

Brian Ferguson - 01/25/09
Sermon for Worship Service on
“War – What is it Good for?”

I always begin a new year with a strong sense of hope for good things to happen. Here we are in 2009 and a newly elected President who really does seem to convey a sense of hope for many people. Last year was a difficult year but perhaps this year will be better and we might finally see a decrease of our involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This may be true but sadly other events in our world are a shocking reminder of the large scale of violence and war we face.

The conflict in Gaza between the Israelis and Palestinians for the last month reminds us of the seemingly intractable problems of war. Yet this latest conflict between the Jews and Arabs of Palestine is just the latest in the catalogue of miserable violence that has been going on between these groups for one hundred years. The escalation of the violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo is another reminder of the deadliest war since the Second World War where 5.5 million people have died since 1998. These and other conflicts around the globe are a reminder of the constant presence of war in human history. The esteemed historian, Will Durrant, calculated that there have only been twenty-nine years in all of human history during which a war was not underway somewhere. I'm not quite sure how you calculate such a number but he is an esteemed historian so I'll trust him.

With War such a prevalent and important part of human history then what is the proper religious response to war? My first impulse is a complete rejection of war along the lines of the famous Edwin Starr song “War - what is it good for? - Remember the answer -Absolutely Nothing. While this desire for a complete rejection of war is understandable I feel it does not do justice to the important subject of war and our Unitarian Universalist movement has a complex relationship to war throughout our history. Desiring to do a **responsible** search for truth and meaning as called for in our religious values then what meaning and truths can I find in our tradition concerning war?

At the 2006 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, we voted to undertake a Congregational Study Action Issue on Peacemaking. These Study Action Issues asks us as a religious movement to reach a consensus on an issue by convening a four year study period within our congregations concluding with a Statement of Conscience outlining our

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position on a particular subject. We will vote on the particular statement regarding peacemaking at the 2010 General Assembly. The specific study action concerning Peacemaking asks us to address the following question: **Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle seeking just peace through nonviolent means?”**¹ As a delegate at the 2006 General Assembly I voted to adopt this Study Action because I believe it is such an important question. I feel we really need to think and talk about whether we are willing to **reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war in all situations**. To find my own view on this question I will look both deep into our history as religious movement and deep into my own soul.

Our Christian heritage has been aware of the importance and ethical difficulties surrounding war. The Hebrew Scriptures have some graphic descriptions of the consequences of war and have been interpreted by some as justifying or even giving divine sanction to war. Augustine, the Christian theologian developed a Just War theory in the 4th Century. His theory attempted to define under what conditions war was justified and what use of force in the conducting of war was appropriate. Some of the conditions required for a war to be deemed just, were a noble goal and not just self-gain or an exercise of power. The limits placed on conduct in a Just War were that war can only be waged by a legitimate authority such as a government and should not target non-combatants. I'll leave aside the tricky subject of what constitutes a legitimate government for another sermon. One of Augustine's important criteria for a Just War is the desire for good to result from war and to treat opponents with kindness where possible even when conducting a war. Christian Theology does not justify war as a good thing and acknowledges that the taking of life is seriously wrong but war is sometimes a necessary evil and the turn to war always reflects a failure of the human spirit to find another solution.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition has institutionally supported the Just War principle and has never been a strictly Pacifist tradition such as the Quakers. The Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor² makes the interesting observation that Just War theory is grounded more in the traditional liberal religious use of reason whereas pacifism is much more

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grounded in scripture and the non-violent teaching of Jesus. Our movement has had members who were willing to and have taken up arms on behalf of justice and defense of principle. We also have had members within our movement who held strong pacifist beliefs and generally supported the right of people to identify as conscientious objectors.

