

WHY NO PEACE IN OUR TIME?

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ANDY REED was elected Labour MP for the Loughborough constituency in May 1997 and was re-elected in June 2001. He has a passion for dealing with poverty, inequality and injustice.

"NOTHING IS MORE PRECIOUS," SAID IGNATIUS, "THAN PEACE, BY WHICH ALL WAR, BOTH IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, IS BROUGHT TO AN END." As the tanks rolled into Baghdad recently, we watched the latest war unfold live on television. As "embedded" reporters gave us the stories live from the front line, we could sit in comfort and watch as the high-tech world of communication and military hardware were combined into a surreal view of modern warfare as entertainment.

Modern communication may have brought the war into our homes, but have we learnt anymore about the cost and impact of war than past generations? It is almost as though the constant barrage of stories and pictures about violence, war and hunger numb us.

As Christians, we recognise that war is one of the greatest evils to befall our modern world. The continuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have challenged Christians in the UK about our attitudes to war. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 have shaken our understanding of the world order. Today, we witness these conflicts in our name, but our responses of support or opposition are still based on the Medieval European concept of the "just war". In its developed form this states that war may be declared, as a last resort, when other options have been exhausted, for a just cause (to defend rights, rectify wrongs, and punish crimes) and with proper motives; the war must be waged by proportionate means (avoiding civilian casualties), and there must be a reasonable expectation that more good than evil will result.¹

When it comes to war and peace, I am not convinced that a great deal has changed over the course of our history. It is a depressing thought. War has always been with us, but does it have to be so? As Christians, we know that eventually there will be a time when there will be no more war. In the meantime, we must try to understand what is happening in our world, and why, and try to do what we can to bring about peace.

The aim of this article is not to offer a series of answers to the problems facing our world. Instead, there are several open-ended questions, which, I hope, will at least provoke thought, discussion and further reading.

THE WORLD TODAY – THE CHALLENGES

There are a few key issues facing this generation – globalisation, the rise of nationalism, ideological and religious battles, local and global terrorism, poverty, inequality, greed and corruption, the rise of the single superpower and nuclear proliferation. The list is not

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exhaustive, but it does show us that we live in a fragile world and that there is a need for a global response.

1. *Globalisation* – The march towards globalisation has, of course, not gone unchallenged. The anti-globalisation lobby may seem an eclectic bunch, but the wide range of those who do not protest, but share the protestors concerns, means it is a voice that cannot be ignored.

I am not convinced that we can stop globalisation. Whether it is a force for good or evil will be determined by how globalisation impacts the world's poor. We need to work to make sure that it is a benefit to everybody, especially the world's poorest and most vulnerable. Then, our economic interdependence could be a positive force for peaceful coexistence.²

2. *Battle of the Ideologies and Religion* – The last century was a one of battle between secular ideologies – for example, capitalism versus communism, National Socialism and colonialism. Overall, it appears capitalism ended the century as the winner. Whilst there are obviously still secular ideological battles to be won, I think they will play a lesser role.

We have, however, seen the return of the religious battles. They have almost substituted secular ideology, as the centre of gravity shifts. We must realise though that sometimes the battle between different faiths is used to disguise longer-running cultural or geographical disputes. I know from my work with Christian Solidarity Worldwide that Christian persecution is an ever-growing threat, so I do not underestimate the consequences.

3. *Global and Local Terrorism* – Terrorism is the new challenge for this century, although, of course, it is not a completely new phenomenon. Terrorist or guerrilla (or, from an alternative perspective, freedom fighter) tactics have been used throughout history. Now, though, nation states and individuals not at war face terrorist campaigns.

The attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, and the hijack of United Airlines Flight 93 (which crashed in Pennsylvania), have taught us a lesson. It is now clear that we are beyond the “comfort” of the Cold War. We are now aware of what has become known as asymmetrical warfare – that is, where there are no standing armies but a state is at war, even when it is never clear who the enemy is and where they are hiding.

4. *Nationalism* – We also have a growing sense of people working in opposite directions. The development of communication technologies and the impact of globalisation make the world seem smaller. The fusion

of various influences and cultures, particularly in the West, means that people are no longer certain of their identities. At the same time, however, we have a growing sense of nationalism and the desire for self-determinism. Nationalism is a dangerous two-sided coin: pride in national identity is something we can celebrate – it can bring people together – but at its worst nationalism breeds racism and intolerance; in its most extreme forms it leads to campaigns of terror and civil war.

5. *The End of the Cold War and the Rise of the Single Superpower* – The break-up of the old certainties of the Cold War period has led to a wide range of unforeseen problems. In the former Soviet Union, for example, Chechnya remains an obvious problem, and other states in the region are hardly thriving. One wonders how the Soviet Union managed to survive as long as it did.

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the USA has become the sole world superpower and it, at present, faces no conventional challenge. Commentators look to the growth of China economically as the coming potential counterweight, but the Chinese appear reluctant to challenge the USA – either militarily or geo-politically – on the global stage for influence. Maybe they have learnt from the Soviet Union, which tried to keep up with the USA and effectively bankrupted itself in the process. But attitudes could change.

