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Conversation with the Mennonites

Symposium on War and Peace
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First, I am thankful for this opportunity to be a part of this conversation. One of the recommendations in the Report on Peace and War adopted by our Synod in 2006 states: “That Synod express appreciation for branches of the Christian church for work being done to make peace with justice a strong vocation and seek to work more closely with them, where possible, to enhance a collective impact and learn from one another.” I take that as permission and encouragement to enter conversation like the one we are having today.

You will notice, as we walk through some of our history on war and peace, that we have gained a deeper appreciation of the peace churches and what they can contribute to our efforts to be peace makers.

The Christian Reformed Church has addressed the issues of war and peace several times. Our Church has spoken in 1949, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1982, 1985, and in 2006.

In 1939, when the Christian Reformed Church synod first put forward a “Testimony regarding the Christian’s attitude toward war and peace,” Hitler had already swept across Poland. The United States, even while maintaining neutrality, edged closer to entering another European war. The political debate in the United States was set in the context of an isolationist political inclination, a fear of a worldwide conflagration in both Europe and Asia, and a widespread movement that condemned all wars as inherently prone to the horrors that attended the First World War.

The 1939 report resoundingly condemned “militarism as an attitude of mind which glorifies war as war” (*Acts of Synod 1939*, p. 241), while warning with equal vehemence against “the evils of present-day pacifism” (p. 241). The integrity of the church’s witness for justice was endangered, Synod argued, by the “insidious

propaganda” (p. 243) of those who “condemn every war, and hence, refuse to bear arms under any conditions” (p. 242). This position is untenable the report insists: “he who denies the right and duty of the government to wage war on just occasions is not in harmony but in conflict with the Word of God - His conscience is seriously in error” (p. 247).

To be sure, adds the report, the duty to obey government is neither absolute nor unconditional: If faced with a choice, we must obey God rather than men. However, this leaves room for “only one kind of conscientious objector” (p. 247) to a government’s call to take up arms—that of a Christian who “is absolutely certain in light of the principles of the Word of God that his country is fighting for a wrong cause” (p. 249). However, “as a general rule, the orders of the government are to be obeyed” (p. 246), and “in a sinful and imperfect world, it may even be necessary to submit to an unjust law” (p. 246). Synod said that a Christian who cannot be certain that his government is waging war justly ought therefore to do as ordered. What are the conditions that define the justified use of military force? Surprisingly, the 1939 report had scarcely anything to offer in response to this question.

In closing, Synod would urge upon all to pray for righteousness and peace in national and international affairs; to study the revealed Word for an understanding of the will of God for the guidance of the life of citizens and their government; to obey all lawfully constituted authorities for God’s sake; and, if a serious conflict of duty should occur, to obey God rather than men.
(Acts of Synod 1939, p. 249)

In 1969, two young men from Chicago asked the church for counsel concerning the Vietnam War and their desire to be selective conscientious objectors. When they did not get any consistent help from the local church, the men then appealed to Synod. Synod reaffirmed the decision of 1939 and supported the young men.

In 1973, Synod addressed the moral issues concerning the decisions to justify the Vietnam War, the use of force in the tactics of that war, and the fact that there were no provisions in US law or policy that allowed for the selective conscientious objector and that the current policy “was quite contrary to the position of our church.” Under the Department of Defense conscientious objector rules, those of us in the Just War tradition and our members had no legal recourse. Since the entire country was discussing the plight of those who fled or were jailed, this Synod also made a plea for amnesty for those who fled to Canada, went to jail or in other ways tried to beat the draft. Synod did not judge the fleeing to another country as wrong.

In 1977, the Synod approved a report on the “Ethical Decisions about War.” This report had 15 guidelines and three introductory observations to assist the reader in using the guidelines. This report is the closest the CRCNA had come to an articulation of the Just War Tradition paradigm for justifying the use of military power. Because of uneasiness with the report of 1973, especially on the part of the Canadian members, this Synod

recommended the following; “If a Christian cannot conscientiously engage in a given war or in alternate service, his refusal must be within the framework of law. He must expose himself to the due process and even the penalty of the state whose laws he has knowingly, publicly, and conscientiously broken. He should not ‘go underground’ or flee the country except under conditions of extraordinary oppression or intolerably brutal tyranny.”