The formation of both the Unitarian and Universalist movements in the late 18th-early 19th century occurred shortly after the American Revolution. Both religions saw war as a source of potential good such as the overcoming of oppression as in the case of the American Revolution. I say that noting the irony that I am a British Citizen. Later in the 19th century, opposition to the Mexican-American war of 1846 to 1848 caused the first organized peace movement in America, the American Peace Society. Unitarians were leaders in this movement and Henry David Thoreau was imprisoned for his refusal to pay income tax since he did not wish his money to be used for a war he disagreed with. The well-known Christmas Carol “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” – I hope it is well known to you since we are singing it later in the service – was written as a protest against the Mexican-American war by a Unitarian minister.³ If you read the words of the hymn there is no mention of Jesus or the birth of baby 2000 years ago but does mention the suffering and strife of war in the present. A very strange combination for a beloved Christmas carol and of course written by a Unitarian.

Within our heritage there have been many who adopted the use of non-violence for social change. In the 19th Century, both Unitarians and Universalists were active with other Liberal Christians in using non-violent resistance to address the abolition of slavery. The Universalist Adin Ballou developed his pacifism on the biblical injunction against violence and is recognized as a major contributor to pacifist theory⁴, influencing some illustrious people such as Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.⁵

The violence and suffering of American Civil War was a huge setback for the cause of non-violence since it was through military coercion of the South by the North that finally ended slavery. Many Christians including those who had believed in non-violence took the Civil War as proof that war could be justified to overthrow evil institutions such as slavery. While I believe that slavery may have been overcome eventually by non-violence, I look at how we

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still continue to struggle to overcome racism in the United States and wonder how long it would have taken? As I ponder this, the words of that great practitioner of non-violence the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. come to mind “**Justice delayed is justice denied.**” I wonder if the violence of the Civil War was justified to bring about the end of slavery. This tension between using ignoble means for a noble cause is at the heart of the dilemma of if and when violence can be justified.

World War I was a source of considerable disagreement within both the Unitarian and Universalist movements. In 1917 the Unitarian General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to support the War and the American Unitarian Association threatened to withdraw financial support for any church whose minister did not support the war. Nine of the fifteen pacifist Unitarian ministers lost their pulpits because of their pacifist stance.⁶ In the recognition of shall we say the overzealousness or just plain wrongness of this action the American Unitarian Association in 1936 formally apologized saying the action was “**contrary to the fundamental principle of freedom of thought and conscience.**” I would say so.

While the Unitarian Association overstepped its mandate in the First World War some congregations showed remarkable adherence to our principles and our congregational polity. The Rev. John Haynes Holmes was an ardent pacifist who strongly opposed U.S. involvement in World War I. Holmes argued that human progress was explained as “**the restriction of force within ever narrower and narrower bounds and the expansion of love to ever wider and wider areas.**”⁷ His congregation predominantly supported the war but also supported Holmes right to freedom of thought and freedom of pulpit. I wonder about this example for our current congregations. I could not imagine our current UUA withdrawing support from a minister who supported the Iraq war - perhaps I’m naive - but I wonder how many of our congregations would support the right of a minister to vocally and passionately support the Iraq war. I would hope we could remember to support the principle of freedom of speech and the pulpit before our own political opinions. Alas I saw a friend of mine leave our movement at the beginning of the Iraq war because of how he was treated by fellow members and church leadership because he supported the Iraq War. The loss of his presence and the reasons behind the loss pain me to this day.

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The Vietnam War was also very divisive war for both our country and Unitarian Universalists congregations with many people leaving our churches due to what they viewed as anti-war absolutism. Not dissimilar to the experience I just talked about with my own friend during the recent Iraq War. Some Unitarian Universalist churches offered sanctuary to Vietnam War resisters further alienating some members of the congregation who did not like going against the legal system. All this time the Unitarian Universalist Association never changed their Just War stance and the Vietnam War was viewed as an unjust war.

Last summer I did my clinical pastoral education at the Palo Alto Veteran Affairs hospital where I worked with primarily Vietnam Veterans with addiction and mental health concerns. I saw the huge suffering and human devastation that we are still dealing with as a society over thirty years after the war has ended. We now have the Veterans coming back from the Iraq and Afghanistan with a higher number of severely wounded compared with previous wars due to improved medical care. Alas I even worked with a few veterans from Iraq who already were dealing with the same mental health and addiction problems as 35 year older comrades from the Vietnam War. The same cycle of human suffering has begun with only the theater of operation being different.

