
(Paul Gregorios)



A Christian philosophy of peace seems possible though no one, including the Pope or the World Council of Churches has been able to provide one acceptable to all Christians. There are such great divergences among Christians regarding the very meaning of the Christian faith. not to speak of fundamental political differences among Christians all over the world.

But there are two questions which many Christians face in developing a philosophy of peace - first that of human sinfulness, and second, the relation between peace in the biblical sense and political peace.

On Human Sin

Christians agree in their belief that human beings as they now are, have been caught in sin; most of them would also attribute war to human sin and greed. The disagreement comes on the issue of whether this sin can be overcome at all. Some Christians think that human beings are by nature sinful and therefore it would be unrealistic and contrary to the faith to believe that peace on earth is a historical possibility. Prominent Christian thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr (Moral Man in Immoral Society, The Nature and Destiny of Man, etc) argue that political decisions have always to take human sinfulness serious and for Christians to act politically or fail to act would both involve some form or other of sin. He argues for political involvement by Christians. Others take more radical positions in regard to human sinfulness and assert that the political process itself being basically sinful, it is better not to engage in any activity for peace or even for justice, since these are unattainable for humanity in history.

This latter view is a pernicious, as well as a self-contradictory point of view, in addition to being opposed to the basic Christian view about peace and justice which we shall develop in this paper. It is pernicious, because the argument serves as a cover for the most reactionary political attitudes and programmes supporting the present state of injustice in society. It is self-contradictory because on the one hand such Christians say that all people including themselves are sinful, and at the same time they give the impression that they themselves remain sinless by not participating in the political process. At that point Prof Niebuhr's point of view is more realistic and consistent. As a neo-calirnist, the German-American professor of theology believed that all human beings are sinful and that they cannot avoid sin; it was therefore argued that Christians should boldly take part in the life of "immoral society" for the sake of greater justice, knowing that any sin incurred in the process would be forgiven by God. ("justification by faith")

Biblical Peace and Political Peace

The second problem - that of the relation between the Biblical understanding of peace and peace understood as a political term - seems to bother more Christians, especially those who are theologically literate.

In the Old Testament, peace or shalom, is obviously a rich term, including justice, prosperity and security, as well as the absence of war. It denotes the flourishing character of a society that is "righteous", that is, conforming to the will of God, free from idolatry, and practising social justice, especially liberating the oppressed and vindicating the down trodden.

In the New Testament, especially under the influence of St. Paul's thinking interpreted in individualistic terms, the term came to denote mostly personal reconciliation of the sinner with God through accepting the grace of personal forgiveness. This was far from St. Paul's intention. He was not an individualistic thinker. For him peace was always a corporate and inter-personal experience, not just a feeling in the individual consciousness. But as a result of the development of Pietism in Europe and Fundamentalism in America, the individualistic understanding of peace took root in Christian consciousness as one individual's personal reconciliation with God, based on the forgiveness of personal sin by God. The class basis of this individualistic pietism need not be discussed here, for Christians belonging to the working classes also developed a similar individualistic understanding of peace, attributing it to St. Paul and the New Testament.

Of course the present writer does not come from the group of Christians who claim derive their theology directly from the New Testament, while failing to recognize the influence of both the particular tradition in which they have been brought up and the socio-economic factors shaping their interests and ideas. On the contrary, the Eastern Orthodox tradition in Christianity is conscious not only of the role of tradition, but also of the need to be aware of the human factors in all theology, including the thought of unbelievers, as well as human interests of various kinds.

Classical Eastern Christian thought knows that theism is philosophically inconsistent. That is what the Fathers meant by the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. But they were prepared to hold on to a faith in the God whose existence and being they could not philosophically defend or comprehend. And their understanding of peace

was therefore integrally related to an unphilosophical belief in God. But it was neither "pie in the sky, bye and bye", nor individualistic. It was a dialectical understanding, recognising the tension between the believer and the unbeliever as well as the eschatological and the historical.

Peace, in the New Testament, did not mean primarily the individual's personal reconciliation with God, though that was part of the experience of peace. Jesus himself used the word 'shalom' means a condition of flourishing, for societies and persons - in wholeness and health, without conflicts and oppression, without war or exploitation, without division and strife, in friendship and love, with social justice and personal goodness, in safety and security, in freedom and reconciliation. Shalom implies peace, security and prosperity or things going well.

