

IN REMEMBRANCE AND HOPE  
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Two weeks ago I was at the United Nations Sunday service at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. Steven Epperson, the minister, spoke eloquently about the contribution that Unitarians had made over the years to the constructive work of the United Nations. One could go further back to the beginning and say that the so-called “Father of United Nations Day” was a Unitarian. Frank B. Frederick, a prominent Boston Unitarian, headed a small group of associates in campaigning for the establishment of a day expressing a commitment to peace and world order. This in due course won the active support of the Assistant Secretary General of the UN, and culminated in a unanimous vote of its General Assembly in 1947 establishing October 24 as United Nations Day.

There has of course been a great deal of disenchantment since that time, and United Nations Day is not as widely observed now as it was in the more hopeful period right after the Second World War. But at that service two weeks ago there was one very moving event – the presentation of the John Gibbard Award, which goes annually to persons or organizations in the local community who have sponsored young people in involvement in the peace-making work of the UN. John Gibbard was a long-time member of our Vancouver church, and I counted him a good friend. He was a retired school teacher, who had been active in the League of Nations Society in Vancouver during the inter-war years, and was its president at the time it became the United Nations Association.

It seems particularly appropriate today to preface my remarks at this service by sharing with you some words spoken by John Gibbard at the Vancouver church's Remembrance Sunday service back in 1984.

He said: 1914 was an important year in my life. I passed the British Columbia High School Entrance Examinations in June just before a young Serb killed the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand, heir to the Hapsburg Empire and close friend of the German Kaiser. A month later Austrian troops entered Serbia and in the next six days Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary, Germany entered Belgium and Britain and Canada declared war on Germany. Later, Italy would withdraw from the Triple Alliance and declare war on Austria and Japan would join Britain in the war in the Pacific and so change the Great War in Europe into the First World War even before America entered the warfare her own reasons in November, 1917.

Why? Why would over eight million young men lose their lives over one murder and the

murderer is a forgotten man after it was over? Why were whole pages in the Vancouver papers being filled daily with hundreds of names of Canadian casualties? Why were youths I had known in our little community of Mission being killed or sent home with a leg, an arm, or an eye missing?

The answer at the time seemed simple enough. Britain and Canada, their people believed, were at war “to save poor little Belgium” while carefully selected quotations from German statesmen and Military leaders proved that Germany had long planned to expand her empire by war. It was only after it was over that we learned that Britain was already secretly committed to join France (and her Russian ally) in any war against Germany. Much later I came to realize that by the same method of selected spokesmen and quotations I could make an equally damaging case against Britain or any other “ great power”.

Back in that same year of 1914 when John Gibbard entered High School, just two months after the outbreak of war, one of the most famous English authors of the day, H.G. Wells, published a book with the title *The War that will end War*. Let me share with you one or two short sentences from that book: “This is now a war for peace -- this, the greatest of all wars, is not just another war – it is the last war! ... I, with my declared horror of war, have not signed any of these 'stop the war' appeals and declarations that have appeared in the last few days. Every sword that is drawn against Germany now is a sword drawn for peace.” It would seem that a lot of people felt the same way, for that book was reprinted twice within the first month after it appeared. What it was saying was that in order to obtain peace you had to make war; you had to undertake a war to end war. The idea was not exactly new with Wells. Vegetius, the 4th-century Roman who profoundly influenced military thinking in Europe for many centuries, came up with the aphorism “Whoever desires peace should prepare for war.”

Today we may feel a little cynical about such a seemingly preposterous idea: a war against war. But in our own time we have seen an extension of its application, particularly in our neighbour to the south, but by no means confined within its borders. We are told that the world we want to see is going to be brought into being by a war against poverty, a war against crime, a war against drugs, and (in recent years) a war against terror. I read this week that in Alberta there is now to be a war against the pine beetle. The use of war as an acceptable metaphor is paralleled by the way in which over the years we have used the word “crusade”, as though this represented a positive striving in a good cause, when in fact the medieval Crusades were among the bloodiest wars in history. As Karen Armstrong points out

in her fine book on the subject, when the Crusaders finally got into Jerusalem they savagely butchered some 40,000 of its Jewish and Muslim inhabitants. Nor were these the only victims – fellow-Christians got the same treatment with the sack of Constantinople in 1204. In Karen Armstrong's words: “The sack of Constantinople was one of the great crimes of history. For three days the ... Crusaders rushed through the streets, raping, killing and pillaging with a horrible eagerness. Women and children lay dying in the streets and nuns were raped in their convents ... In the great basilica of St Sophia drunken soldiers tore down the silk hangings and trampled the sacred books and icons underfoot, and a prostitute sat on the Patriarch's throne singing bawdy songs.” Such was the reality behind a word that is used to this day as a metaphor for commitment to a noble cause. And in 1914, as John Gibbard pointed out, there were many people to whom it seemed that they were enlisting in a noble cause.

