



THE METHODIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP
with the
FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION

PEACE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

No. 28

July 2008

AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

Dr. Alan Litherland

War is a Problem

War is a problem which masquerades as a remedy, and this makes it inherently contradictory, like firemen tackling a blazing building with flame-throwers. But that raises the question, "What's the alternative?", and the obvious answer is, "Non-violence". At the end of the war ridden twentieth century the United Nations designated the year 2000 as a "Year for the Culture of Peace", and the first decade of the new century as a "Decade for the Culture of Non-violence." So we can with some authority describe non-violence as an idea whose time has come.

The idea of non-violence goes back a long way. Round about 500 BC there were three unconnected and quite different visionaries of non-violence. The Buddha, born about 560 BC, put forward an Eightfold Path which includes a refusal to kill and the practice of a love which harms no-one. Around the same time, Mahavira founded the Jains, who practiced ahimsa, or non-harming: "One may not kill, ill-use, insult, torment or persecute any living being...". Also around the same time, the writer of Isaiah 53 spoke of one who, though he had done no violence, "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities."

Hungary Shows the Way

Since 500 BC there have been very many illustrations of the effective use of non-violence, but we have no space for them here, so we fast forward to 1848 AD, the year of revolutions, when the Hungarian resistance to Austrian oppression set a practical example of patient and persistent non-violence. An initial armed revolt was quickly suppressed by the Emperor Franz Josef, but then Francis Deak, who had played no part in that revolt, called on the Hungarian people to resist without violence: "This is the safe ground on which, unarmed ourselves, we can hold our own against armed force." Deak drafted a plan for Hungarian independence in education, agriculture and industry, a boycott of Austrian goods and systematic non-cooperation with the Austrian government. They refused to pay taxes, and when goods were distrained and put up for auction, the emperor had to send in Austrian auctioneers and Austrian buyers. When Austrian soldiers were billeted in Hungarian homes, they were simply ignored and eventually asked to be removed. The prisons were full and the cost of maintaining them far exceeded any possible gains. The Austrian emperor offered compromise, but it was refused. Eventually, on 1 February 1867, Hungary was granted in full the constitution it had demanded.

The Bloodiest Century

The twentieth century blotted its copybook with two ferocious and idiotic world wars followed by an equally idiotic nuclear arms race. Yet in the same period there were some remarkably inspiring examples of non-violence.

Take a look at Brazil in your world atlas. Close to the border with Bolivia there is a Brazilian state called Rondonia. This commemorates the achievements of Colonel (later General) Candedo Rondon in the

early years of the century. For 300 years there had been war between the European settlers and the native Indians. Rondon, who had been badly wounded in the fighting, was put in command of the Brazilian army. Being a Christian, he transformed the army, re-naming it the Indian Protection Service, and his orders to them were: "Die if you must, but never kill." His troops started to bring help to the Indians, and gradually most of them were won over, but the fiercest tribe, the Chavantes, refused. Rondon sent in twenty-five picked volunteers, and they were massacred. He sent in another twenty-five, and they saw the army of the Chavantes marching on their camp. But they had come with blunted spears, to negotiate a treaty of peace.

Czechoslovakia's resistance to the Soviet invasion of 1968 was so impressive that it deserved a book all to itself (Czechoslovakia, 1968, by Philip Windsor and Adam Roberts, Institute for Strategic Studies, 1969). Moscow disapproved of First Secretary Dubcek's "Socialism with a human face", and on August 28th, tanks from Russia, Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Bulgaria poured across four frontiers and occupied most of the cities within twelve hours. The Czechoslovak army was instructed not to fight, but unarmed resistance began within hours. Officials refused to carry out Russian orders. Radio and television operators refused to broadcast Russian messages. Shopkeepers refused to supply provisions, and many young men who had learned Russian leapt on invading tanks and argued with the drivers. Underground newspapers and radio stations operated. Resistance was resourceful and well organized and could have continued for a long time, but Dubcek was taken to Moscow and arm-twisted into accepting a compromise, which Moscow later repudiated.

