

The Religion of War and Peace: Better Understanding of International Conflict

By Dr. Armand Abecassis

The definition of peace which first comes to mind is a negative one: We view it as an absence of war. But is having peace only a cessation of war? Does peace between states and nations simply mean not destroying one another? Actually, it is impossible to think and reflect upon peace without talking about war. The two terms are inseparable from a logical point of view: As soon as we think of one, we think of the other. This is why the two notions eventually leap back to one another, forcing you to define one by making reference to the other, otherwise known as a binary logic. It is the same for morality; we can't define good without referring to what is bad. The same can be said for esthetics, we define beauty by making reference to ugliness. From a scientific point of view, to understand the idea of truth, we must consider the idea of falsehood. In regards to our problem, we must not only look at the logic which forces us to associate one with the other, i.e. peace with war, but to also consider the history of the people. Proudhon, a French sociologist, wrote: "A War is a vindication of peace." Throughout time and everywhere, in all civilizations, war has been used as a means to establish peace though only a tenuous peace, since it only serves as a means to prepare for the next war. This is the likely reason that people have always thought of peace as a cessation of war. This is different from the pure animalistic physical violence because it is organized and collective. The military is the driving force, and the politicians the deciding factor that also reap the benefits. This is the principle of peace, which perpetuates, thanks to treaties between states. Thus, they are founded on a connection with strength and consider war as a balance of those strengths. Every time a state was disciplined for being stronger than the others, it turned peace into its own profit and controlled the world. It is likely that the Persians, Medes, Greeks, Romans, Caesar, Napoleon, and Stalin understood peace. To them it was an absence of war and domination where imperialistic or colonials conquered territories, and integrated them into their own vision of society.

Therefore, let us ask the question in a more radical manner: Does peace between states stem from a political nature? Can politics and politics alone, create a foundation to define and perpetuate peace?

Politics are certainly inevitable; it is of course necessary for states to protect themselves against outside threats and danger from their enemies. They must reassure their citizens that they are safe, that is to say, that all precautions have been taken to prevent enemy invasion. Germany had no business being in France or Poland between 1939 and 1945. The Greeks and Romans had no right to occupy the conquered countries around the Mediterranean, and Napoleon should have stayed home rather than wander into Russia and Egypt. However, countries that declare war generally try to justify it by saying that they not only had the right, but it was their duty, and justice was on their side. We have never seen a nation go to war without claiming that she felt threatened or attacked, and without claiming that it is to defend her very existence as a state, her security and territory. If Sharon in Israel follows his political views against Arafat, and Arafat does not cease terrorist acts, it will be because each of them feels threatened and attacked by the other. It is the same between Bush and Sadam Hussein, and between Osama Bin Laden and the Western Civilization. Once the circle of violence has begun, it is difficult to know where, when and how to stop it.

Let us take our question a step further. Is peace only security? Security is the principle objective in politics. It is the driving question, which asks: how can we obtain peace? How can we ascertain it? Can we have it indefinitely? Realism opens our eyes to the concrete historical reality of people, of nations, of tribes, and of hordes. As far as we can recall in the history of humanity, we can see that the only drive has been to instill a sense of security among them. From the moment when humans organize themselves into a group with leaders responsible for their actions and administration, they have to give the means to obtain peace and end violence. Actually, there are situations, which must be solved by violence against violence. Moses liberated the Hebrews from bondage by using violence; Spartacus attempted to revolt against the injustices of Rome but unfortunately failed. Those who revolted in the ghettos of Varsovie wanted to die standing, but could do so only by being armed, even if they knew of the Nazi's barbarism. The Americans who landed in Normandy, guns in hand had to pay a high price to rid Europe of Nazi torment. Men have had to learn, despite themselves, how to struggle against the suffering inflicted upon them. They had to struggle against the violence and death by chasing and condemning the guilty ones, on a national and international level.

We can now take our question to a deeper level. Humanity is divided into different societies, nations, people, and states; as of today we still have not been able to create an effective structure, a code of laws, which would assemble some sort of efficient general society of nations in the image of every organized society. Since cultures are different and each has their own set of values, wanting to realize their own goals, and wanting to use their own means of strength to depend upon themselves and their perpetuation, they are driven to conflicts with others who tend to resolve problems with war rather than diplomacy. This is due to geography, economy, demographics, politics and sometime religion. It leads us to ask the following: Is the dispersion of humanity into different nations finally the real cause of war? There will be war and violence due to differences in cultures, history, and geography. The difference will then be the cause of violence. Let us suppose that is the case: The difference is the cause of violence. We would then infer the following consequences.

a. Firstly war is linked to a social being, to the living together as a social group, to the belonging to a state or to a particular nation. No nation can put themselves in the place of another nation nor can they understand the other. The biblical myth of The Tower of Babel depicts this situation. We read that: "At that time all mankind spoke a single language. As the population grew and spread eastward a plain was discovered in the land of Babylon and they settled there. They spoke about building a great city with a temple tower reaching to the sky a proud eternal monument to themselves..." (Genesis 11, 1-3.)

