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Disarmament: Vision Unfulfilled

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Disarmament: the Religious Origins

The vision of a weapons-free world originated with the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah in mid-8th century BC Israel when the Assyrian Empire dominated the Middle East. Their oft-quoted "swords into ploughshares" identical statements (*Isaiah 2.2-4 & Micah 4.1-3*), in the context of God's judgment on and Israel's moral mission to the world as then known, foretold a "great pilgrimage of the nations to the mountain of God in Jerusalem with the central purpose of world peace and world disarmament".²

"In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be set over all other mountains...All the nations shall come streaming to it...For instruction issues from Zion, and out of Jerusalem comes the word of the Lord; he will be judge between the nations, arbiter among many peoples. They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-knives; nation shall not lift sword against nation nor ever again be trained for war."³

In the same era, the prophet Hosea echoed their vision, in a new peace covenant embracing nature:

"I will break bow and sword and weapon of war and sweep them off the earth, so that all living creatures may lie down without fear." (*Hosea 2.18*).

Two centuries later (*c. 520 BC*), with Darius of Persia allowing the Jews to return from Exile in Babylon to Jerusalem, the prophet Zechariah re-affirmed disarmament as central to the peaceful Messianic kingdom. He saw the king coming humbly to Jerusalem on an ass, a vision many consider inspired Jesus' Palm Sunday entry. He declared unequivocally:

"He shall banish chariots from Ephraim and war-horses from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished. He shall speak peaceably to every nation, and his rule shall extend...to the ends of the earth."⁴

So this utterly new and revolutionary concept of a weapons-free world, born in Ancient Israel as a prophetic response to its situation of frequent conflict in the vortex of Middle East power struggles, was understood as God's revelation for all nations. Remarkably, the 6th century BC also saw the new Buddhist and Jain religions in India proclaiming 'ahimsa', non-violence, which in practice meant disarmament.⁵

Jesus of Nazareth

While Jesus did not specifically call upon Rome and neighbouring empires to disarm, he certainly both inherited and personally embodied this Hebrew 'shalom' tradition of God's peaceful kingdom for Israel and all the nations.

¹ He wishes to point out that this paper has been written in his personal capacity – see p4.

² Walther Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World* (1976), pp.127-8

³ This original world disarmament vision is splendidly expressed in the famous statue, given by the Soviet Union, at the United Nations in New York.

⁴ Zechariah 9.9-10. See also Psalm 46.9

⁵ John Ferguson, *War and Peace in the World's Religions* (1977) p.43

He called peacemakers 'children of God', told his disciples "those who take the sword shall die by the sword" (*Matthew 26.52*), and with his entry into Jerusalem Jesus seems deliberately to have enacted Zechariah's vision of the peaceful Messianic kingdom. His way of non-violence carried forward the prophetic disarmament vision.

Historical Perspective

Three centuries of courageous pacifist witness by the Early Church endorsed this vision. The Church often strove to prevent or limit wars between Christian states in the centuries after Constantine; the Papacy's attempt to ban the crossbow was an early disarmament initiative. However, the Reformation removed a central Christian authority which could attempt to limit wars and weapons across Christendom, and the rise of nation-states led Christians to align with national allegiances. These factors almost caused the disarmament vision to be lost: 'peace churches' like the Quakers faithfully kept it alive.

Some progress was made in warfare-limitation. Revulsion against the huge suffering of 16th-17th century Europe's religious wars rendered such conflicts rare post-1648. Warfare by professional armies (often mercenaries) rather than involving civilians was a further welcome restriction for much of the 18th-19th centuries.

Internal Disarmament

Disarmament within states became recognized as necessary for civil order - or was imposed by rulers fearing opposition. Monarchs won freedom from civil wars by disarming their nobility: in England, Henry VII's ban on nobles' private armies after the Wars of the Roses was a significant example. Civil disarmament later saw a ban on wearing swords, prohibition of duelling (*UK 1818*) and modern laws against offensive objects. Recent UK 'internal disarmament' has seen successful weapons de-commissioning under the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the post-Dunblane ban on handguns. The Scottish Parliament has current moves to ban the sale of air-guns following deaths among children. Such civil disarmament matters: from USA and Brazil to Afghanistan, states without gun control witness high levels of civil violence.

Modern Era

The terrible impact on civilian populations of modern industrial, scientific and hi-tech warfare produced the modern impetus for disarmament by international agreements. 1930s treaties to limit navies and ban aerial bombing failed, but 'dumdum' bullets (*WW I*) were outlawed. Chemical weapons, banned by the 1925 Geneva Protocol, were little used in WW II.

