

The Pacifist Conscience, Rev. Dr. V. Jonathan Hartfield

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Thank you for asking me to speak on this subject, and I hope that I will be a catalyst for further discussion about the pacifist conscience. I would suggest that it is a foundation idea for any group interested in disarmament initiatives and they will flounder without it. Who, after all, will seriously go on the difficult and frustrating journey towards disarmament, if one is intent on keeping war as a possibility, even a small war, as in Afghanistan? And of course, if disarmament is successful, and we were to live in a disarmed world, the methods of the pacifist will have to be used to resolve the inevitable tensions and rivalries that occur when leaders compete, especially when they invoke their national interest to support their desire to be first in the pecking order.

Generally in the world's history, pacifists have been unpopular, for as Mark Kurlansky has pointed out in his book 'Non-violence' – this is a dangerous idea.

I was interested to see that your notice for this meeting printed a definition of pacifism – and I am pleased about that – but it could have made me feel an almost extinct species, rarely encountered by the average man and woman in the street, and therefore in need of description and definition. However, I accept that for many, pacifism is considered preposterously naive in the harsh 'slug-it-out' reality of our world.

This is reflected in our lack of pacifist words. In English our methods are described by negatives, non-violence, non-violent resistance, or, for the most passive of pacifists – non-resistance. Note that pacifists have their spectrum from total passivity to non-lethal pacifism, but for all of us, there is no killing of another human being – a respect for human life, the sanctity of human life. But English doesn't find it easy and we pacifists are often at a loss for good words. So, a definition, and one that is positive, is helpful, for we try to create the conditions amongst people that make for peace ; honesty, compassion, forgiveness etc. We pursue these positives amongst the people we meet, as well as our challenge that says 'No to war and its preparation'.

I have also been given 'conscience' in my title. The Oxford Dictionary says 'moral sense of right and wrong – knowledge within oneself of right and wrong'. It is a capacity of the human mind, (possibly shared by dogs) although I have reservations about Hitler, Stalin, and people of that ilk. I don't think the content of the conscience – what is right or wrong – is inbred. To me that is formed by ideas and the behaviour of those around us. I think that consciences can grow and change and mature and become weaker or stronger. They are dissolved by alcohol and are much enfeebled by the presence of crude oil.

Conscientious objectors are people obedient to conscience when required to fight, which implies to me that in a time of war, there appears to be no sensible reason not to fight, so a person's refusal to fight can only be that strange individual light we call conscience.

Even in peacetime, the paradigm, the norm of our society is military, even down to the clothing at Royal weddings, so pacifists are usually swimming against the tide.

I had better mention my own pacifist conscience which was not always present. My father was a Major in World War 1, my stepfather a Captain in World War 2. Both had difficult and adventurous times but they rarely talked of it, and unfortunately I didn't ask them much. If they had lived here, neither would have attended the RSA, nor wanted a bugle blown at their funeral, even if they in no way felt guilty about their war service.

I was 6 when war was declared, and remember it. I was patriotic and at a boarding school, and accepted the current 'Onward Christian Soldiers' norm of British Anglicanism. I thought Uncle Joe Stalin a good bloke. That is what we were told. My only deviation was that I thought that clerics wearing their military medals and ribbons were 'show-off', and a bit distasteful.

It was as a medical student in my early twenties that change came. I was on top of a bus going down Regent Street in London, when I suddenly thought, one of the 10 Commandments is 'Thou shalt not kill', so I must not. I was wrong of course, the command is 'Thou shalt not murder' meaning private civilian killing, not group slaughter as in war. However, it was a start, and a good thought for someone who was to become a surgeon, and is still a Hospice doctor. For me the pacifist position unravelled slowly as I re-committed myself to Christianity, and found myself happily married to a pacifist CND wife. In Nigeria I worked with a colleague who was a pacifist, and in our 10 years there we experienced four and a half years of riots and civil war. I don't remember any great talks on pacifism as we were probably too busy, but some 15 years after my London bus ride, I had become one.

I am of the variety that does believe in police action, and I know that slipping on a pair of handcuffs can be defined as a violent act. But nobody is to be killed or tortured, and criminals are dignified by their humanity, and hopefully changed inside and out. If they are enemy I am to love them.

So to history. I will concentrate on the Christian witness because our society is moulded on Christianity, and I speak as a member of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship. Also time is short.