The Bible teaches us that in this myth men have decided to annul their differences and unite themselves in speaking the same language and in pronouncing the same words, and speaking the same words. They had decided to build the same civilization that is identical for all; to eat, drink, play, dress, study, and paint the same way; and to dwell in the same houses. The Bible is not in accord with this way of uniting people by resemblance, in a uniform manner. A man rose up, his name was Abraham and he wanted to unite people by teaching them to preserve their differences. He believed that unity of humanity does not mean the disappearance of States and Nations. Far from being an obstacle to its unity, the multiplication of irreducible cultures is its condition.

Unity does not mean uniformity, massification, and reduction to the anonymous, to the impersonal.

We are back to our question: Under the conditions where unity respects diversity and differences, war is the always present, hidden threat to the creation of each Nation and of each State.

b. The second consequence is paradoxical: We discover that war has been positive for many people. It is again Proudhon who wrote, "War is the Midwife of Societies." History itself gives him reason, unfortunately. It is through battles on the battlefield where men defend themselves by killing men, that solidarities, proximities and complicities were reinforced. The patriotic sentiment, the anguish before a native land in danger, and dying for it, contributes very strongly to strengthen the nationalistic sentiment. Victory as defeat helped a lot the citizens to unite under the same flag or under the same patriotic ideas. The psychological, spiritual, political and economical weakness is always exploited by the people who seek to impose their domination. We know this psychological law to which one asserts his personality by opposing himself to the others; the unity of groups is easily obtained in the rising against a potential common enemy.

c. This leads to a third consequence: Humanity ends up in building blocks, superpowers which threaten daily each other, but who cannot go into action because of the striking power several of them have. They know that the planet could explode and make them all disappear. Peace is thus obtained due to this world menace. It is founded and based on fear of disappearing. Indeed this peace has the merit of existing, but what is a peace based on the fear of dying? Can we not consider a more exciting peace?

d. The fourth consequence is the one we are going through in our time. World war has become impossible but it does not prevent particular ones, regional ones. The modality of war has changed but its logic has remained the same: it is still to neutralize the force of the one that is considered an enemy, to acquire weapons from the superpowers who manufacture them, to conspire civil wars and troubles in certain States and especially terrorize their citizens. Today we see that no one has been able to neither know nor find the riposte to these weapons of the weak, which is terrorism. Why? Because even the fear of death is not a deterrent for individuals who are ready to sacrifice their lives by blowing themselves up in public places to kill a maximum of innocents. They are being brain washed and persuaded that their absurd death is a religious sacrifice that God rewards. Truly they are being manipulated and are pushed to their death only for a territory, for a nation, for a national identity wrongly understood, for a financial interest or even for psycho-pathological reasons.

What have we been able to conclude so far to answer this question? Firstly, that the threat of war and violence is included in the differences which separate cultures and nations. Secondly, that these differences have to be maintained and respected. It is in this sense, that civil peace which pertains to interior security, the settlements of conflicts between citizens, the strives between parties and between the different communities, cannot be obtained but by laws recognized by all. All this is a reminder to each one: they belong to the same culture, to the same people, the same history, the same humanity and go beyond the different ways of expression.

We can then generalize what we have just demonstrated by another form of a paradox: Peace is not the disappearance of conflicts and of oppositions: Conflict is essential to the life of relationships. The differences that exist between the interlocutors, express themselves in these conflicts. Peace is not absence of conflicts, because it exists only with them, through them and owing it to them.

Heraclite has written: “All that happens is through conflict and by necessity and Polemos is the father and the king of all.” Nietzsche also thinks “War is a natural phenomena between human beings.” Conflict is thus necessary to peace in the sense of a good human use of it, and to the extent of the openness and the reception of conflict and of differences. Conflict is permanent; it is the condition to existing, inter subjectively and brotherly.

Our question therefore goes deeper: How to live together going through conflict, avoiding that it becomes an army and organizes itself in a war? This is, at last, the true problem, the true question of war. It is as well interior as exterior to the human being: inward peace has to be build on a permanent crisis, which inhabits the human being in constant opposition with himself and with the other. The Bible suggests love between human beings and brotherhood. But in what sense is this love of the neighbor to be understood. How is the ideal of this love expressed by the prophet Isaiah who wrote:

“In that day the wolf and the lamb will lie down together and the leopard and goats will be at peace. Calves and fat cattle will be safe among lions, and a little child shall lead them all. The cows will graze among bears, cubs, and calves will lie down together, and lions will eat grass like the cows.... Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea so shall the earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord.” (Isaiah 11, 6-9.)