The advent of the Atomic Age at Hiroshima in 1945, and the Cold War USA-USSR nuclear arms race, brought humanity into unprecedented terminal danger: the deployment of weapon-systems with the power to destroy all life on the planet. For Christians this posed both a humanitarian and fundamental theological challenge: atomic weapons could destroy what we believe to be God's world, so usurping the sole divine prerogative to end the created order.⁶

With the very survival of humanity at stake there arose mass peace movements demanding disarmament, both nuclear and general, of governments blinkered by mutual suspicion and military establishments, yet fearful of the nuclear nightmare. The sheer wastefulness of arms expenditure was another factor. The words of Dwight D Eisenhower, C-in-C Western Allies in World War II and US President 1952-60, became ever timely:

"Every gun, every warship, every tank, and every military aircraft built is, in the final analysis, a theft from those who are hungry and are not fed, from those who are naked and are not clothed.... Some day the demand for disarmament by hundreds of millions, will, I hope, become so universal and so insistent that no man, no nation can withstand it."

Lord (Peter) Archer of Sandwell, President of World Disarmament Campaign, has stated:

"Armament limitation by agreement would achieve three purposes. First it would limit the destruction of life and the environment. Secondly it would limit the diversion of resources urgently needed to address the world's social and economic problems...Thirdly it could prevent the actual impetus to war which results when even peaceful states perceive destructive weapons as necessary for their defence, and thereby appear to other peaceful states as threatening them."

⁶ Brian Cooper, Thinking about Nuclear Weapons (WDC Paper 2005)

However, states' commitments to nuclear and 'general and complete disarmament' in the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (*NNPT Article VI*), and the Final Document of the 1978 UN First Special Session on Disarmament, remain unfulfilled to this day.

The Cold War nuclear danger was limited by a number of UN and USA--USSR arms control and disarmament treaties (*e.g. Test Ban Treaty, 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, Intermediate Nuclear Forces (Europe) Treaty*) of lasting relevance. However, the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to stop development of new types of nuclear weapons, constituting "an effective measure of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation", remains unratified by the nuclear states except UK and France.⁷

Although no international nuclear crisis seems imminent, and the casualties of current conflicts are mainly victims of small arms and bombing, the existence of vast nuclear arsenals remains a huge menace to human and environmental survival. Nuclear states now deploy some 11,500 nuclear warheads. There remain some 18,000 in reserve that are to be dismantled under the Strategic Arms Reduction treaties; half of these are Russian.⁸ Terrorist use of nuclear weapons, future Middle East or India-Pakistan crises or US nuclear strikes against a perceived threat, could all trigger wider nuclear conflict. Only disarmament can remove such appalling dangers. Alas, the international context post-September 11 2001, with 'War on Terror' and 'Security' dominant preoccupations, is inimical to advances in disarmament. The USA blocks progress under the NNPT, interpreting it solely for anti-proliferation especially against Iran. Both USA and Russia are now modernizing their Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) forces and the UK plans to replace Trident. The US revival of its National Missile Defence, referred to as 'Star Wars 2' and intended to destroy hostile missiles in flight thereby negating 'deterrence', threatens to initiate a new nuclear arms race with Russia and China.

Hopes and Prospects

Although the current international context is not encouraging, the situation is not without hope. In respect of non-nuclear weapons, some progress has been made and much more can be achieved.

1. The banning of biological and chemical weapons has gained fresh urgency in this new era of global terrorism. Building on the 1925 Geneva Protocol, the 1972 Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention (*BTWC*) prohibited their development and possession, but lacking enforcement procedures it depends on the world community's political will. US opposition must be overcome to give the BTWC teeth. The 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention (*CWC*) is a far stronger measure: states undertake not to develop, produce, acquire, stockpile or keep chemical weapons; there is strict enforcement by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (*OPCW*), with UN backing. A model disarmament treaty, it resulted from years of painstaking negotiations.⁹ Both BTWC and CWC await universal endorsement, but the international community is now overwhelmingly opposed to biological and chemical weapons - a very important advance.

2. Small arms and light weapons, *e.g.* the Kalashnikov rifle, account for some 100,000 deaths and 1 million injuries each year (*post-1989*) and constitute a critical factor in Africa's many conflicts including being used by child soldiers and forming the major component of illegal arms trafficking. Consistent lobbying by NGOs, coordinated by IANSA (*International Action Network on Small Arms*), for UN action to control and reduce the small arms epidemic, is making some headway though against US hostility. The new UN Arms Trade Treaty to suppress illegal arms trading agreed in principle and pending negotiation, will cover all weapons but especially bear on small arms. The UK's key backing for this measure and the EU moves to tighten control of arms trading from Europe must be welcomed and closely monitored by the Peace Movement.

3. Getting the 1997 Ottawa anti-Landmines Treaty strengthened and universally agreed as well as action against horrific weapons such as cluster bombs and napalm, are other campaigning priorities on which progress is possible. Post-conflict events for the public destruction of weapons in African states, *e.g.* Mali and Guinea Bissau and the successful de-militarization of Northern Ireland are symbols of hope for advance in non-nuclear disarmament. The latter is now accepted as essential for post-conflict stability.

