, 'Never before in the history of the world has there been a global, visible, public, viable, open dialogue and conversation about the very legitimacy of war.'

Sometimes the call to faithfulness can seem very daunting. Despair is a serious temptation. But here the 'faith' in faithfulness can help. We have seen the loving potential of humanity and that vision can never go away. We know that we have the basis for a 'politics of identification' rather than a politics of identity,¹³ for a universalist approach that comes from the recognition of divinity as part of humanity. We have experienced the peace and strength that come to us even in our moments of despair. We know the joy and even the fun of working together on the things that make for peace. To be called to faithfulness may be hard, but it is immeasurably easier than to live without faith, hope or purpose. I will close with words from an Epistle written by Friends (Quakers) in Aotearoa/ New Zealand:

Together let us reject the clamour of fear and listen to the whisperings of hope.

Notes and References

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- ¹¹ Matthew, chapter 25 verse 45
- ¹² *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785
- ¹³ Henry Louis Gates Jr, 'A liberalism that dares to speak its name'. *International Herald Tribune*, 30 March 1994