A new era of non-violent transformation began in 1986, with the deposing of the Dictator, General Marcos of the Philippines. There was already seething discontent when the opposition leader, Benigno Aquino, returned from exile and was assassinated as he landed. His brother, Putz, believed that he had the resources for an armed revolt; but did not want to start a civil war. He was persuaded by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation's roving ambassadors Jean and Hildagard Goss-Mayr to adopt non-violence instead. They embarked on a series of training schools and a specifically Christian movement, AKKAPKA, was formed. Waves of protest followed one another. Eventually the army effectively withdrew their support and Marcos departed. An MPF member who was there at the time came away convinced that it was the strength of the Catholic Church and the saintly leadership of Cardinal Sin that held the people together. But although Marcos was gone there were still serious divisions, which caused problems later.

The Year of the Dominoes

1989 was a quite extraordinary year. In April, Mikhail Gorbachev was in China for a Sino-Soviet Summit, at a time when students were gathering to demand democracy. About 100,000 occupied Tiananmen Square, and people round the world were inspired by the one who ran in front of a tank and had to be dragged away. By May 20th about a million Chinese occupied large sections of Peking, but their protest was brutally suppressed and hundreds were killed.

The "Dominoes" were probably partly inspired by these events. When Gorbachev came to power he faced serious economic problems, and his response was to seek improved relations with the West, and to warn the communist governments of a string of Eastern European buffer states that they were on their own. Effectively, he pulled the rug from under them.

Poland was already well on the way to democracy and in August, 1989, elected the first non-communist Prime Minister in Eastern Europe for 40 years. Hungary then passed the ball to the East Germans, who had been prevented from moving into West Germany, with severe penalties for those who tried. The Hungarians had already "pulled down" the border with Austria, and in August invited East Germans to take their holidays in Budapest. Many thousands did so, then escaped into Austria and were welcomed into West Germany by the back door. Back in East Germany, candle-lit "prayer meetings" organized by the churches in Leipzig developed into mass demonstrations, and the communist government threw in the towel and resigned en bloc. There was virtually no violence.

Czechoslovakia no doubt drew on its experiences of 20 years earlier. Demonstrations started in November, and initially were dispersed by the police. But public demonstrations kept increasing until the Politburo

resigned and Vacslav Havel was elected as President. Events were so rapid and free from the violence that they earned title "Velvet Revolution". At the same time equally velvet changes were happening in Bulgaria, but with less publicity. No fuss, no violence, new government.

Romania was different. Dictator Nicolai Ceausescu, who lived in a dream world of his own, was determined to stay in power. On December 17th, 1989, pro-democracy demonstrations in the city of Timisoara were ruthlessly suppressed. An eye-witness reported seeing two young men standing in front of tanks - but they were mown down.

However, demonstrations spread. A week later, Ceausescu was addressing a large gathering in the capital, Bucharest. Suddenly the crowd erupted and started shouting him down. He appeared to be completely taken by surprise, and simply ran away. Seeing the mood of the people, the army changed sides and backed the demonstrators. Ceausescu and his wife were arrested and executed by the army.

New Style Revolutions

The non-violent revolution in Mali was different, almost unique, in being organized from the top down - but no less inspiring for that. After a long period of oppressive rule, followed by civil war and a series of agreements that were not kept, a process of peace-building began in 1994 under the leadership of President Konore. It included democratization, a series of local meetings in the African tradition, the setting up of hundreds of local communes, the wide involvement of the civilian population and NGOs, and local development projects which were implemented in return for handing in weapons. It culminated in a solemn "Flame of Peace" ceremony on March 27th, 1996, attended by international leaders, when the collected weapons were stacked into a giant pyramid, doused with fuel and ignited by the Presidents of Mali and Ghana.