To go back some 4000 years, the Jewish creation myth is a non-violent one. The Word brought order from chaos, and it was pronounced good. It is not a creation born out of violence as some creation stories suggest. Eden is a peaceful garden. The first murder, that of Abel by his jealous brother Cain, happens outside of Eden. Later Moses was to forbid murder in the 6th Commandment. This did not prevent war, and the Jews fought a lot – but there were restraints – no booty for example, which removes a potent reason for fighting. Vengeance was restrained – 'an eye for an eye' replaced two or more for one. Prophets like Amos demanded justice for the poor, and the three Isaiahs envisioned a time of peace with 'swords beaten into ploughshares'. There arose the Jewish concept of shalom.

It is Jesus of Nazareth who has been the prime inspiration for the pacifist conscience. In Mark Kurlansky's words, 'the early Christians are the earliest known group that renounced warfare in all its forms, and rejected all its institutions', (p. 21).

Many people, including Christians, don't recognise this, which led Gandhi to comment that the only group unaware that Jesus was a pacifist is the Christians.

First century Palestine was as turbulent and violent then as it is now. Rome was the colonial power, with its ever-present military. Cruel and corrupt little tyrants like the Herods had a degree

of local control with their own armies and prison cells. They were not Jews. The Jews themselves looked for political and religious liberation, achieved mainly by force. Uprisings were frequent and ruthlessly crushed. The crucifixion of freedom fighters so common, that at times there was a shortage of wood. The Messiah, eagerly anticipated by the Jews, would outshine King David's brilliant war record.

Jesus was not a meek and mild figure who travelled around the fringe of Palestinian society, patting babies' heads. He was right in the thick of it, and many of his sayings and actions had major political consequences. At one time, presumably when the unpopular Herod was on the back foot, the crowds tried to make Jesus king. Jesus did claim to be the Messiah, but turning expectation upside-down, it was a peaceful Messiah he embodied and not a military one. This upset many people and contributed to his rejection by many Jews.

Although the whole of the New Testament can be considered a pacifist manifesto, it is much more than that of course, particular parts stand out, and the Sermon on the Mount is one of those parts that has inspired many people, both inside and outside Christianity. Here are a few verses from the Sermon, (N.T.Wright's translation) –Matthew 5: 38 -44 ; 'You heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.', but I say to you, 'don't use violence to resist evil. Instead, when someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the other one towards him. When someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your cloak too. And when someone forces you to go one mile, go a second one with him. Give to anyone who asks you, and don't refuse someone who wants to borrow from you. You heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy '. But I tell you, love your enemies. Pray for people who persecute you.'

So the followers of Jesus are to love their enemies, meaning to continue to recognise them as humans and not demons, and Jesus adds to the Jewish law that says that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves, the prescription that we are to love our enemies as ourselves. He also said do not use violence to resist evil, do not strike back in kind, and he then gives three brief examples that clarify his position. None of them are totally passive, as is often implied in our everyday speech. They are three very practical examples of non-violent resistance – turn the other cheek, specifically the left one, give away your shirt, and go the second mile. All three scenarios would have been familiar to his hearers. A degrading slap on the face for a servant, a debtor being stripped of the little he had by a rich landowner, and a Roman soldier demanding to have his bags carried. All must have happened frequently. This is not an armchair Jesus talking of a future vision, it is him talking to his people, so that they can achieve dignity and justice now in their time of political and economic oppression.

We first hear of Paul at the stoning of a young Christian leader. Paul is a stropky fellow, but some 10 to 15 years later he is writing 'overcome evil with good', a complete reversal of his earlier self.

In 66 AD the Jewish Christians did not support their non-Christian relatives in the great uprising against the Romans. The Church was pacifist and remained so for nearly 300 years. Christians did not kill, nor did they willingly go to the Games where people were killed. Soldiering was a common profession, but soldiers who were converted to Christianity had to leave the army before they could be baptised. Killing and Christianity were incompatible.

At the beginning of the fourth century Christianity became legal, and ceased to be persecuted. Church and state linked arms and the Church's mainstream anti-militarism withered away. The justified war doctrine was formulated, and the Church ceased to be totally pacifist, but some

pacifists continued. The Monastic tradition continued and nurtured the pacifist conscience. For example – St. Martin, an ex-soldier in the 4th century, St. Benedict in the 5th century, St. Francis in the 12th century, initially a soldier, attempted reconciliation in the Crusades but failed. Franciscans and Benedictines are mercifully still with us. After the Reformation some Protestant denominations appeared in which pacifism was an integral part of their belief, eg. Lollards in the 14th century, Anabaptists in the 16th century, and Quakers in the 17th century. Frequently they were persecuted for this and their other beliefs.