In 1982, Synod approved a report called “Guidelines for Justifiable Warfare.” What is interesting about this report is that it was first presented in 1964 and sent by Synod to the churches for study. It was not brought back to Synod during the intervening years. This report also addressed the use of nuclear power in war. Synod communicated this report to the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of Canada, and the Secretary General of the United Nations.

In 1984, Synod was asked to support tax resistance as a form of conscientious objection. In 1985, Synod adopted another set of guidelines, this one dealing with “Conscientious Objection and Tax Resistance.” The church acknowledged the need for Christians to obey the government and the right to object to policies and practices the Christian deems as unjust. The means and strategy of the Christian objector must be compatible with biblical teachings on government. To bring change, the Christian should exhaust honorable, legal, and discreet means. He should consider civil disobedience as a last resort. If his conscience leads him to the extremity of disobeying government, the Christian ought to submit to government’s authority by accepting the penalty for his disobedience. The Christian may ask for and expect sympathetic concern from fellow Christians, members of the church as body or organism. It is ordinarily inappropriate for the Christian conscientious objector to ask the church as institute to join him in his individual strategy. The instituted church cannot assume, as its own, individual methods of resistance; it has neither the competence nor the authority from the Lord to do so. The Christian may, however, expect the church to give him what it does have the authority and competence to give: prophetic proclamation of the Word, pastoral care, and diaconal support. The nature of the church’s “necessary support” for him is to help him endure his hardship, not to join him in the individual methods of objection he chooses.

In 2006, Synod approved another report with several recommendations. The statement I quoted at the beginning came from the Study Committees long discussion of the continued viability of the Just War Tradition given the many new developments in the current world political, national and international scene. The committee felt that the Tradition was still a good way to structure the ethical and moral debate concerning the justification to go to war and the conduct of the war. Synod approved sending two messages to the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Canada: one concerning the ambiguity in the National Security Strategy of 2002 between Preventive war and pre-emptive war (The Department of Defense now has a different definition for each word); and the need to change the DOD Directive on Conscientious Objection to include selective conscientious objection. The Department has not accepted this position, so draft legislation has been sent to several legislators urging them to introduce the Bill.

Summary of CRC’s Position on War and Peace

1. CRC members are exhorted to be peacemakers:

... we who claim his name must live peaceably ourselves, furnishing to the world conspicuous examples of peace-loving, harmonious living, and must also privately and publicly denounce war and strive to prevent it by prayer, by redressing the grievances of oppressed people, by prophetic calls to peace, by urging the faithful exercise of diplomacy, by entering the political arena ourselves, and by strong appeals to all in high places to resolve tensions by peaceful means. Christians must be reconcilers. (Acts of Synod 1977, p. 558)

2. CRC maintains that a “just war” is possible and permissible, i.e. that a legitimately constituted government may and, in the case of aggression, must use appropriate force to achieve the ends of justice and freedom.

3. The CRC position is grounded in the view of the state and its bearing of the sword as found in Romans 13:4 and supported by the general analogy of scripture reference the rightful use of force by duly constituted government in the pursuit of justice and freedom.

4. The CRC recognizes that even though there are occasions and reasons when war may be justified, it also recognizes that (“in the eyes of God”) there are no completely or purely just wars.

5. The CRC eschews both pacifism and militarism. Even though the 1977 report acknowledges that pacifism is attractive to many Christians, it judges that in the final analysis “pacifism is mistaken.” With respect to militarism, however, the report speaks even more strongly.

6. Selective conscientious objection is acceptable with respect to a specific war under very limited conditions.

7. The imperative “to obey one’s government” is a generalization and not a universalization (“obey them in all things that are not in conflict with God’s Word” – Belgic Confession, Article 36).

8. The principle of proportionality and discrimination leads the CRC to conclude that the widespread use of nuclear weapons in a war renders such a war as unjust.

Finally, because of the uniquely Christian love of peace and mission of reconciliation, Christians know that all national truculence, all inclination—surely all eagerness—to fight, all crusading spirit, every proud display of weaponry and glorying in military might, is thoroughly immoral and contrary both to the letter and spirit of everything our Lord teaches.