We know now what unspeakable carnage there was during that first World War, but at that time and for years afterwards the official version was that it had been a noble crusade -- 'to save mankind' as it was put. Those with first-hand experience knew better, of course, and hence the widespread cynicism. The little English village in which I spent my childhood had a population of about 150, but its war memorial commemorated six young men who went to the war and never returned. Of those who did return, two were never in a condition to hold a regular job again. Our next-door neighbour, who had been a blacksmith, was one, and I remember his saying when the second World War began that he would sooner see his son in the cemetery than have to go through what he had gone through. What he had gone through he never ventured to describe. My own father was a year or two older than John Gibbard – just old enough to be caught up in the final period of the war. In the spring of 1918 he faced the great German offensive, a last desperate effort to retrieve declining fortunes and break through to Paris. The battalion in which he served began the battle with five hundred members and ended with fifty. He himself survived because a shell burst close to his trench and buried him alive. By the time he dug himself out he was behind the German lines, and spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp.

Years later, when I was about five years old, my father was clearing up the garden at this time of the year, and had a big bonfire going. Meanwhile, I had been rummaging around indoors, and in a closet found the old army cap he had when he was discharged. Proudly I put it on and marched out, expecting some kind of admiration, and was completely nonplussed when without a word he snatched the cap off my head and threw it on the bonfire. Only years later did I come to realize what that meant, for he too never talked about his experiences.

Whatever the remembrance, in those days people remembered. Remembrance Day was never a public holiday in Britain, but at 11 o'clock on November 11 the whole nation came to a standstill for two minutes of silence. I remember observing that in the high school I attended, which had about thirty names on its war memorial. For many people today here, it is no more than another public holiday, but in my memory it stands out as an occasion when, no matter with what kind of emotion, people remembered.

I spoke a few moments ago about the way in which war has come in our time to be accepted as an acceptable metaphor. But as I think back now, I am struck by the extent to which this was true in the religion in which I was raised. I got messages that were very hard to add together. On the one hand, at church services every Sunday we prayed, "Give peace in our time, O Lord". While on the other hand, many of the hymns we sang told of our being soldiers of Christ who must fight the good fight. "Christ the royal master leads against the foe / Forward into battle see his banners go." "From victory unto victory his army he shall lead / Till every foe is vanquished and Christ is Lord indeed."

When I was very young, I was only dimly aware of this paradox but like my father, I came of age during a war and was faced with conscription for military service. For most of my friends there was no question about their acceptance of this. But I had a cousin who became a conscientious objector, on the grounds that his was a religion of peace, and that made it impossible for him to participate in a war. I too took my religion seriously, and had to wrestle with the question of what I was to do. War was an evil, but so also was the Nazi regime that had fastened its sway over Europe an evil. Which was the greater evil, and if the answer was that Nazi practice was the greater evil, how would it be overcome except by participating in the lesser evil of war?

So I made my decision, and served in the Royal Air Force. I became an air navigator, but by the time I had completed my training the war in Europe was within a month of being over, so I never had to practise what I had been trained for. Since that time I have often had occasion to think about what would most likely have happened if I had completed that training a year earlier. Those were the days when the cities of Hamburg and Dresden were bombed into seas of fire which brought an agonized death to many thousands of civilians, and I would almost certainly have been one of those who did this. When the war began there had been a revulsion of horror at the Nazi bombing of the city of Rotterdam,

which was certainly terrible enough, but resulted in civilian casualties numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands that the similar bombing on our side killed before the war was over. The latest estimate of deaths in Dresden, only just published, is 25,000. We had succeeded in overthrowing the Nazi menace only by adopting its procedures on a larger scale. And I could have been drawn into that process step by step as a result of the decisions I had conscientiously made at an earlier stage in the war.

All this was possible only because of the numbing of conscience for most people as the war proceeded. It came to light later that the decision to bomb residential cities had been kept secret as far as possible, for fear that people like the Archbishop of Canterbury would raise moral objections in public and thereby, in the opinion of those responsible for policy, weaken the war effort. Religion might support war to produce peace, but not at the cost of other moral delinquencies. But the numbing of conscience through involvement in war-making rather than peace-making has stayed with us through the years that have passed since the events I have just been describing, so that today the thousands of civilian deaths in Afghanistan or Iraq barely get mentioned, while the even larger number in the Congo, for instance, are only just beginning to be noticed in the world at large.