The aftermath of the Iraq war is going to have a huge impact on our society in the years to come and our movement is doing little to reaching out to families of military who are suffering loss and hardship at this time. Our stance as a Religious movement against the Iraq War should not stop us reaching out to those in our country most affected by the war. Eric Johnson, the founder of the Unitarian Universalist Military Ministries says there are 550 members of our congregations serving in the military but there are tensions with them and other congregants. One member left his church when a fellow congregant described him as an **“instrument of murder.”**⁸ Such statements are dehumanizing, do not honor our principles, and have no place in our religious community in my view.

We have to accept that true diversity of beliefs goes beyond just theology to political, social, and ethical issues. A real diversity of beliefs will include beliefs that we do not agree with. We already have so much division in our country I think we need to be repairing relationships

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not destroying them. I see this message in the words and actions of our new President. I hope the discussions in our congregations around the Study action issue of Peacemaking can begin to build bridges not just between pacifist and just war supporters within our religious movement but perhaps reaching across political divisions in our country.

I am not sure that the Unitarian Universalist movement should reject all kinds of violence and war as called for in the Study Action on Peacemaking. Non-violence is certainly the preferred option for dealing with conflicts but do we as a religion wish to select that as the only option. The violence of the American Civil War did end the institution of slavery. The Second World War I believe was necessary to stop the aggressive actions of Germany and Japan. Yet too often governments resort to warfare too quickly before exploring other options. The trend in wars during the 20th Century has been significantly higher civilian death rate compared with combatants due to the power and indiscriminate nature of modern warfare such as rockets and bombing. This raises the question can we have a modern war that meets the Just War criterion of not targeting non-combatants? These pros and cons of war are what make the determination of justified warfare so difficult.

I do not know what I want to see in our Statement of Conscience at the 2010 General Assembly. I believe that the fact we will be discussing this issue throughout our congregations is vitally important and a strength of our movement. This conversation may be more important than the result of the vote as we engage each other in dialog about literally life and death concerns. Sadly, I have not seen much evidence of these discussions taking place in our congregations and the vote at General Assembly will be occurring next year.

Has this been a subject of congregational discussion here at the Wildflower Church? Central Texas has one of the largest concentrations of military bases in the U.S. therefore the issue may have a special interest and impact for this community. Even my brief outline of some of our history shows its complexity and contradictions. Our history will continue to provide the voices, wisdom, and even mistakes of the past that we may learn from. My soul will bring my own lived experience and family heritage into dialog with our tradition. By doing this we can

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begin discerning the appropriate actions regarding peacemaking through non-violence and bounds for justified military intervention.

Reasonable and loving people can disagree on fundamentally important issues such as war and violence. Between the extremes of immediate violent response for any perceived wrongdoing and complete non-violent response in all situations there is a variety of intermediate responses. The clarity of positions on the extremes can make those who have those positions be very passionate about them. For those who see military action under certain conditions being justifiable it is a more nuanced position and consequently harder to get passionate about. It is hard to be very passionate about a moderate position.

As I look at situations in our world today like the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan or the catastrophic war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I wonder if a military intervention might be the best way of ending the horrific violence in those areas and prevent further loss of lives? Perhaps so. This is what Chris Hedges meant in the earlier reading when he said **“There are times when the force wielded by one immoral faction must be countered by a faction that, while never moral, is perhaps less immoral.”**⁹

These difficult situations are what I believe we should be discussing when we talk as a religious community about peacemaking. We will not all agree in all situations but I believe how we disagree is as important as what we agree on. Our principles call us to do so respectfully and responsibly. In our disagreements then it is important that we stay in right relationship with each other. So many of the conflicts in our world are because people have stopped being or never been in relationship with each other and can only see the other as different or an enemy. I hope and pray that even as we disagree on important issues we listen to each other in a relationship of loving-kindness, compassion, and understanding. When we do so we are acting non-violently towards one other and embodying the words of Gandhi by **being the change we want to see in the world**. This would give me the greatest hope for our future together as a religious movement and a global community. May we all find the strength, patience, and courage to undertake this important work.

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁷ Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985)
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