In 1815 David Hodge, a wealthy Presbyterian, founded the New York Peace Society, which was the first formal peace organisation in the USA. In 1838 Adin Ballou and William Garrison founded the New England Non-resistance Society. Ballou's book 'Christian Non-Resistance' influenced Tolstoy, who in his turn, influenced Gandhi. Gandhi's methods emerged from his Hindu background, influenced in particular by the Sermon on the Mount and the writings of Tolstoy. Gandhi's methods inspired Martin Luther King Jnr, who in turn influenced Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and so it goes on.

Time and time again, it is the Sermon on the Mount that has inspired and nurtured the pacifist conscience, and formed the desire to resolve confrontations by non-violent methods. This practical loving your neighbour, friend and enemy, is summed up by the positive word 'agape'.

Since Constantine, the Church has allowed killing and war, and a justified war would, I think, be the majority view when diplomacy has failed. It is, by its own rules, a war of defence. I hope I have shown that there has always been dissent to this majority view. There is a counter-culture in the major denominations also, for example the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship. In the 1930s there was great public support for peace movements after the horrors of World War 1. Mostly this pacifist sentiment disappeared when Hitler became a major threat. The collapse of the New Zealand Methodist Church's pacifist stance and its treatment of Ormond Burton and other pacifists, is a particularly shameful local tragedy.

The last part of my brief is to mention its influence internationally. In line with the positiveness of the pacifist position, how are we, for example, to measure all the contributions towards justice and a healthy society made by monks and nuns, Quakers and Mennonites, and other pacifists? It is hard to winkle out wars that were defused, for history books and the modern media are more interested in battles and conflicts than groups finding peace and harmony. Most often tempers are calmed behind closed doors, and it usually means that both sides have to climb down a little. Leaders do not like their people to see that too clearly. Will our Wikileaks world make this easier or more difficult? However, there are some objective public facts that we can point to that give cause for hope, despite the increasing build-up of ever more destructive armaments.

First, there was the phenomenal growth and spread of the early pacifist church, for nearly 400 years. Although much persecuted it grew as it applied its love your neighbour and enemy wherever it went, transforming local societies.

Second, in our contemporary world, there has been a change in attitude over the last 60 years. All those Ministries of War have become Ministries of Defence. New Zealand has a Defence Force.

Third, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Study has been set up in the University of Otago. It owes much to the pacifist conscience of the late Dorothy Brown of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship. There are other centres throughout the world.

Fourth, in the Church most people learn their theology by singing hymns, and hymns express the theology of the church of their time. In New Zealand, Shirley Murray, Colin Gibson and others are writing superb pacifist hymns, which are being incorporated into international hymn-books. Current major hymn-books have many more peace hymns than in previous editions. 'Onward Christian Soldiers' is still in for Just War enthusiasts, much helped by Sullivan's fine tune.

Fifth, the United Nations is still with us and there is a spirit of reform in the air. The International Court of Justice is a source of hope. Neither of these institutions are specifically pacifist, but no war is their intention.

Sixth, to more specific political of non-violent resistance in action – the people of Parihaka, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King are well known. But the liberation of Europe from dictators, somewhat surprisingly beginning in 1974 in Portugal, have shown non-violent action as never before. The Berlin Wall fell without bloodshed. Starting in Poland, where Solidarity was nurtured by the Catholic Church, the movement used the methods of Jesus. In the end 13 nations underwent non-violent revolutions. This involved 1.7 billion people. In China it has so far failed in its objective. The Burmese monk uprising of 2007, was ruthlessly crushed, but we are seeing changes now. In Iran, the Shah was deposed non-violently in 1979, and there are momentous happenings in the Middle East now. Currently there are non-violent street protests against the greed of bankers and their like throughout the world.

Cell phones and other networks can make these protests more controlled and therefore more effective, for non-violent action requires better organisation than a violent response.

Seventh, let me finish with the example of two long-term non-violent groups that have achieved much. This year Amnesty International celebrates 50 years of shaming tyrants and liberating prisoners, mostly by post. Greenpeace, officially named in 1972, has been particularly creative, adventurous and courageous in its non-violent methods, which are directly in line with Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, his donkey-ride into Jerusalem, and turning the left cheek.

The pacifist conscience has a long history, it even has its successes, but as your continued presence here affirms, it still has a long way to go before we reach the peaceable kingdom. That should not stop us from trying, and the outlook is hopeful.

Some useful books

- Civil Resistance and Power Politics. Ed. A. Roberts and T. Garton Ash.
- Christian Peace and Non Violence, a Documentary History. Ed. M.G. Long.
- Holy Bible. It is not lawful for me to fight. J-M. Hornus.
- Non-Violence. The history of a dangerous idea. Mark Kurlansky.
- The Third Way Walter Wink.

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