

Faith and Peace

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Anne Frank: A Living Legacy

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Humanity has a long history of intolerance and violence based on religious, ideological, racial and ethnic differences. This blight on human culture reached unprecedented levels in the 20th Century, particularly during the period of the Second World War dominated by the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust but which also featured such terrible crimes as the work of the Einsatzgruppen in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the Rape of Nanking. Millions of people were killed in the First and Second World Wars as well as other conflicts, some of which continue to the present day. In the midst of all these terrible events Anne Frank's life stands out as a shining example of what could be rather than what was, and to a degree, still is. And if we, as a world community, are ever to find the "what could be" which is represented by Anne Frank's life, we must remember the words of her great admirer, Eleanor Roosevelt "...it isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it."

Summons to seek peace and to cast aside weapons date to ancient times. The prophet Isaiah said that God would "wield authority over the nations and adjudicate between many peoples; these will hammer their swords into ploughshares, their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift up sword against nation. There will be no more training for war." The Psalmist said "What God is saying means peace for his people, for his friends, if only they renounce this

folly.” Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount , said “Happy are the peacemakers: they shall be called sons of God.”

Messages like these, indeed, are fundamental across all of the great religions. According to the Holy Qur’an, war is such a disaster that Muslims must use every method in their power to restore peace and normality in the shortest possible period of time. In Sura 4, verse 90 it is said “[Be at peace with] those who approach you with hearts restraining them from fighting you as well as fighting their own people. If God had pleased He could have given them power over you and they would have fought you; therefore if they withdraw from you but fight you not and [instead] send you [guarantees of] peace then God has opened no way for you [to war against them].”

The Dalai Lama in his New Millennium message declared that “We must first work on the total abolishment of nuclear weapons and gradually work up to total demilitarisation throughout the world.” Mahatma Gandhi, however, noted that nevertheless “It may be long before the law of love will be recognized in international affairs. The machineries of government stand between and hide the hearts of one people from those of another.”

If the call for peace and the reduction of arms is a central religious message, why then has organized religion been so singularly unsuccessful in promoting peace and disarmament? The step that the medieval papacy took in banning the crossbow is an example to keep in mind. For a time, the ban on the crossbow may have reduced violence. But technology rapidly outpaced this effort of restraint, and soon the spirit of that ban was as arcane as the crossbow itself.

While individual religious leaders from time to time have succeeded in successfully advocating peace, the overall picture is far more bleak. On balance, organized religion has more often been the cause, rather than the cure for violence, intolerance and war. This result is in

diametric opposition to the teachings of the founders -- and many subsequent major figures -- of all the world's principal religions.

In classical times wars were fought to preserve and expand dynasties, to conquer new territories, or for economic gain -- rarely for religious or ideological reasons. And this remained largely true for centuries after classical times. The clashes associated with the rapid expansion of Islam in the seventh and eight centuries were far less conflicts about religion as they were wars to unify the Arab world and expand its domain. This emerging empire did not follow a policy of eliminating Christianity and Judaism in areas that were predominantly Christian or Jewish which came under the control of the Muslim Caliphate. Jerusalem, for example, was governed by a succession of moderate Muslim leaders.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, the spread of Christianity followed Roman and Byzantine legions. Rather than solely an effort at proselytizing, it was more a civilizing force. And centuries earlier, the Israelites, after the Exodus, established the kingdom of Israel in Palestine by force, not so much for religious triumphalism but for the purpose of creating a national and cultural identity.

Thus, as a general matter, none of these conflicts were truly religious wars; they represented state and national expansions of a traditional nature. And after the three great religions of Abraham; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, were all established by the end of eighth century, Jews, Christians and Muslims were able to live together in relative peace and harmony for some 300 years. Far to the east, Buddhism expanded through India into China and Japan and some adjacent areas largely peacefully and Hinduism is the cultural religion of India.

It was arguably not until the 11th century that organized religion took a fateful turn and became a direct instigator of violence and war. In 1095, Pope Urban II preached the First

Crusade. He did so in part to divert energies away from the incessant dynastic conflicts that plagued Europe in the Dark Ages, and also to turn attention from the stagnant economic conditions that had existed in Western Europe for centuries. But more importantly, the goal likely was to create a new, aggressive, militant Christianity that could be a tool of the Papacy and Western dynastic leaders.

Almost immediately, within a year or two, the First Crusade evolved into a religious conflict. As they began their march toward Palestine, the Crusaders attacked European Jewish communities simply because they were Jewish and not Christian. Those attacks foreshadowed other attacks against Jews during the Crusades era, and far more serious ones in the 14th Century when Jewish communities were singled out as scapegoats for the Black Death. The incidents of the 14th Century chronicled in Barbara Tuchman's "A Distant Mirror" then set the stage for the ultimate disaster of the Holocaust in the 20th Century, the backdrop for the beautiful and tragic story of Anne Frank.

The First Crusade touched off a thousand-year war between Christianity and Islam -- one that still rages today. And Christian anti-Semitism as we have known it stems largely from this period. After the Crusaders finally arrived, after enduring many hardships en route, at the gates of Jerusalem in 1099 in the First Crusade, they decided on an all-out attack on the city's inhabitants. In the next two days, Crusaders slaughtered 40,000 men, women and children in Jerusalem simply because they were Muslim or Jewish. We live today with the impact of the Crusades and the many, many other atrocities that followed over the centuries.

The battle over Palestine during the Crusades lasted nearly two hundred years. The Muslims eventually turned the tide, thanks in part to the leadership of the famous Salahuddin. However, the era of religious war had begun, and it continues today. Later, the Muslim cause

against the West was taken over, to a degree, by the Ottoman Turks, who conquered Constantinople in 1453 and brought much of Southeastern Europe under their sway before being halted by a Christian army at the gates of Vienna in 1520.

