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Why Bother?

For those of us who believe in God, it is difficult to explain war and the structural and personal violence we see on the earth. It is difficult to reconcile a violent existential reality with a creative force, presence, personality who was before the beginning and who will be after the end, an all loving, all powerful, all knowing Is-ness who is at once as far away as the most distant galaxy in the cosmos and at the same time lives in our own very breath, a mother/father divinity who comforts and provides for us, who knows us and loves us and can call us by name. The old old questions of theodicy return like a fine coating of dust that comes no matter how meticulous our housekeeping. If God is all loving why would S/He create such a violent world? If S/He is all knowing did S/He not know how to create a peaceful world? If God is all powerful why did S/He not use that power to create a peaceful world? If God is everywhere, why does not H/er presence bring peace?

We have invented the theology of the fall of humanity from its own perfection to help our minds understand this conundrum. We have invented ontological evil, the idea that humanity in its very being is prone to wickedness and this is a fact that we just must accept. Still, the question remains: why did not God make human beings better creatures? I do not know.

As a scholar working on peace theory, and as a scholar reading the history of war, I ask myself: Why bother? History and the doctrine of original sin tell me that the work of peacemaking, making war and violence obsolete, is an impossible task. Yet, in the face of this impossibility, I put pen to paper and then go to my computer to think about and to write about the possibility of peace. I listen to Luther Vandross sing "The Impossible Dream" and set to work. It is an act of faith that reason cannot explain.

September 21 is the UN International Day of Peace and Global Ceasefire. It is a day dedicated to the possibility of peace in the world. The logic of the day is that peacemaking is a responsibility of every human being and not only the responsibility of leaders of nations. Peace Day is a day when we think about how to create a culture of peace in the world. It is a day when we think about how to make peace within our own orbits. It is a day to contemplate the meaning of peace and of conflict. It is a day to promote nonviolent conflict resolution. It is important to begin to think about this day now so that we can work from the beginning of the year to make the vision a reality. The vision: guns fall silent, knives stay still, roadside bombs do not explode, coercion of every kind stops, we think peace and speak peace.

These are noble goals. But are these goals reasonable or a waste of time? I believe that war is an unnecessary barbarism and humanity can create cultures of peace. Am I thinking and working from a belief that is true? In an essay, "The Ethics of Belief"ⁱ philosopher William Clifford argues that it is a moral obligation to act from true beliefs. He concludes, "To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." Clifford argues that beliefs lead to actions and actions have both immediate and long term consequences. Beliefs and action create the world we bequeath to future generations. Everyone is responsible for their beliefs because everyone has an influence on others for good or for ill. Thus, our moral responsibility is to be certain that we have reached our beliefs because of sufficient evidence, thoughtfully considered. Otherwise, we become credulous, and we become prey for liars and cheats.

Clifford is right to teach us that we ought to base our beliefs upon sufficient evidence. So, upon what evidence do I base my belief that war is an unnecessary barbarism and that the creation of cultures of peace is possible? An elementary survey of the history of war shows us that war is savage, barbaric, brutal, mean and uncivilized. In its murderous character, it is the worse crime that humanity

perpetrates upon itself. It is just plain ugly. It is a horror. It is extreme violence violating human dignity and animals and plants and the very earth itself. A poet writes of the drums of war that they bring “all that Misery’s hand bestows, to fill the catalogue of human woes.”ⁱⁱ War is a tragedy. It is the utmost evil. Yet, some would argue that it is sometimes a necessary evil.

I say that war is not necessary because the conflicts that wars intend to solve can be solved through negotiation. When war happens, we see a failure of negotiation, but the failure does not mean that negotiation is still not a strategy that can prevent war. Even when wars are fought, at some point the adversaries will sit down and negotiate peace. The question is who will be most defeated, most exhausted? Who will have lost more? Let us not be deceived, all sides lose in war. My evidence for believing that negotiation makes war unnecessary is that human beings negotiate conflict every day. We negotiate things as mundane as who will do the dishes tonight, or what television program we will watch. We negotiate large things such as trade and peace treaties. Problems come when in both small and large negotiations we want to exercise power over the Other. Here is where it becomes important to think about how we create cultures of peace.

Cultures of violence proceed from the idea that power means power over others. Cultures of violence want to use violence to acquire not only the necessities of life, but to acquire life’s luxuries, often at the expense of someone else. Cultures of violence see the Other as object, something to use. This is an I-It relationship. Cultures of peace understand that power means power with the Other. The acquisitive impulse is modulated by the desire to see that Others also have what they need. The beauty and the abundance of life are for all. The dignity of life is for all. The Other is not an object for use, but a subject into which we enter into relationship. This is the I-Thou relationship.ⁱⁱⁱ It is a relationship of love. All cultures are creations of human free will. Humanity can choose to create and to live in a

culture of peace. In a multicultural world we can see glimpses of a culture of peace within certain pacifist communities.^{iv}

So, why bother? We bother with such events as the UN International Day of Peace and Global Ceasefire because the Spirit that we see moving in the world, in us and beyond us, the creative force that we name God works through us. A perfect God's imperfect creation is becoming perfect. Creation continues. The perfecting of creation continues. The perfecting of humanity continues as we use our free will in faith, making choices to the level of our maturity. The work is to become more mature, more complete, more perfect in our faith in what is possible. Thus those nagging questions of theodicy we ask of God we ought to ask of ourselves. Why do we allow a violent world? Why do we allow structural and personal violence? Why do we allow the fear that breeds violence to live inside of ourselves? Why do we not confront the evil that wants to reside in our own hearts, homes, communities, nation, and world? God's perfecting work happens through the spiritual and intellectual evolution of humanity. Our belief in peace, our actions toward peace creates cultures of peace that brings us closer to a peaceful world that we imagine and that a loving God intends.

ⁱ William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief", Philosophy of Religion: the Big Questions, ed. Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) 269-273.

ⁱⁱ John Scott of Amwell, "The Drum", The Book of War: 25 Centuries of Great War Writing, ed. John Keegan, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999) 112

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Buber, I and Thou, (New York: Touchstone, 1996)

^{iv} Elise Boulding, Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 22-24