

In the spirit of understanding the development of a positive theology of peace as the task of every field of theology, we have invited four scholars from different fields to explore with us and to challenge us to develop a positive theology of peace.

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FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN PEACE

The appearance of the American bishops' pastoral letter on peace is, perhaps, one of the most urgent among many factors challenging scholars to address in a new way the entire Christian peace tradition. We ask spontaneously: What do the Scriptures have to tell us about peace? How did the early Christians understand their responsibility to promote peace?

In an attempt to contribute to the ongoing discussion, I propose, at this time, to pursue a threefold task: 1) to review, in a general manner, the biblical concepts of peace; 2) to examine, again in a general way, the evidences for a Christian understanding of peace in the patristic era; 3) to suggest some points of departure for reflection on the theological significance of a commitment to peace and justice which seeks to assure convergence between the struggle for human rights and the coming of the reign of God.

I. BIBLICAL CONCEPTS OF PEACE

Any effort to identify the foundations of peace, as it is to be understood by Christians, must take two realities into account. The first is the recognition that the biblical foundations for a teaching on peace can be found in both the Old and the New Testaments. The second is that questions put to the past by the present must be articulated in terms of a situation and an experience that are "new," because they are contemporary, that is, conditioned by factors of a "different" time and space in human history.

Old Testament

There seems to be agreement among scripture scholars that a general, composite statement on peace can be derived from the books of the Old Testament. At a first level, biblical peace can be said to indicate "the well-being of daily existence." It is harmony with God, with nature, with others, with oneself. "Concretely, it is blessing, rest, glory, riches, salvation, life." At the same time, we find a more specific, experiential notion of peace that develops throughout the Old Testament. The Psalmist pleads for a peace that is deliverance from the sufferings and trials that mark a time of invasion and war; a peace that is freedom from strife and anxiety; a peace that is equated with a life of happiness, harmony and well-being. The

prophets speak of a peace that can be expected because of the coming of a Messiah who, in the midst of upheaval, was to be the Prince of Peace, bringing the assurance of a salvation that could be measured in human terms. The Wisdom writers address the question of a peace that transcends this life with its afflictions and distress. Here, God is revealed as One who wills to give the gift of a peace that is more than the tranquil life or the absence of war. God's peace, in this life and beyond it, signifies, above all and ultimately, union with the divine.

Along another line of development, peace comes to be linked to still other ideas. The God of Genesis wills the full development of all the possibilities that belong by right to those who have been created in the divine image and likeness. In Exodus, God is revealed as Liberator, whose redeeming action ushers in an era of justice. In Isaiah, peace is understood, primarily, in relation to justice and righteousness. Biblical justice, itself, come to signify Israel's individual and corporate fidelity to a way of life which affirms the values of a faith-community that abides in peace.

New Testament

In the New Testament, again, we find a general notion of peace, nuanced by the diverse insights of one or another of the authors. First, peace is perceived as the realization of the hopes and promises made to Israel. The early Christian community held the firm conviction that the messianic prophecies had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Christ is, indeed, the author of peace. His followers are sent forth to preach the "good news of peace." Then, in Matthew and Mark, the message of peace is given along with the announcement that the kingdom of God has come. The Lukan account of the gospel presents Jesus as one who went about proclaiming peace and posing gestures and actions which were meant to bring about true peace. Through the teachings of Paul and John we are able to understand that peace has its origins and its assurance in the mystery known as the grace of Christ. Peace is the result of the Lord's sacrifice and of his victory over sin and death. Peace is also that fruit of the Spirit which testifies to our union with God, even as it witnesses to our love for those with whom we are one in a community of faith, worship and service.

II. PATRISTIC EVIDENCES FOR UNDERSTANDING PEACE

From the beginning, the Christian gospel proclaimed and promised peace. This message, however, has not been without ambiguity. The reason for this is simple: from the beginning, Christians—like the Lord, himself—have invoked peace and rejected peace. In every age, the followers of Christ have denounced war and used it to their advantage. In other words, it is not possible to examine the evidences for a Christian understanding of peace without also attending to early Christian attitudes regarding war.

