

The threat of war, the challenge of peace

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Millions of Liberians were caught in a war over which they had no control last year as the forces of President Charles Taylor and rebels seeking to overthrow him led the entire country into a spiral of unspeakable violence.

And yet, for every act of brutal destruction, there were also many acts of compassion.

Liberians working for international relief organizations were at the front lines of the conflict, responding to human need even as they themselves were rendered homeless by the fighting and watched as looters stripped their homes bare.

Stories abound of women who, while fleeing the fighting – sometimes for the third or fourth time – took lost or orphaned children under their care. Many observed Liberians with scarcely more than the clothes on their back sharing their meagre rations of food with those who had less.¹

These stories of people reaching out to others in spite of the horrendous violence going on all around them point to “the peace of Christ that passes all understanding”.

But peace – real peace, enduring peace, peace with justice, “shalom” – requires Christians to understand, to come to grips with the issues and dynamics of the world that seem to produce a never-ending cycle of war and violence. And in all this, Christians are called to care “for the least of these” – the victims of war, hatred and violence.

In 2001, the World Council of Churches launched a “Decade to Overcome Violence”, calling on Christians around the world to address issues in their own contexts that contribute to escalating violence – from international conflict such as the Iraq war to domestic violence in individual homes. The WCC outlines the challenges in four categories:

1. The spirit and logic of violence
2. The use, abuse and misuse of power
3. Justice
4. Religious identity and plurality.

How can each one of us and the communities of faith in which we live contribute to the overcoming of violence wherever it occurs?

The spirit and logic of violence

In the 5th century, Augustine, a primary shaper of western Christian thinking on war and justice, said that governments have the “loving obligation” to use force, if necessary, to defend innocent people against evil. However, those who

would resort to violence must demonstrate that such a war would be justifiable according to seven criteria. These are:

1. The cause must be just, such as self-defence or the defence of a helpless third party;
2. The war must be fought with the right intention – the actual motives must match the cause;
3. The war must be declared by a legitimate authority;
4. The war must have a reasonable chance of success, avoiding the sacrifice of human lives for a hopeless cause;
5. War must be the last resort, after all other alternatives have been exhausted;
6. The violence must be proportional to the wrong or injury suffered using only enough force to achieve victory and making every effort to avoid non-combatant deaths;
7. The goal must be to establish a just peace.

Just war doctrine is still the operative gauge for judging the legitimacy of war today, but the events of September 11 and following have called into question whether “just war” criteria are still valid or applicable.

Just war theory is not the whole of the picture for Christians. We also have to contend with our primary witness – God’s word, revealed in scripture and in Jesus Christ. Writing in *Presbyterians Today* magazine, Christian ethics professor Mark Douglas outlines five biblical principles that also drive the faith response to war:

1. All human life has value – the basic claim of the Bible is that life should not be taken, hence, our lives have no more intrinsic value than our “enemies”;
2. War is not the norm – God’s command and Jesus’ ministry are marked by the claim that peace, not war, is the purpose of creation;
3. War is an expression of sin – lacking God’s omnipotence and Jesus’ perfect obedience, humanity “falls short of the glory of God”, and the waging of war is one of the surest signs of that human failing;
4. War is not hell, because God is there – there is no realm of existence in which God is not active, so Christians must attempt to discern *how* God is acting in situations of war;
5. Christians are motivated by faith, not fear – we live in the assurance that God is merciful and just, that God makes all things right and that we are called to love God and neighbours, *all* neighbours.²

The use and abuse of power

The unilateral use of force by the United States in waging the Iraq war – and particularly the articulation of the new doctrine of “pre-emptive war” by President George W Bush – is the most recent example of the flagrant misuse of power, at least in the eyes of the UN, which called the US-led military action “an illegal invasion”.

Bush, citing the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon by al-Qaida, argued that the use of such deadly force by a non-state military power has changed the way the world must look at war and peace. Hence, a “war on terrorism” rather than a war against another state.

To every action, however, there is a reaction.

The most recent government crackdown on dissidents in Cuba, for instance, was due, some Cuban leaders say, to the fear that that “enemy” was next on the United States’ list of countries needing “regime change”. US officials denied that, of course, but more than 40 years of unrelenting hostility by the US government makes the Cuban claim plausible, if not probable.