4. Progress on nuclear weapons will be much harder: they have become perverse emblems of national prestige for their possessors. The five major nuclear powers - China, France, Russia, UK and the USA - have abjectly failed to 'pursue negotiations in good faith' towards disarmament under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (*Article VI*). Russia and China are deeply suspicious of permanent US global military supremacy. Consequently none of these three is inclined to serious nuclear disarmament. Nevertheless the 'unfinished business'

⁷ Lord Archer of Sandwell, *From Chaos to Cosmos: Keeping the Peace. (One World Trust 2006 p.11)*

⁸ Unpublished figures from Frank Barnaby.

⁹ Lord Archer of Sandwell, *supra pp.* 17-18

from the end of the Cold War, of USA-Russia strategic arms reduction, could be accomplished without disadvantage to either side: to render humanity that much safer, the UN must urge them to do so. For NNPT, World Court Project's new initiative for an International Court of Justice ruling on the 'Good Faith' of the nuclear powers under Article VI, merits wide support, as do fresh moves in the UK "to put disarmament back on the agenda"¹⁰. Such should encompass UK working for universal support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), for progress at the Conference on Disarmament (UN, Geneva) on the Fissile Cut-Off Treaty to stop production of fissile material for military use, and for putting Trident into multilateral talks. Significantly, such leading US figures as Henry Kissinger and Robert McNamara, with Mikhail Gorbachev, in 2007 launched a major initiative on the above issues, urging nuclear states to recapture the vision of a nuclear-weapons-free world. Significant too, was the 2006 Treaty of Semipalatinsk setting up the Central Asia Nuclear-Free Zone (NFZ)¹¹ (*joining the Latin America-Caribbean, South Pacific, South-East Asia and Africa NFZs*). Against all the odds, and step by patient step, **nuclear disarmament is possible**.

World disarmament is a God-given vision awaiting fulfillment. With global military expenditure at 1100 billion dollars per year and the world awash with weaponry, fulfilling the vision is truly urgent. Public campaigning and lobbying of governments and international institutions by NGOs remain the priority. "Let us seek peace - and pursue it" (Psalm 34.14).

REV. BRIAN G. COOPER

February 2008

Brian is a retired ("that's a joke!" he says) Baptist minister. In the 60s he was much involved in Coventry's city and cathedral international peace and friendship links and was for over 20 years Chair of the British Christian Peace Conference. Useful addresses: Christian CND Mordechai Vanunu House, 162 Holloway Rd, London, N7 8DQ. www.cndn.org.uk. World Disarmament Campaign PO BOX 28209 Edinburgh EH9 1ZR - 0131 446 9545

Prayer

God of shalom, your Son, the Prince of Peace chose not the stallion but the donkey to show the nature of your Kingdom. Teach us that, "with forces of arms we nothing can" in terms of lasting peace, trust and reconciliation. May we find a safety based not on force and overwhelming power but on valuing every human being through our striving for justice, service and compassion. For you love's sake we pray. **Amen.** (See H&P 661).

Requests for more copies, notification of change of address etc. to Rev. Maurice Wright (MPF Secretary) 01743 873633 mhw@surf.free.co.uk. If you use email and would prefer to receive P21C that way, please ask, it will save postage. Donations to cover postage, printing and commissioning costs are welcome. Some have raised the issue of having to cut out the form below and losing what is on the back. This is not necessary. Mark your response P21C and include a note of your name and address and the amount together with your cheque. That is sufficient.

May I remind you that it is possible to join the Methodist Peace Fellowship which includes membership of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. This brings extra information about Christian peace work. If you are on-line you can look at the website www.for.org.uk this will give you an opportunity to see the excellent magazine "Peace by Peace" which is sent by post to all FOR/MPF members and to those P21C recipients who receive P21C by post. Contact me for more information.

The Methodist Conference meets at Scarborough this year. The MPF meeting will be on Monday July 7th at 8 p.m. at Westborough Methodist Church: Dr. Stephen Leah who will speak about a viable peace in Palestine and Rev. John Howard who will speak about PHARP (Peace, Healing and Reconciliation Project) in Rwanda.. Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet will be in the chair. There is a stall at Conference and help is always welcome, phone Denis Beaumont 01902 895585.

Love and peace *Maurice*

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¹⁰ e.g. 'Disarmament & Globalization' project of Centre for International Studies & Diplomacy at School of Oriental & African Studies, London - contact: Dan Plesch.

¹¹ Jozef Goldblat, Denuclearization of Central Asia, (Disarmament Forum - UN Institute for Disarmament Research - Issue 4 2007).