Peace in the Early Christian Community

To the Christians of the subapostolic era, peace meant, above all,

reconciliation with God, an atmosphere of harmony and concord within the Christian community, absence from persecution. It also meant freedom from the distractions, trials and dangers that came with a state of war in the Empire. Christians were exhorted to live in a peaceful manner, following the models about them: the measured repose and tranquility of the cosmos; the ordered concord of the Roman army; the harmony and unity of the human body.

During the first three centuries, Christians thought of peace in terms that were clearly spiritual. Peace was described as God's universal order, as the gift of the Spirit of God, as the Christian's special heritage, as a sign of salvation. Peace was a kind of "sacrament" to be exchanged among sisters and brothers in Christ, first of all in the celebration of the eucharist. From the middle of the third century, references to peace were made in relation to the unity that prevailed in the church, to be distinguished from the divisions that existed among those who were the prey of schism and heresy.

The early patristic peace-themes are all found in Augustine, although little is known about his impact on the idea of peace. Augustine is the one, however, who preserved and gave shape to the best of the early tradition on this subject. His teaching can be summarized in two principles: 1) social peace is a good, though incomplete, which reflects true celestial harmony; 2) interior peace belongs to the Christian in whom the fusion of "ascetic rest" and classical self-discipline has been realized. Augustine recognized the inherent worth of lesser forms of peace. He perceived the world's peace not so much as false or evil, but as incomplete; it was meant to be a means to true peace. He insisted, further, on the interrelationship that must exist between personal, interior peace and the exterior conditions of peace that are to mark the Christian's life.

After the fifth century, misinterpretations of Augustine's teaching, particularly that of the two cities, brought about a change in the notion of peace in Christianity. The Augustinian idea of peace was assimilated into an ascetic concept of rest, understood as union with God through contemplation. With the development of monasticism, peace came to be defined, increasingly, as the inner serenity which belongs to those who have embraced a life of prayer, asceticism and solitude for the sake of the Lord. By the twelfth century, too many "peace traditions" were at work in the church and a more juridical, less theological concept prevailed.

Early Christian Attitudes Toward War

In the first three centuries of the Christian era, the idea and the ideal of peace resulted in consequences for citizens of an empire that maintained a standing army. Two questions emerged in regard to this subject: 1) Could a Christian prince embark, legitimately, on war of any kind? 2) Was a Christian bound to military service? The first question might well seem rhetorical to us, since the Christian community was still, at this time, a non-privileged, minority group in the Empire. The very idea of a "Christian prince," according to Tertullian, was an impossibility.

Answers to both of these concerns, however, were attempted. They were phrased, on the one hand, in a general condemnation of war, based on the teachings of Jesus and on the peacefulness that was understood as essential to the Christian life. Indeed, this attitude included a strong rejection of violence of any kind as incompatible with the Christian way of life. On the other hand, as time went on, a more direct expression of what has been called, "the Christian abhorrence and disapproval of war," expressed itself. This expression is found most clearly in the writings of Tertullian: the *Apologeticum*, the *De idolatria*, and the *De corona*. According to Tertullian, it is not possible for Christians to take part in any activities which imply association with pagan oaths and idolatrous worship. Christians are not to be members of a corps known for its cruelty and evil, such as that practiced by soldiers who were also the emperor's police force. His most telling argument was that followers of a thorn-crowned King could not run the risk of having to accept and wear the garlands of glory bestowed on those who returned victorious from battle. In the light of the danger to Christian faith that association with military life required, many early writers, following Tertullian, arrived at the logical conclusion that Christians had no choice other than refusal to bear arms.