Our question transforms itself again: How to understand love of neighbor in a way that it may not maintain and develop itself but only by the inevitable conflict between the individuals and collectives differences? If to love is to always love the difference of the other, and not love him for his resemblance he has with us, does that love go beyond feeling and affinity? It is also, and especially, spiritual. What does that mean? It means that love is before all humility: I am only a human being, meaning characterized by being finite and limited. I am not God, I do not have the absolute truth, the perfection: my experience, my words, my thoughts, my feelings, my behavior are always relative to me as a human being and to my individual way of assuming my humanity. The other has thus also a right to be who he is and to perceive the world and men as he perceives them. It remains to be done that when we meet each other, we have to accept, to submit both to the world of values, what we call individual morality which goes beyond Human Rights and Rights of Citizen that certain nations do not even respect. In this sense, to love the other is first to respect his difference and to build with him a world where he finds his place too. It is mostly and mainly to feel responsible for his difference, and to defend it everywhere, it may be unknown, threatened, and challenged. Moreover, it is to worry for this difference before to worry for oneself. Violence can disappear by this way only. The conflicts between the differences turn into dialectic, between love and peace. I am convinced in my philosophical and psychological researches that, the main problem of the human being is, the one of brotherhood, the problem of the relation with the other. I am also convinced that it is the main problem in the Bible.

I have thought about reflecting on these questions of war and peace by centralizing them around the encounters of biblical figures, which took place around the wells and springs, and that are written about in the Torah, as well as the Gospels and the Koran. In these Nomadic times, life in the camps and the villages was dependent on the water well to which all would gather around to collect the water for the family, animals, and the livestock. The shepherdess was not only at the well to fill her jar, or to water the animals but to meet other shepherdess and shepherds, to dialogue with them and share news, impressions, and time.

Economical and conjugal alliances were contracted. The well was the social location of communication and a place of evaluating the capacity of human beings to open to each other and to listen to each other. And this especially, if it was a stranger coming from the desert, famished, thirsty, and tired. We have forgotten this meaning today because water comes to us in our kitchens, bathrooms, and gardens.

The canalization that brings water to us makes communication difficult. I have taken the road that leads to eight biblical wells, and so I became aware that they are the multiple paths that go from war to peace. The first well, takes place in an armed conflict, it contains bitumen and not water. Bitumen was used for construction; it is still called today a well, from which petroleum springs from the raw material of civilization. The wars that this black gold provokes are the bloodiest ever. They are always a threat to enflame the entire planet. But the last well, the eighth one, is the one where Jesus met the Samaritan. This well becomes a source of peace as Jesus told the Samaritan: "If you knew what a wonderful gift God has for you and who I am, you would ask me for some living water." (John 4, 10.)

Between these two wells, six wells, tell us the stories and the adventures that lead from war to peace, internally and externally, going from justice to love. Where are the water diviners and well makers today capable of gathering living water from one source to quench the thirst of man, or at least to match it? Is human thirst only physical; is it only the human body that demands water? Does the psychic need to be quenched too? Beyond the physical and psychological is the whole human being inspiring, hoping, and waiting for thirst, for meaning and value? As thirst is a negative marker of water that the body needs, aspiration and desire are the markers of the spirit to which man is open to the meaning of life, which could fulfill and give interior and exterior peace. The greatness and the limit of man is that he can be deceived by water.

He can also be deceived by the meaning of his life, offered to him to reconcile him with himself and with others. Altered, false and polluted beverages are today offered to him, which poison him and, he is obliged to drink them because he is thirsty and wants to survive. Religions, ideologies, and mystics harass him from everywhere and pretend to answer to his aspiration, to the meaning to joy, and to peace. In reality they confiscate him to himself and to others, setting him against others and exploiting him.

Where to find, and how to drill the true well, connected to the source of living water, capable to answer to the thirst of liberty, justice, and peace inscribed profoundly in the human being. Water treatments by men are very revealing on his social projects, on his vision of men and, on his concrete concept of history. Today too, the exploitation of a gold mine or minerals or oil wells by society that owns them, is very revealing on its capacity to incarnate universality, solidarity, and responsibility. The nomad of biblical times were without doubt right to settle far from wells,

affirming that this well and water belong to God. That meant, at least, that men and women who would gather around the well, would come there with the awareness that water did not belong to one human being or one nation. That is why they were sharing it according to the economy of abundance, and not based on self-interest but from give and take. Will human beings learn one day to give without expecting something in return, to give just for giving, and not to give in order to receive? To receive to give and not to receive to get.

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