Meanwhile, the dilemma remains for those who take religious commitments seriously. We are only too well aware that the Crusades, nominally fought in the name of religion, are only one example of the involvement of religion in blessing or actively promoting war. In September I was asked to speak on religion and peace at a Unitarian church in India, and it was only at the last minute that I remembered that modern India, as separate from Pakistan, came into being with a war in the name of religion. The most influential religious document in Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita, conveys its deep spiritual message in the context of two armies drawn up for battle, a battle that is surely about to begin. In Christianity the militaristic hymns I mentioned earlier perhaps get their inspiration from the Bible itself, where God is described as the Lord of Hosts, a term which originally meant God of the army of Israel, though it was later raised by the prophets to cosmic dimensions and the hosts were no longer military but angelic. But this ambivalent term is still used in much Christian worship.

Even in the teachings ascribed to Jesus there are strange anomalies. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount he is recorded as saying, "Blessed are the peace-makers", but a few chapters later in the same Gospel you find the words: "Don't think that I have come to bring peace to the earth: I have not come to bring peace, but a sword ...one's enemies will be members of one's own household.." (Matthew

10:34) And so one could quote from the scriptures of Islam and other world religions.

There are, of course, some people who would argue that religion has been more of a curse than a blessing in human history, and the sooner we humans outgrow it the better. And certainly, as a force making for war rather than peace, organized religion has much to answer for. The so-called wars of religion have been brutal beyond description. I forget who it was that said he would prefer to see war-makers with at least the honesty to admit that their motives were rape and loot and other forms of giving unbridled rein to a lust for power, rather than the sanctimonious claims that have so often been made. Maybe it was Gibbon; at least he has a celebrated passage in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in which, referring to one of the many conflicts of that time, he says: "The war was preceded, according to the practice of civilized nations, by the most solemn protestations that each party was sincerely desirous of peace."

But wherever organized forms of religion line up in such situations, we always need to ask ourselves: is this really an expression of religion, or is it politics masquerading as religion? It's possible to look back at the so-called wars of religion and discern the economic and political forces behind the facade of religion, not to speak of personal ambitions on the part of individuals. Even where it's difficult or impossible to do this, we can still ask whether the significant factor is not religious attitudes in any acceptable sense, but rather the dogmatic approach which says that my understanding of truth is the only possible one, and all other claimants to truth have to be repressed, violently if necessary.

In spite of all the attempts to use religion as an accessory to war-making, I still maintain that at root religion is concerned with building peace, not through a war against wars or against anything else, but through constructive action. What convinces me of that? I believe that religion is ultimately concerned with wholeness, or holiness, which is another form of the same word. Religion is our concern for the whole way in which we respond to the whole of what meets us as we go through life. It brings everything together into one whole, rather than breaking it down into divisions. Working towards wholeness takes us beyond the conflicts that break our peace. And that wholeness has to be achieved at all levels of our personal and social being. Our goal as individuals is to become whole persons, undivided by inner conflicts. That's easy to say, but by no means easy to achieve. It requires spiritual disciplines that often demand much of us, but in the end bring rich rewards.

If we achieve this wholeness within ourselves, it gives us the foundation upon which to build

wholeness with others, for we come to realize that we are not isolated individuals, always separate from others if not in conflict with them. We are, as again the higher religions have all taught us, members one of another. Loving your neighbour as yourself arises from a growing awareness that in a very deep sense your neighbour *is* yourself. You and your neighbour are bound together in one wholeness to which each gives something and from which each gains something. And that wholeness goes on expanding into wider and wider levels, till it takes in the whole of humanity. If that can be achieved, then peace comes of itself as a natural fruit.

But we have not done yet. We live today under a massive threat brought about by our drifting into a war against nature rather than an attempt to build wholeness (holiness) there too. Most obviously in the modern Western attitude that has come to dominate the world in the past few centuries, nature is seen as an adversary to be overcome, not as a whole of which we are inseparably a part. A year before the outbreak of the first World War the Indian poet and sage Rabindranath Tagore told an American audience: “The west seems to take a pride in thinking that it is subduing nature; as if we are living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things”, and went on to add that this creates an artificial distinction between ourselves and the Universal Nature within whose bosom we lie. I think that now, nearly a century later, we are more willing to give heed to such a statement than most people were at that time. Tagore was presenting, avowedly, a deeply religious approach to life, and peace with the whole nature of things was part of that religion.

I began by recalling thoughts engendered by the celebration of United Nations Sunday only a couple of weeks ago. Let me conclude by reminding you of the words that open the preamble to the charter of one of the more promising agencies of the United Nations, UNESCO: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” That, for me, has the ring of truth, particularly since I see as the content of what are here called “minds” not only intellectual ideas, but also feelings, motivations, aspirations, commitments. These all form part of our personal religion, and all play their part in constructing the defences of peace.

Remembrance can take many forms. If it is to be productive, it must have something to offer to our present and our future that we have learned from looking back at our past. Otherwise it becomes no more than living in a nightmare or in a sentimentalized illusion. If religion is a call to wholeness, then past, present and future are brought together into one deeply meaningful whole.