Soon afterwards, though, it was Christian battling Christian when the Reformation in Europe pitted Catholics and Protestants against one another. The Thirty Years War in Central Europe in the 17th Century eliminated about a third of Germany's population before the Peace of Westphalia was secured in 1648.

Religious and ideological warfare -- which seemed to recede during the Enlightenment in Europe and the emerging dominance of secularism there -- returned with a vengeance in the 20th century. Examples abound: the rise of Fascism and Communism leading to the world struggles of World War II and the Cold War; the Holocaust itself; the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland beginning in the 1970s; the conflict among Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Muslims in former Yugoslavia after its dissolution following the end of the Cold War; the long running war between Judaism and Islam in Palestine beginning in the 1920s and intensifying after the founding of Israel in 1948; the clash between Muslims and Hindus in South Asia beginning during the Partition of British India in 1947; the conflict between the Buddhist majority and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka commencing in the 1980s; and the current worldwide Islamic fundamentalist insurgent campaign based on terrorism and epitomized by Al-Qaeda.

While some of these wars are significantly ethnic or national conflicts, they all have a heavy religious or ideological component. And with the exception of the wars against Nazism and Communism, these conflicts roil on, and some are intensifying. What can be done? How

can organized religion overcome the habit of exclusivity, violence and conflict that has been so much a part of the message for the last 1,000 years, and return to the path of peace.

In today's world, at least, peace and disarmament are inextricably linked. In previous centuries, military weakness was seen, to some degree correctly, as an invitation to attack. During the Cold War, "Peace through Strength" was a well-known maxim. The two Superpowers, though, distorted this concept beyond recognition during the Cold War arm race, with the United States constructing some 72,000 nuclear weapons and deploying up to 32,000 in the field at one time, and the Soviet Union maintaining some 45,000 nuclear weapons deployed in the field for many years -- a large number of these weapons on hair trigger alert.

The world is vastly different now, and for the first time in many centuries, no major state threatens another militarily, except in South Asia. The world's chief threat is not major war, but rather declining world order and catastrophic terrorism. In this situation, peace and disarmament, particularly nuclear disarmament, are inseparable. Nuclear weapons no longer have any military utility. But if one or more should fall into the hands of an international terrorist group such as Al Qaeda -- which would surely use them -- we could witness the greatest disaster in human history, throwing modern society and the world economy into ruin. Thus, nuclear weapons now threaten all states; indeed such weapons are becoming as great a threat to their possessors as they are to other states.

Sovereign nations, on their own, have seemed unable to effectively address this problem or to find the road to a peaceable world. The international treaty system designed to constrain the nuclear threat, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the centerpiece of world efforts to limit nuclear dangers, appears to be gradually coming apart. Nearly 30,000 nuclear weapons still exist worldwide, and the number of countries declaring themselves to be nuclear

weapon states is growing. Many conflicts rage on spawning hatred and violence around the world.

If nations are unable to deal with this threat and to progress on the path to peace and stability, which very much appears to be the case, perhaps the religious communities could take the lead and lead the way toward truly “beating swords into plowshares” in the 21st Century. Sadly, as I have mentioned, many of the world’s major religions remain at war with one another. Can this change? Will the Good Friday Agreement finally bring peace to Northern Ireland? Is there a solution to the Palestine question? Can Pakistan and India truly make peace? Can Buddhists and Tamils come to terms in Sri Lanka? Will the war on terror be won?

We must hope that leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu faiths can put aside their differences, as their faiths at their essence truly demand, and unite in search of peace and disarmament. It will be the faithful of every walk of life suffering if any of the world’s major cities is destroyed by a terrorist nuclear device. Now more than ever in history, it is imperative that religious communities join in the most serious task of pursuing peace.

There have been attempts. The Dalai Lama has been an outspoken advocate of peace for many years. The American Catholics Bishops’ Letter of 1983 made an important contribution, asserting that nuclear deterrence was only morally acceptable as a step on the way toward nuclear disarmament. The Bishops declared “profound skepticism about the moral acceptability of any use of nuclear weapons.” And the person who once owned this house once wisely declared “If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships -- the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world at peace.

But these efforts and parallel ones by Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu leaders have not been sufficient to affect the bulk of their followers. The religious

establishments themselves must now, as a matter of the greatest urgency, considering the alarmingly insecure state of the world today and make it unmistakably clear to the faithful that the era of religious conflict is past. Religious establishments must emphasize to their followers that religion-based violence is off the table, that those who carry out violent acts in the name of God are outside the faith. That all faiths under God support and advocate universal peace and worldwide reduction of weapons.

Perhaps in this most dangerous age, the world's religious leaders can succeed where statesmen and politicians have so appallingly failed. Working together, by implementing the visions of their faiths' founders, perhaps they can turn the world community away from intolerance and the accompanying endless cycles of violence, with unimaginably destructive weapons looming in the background, before it is too late. This is a concept that even with complete faith and dedication would take years to organize, much less accomplish. As President John F. Kennedy recognized "Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures."

But if there is a lesson that history can teach us in thinking about such questions it is that nothing that is good should be thought of as impossible. The old Christian hymn expressed it well, "In every insult, rift and war, where color, scorn or wealth divide, he suffers still, yet loves thee more..."

We all should be guided by the sentiment expressed in the Bhagavat Purana, a Hindu scripture that some say is over five thousand years old: "May the entire universe be blessed with peace and good hope. May everyone driven by envy and enmity become pacified and reconciled. May our own hearts and minds be filled with purity and serenity."

Yes, indeed, as Anne Frank wrote, “How wonderful it is that no one has to wait, but can start right now to gradually change the world.”