And the most dramatic case is the real or threatened nuclear build-up by North Korea. Already identified by Bush as part of the “axis of evil”, the North Koreans have taken understandable if ill-advised measures to counter what they perceive as an abuse of power.

Of course, these same issues are reflected in conflicts throughout the world: in the Balkans, the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, African wars in Sudan and Congo, insurgencies in Peru and Colombia. Power and abuse of power occur on every continent in many guises.

Justice

Fundamental to every conflict – global, regional, local and domestic – is profound injustice. Contemporary economic globalization has created immense opportunities for a few, but has had devastating economic, political and social consequences for most.

The global economic system seems utterly chaotic to all but the shrewd manipulators who are amassing uncountable fortunes. World Trade Organization meetings invariably dissolve into dysfunction while the disenfranchised shout their objections – sometimes violently – from outside the decision-making halls.

And the problems mount – environmental degradation and pollution, concentration of capital in a few hands, famine and drought, massive migrations of political and economic refugees, scandal and corruption which rob peoples everywhere of precious resources, the uncontrolled scourge of Aids, particularly in Africa and Asia.

Christians everywhere are attempting to address some of these issues and are achieving some successes:

- Religious groups, in alliance with celebrities such as Bono of Irish band U2, are securing more funding to combat the spread of Aids;
- Fair trade (as opposed to free trade) organizations are proliferating;
- Socially-responsible investing is putting more pressure on corporations to clean up their corporate behaviour in areas such as environmental protection, working conditions and community reinvestment;

- Microcredit organizations such as *Oikocredit* are making it increasingly possible for entrepreneurs around the world to gain more control over their economic destinies;
- Anti-hunger organizations such as Bread for the World are making modest inroads into redistributing the world's vast food supplies.

Faith groups are increasingly coming to understand that justice for all God's people will not be achieved by governments alone. Reformed Christians have always known but are increasingly embracing Calvin's understanding that, in a fallen world, all of God's creation and all aspects of God's creation are the mission field, demanding a faithful response from all of God's created to bring peace and justice to fruition.

The question, of course, is how?

Religious identity and pluralism

Ironically, some of the most serious impediments to peace are found in interreligious conflict: the Balkans, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Sudan, Kashmir, India. The struggle to retain one's identity in a world growing more pluralistic has led to some of the most intractable conflicts in the world today.

One sign of hope is increasing dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

In the wake of the September 11 tragedy, for instance, the interfaith listening project of the Presbyterian Church (USA) brought pairs of Christian and Muslim colleagues from 10 countries to tell US Presbyterians about Christian-Muslim cooperation in their contexts. Those conversations have spawned numerous projects around the US designed to foster greater understanding and cooperation between Christians and Muslims in several communities.

Other examples of interfaith cooperation abound:

- In Iraq, the Middle East Council of Churches is working closely with Muslim leaders to provide much-needed social services in that war-torn country;
- In Albania, the Orthodox Church took the lead in providing hospitality and refuge to Muslims fleeing the violence of the Serbian invasion of Kosovo;
- In Peru, Protestants and Pentecostals have joined to demand the clean-up of mining operations that are creating devastating lead-poisoning of children;
- In Sudan, the New Sudan Council of Churches is inching warring Muslims, Christians and Animists closer to peace after 40 years of war in that country;
- In Indonesia, where communal conflict has claimed many lives, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches brought together Christians and Muslims from Maluku and Sumatra for an interfaith consultation on peace; this work continues.³

Questions

1. Are the just war criteria still valid in the 21st century? Why or why not? How would you change the historical just war criteria?

2. What are the appropriate uses of power in the world today? How can abuses of power be corrected constructively and nonviolently?
3. How can the church and other faith communities most effectively “speak truth to power”?
4. What are the critical economic, political and social justice issues facing your community? How are communities of faith trying to address them?
5. Is progress being made in your community to improve interfaith understanding and cooperation? Why or why not? What are the barriers? What would you like to see happen?

Notes

1. See Callie Long, “Liberian churches look to compassion to transform the country”, *Ecumenical News International*, September 12 2003.
2. Mark Douglas, “Is it ever right to fight?”, *Presbyterians Today*, Presbyterian Church (USA), November 2003.
3. Park Seong-won, “A new horizon of multireligious commitment to peace for all”, *Update 12/2&3* (October 2002), and related articles. See www.warc.ch/update/up122/12.html