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THE THEOLOGY AND POLITICS OF PEACE

“...nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” [Micah 4:3]

I possess and I treasure, not for sentimental reasons but for its powerful message, the belt-buckle of the uniform that my father wore from 1914-1918. He was an officer in the 9th Artillery Regiment of the Imperial German Army, having volunteered to serve his country at the tender age of 18. *GOTT MIT UNS* – God With Us – are the words inscribed on that belt-buckle. Though not religiously brought up, my father did not for a moment doubt the truth of those words. He was fighting in a just cause, so God must have been on the side of his nation. Patriotism, love of the Fatherland, and godliness went hand in hand. The war sermons of the bishops of the Church of England at that time eloquently testify to the fact that they fervently believed in the same message. God, King and Country were in total harmony. Why inscribe the obvious on Tommy’s belt-buckle?

I grew up as the child of German refugee parents who had fled to New Zealand from Hitler’s Germany. I was seven when the Second World War began, the only foreign child in my school and a German one at that. There was a game called ‘Hunt the Hun’. I was the Hun, chased around the playground. I played the role, toughed it out. On one occasion, a little girl who had not joined in, stood on the sidelines and called out to the players: ‘He’s not just a German. He’s a Jew!’... from bad to worse then. She’d sort of got it right. It was because of my father’s Jewish parents that we were now ‘enemy alien’ refugees. What that little girl had picked up from grown-ups was that Germans were bad and Jews- whoever they might be – were even worse.

As a young German country doctor, my father had been converted to Christian faith in a way not unlike St Paul. That turned his life around. I grew up with Bible stories and a crucifix over my bed. My mother did the praying at bed time. Very early on, I had been taught that Jesus did not hate his

enemies, not even those who killed him. So I wasn't to hate the kids who called me a Hun. They just didn't know any better. So said my parents.

That there was a war on dominated my early years. The day it started, my father tried to help me understand what that meant. There would no longer be any contact with the German home from which we had been driven. That Hitler might even win that war, was a dreadful thought.

Our vicar's son had joined the Air Force. My mother had befriended him and he wrote to her from his training station in Canada. He died very soon after going into action. That brought my German mother, whose brother was probably fighting on the other side – was he maybe also dead? - and his New Zealand mother very close together. Women sharing tears.

So, at an early age I had to think hard about war. I had that belt-buckle. To this day there hangs in my study a fine line-drawing by one of my father's comrades, a drawing of members of his battery hauling a heavy howitzer out of a deep ditch in the Somme where most of the foot- soldiers died while the artillerymen behind the lines had a better chance of surviving.

In church, a local branch of the Church of Scotland, the national anthem was sung. Once more, of course, God was on the Allied side, while, as before, the German sermons were encouraging their young men that to die for Hitler and the Fatherland was heroic. By the time I was ten, I'd begun to see the contradiction between what was being preached and what the Bible said.

A lifetime and a Doctor of Divinity later, that childlike insight has not fundamentally changed. From an early age I could not fathom how you could both love your enemies and be prepared to kill them. Theology - as I was to learn much later - is not just for so-called experts. "Out of the mouth of babes..." Many famous German professors and biblical exegetes had readily fallen for Hitler's racist heresies, much like many devout Christians in South Africa who fell for the theory and practice of apartheid.

I was destined, almost by force of circumstance, to be a young pacifist – of sorts. But I was in no hurry to jump to firm conclusions. There was a lot of thinking and praying and testing to be done. Why did most Christians not

agree with my simplistic conclusions? Was the obvious, that war is by definition diabolical, not necessarily true?

The fact that my parents had become Quakers in New Zealand is an important part of my story. They did that because the Quakers were the only Christian - or for that matter non- Christian - body to make it their formal policy to befriend enemy aliens. No mainline church did that, though many Christian and non-Christian individuals did. What Quakers did, seemed to be so much closer to where Jesus was. One of the things Quakers did not do was to be prepared to kill, even in a just cause. But was this small elitist group necessarily right? I kept asking questions. Was it ok to let Hitler win?

Like all the others at secondary school – with two exceptions – I joined the cadet corps: junior soldiers, uniforms, rifles and all that goes with that. As a sergeant I went on holiday for army camp training – and liked it. Even shooting at human-like targets didn't quite put me off. Then, at 18, things got more serious. I was called up for genuine national service. I thought of those two brothers at high school who had the courage to stand out and say no, the Baxter brothers. One of them was James K. Baxter, later to become New Zealand's most celebrated poet. His father, with no education beyond the age of 15, had refused to fight in 1915, had been cruelly dragged to the French trenches and symbolically crucified there, being left to hang from a pole with his feet in the mud, yet was not broken. His book *We Will Not Cease* had become a classic. Faced with the need to decide, I now felt I had to register as a conscientious objector, by now a civil right. My school's headmaster, as it happened, chaired the panel that had to adjudicate on my sincerity. "You Oestreicher, that model cadet! What's come over you?" I made my case successfully, with the New Testament as my support.