At the same time, however, another attitude toward war can be perceived in the Christian community. There was a biblical basis for this attitude, also. Certain sayings of Jesus and some of Paul's teaching invoked military terms, phrases and metaphors to illustrate the ideals of the Christian life. By the third century, military images and expressions of every type were commonly used in exhortations and sermons. The *milites Christi* was a spiritual warrior, whose combat was against spirits of wickedness: demons, heretics, persecutors of the true faith. With the dawn of the Constantinian age, this concept underwent dramatic modification and was translated into less symbolic, more realistic warlike postures. With Anthony the Hermit and Martin of Tours, the ideal of spiritual warfare was preserved for future generations. But loyalty to the emperor and defense of the unity of the Empire were perceived as duties for a Christian who acknowledged that all authority was of God. Before the end of the patristic period, Augustine sought to address the question theologically. His position, namely, that war was both the result of sin and the cure for sin, was to prevail until the sixteenth century.

III. PEACE AND JUSTICE

This brief overview of the biblical and patristic foundations for Christian understandings of peace and Christian attitudes toward war leads us, in a sense, to a point of departure in our reflection.

Today, we speak of peace in terms of justice and love. As one writer has expressed it, "tender love" and "firm justice" are the "one road to peace." This road winds through the biblical tradition, leading us to retrieve concepts of peace that are revealed in the actions of a God who creates us in freedom and for freedom; a liberating God who saves us from non-freedom of every kind; a God of Wisdom who wills that peace be

boundless, established and sustained with "justice and righteousness" (cf. Isaiah 9:6); a God who came to dwell among us as Prince and Author of peace and as the Saviour who calls us to be peacemakers in his name.

This road winds, also, through the patristic tradition, leading us into a land where commitment to peace meant a basic rejection of every kind of violence. We see this commitment in the ambiguous position of Christians who served as loyal citizens in the emperor's army, always hoping that they would never have occasion to engage in battle. They stood ready to accept martyrdom for refusal to fight; to petition, as Tertullian had suggested, for alternate service. Perhaps, they hoped in their hearts for the kind of miracle that preserved Martin of Tours "from being outraged even by the death of others" by finding the "need of the battle" removed, as the enemy, surprisingly, surrendered before an anticipated attack.

As citizens of two worlds, the early Christians were faced, as we are, by challenges that seem to situate us in ambiguity. Perhaps, our position can be made clearer, if not easier, through what we learn from the heritage of our past:

1) The Scriptures clearly point to the fact that promotion of peace and action for justice must go hand in hand. *How can this concept be developed in terms of the contemporary needs of the world in which we live?*

2) The patristic tradition yields a threefold teaching: a) a creative tension exists between world order and the peace of the reign of God; b) the inner peace we experience must witness to our union with God and, at the same time, to our loving, harmonious relationships with other persons; c) the Christian carries a responsibility of commitment to non-violence, for the promotion of life and life-values. *What theological groundwork needs to be done to clarify these understandings and their relationship to war and peace today?*

In the light of these teachings, one final question needs to be articulated: *What values and insights from the biblical-patristic peace traditions might contribute to a theological and pastoral understanding of peace in view of action for justice in the church and the world today?*¹

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¹ For further development of these themes, see, for example, C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982); René Coste, "Les fondements biblico-théologiques de la justice et de la paix" *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 105, n. 2 (mars-avril, 1983); Adolph Harnack, *Militia Christi*, trans., David McInnes Gracie (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); John C. Haughey, S.J., ed., *The Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977); Francis X. Murphy, *Politics and the Early Christian* (New York: Desclée Company, Inc., 1967); Thomas Renna, "The Idea of Peace in the Augustinian Tradition 400-1200." *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979); James Walsh, S.J., ed., *The Way*, Volume 22, nos. 1, 2, 3, 4: "The Foundations of Peace" (January, 1982), "The Struggle for Peace" (April, 1982), "Justice, Love and Peace" (July, 1982), "Light, Solace and Peace" (October, 1982).