Let me summarize the Just War Tradition and then move on to where I think we might find places to discuss and cooperate. The just war tradition develops moral criteria under three rubrics:

1. *jus ad bellum* – 7 components are considered necessary for justifying the use of military power.

- A just cause

- Right authority (The US Constitution makes Congress responsible to declare war, it has not done so since WWII.)
 - Right intention
 - Proportionality (not do more harm than good)
 - Last resort
 - Achieve peace
 - Reasonable hope for success.
2. ***jus in bello*** - 2 components for just use of force in the exercise of military power.
- Proportionality – use of restraint regarding the appropriate weapons of war
 - Discrimination- extent of harm to non-combatants
3. ***jus post bellum*** The weakest and less articulated part of the tradition and hence, no moral criterion are identified.

The first place to begin is with what we share in common. The Synod of 1977 said: In the face of these difficulties it is not possible for the church to arrive at a neat set of morally binding rules for her members relative to war. At best she can offer guidelines that mark out boundaries, point out directions and dangers, and stimulate the mind to thoughtful, honest evaluation of the issues at hand. Such guidelines can do no more than assist the church and her members in translating into practicality and in implementing the principles of Holy Scripture. Moreover, the church cannot expect that any set of guidelines, however carefully drawn and conscientiously employed, will necessarily result in a unanimous evaluation of any given war.

In his unrelenting opposition to all war, the committed pacifist may not despise and reject a fellow-Christian whose conscience persuades him of the legitimacy of his nation's armed response to aggression. Nor should the Christian whose conscientious patriotism readies him to take up arms against aggression scorn and condemn the Christian pacifist whose conscience forbids him to engage in or encourage any act of violence. (*Acts of Synod 1977*, p. 570)

The Bible in a number of places approves passive resistance, and, although this report concludes that war is sometimes necessary, and participation therein justified, we do not hesitate to point out that Christian pacifism has a long and respected history. The difficulties inherent in the problem of war and Christian participation therein, together with the imperfect moral state and limited wisdom of every Christian, summon all members of the church to mutual understanding and tolerance of the conscientious convictions of one another. The historic peace churches have led the effort to legalize conscientious objection to war. You can help us gain the same legal status for selective conscientious objection. I have briefed this to high levels in the DOD, but it has not found a champion. I have circulated to Senate and House members a draft legislation to place this into law.

“The just-war tradition” is the name for a diverse body of literature that reflects centuries-long efforts to articulate appropriate moral criteria for judging whether and when governments may justifiably go to war and how they should prosecute warfare by just means. This tradition highlights and

seeks to articulate the moral obligations of citizens and rulers in relation to the use of force in restraining injustice. The just-war tradition begins with the assumption that God has given those who govern the authority to use force, when necessary, as part of their responsibility for good governing. It also emphasizes the important distinction between the routine task of maintaining domestic order through systems of law enforcement and punishment, and the resort to warfare, which may be justified only in very limited circumstances when all other means of upholding peace and justice have been exhausted.

Some Christian pacifists believe that participation in any form of violence—even that involved in domestic law enforcement—is prohibited to those who seek to conduct their lives “inside the perfection of Christ” (Schleitheim Confession, 1525). If the threat of force is indeed necessary to maintain order, they argue, Christians should be exempted from any active involvement in order to follow a higher way. Other Christian pacifists acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of force by Christians in law enforcement but not in military action. What unites these strands of pacifism, and distinguishes them from the just-war tradition, is their conviction that warfare is always wrong for a Christian.

It should be emphasized that, when it comes to particular situations of conflict, the areas of agreement between just-war defenders and pacifists are often larger than their disagreements. Both sides in this long-standing discussion acknowledge the legitimate authority of government to employ means of force when necessary, while differing over exactly when it is necessary. Both sides agree that governments must seek peace and root out injustice. Both sides also condemn every resort to warfare that is driven by greed or glory and not by the pursuit of a just order.

An important place where we could have a dialogue and where we could learn from you, has to do with intervening before the relationships turn belligerent. We need to push back the “last resort” component and find ways to mediate in potential areas of conflict. One way to do that is to learn about reconciliation, peace building, peace making, and passive resistance.

