

PROBLEMS IN A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO PEACE  
an eastern orthodox view

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(Dr. Paul Gregorios)

Christian theological expositions on peace usually suffer at three points - first an individualist interpretation of Christianity, second an other-worldly interpretation of salvation, and thirdly a mistaken conception of original sin and of the inevitability of sin and evil.

The individualist mis-interpretation

Within bourgeois-capitalist political economic systems, the Christian gospel has too often been interpreted exclusively as the "salvation of the believer" or personal salvation. In this quasi biblical perception, "peace" is seen primarily as reconciliation between one sinner and his or her God, and secondarily as reconciliation with other believers. A third level may be reconciliation within the individual Christian himself.

In this system peace means absence of conflict, reconciliation and inner tranquillity. For Christians bred in this way of thinking, peace between or among nations has nothing to do with Christian peace as they understand it. They will even quote scripture to prove that Christian peace and political peace are totally different. The text that comes most handy is the words of Jesus:

"Do not think that I have come to send peace on earth;  
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword".

and "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you;  
not as the world gives do I give you" (John 14:27)

What is forgotten in the interpretation of these texts is the traditional content of the word "peace" for the Hebrew people. The Hebrew word "shalom" (or its Aramaic equivalent which Jesus probably used - "shelam") has a rich connotation, which includes (a) the flourishing and prosperity of a community; (see e.g. Psalm 122:7); (b) the absence of the sword and (c) reconciliation between warring rings (e.g. Judges 4:17, 1 Kgs 20:36).

But the Old Testament notion of peace, especially as it developed in the later prophets and psalmists, becomes an integral aspect of goodness, justice and truth. There are many texts which show this connection clearly; e.g.

"Loyalty and truthfulness will meet  
Justice and peace will kiss each other"

Ps. 85:10

"The work of justice will be peace  
And the service of justice will be  
quietness and trust for ever"

Isaiah 32:17

Now peace, if it is integral to justice, cannot be simply the absence of conflict. For justice can be attained only by confrontation and conflict with injustice. When Christ said that he had not come to bring peace, but a sword, he was simply affirming the principle that evil creates war,

and peace comes only by confrontation with evil.

It is a mis-interpretation of the Bible to think that when Jesus speaks about "my peace", he means an exclusively religious peace of the individual. The peace that Jesus wanted was peace for the whole of humanity, a peace that was integral to just societies. That peace will certainly require a certain amount of confrontation and conflict with the forces of evil and injustice, which are the root causes of war. The peace of the person in his/her relation to God (the totality and source of all being), in his/her relation to other human beings, and to his/her own self-alienation are all aspects of that wider peace which the angels announced at the time of Jesus' birth:

"Peace on Earth"(Luke 2:14).

Christian theology of peace will therefore have to start with a re-interpretation of Christianity that has freed itself from bourgeois-capitalist individualism. The notion of the Reign of God, (or Kingdom of God) which means in fact the triumph of good over evil in all societies, alone can supply a genuine Christian understanding of justice and peace as integral to each other. In such an understanding of Christianity, the Reign of God would not be identified with the Church, nor would it be necessary for Christians to dominate such just and peaceful societies. They can participate in the Reign of God, bear witness to it, and rejoice in it. But the Reign of God need not be the exclusive domain of Christians,

nor under their control. It is historically true that quite often the Reign of God has retreated from societies dominated by the Church, through injustice through suppression of human liberty, through inhibiting the progress of knowledge, and by persecution, oppression and exploitation.

The re-interpretation of Christianity should not ignore or forget the personal element in the Christian understanding of salvation. But it will recognize that the personal experience of peace must be an integral part of corporate security, justice and truthfulness for all.

#### The Other-worldly Understanding of Salvation

Christian faith affirms that life in history is only a phase of human existence - not the whole of it. At this point it differs from Marxist thought.

There are modern versions of Christianity in which the pendulum swings the other way - to affirm that Christianity is concerned with this world and no other. A fresh interpretation of Christianity (secular or religionless) was provided by German thinkers like Gogarten, Bonhoeffer and others. Reacting against German pietism (emphasis on the inner and the other worldly), they have affirmed the "secular" as the realm of God's activity. This one-sided interpretation of Christianity is fast becoming passe. Modern physical theories do not permit us to make such categorical affirmation as that this world open to our senses is the only one that exists, or that it exists objectively and independently of our perception of it.

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The Christian church affirms a dialectical view of of this world. We are not allowed to deny the world's reality or to say that it is only a creation of our perception. What modern Christians like the present writer would say is that our perception of reality as it now confronts us through our senses is only one dimension of the universe shaped by our particular perceptive equipment and social traditions.

So long as we are in history we should take history seriously. But that does not mean that history is the whole of reality.

The Marxist would say that all history is a part of natural history, and that natural history is the history of the whole. The first part is also the view of Eastern Christians, who have been reluctant to separate nature and history as two separate realms. The history of nature is an integral aspect of human historical existence. But Christians like the present writer are not prepared to say that we have through natural history which gives us an accurate and complete account of how the universe began or what principles or forces guide its destiny. We have made enormous progress in the last two centuries in understanding the evolution and development of the universe and of life, but we are far from understanding the origin, the nature and the evolution of matter and life in any fully satisfying way. Our present scientific understanding of matter or life is insufficient to give us orientation for directing our own lives. That orientation can be helped by science, but not provided by it.