Developments in technology and weaponry have made it possible to prosecute and win wars, often from 30,000 feet, with computer-game accuracy, and with minimal casualties on “our side”.³ We rely on professionals to fight and win the battles, whilst the rest of us go about our daily business as if nothing is happening, forgetting those involved in the conflict who suffer various hardships and are being maimed and killed by our weapons.⁴ One of the hardest things to stomach as Christians is to hear the value placed on American or British lives compared to those they kill.

The USA now sees its role as the global policeman and is thereby challenging to the authority of the United Nations. Like its predecessor, the League of Nations, the UN does not have an easy time and there are serious questions about its future. But if, as Christians, we are to genuinely love our neighbours, I believe we should be willing to invest in the institutions where that love and unity can be expressed. We need such legitimate bodies to counterbalance nationalism, superpower states and the corruption of governance around the world.

NOTES

1. The just war theory dates back to Augustine. The emergence of Christendom in the fourth and fifth centuries made the pacifist position increasingly difficult to maintain. Augustine, adapting the rules of warfare developed by classical thinkers such as Plato and Cicero, gave expression to a new attitude toward conflict on the part of Christians.

2. One only has to look at the European continent. Ravaged by war for centuries, the end of the Second World War has heralded a new relationship based on economic union.

3. Both wars with Iraq and the conflicts in Kosovo and Afghanistan are examples of this.

4. As a third world friend said, “America goes to war – war comes to us.”

The challenge for all Christians is to work and pray hard for a world based on the principles of love, justice and peace for all, and to work for reconciliation.

► *6. Nuclear Proliferation* – I find this one of the most disturbing but least talked about areas. The recent conflicts between India and Pakistan, and the rather dangerous posturing by North Korea, have an added dimension as these nations, along with Israel, have a nuclear or near-nuclear capacity. What impact will this growing “nuclear club” have on stability and peace? The Cold War existed on the basis of mutually assured destruction, which meant the nuclear arsenals were never used. Now, it seems, the threat is greater. Also, what happens when a rogue state or a state closely linked to international terrorism has possession of such weapons?

A JUST CHRISTIAN WAR?

Even though we know that war is evil and that the challenges facing the twenty-first-century world often lead to conflict, can war ever really be justified?

For Christians involved in politics, the theorising comes to an end when we are put to the test of a public vote for or against war. The recent war against Iraq divided opinions amongst Christian MPs, as it did in every other walk of life. Personally, I could not see that even the criteria of the just war doctrine were met, yet our two Christian leaders thought otherwise. In my discussions with the Prime Minister, before I resigned from the government on the issue, I was struck by the sincerity of his belief that from a Christian perspective the war was morally “just”.

There have, of course, been attempts to update the doctrine of the just war, especially in the light of the style of modern warfare. It is no longer possible to send armies to fight each other in remote fields, far away from civilians. We now know that “collateral” damage (i.e. the killing of innocent civilians) is a price we have to pay.

But the absence of war is not enough. We cannot ignore the racism and hatred that exists on our doorstep. Before becoming an MP, I thought the level of hatred that led to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo could never happen in the UK, but the hatred and hostility that I see in my own tolerant Loughborough community, following the events of 9/11, is truly frightening. It seems that, in the wake of 9/11, the gentile facade of respectability soon disappeared in many communities. Even the intolerance shown by fellow Christians has shocked me. We seem able to stereotype and create enemies all too easily. With the jingoistic headlines and the fear whipped up by the media, I can suddenly see how, even in the UK, “foreigners” can be dehumanised into a position where people do not care about them and their families. We must pray for *every* individual affected by war.

CONCLUSION

Recent decades reveal a depressing catalogue of war, civil war, torture and repression in the world. Estimates vary, but there are probably between 50 to 60 wars of varying degrees taking place at this time, including Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq, the Middle East, Kosovo, Chechnya, Liberia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire), Northern Ireland and the terrorist activities of groups such as the Red Brigade, Bader Meinhoff and the ETA in the Basque region. In each case, we must ask ourselves whether the just war doctrine applies, whether we had a role to play in the historical build-up of the tensions, and what we can do to bring the war to an end.

So, why are we struggling to find peace in our time? In one sense the answer is very simple. Sin is still with us, and war remains one of the greatest sins. The problems of injustice, poverty, greed, and territorial disputes that have dominated world history are still with us. At the same time, the world has changed. The complexities of our global village mean that we are all potentially affected by any dispute anywhere in the world. We may be able to fight our wars “over there” and continue our daily lives, but as we continue to see the development of the asymmetrical war we may have to alter our lifestyles and, as a consequence, lose some of the freedoms we have taken for granted.

The positive alternative remains removing the root causes of terrorism wherever possible. I would still argue that the war against terrorism could equally be won in the negotiating tables of the World Trade Organisation or in the Road Map to peace in the Middle East, rather than by dropping smart bombs from 30,000 feet on Kabul or Baghdad. Peace and reconciliation are possible. It requires hard work, love, understanding and patience. Christian and other religious leaders have the opportunity to lead in this work, but all too often the Church is found wanting, compromised by the secular world and the society it serves.

We have to face up to our roles in the conflict. We find ourselves facing the weapons we sold to other countries – like in the Falklands facing French Exocet missiles; and in Iraq, facing a country we armed in their fight with Iran, who we now see as our friend. It is a strange world, all interlinked by our own actions.

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