When Christ transformed this greeting world, he distinguished his peace from the way ordinary people wish peace to each other. The world's understanding of peace as largely the absence of conflict was radically challenged when Jesus said to his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; the peace which is mine I gave to you; not as the world gives the peace greeting; ~~I give to you, not as the world gives the peace greeting;~~ I give you real peace". (John 14:27) It is peace in the midst of conflict and struggle; it is the peace that comes from overcoming of fear and anxiety - fear of the enemy, fear of power, fear of evil, fear of death. This peace of fearlessness and freedom from anxiety about the future - one's own future, the nation's future or the future of humanity as a whole - is perhaps the most distinctive element in the Christian understanding of peace.

One can say that the Christian's conception of peace does not focus on a society free from war, but on a community free from fear. This should be the element that Christians can bring to the Peace Movement as a whole. Freedom from fear does not mean an easy optimism that things would work out all right. It provides, however, a panic-free attitude which enables people to confront situations of conflict with equanimity, confidence and wisdom.

Jesus has promised the co-existence of peace and conflict: "These, words I have spoken so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have trouble, but be secure, for I have won the victory over the world"(John 16:33). Christians do not look forward to a conflict-free existence in history. To live in history is to be engaged in conflict against the forces of evil and death. But they engage in that conflict with confidence - confidence that even if they die in the conflict, the cause of peace and justice must win, because of the promise of Christ, and because of his victory over evil and death.

Here the philosophical basis of Christian work for peace is at variance with the classical Marxist basis. The classical Marxist basis also provides a certain confidence about the future, for Marxism attaches to history the promise which Christians attribute to Christ - that evil and and injustice will be beaten and that the classless society would emerge in history, by some element of historical necessity written into the very law of nature. Christians, on the contrary, cannot envisage a conflict-free society in history, but look forward to it beyond history, in the transcendent world which now exists beyond the horizon of our senses.

This may look e like Christian superstition to Marxists. And Christians may be tempted to regard the common Marxist view that nature and history progressing by dialectical processes which can be understood by the human mind constitute the only universe that exists, and therefore the common Marxist denial of a transcendent dimension in the universe, also as superstition. To say the least, it is unscientific to insist that the human mind and senses are actually or potentially capable of knowing everything there is to know. There is no scientific basis for such an affirmation - neither is there any demonstrable or verifiable evidence for such a view. At best it is an assumption, a belief, to which Marxists gave as much right as Christians have to hold on to their assumptions and beliefs.

But this does not by any means imply that Christians and Marxists cannot work together for peace with justice. Agreement in all assumptions and beliefs is not a necessary condition for common work for something commonly perceived as good and desirable.

The Christian belief that a conflict-free society or community is possible only beyond history does not lead to the conclusion that Christians should not work for the betterment of society. Neither ~~question~~ ^{quietism} nor reformism are necessarily Christian positions. On the contrary, the Christian belief is that the transcendent fulfilment of human destiny, that is, a community of love, joy, peace and justice, should both be reflected in the Christian community in history, and that the world itself should be drawn closer to the transcendent ideal, called the Kingdom of God. This also implies that sometimes the forces of evil would be forcibly overthrown by revolutionary forces. Christians will not be the leaders in this revolutionary process, at least not in all circumstances, but they acknowledge its legitimacy.

As Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century Christian philosopher, put it:

"Therefore, all human governments are subject to sudden revolutions of change; for (human) beings who are by nature of equal worth, cannot be given a lesser share in ruling power; but there is a natural impulse for all to seek equality with their rulers, since they too belong to the same human race". 1

Powers that are oppressive of other human beings will be overthrown. Christians recognize this, not as a law of nature, but as a law of God. It does not mean, however, that Christians have to organize themselves as a political party to overthrow oppressive governments. It means, however, that Christians should always be on the side of those forces struggling for peace with justice, and not on the side of the oppressive and exploitative forces.

Conclusion

Human sinfulness or belief in such, cannot be the ground for nonparticipation in the political process for Christians. They must participate, in order to make secular human society conform more and more to the transcendent ideal of the Kingdom of God.

Christians may not share with Marxists the view that a perfect communist society, (i.e. one with the fullness of peace and justice and without class or group conflict) is attainable in history. Christians do believe that societies should advance towards greater justice and peace, even by revolutionary changes, though they may not themselves be willing to engage in violent acts. For such advance, it is imperative for Christians to work with all men and women of goodwill, even when they disagree on certain basic beliefs.

1. Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium, I: 527
PG 45:413 B, Eng.Tr in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers,
Series Two, Vol.V: 84 A.