Next we come to the "copycat" revolutions of the present century, which began in Serbia. On December 24th, 2000, President Milosevic was defeated in an election but refused to accept the result and clung to power. Within days, a pro-democracy group based in Cacak, about 70 miles south of Belgrade, confident that the vast majority of Serbians wanted Milosevic out, launched a "March on Belgrade". A large group of protesters set out, led by the mayor of Cacak and including a man with a bulldozer. They already had links with sympathizers in the security forces, and along the route police defectors would theatrically throw away their helmets and join the marchers. After pushing down five police blockades, about 10,000 marchers stormed into Belgrade and took over the Yugoslav Parliament. Enormous crowds came out to greet them and there was no further serious attempt to stop them. A new President was elected, and in the words of the Independent newspaper ((18.10.00) his inauguration "formally completed an astonishingly bloodless revolution which few in Serbia had dared to believe possible."

Edouard Shevardnadze's presidency of Georgia came to the buffers in November, 2003, when elections were blatantly rigged. Opposition leaders visited Serbia and during 2000: members of Serbia's movement slipped into Georgia to run training courses for students and others. When the time came, the revolutionaries, with obvious public support, "stormed" the Parliament building and took control. The security forces refused to take any action against them. One soldier told a reporter "I am not for the government and I am not for the opposition. I am for the people, and I refuse to take up arms against them."

The "Orange Revolution" in the Ukraine was different. The population is about 80% ethnic Ukrainian and 20% Russian, and the revolution began as a revolt by the majority against rule by pro-Russian leaders. And it received support from the American CIA. After a massively rigged election, crowds jammed the cities waving orange banners. They were later joined by pro-Russian demonstrators from the East, and for days vast crowds belonging to opposite camps demonstrated peacefully in a remarkable display of friendly rivalry. The Supreme Court ruled the rigged election invalid; the popular Victor Yushchenko was elected President and named Julia Timoshenko - the "Orange Princess" - as his Prime Minister.

In 2005 there were "copycat" revolutions in Lebanon (the "Cedar Revolution") and in Kyrgyzstan (the "Tulip Revolution"), but they were inconclusive.

The Stilt-walkers of Guatemala

In a recent issue of Christian Aid News, Sian Curry described a remarkable youth movement "fighting for peace" in Guatemala, where the murder rate is the highest in Latin America, and where deprived neighbourhoods are ruled by brutal youth gangs and murder, rape, kidnapping and extortion are daily occurrences. This initiative is at Caja Ludica and its chosen weapons are music, dance and carnival. The stilt-walkers obviously draw public attention, but each group includes jugglers, dancers, musicians, poets, monocyclists, artists, acrobats and actors. No-one is turned away, and they continue despite death threats and actual killings. They kick-start their work in a particular school or neighbourhood with a spectacular carnival parade, and return to recruit youngsters who want to join. The recruits learn teamwork, breathing and relaxation exercises alongside the other skills. Within about 18 months, those who stay the course are ready to branch out into another community.

These remarkable young people seem to me to have devised a technique which is potentially powerful enough to overrule and displace the "myth of redemptive violence" that is implanted in the minds of so many children from a very early age. If that is true, it is a very important development indeed.

A Prayer

Heavenly Father, we give thanks for people like the stilt-walkers of Guatemala, and the many others who down the ages have found ways of influencing events for good without using violence. In a world with so much violence that it threatens the very future of the human race, we pray for a synthesis of the forces of peace that will be powerful enough to steer humankind in a new direction. Amen.

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 2008 Methodist Conference meets at Scarborough. The MPF meeting, "PEACE IN PALESTINE AND RECONCILIATION IN RWANDA", will be on Monday July 7th at 8 p.m. at Westborough Methodist Church.

Speakers: Dr. Stephen Leah (Chair of the York Branch of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign) who will speak about a viable peace in Palestine
Rev. John Howard (Wolverhampton and District Chair) who will speak about PHARP (Peace, Healing and Reconciliation Project) in Rwanda.

Chair: Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet.

AGM at 4.30 p.m. followed by tea. There is a stall at Conference and help to staff it is always welcome, phone Denis Beaumont 01902 895585.

Love and peace *Maurice*

RESPONSE FORM To: John Young, Shalfleet, Dunston Heath, Stafford, ST18 9AN

I enclose £..... as a contribution towards the costs of "Peace in the 21st Century". [Cheques payable to the Methodist Peace Fellowship, please. If you would like a receipt, please tick here.....]

Name.....

Address.....

..... Email/Tel.