

Comment

Peace: getting over the point

There is no doubt about it: peace is a yawn-subject. As Peter Hebblethwaite, a man with good journalistic instincts, said once about a papal message for World Peace Day, although no one is openly opposed to peace, it is not a topic to set the blood racing. Since then the world's biggest and gravest question has become even bigger and graver, and the more we learn, the more terrible the prospects look. In 1980 40 per cent of the sample in a British opinion poll expected a nuclear war before the end of the new decade, and in the UK alone 300 firms were marketing fall-out shelters, radiation suits, and such gadgetry. Now we know that an all-out nuclear war will be followed by an apocalyptic hemisphere-wide darkness and chill which it would be better not to try to survive. What future have we?

Yet still, peace is a yawn-subject. Part of the problem is that we live in a media-made world. Nearly all the important information we get comes to us through the media, and, as any of us who have worked in the media know, the media depend for their impact on drama (in other words, on the specific and the human, on tension and conflict and comedy) and on novelty. All the world's a stage and everything becomes the stuff of entertainment. But the basic message of peace is universal and simple and unchanging.

This is, of course, the greatest source of strength of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. CND has the support of an amazing mixture of individuals and interest groups just because it is a single-issue campaign with a constant aim. But this is also a source of weakness. CND's first objective is to rally the forces of public opinion, and, unlike the great popular movements of the past in Britain (the Chartism of the 1840s and the Suffragette Movement of Edwardian times, for instance), it does this with the ubiquitous camera never far behind. But, if your message is simple and constant, where is the drama and the novelty?

It has been going for 26 years. Yet, in spite of its early massive show of strength, the movement had little effect even on Labour government policies, and in the 1960s got a very poor public image and nearly disappeared. Why?

Plenty of big reasons have been produced: the interdependence of the present-day world's power-structures and the decline of parliamentary democracy; the apparent growth of detente after the Cuba crisis of 1962; the split inside the movement over the rights and wrongs of non-violent direct action; the hawkish sympathies of many

of the owners and controllers of the media. One reason rarely mentioned—it sounds much too banal—is that, just because “the language of the media” is what it is, the media are sure to *tend* to deflect attention from CND’s basic aim to whatever human drama happens to be going on. A good case can be put up for certain kinds of direct action, but media coverage of rowdiness at some CND events in the past did much more damage to the movement’s credibility than many long-standing members of CND are ready to admit. And, today, when CND has taken on a big new lease of life, the danger is there again. If, in a huge and otherwise dull and orderly demonstration, a mere twenty way-out youths sling bricks (or whatever) at policemen, do not blame the media if it is those twenty who make the headlines. Not one of us should set out to do anything in the public eye today who does not understand the language of the media and how to use it, and how the media undoubtedly do help to shape people’s ways of perceiving “reality”.

Quite a lot of the members of the Christian groups in CND not only seem to realise this but also—because they share basic beliefs—seem to be able to organize themselves to do the kind of thing which “makes a good story” on the media. Increasingly they seem to be favouring carefully arranged small-scale “witness”, rather than traditional-type “protest”. An example would be one group’s celebration of a penitential service on Ash Wednesday by the runway inside the USAF nuclear bomber base at Upper Heyford, in Oxfordshire.

“All you are doing is pissing against the wind”, a friend said to them. But they gained more than just “quite good media coverage”; they were doing and saying things that made quite good television. In other words, what they were doing arrested attention and raised the question quite naturally in the minds of viewers: “Why are people like this doing this thing?”. They were able at least to begin to convey that it was religious convictions that inspired their action—that their action was an assertion of “true religion against idols and the lies of false religion”, to quote Roger Ruston’s “The Prince of Peace”, which we published last March.

Unquestionably, it is important to tell human beings over and over again that religious convictions can have political consequences. Nevertheless, in a secular society like Britain’s this is not going to impress many very much. More important is the point which members of groups like this are spelling out less in words than in actions: namely, if you accept that there is a reason to justify the extermination of hundreds of millions of men, women and children, and their cultures, you deprive yourself of your humanity. To use old-fashioned language, you damn yourself. Further, the confronting of that terrible temptation is not reserved only to world leaders and strategists and

physicists and the fliers of nuclear bombers. We all have to face it. "Their" intention to make nuclear war is *our* intention, so long as we accept the system.

Today there are some heavily committed people in the peace movement—Christian women especially—who are there, going through all the misery of getting themselves arrested on demonstrations and so on, because this is the only way that they can cope with "the nuclear shadow" which they have found to be stripping every activity in life, even the rearing of children, of all real value. People as sensitive as this only make up a tiny minority. But the moral quality of everyone's life is radically altered for the worse by living with nuclear deterrents, whether one realises this or not, and whether one is sensitive or not.

So the peace question is not just the business of a few, but is everybody's business in a very personal sense. And that means it is part of the drama of everyday loving and surviving after all! Public persons and their executives talking generalizations about peace are bound nearly always to be boring, but let us scrutinise ourselves if we go on finding peace itself is a yawn-subject.

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The Need for Philosophy in Theology Today

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The text of a paper presented at the Upholland Theological Consultation, 25–27 April 1984, the gathering which founded the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.

With all the welcome emphasis, since Vatican II, on biblical studies, patristic ressourcement, the historical approach, the ecumenical dimension, pastoral and missionary relevance, and so on, there is still a need, in Catholic theology, for philosophy: that is the thesis to be ventilated here

With the tradition we have inherited, constructive theology is