At university I did two things, I started to study politics and I joined the Student Christian Movement, a liberal ecumenical group of young seekers for truth who questioned everything. Jesus remained at the centre of my thinking, but Karl Marx was not far off. I left the Quakers (though not in spirit and not permanently) and became an Anglican, a much more down-market and ordinary kind of church as I saw it, and not too dogmatic either.

The priest who prepared me for confirmation respected but radically challenged my pacifism. It was him vs. (as I argued) the Sermon on the Mount. As a recently ordained priest in England in 1939, Charles Harrison's conscience had driven him, he cogently argued, to put his priesthood on hold and train to be a fighter pilot. No, he could not just be a military chaplain. If others were expected to kill and maybe die, so would he. "I shot down German fighters and prayed for their pilots as I did so. Contradiction? Yes, like life itself." I could not but be impressed, but I still disagreed. Thirty years later when he was dying of cancer he confessed to me that his justification for fighting had been the honest truth, but not the whole truth. He had not admitted to his love of flying. It was a fine example of the non-theological factors that influence the rationale of our theology. My pacifism, I would have to agree, is no less influenced by who I am.

Not theology alone but also my study of politics helped me to recognise why the pacifism of the early Church did not or could not survive in mainstream Christendom after the conversion of the Roman Emperor. The faith had become an imperial religion. *In hoc signo vincet*: it was now possible and indeed necessary, in the sign of the cross, to serve in the emperor's legions and in God's name to win. The theologians would have to find a way of justifying the apparently unjustifiable. The 'just war doctrine' has held sway ever since Constantine, so refined and made conditional by medieval scholastics that hardly any real war fulfils its strictures. In practice every war, on every side, has of necessity been held by rulers to be just, from the most bloody crusades to Hitler's equally bloody conquests ... and imperial wars in the interest of Christian 'civilisation', of course included. A military chaplain had to be on hand to say prayers to send the *Anola Gay* on her way to wipe out a hundred thousand people in the city of Hiroshima. A 'little war' in the Falklands ensured the political survival of a Christian 'empress'.

What now are the theological grounds for my surviving pacifism? Not biblical texts. I am no fundamentalist (though I wonder how most biblical literalists manage to be unquestioning patriots in the light of the words of Jesus on this subject, lots of them, though not a word from him on gay sex). However, it is the life and death of Jesus that seems to leave me no choice. He

consciously departs from Jewish tradition which in most respects he honours. Yet in this context he firmly declares: "You have heard it said, but I say unto you..." He does what he says. He puts his own life at risk in a classic example, to use a modern concept, of non violent direct action in the forecourt of the Temple itself. (cf. The protest camp on the forecourt of St Paul's and the City of London bank traders...*plus ca change*) Jesus is the only victim of this challenge to the corruption of his day and he does pay the price, reprimanding the disciple who wants to defend him with a sword. His model is a lamb, not a lion. The Passion says it all, with forgiveness for his killers. I could assemble more theological tools. They are unnecessary.

But, the world being what it is, and humans being foolish sinners, was Micah's pre-Christian vision of a world without war no more than a wonderful dream? I think not.

At this point I put aside for a moment my pacifism as an individual act of Christian discipleship, a sacramental sign of the Kingdom of God which both is and is not yet, a position which I held for much of my life, and put on the mantle of a secular political scientist. Political science, though more of an art than a science, is my only academic discipline. If Jesus is my spiritual guru, my chief political mentor is the secular Jew, pre-eminent scientist and wise human being Albert Einstein. A prophet as early as the 1920s, he lectured credibly and with passion that if the human community did not find a way of effectively outlawing war (as individual murder is outlawed), war defined as state or quasi-state organised killing, then, given the development of the technology of killing, whether nuclear, chemical or bacteriological, the human race and nature as we know it would not survive for very long.

From the bow and arrow to the bullet to the hydrogen bomb has been a relatively rapid progression. Vast resources have gone into the art and craft of killing, fortunes spent and huge profits made. The world's universities and best brains are up to their necks in this process. Einstein was at the heart of it all and warned that the world might blindly and all too readily go the way of the gadarene swine, the way to self destruction. Technological progression is going hand in hand with intellectual and moral regression. Albert Schweitzer's theologically based philosophy of reverence for life was being

written as Einstein incessantly warned of our threat to ourselves. These were civilisation's two giants in the first half of the 20th century. They were not and are not heard in the seats of power. Their legacy is in the hands of small prophetic groups in many countries. How many leaders of church and state in Britain are aware of The Movement for the Abolition of War, right at the margins, founded with his friends by that prophetic Catholic Christian Bruce Kent, who sacrificed his public priesthood to the cause of peace? If that is a lost cause, we are all lost.