Here the Christian's understanding of the other dimensions of existence - dimensions other than those open to our senses - does not rest on any scientific basis. But then neither does the negation of these dimensions have any scientific basis. Both the affirmation and the negation are acts of faith. And a human person has as much right to negate other dimensions as to affirm it, though Christians would argue that the affirmation of these dimensions seems more logical than their negation.

But our point is the relevance of a Christian theological approach to peace to both the world open to our senses and to the conjectured or faith-affirmed other dimensions. Marxists may want to disagree with the Christian approach, but should perhaps understand it before disagreeing.

The authentically Christian approach is not other-worldly, but rather "eschatological". This latter word is difficult even for Christians to understand. It may be even more difficult for non-Christians to grasp. The word "eschatology" literally means reasoned discourse (logia) on the last things (ta eschata).

An example of eschatological understanding may be provided here, at an almost simplistic level. Supposing we have before us a germinated seedling of an oak-tree, a few days old. How do we understand this seedling? It can be

understood as a germination from the acorn or seed which had been provided with the conditions for growth; or it can be understood in terms of the oak tree that it could become, given the proper conditions in the future. The two understandings are obviously not contradictory, but rather complementary - one starting from the past as the result of a process, another projecting into the future, based on the potentialities contained in the object.

The Christian understanding of reality is both historical (as a process) and eschatological (as a potentiality). This means having some notion of the origin of reality as well as its destiny, and of present reality as somewhere in between at the crossing point of the receding past and the approaching future - memory and hope, as the Christian writer Gregory of Nyssa put it in the fourth century.

The Christian understanding of the origin, existence, and destiny of the universe, are faith-based affirmations. We speak about these in terms of "creation", "contingency" and "final fulfilment". We do not believe that the universe is self-generating or self-existent. Those adjectives we ascribe to God, who is beyond conceptual or rational or logical understanding or explanation. The universe itself we believe to be other-derived and other-dependent, and our understanding of its final fulfilment is based on the conviction that the universe comes from God,

and is pledged to be brought to its final fulfilment by God.

In this framework, the Christian approach to peace finds its mooring points. We believe the universe to be essentially good since it comes from a good God. We recognize the presence of evil in the form of injustice, hardness of heart, cruelty, hatred, war, destruction and so on. We say this is partly the result of the work of other forces opposed to the good purposes of God. We say quite clearly that war and injustice and evil are opposed to the good purpose of God. Of course one can cite Bible passages which say the contrary, e.g.

"I am Jehovah and none other,  
I form light and I create darkness  
I make peace and I create evil  
I Jehovah do all these things"

Isaiah 45:7

But in a Christian philosophical theological approach evil is opposed to the will of God. The Hebrew root lacham or the word milchamah which means war or fighting, signifies "devouring each other" or mutual destruction (even M.A.D - mutually assured destruction). Though the God of the Old Testament is often pictured as a man of war (Exodus 15:3 - Yahweh ish-milchamah), the final messianic expectation is for a world of peace





That does not however mean that the Christian is not interested in peace in history. On the contrary, the norm for his striving is supplied by his understanding of the final fulfilment. If the final end of the reign of God is a world without war and without injustice, then it is the manifestation of that final end that the Christian seeks in history. That is the dialectic of the eschological. Knowing fully well that the Reign of God will be only partially manifested in history, the Christian seeks to maximise that partial manifestation.

The Christian's participation in the peace movement is thus based on his perception of the eschatological norm. His faith makes him see the end of the historical process as a world community without war or injustice. His faith also tells him that in history as we now experience it, the wheat and the tares will always grow together.

Of course we should pull out the tares wherever possible so that the wheat can grow more unhindered. But in many cases Christians are more gentle about pulling up the tares, for fear of damaging the wheat (Mt. 13:29). They know however that the tares have to be weeded out - now or later.

Marxists may be a bit impatient about this Christian reluctance for too much plucking out of tares. At this point more dialogue may be required between Christians and Marxists.

### Original Sin and the Inevitability of Evil

If there is anything original about originalism the credit should go to Augustine of Hippo and not to the Christian tradition. Neither the Bible, nor the Eastern Christian tradition speaks about "original sin". Such a term does not exist either in the Greek or in Syriac, or in the other languages of the Eastern Christian tradition.

We do have, however, both in the Bible and in the Eastern tradition the notion of a "sin of our first parents" (protopaterikon hamartema) in Greek. It is a mythopoetic way of expressing the view that human society is pervasively and universally infested with evil in various forms and guises.

But in the Eastern traditions we are unwilling to give any final position to sin in human nature. Sin is an accretion - a pervassive accretion of course - to human nature, but something that is alien and external to human nature.

Unfortunately some Christians regard sin as having some kind of pervasive power which prevents us from achieving any kind of justice or purity (holiness) in this world. This is then advanced as an excuse for not striving towards a world without war, without weapons.

Eastern Christians dissociate themselves from this way of thinking. For them sin is not the first word of the gospel, nor its last word. The first word is this: the created order is good and sin entered it from outside, from the world of non-being and freedom.

Neither is sin the last word. The final word for Eastern Christians is theosis- the progressive and infinite growth of human societies towards the divine perfection. And the divine perfection includes the absence of war and injustice. The work for disarmament, justice and peace thus becomes an integral part of the community's forward movement towards deiformity.

Sinlessness may be an impossibility in history. But there are degrees of sinfulness and also of justice. The Christian striving for peace with justice includes the determined and organized effort to reduce the power of sin (or of alienation, its Marxist equivalent)., and to enhance the degree of justice and peace in all societies. The final fulfilment as norm for present action demands from Christians this active work for peace with justice.

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