Given the will, the abolition of war as an acceptable instrument of policy is as possible as the abolition of slavery. The United Nations Charter already pays lip service to it. To implement it would mean a radical change in public opinion the world over. And it would mean defeating the world's most powerful lobby, the military-industrial complex. Astonishingly, shortly before his death, Dwight Eisenhower, first America's top soldier and then its president, warned the American people of the colossal danger of that complex. He had been at its heart and had the moral insight to blow the whistle while he still lived ... a dying president's 'still small voice'. Maybe, when he's lost power, Obama will add his. Maybe. Maybe it is a pity he has never been a soldier, yet is expected to wage a phantom 'war against terror'.

At the edges, the world's peace movement exists everywhere. The churches, were they to embrace a post-constantinian world, could be at the heart of that movement. Then Jesus would feel less of an exile from those who claim to speak in his name. That may be too much to hope for. The secular world is a little more promising. Even NATO has established a peacekeeping academy.

The military might well be ahead of the politicians. They will need to transform their existence into a world supra-national police force, equipped to prevent and end wars but not to fight them. Academic peace research institutes, with less than 5% of the resources for war studies, are at work on all these issues. There are no easy answers, but finding them is well within human possibility. At one level this is a deeply spiritual issue, at another it is a huge task for the social psychologists. We need not be wired, as we still are, to solve conflicts by violence.

Might this promising new Pope Francis refuse to be met, when arriving on foreign soil as a head of state, by military guards of honour with fixed bayonets? Children bearing flowers would serve better as sacred signs of national identity than young men and women in helmets. The soldiers are not the problem but the unwitting tools of our tribal worship of war.

My deeply personal pacifism retains its spiritual validity. When the Catholic Church beatified Franz Jägerstätter, who was executed for refusing to join Hitler's legions, against the advice of his bishop, but because Jesus would not allow him to kill, the Church was (very belatedly) honouring his conscience. It was not suggesting that this is what every faithful Catholic should have done. That still remains a step too far for many.

My contention now is that realism, not idealism, should lead to a universal rejection of war. My personal conscience is no longer my primary concern. Unlike some of my pacifist friends I now see a future role for minimally armed peacekeepers, part of a non-partisan world police force. UN blue helmets are a very modest first step in this direction. Their intention will not be to take but to save lives. Complicated and imperfect, of course, but possible and necessary. This is a human, not a Christian task, though it does enable me to believe that the Sermon on the Mount is the last word in *realpolitik*.

Many hurdles remain. One of them, and here I find myself ecumenically somewhat isolated, is the current almost liturgical bracketing of justice with peace. These two concepts, both biblical and universal, are used as though they virtually mean the same. They do not. The human and Christian duty to work for a more just world is beyond question. My years as chair of Amnesty International UK testify to my commitment to that universal struggle for what the bible calls greater righteousness. Perfect justice, what Christians call the Kingdom of God, is eschatological and will remain a permanent objective as long as human beings exist.

That necessary struggle for a *more* just world should not be confused with the maintenance of peace, the attainable abolition of legitimised violence. If we so define peace that its achievement depends on the prior achievement

of perfect justice we are in fact saying that peace is impossible. If we buy into the definition of peace illustrated by the text over the gate of the intercontinental missile base of the US Air Force: *peace is our business*, in other words if we believe that justice must, if need be, violently enforced, then there will be neither peace nor justice.

Of course injustice is one of the underlying causes of war. Of course there is a connection. Many children die every day because they have no access to clean water. That is scandalous when what is spent in one month on the world's armaments could save their lives world wide. That highlights the connection. But the many who still maintain that war is a legitimate means of achieving justice create the greatest hurdle to making the world more peaceful. In reality wars perpetuate injustice. They do not protect women and children. They are war's first victims. Its outlawing is part and parcel of making the world more just, but because we are what we are, never completely so.

The psalmist who looked forward to the day when righteousness and peace kiss each other was not wrong. But that day is not yet. There remains a dialectical tension between them. To recognise that is important. Once again my guru Jesus attests to that. He preached and lived peace. He was not a zealot, a freedom fighter, insisting first on justice for his people. He lived within the harsh injustices of Pontius Pilate's Roman occupation. He did not kill the Roman officer but healed his child.

Within the greater *shalom* of God, political peace, the rejection of war as an instrument of policy, imperfect though it will be, is necessary and possible.

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