I am deeply concerned that the last U.S. administration used the just war tradition to justify going to war, especially in Iraq. I could go into great detail on the misuse of intelligence, the failure to acknowledge the true state of Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the ideological influence of the Neo-Conservatives had on the choice to go to war in Iraq. I have lengthy briefings on these issues.

I am also concerned at the abandonment of the UN inspections. Labeling this effort a failure led the administration to use the argument of last resort, but the inspections were successful and plans were briefed to the UN on how to strengthen these inspections. The Carnegie Institute had plans for the UN to send a small military force with the inspectors. The small force was designed to give the inspectors more mobility to conduct surprise inspections; it would have increased their intelligence capability; and protected them from infiltration by counter intelligence by the Iraqi government. If more people would

have known about these plans and the reality on the ground, the Bush administration would not have been able to justify “last resort.”

There are some very important efforts at peace building and reconciliation going on by people in the faith community that bring the religious dimension of trying to prevent war. We need to share these efforts so that ‘last resort’ to the use of military power is really the last possible course of action. When I got to the State Department in 2000, there were no reconciliation projects supported by the Department. I asked to have that as part of my portfolio. I was able to get money to fund three projects; In Lebanon, Pakistan, and Sudan. A friend, of mine Doug Johnston, edited a book called “Religion the Missing Dimension of States’ Craft.” We need to put to better use the resources of the religious community to make the choice to use military power more clearly unethical.

I think we can cooperate on the use of nuclear military weapons. The Christian Reformed Church is pacifist on the use of these weapons. We should object to all weapons of mass destruction, because they are neither discriminating nor proportional. We should all support efforts to restrain the production of these weapons and further testing of these nuclear weapons. I think we also should examine the use of “conventional arms.” Military training has gotten very good. In WWII only 20% of the fighting force shat to kill, today that is up to 85%. We, the US and Canada, have trained and have fielded the deadliest and most lethal force in the history of war fighting. I am concerned because soldiers are more concerned with killing than being killed.

We also need to join and raise our voices against the use of military force as the option of first choice rather than last choice. In New Orleans, confusion was rampant because there were many groups that were restricted by law to use the force necessary to maintain civil order. The various rules of engagement made for chaos.

But I see the biggest challenge is in developing criteria for Justice after War. As a person who has been a member of the Army for 40 years, I have always been fascinated by the words “In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” In my lifetime, most wars have ended badly. The last good ending to a war that brought with it the hope of peace was World War Two, where the defeat was so overwhelming that the will to continue the fight died with the war’s last casualties. The Marshall plan set in motion a recovery and a rebirth of the nations ravaged by the war. Korea, Vietnam, the war in the Balkans, and the 1st Iraq war did not end well and peace has come hard or not at all. The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are not likely to end well. We certainly are not more than conquerors and neither are our enemies. I think that one reason for these bad endings is lack of a well developed set of standards for what we would like to see at the end of a conflict. What does peace look like?

When I was Command Chaplain in European Command, we did a lot of operation planning for contingencies given to us by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I always asked the question, what outcome do you want to have at the end of this conflict? What are you trying to establish or create? It is only recently that some ethicists are writing about justice after war. Brian Orend, from the University of Waterloo, has written a wonderful

book “The Morality of War:” where he begins to shape some thinking in the area. His thinking is most helpful to begin the discussion.

When we visited the Occupied Territories, I asked one magnificent Arab woman what she desired as an outcome to the peace negotiations. Her answer was, “I want a Minimally Just Society.” She could not elaborate on what she meant exactly. How would we define a minimally just society? What criteria would lead us in determining what needs to be in place for a nation or tribe to be considered at peace? What parts of a peace treaty need to be in place to make the outcome moral and ethical? What about reparations; what do we need to put in place for the losing nation to be in a more secure and just state of affairs; what limits and restraints need to be applied to ensure the conflict does not flare up again? These are important considerations. The Peace treaty at the end of WWI was part of the cause of WWII.

Orend has these criteria for a Minimally Just Society: Such a community is one that does all it reasonably can do: 1) gain recognition as being legitimate in the eyes of its own people and the international community 2) adhere to the basic rules of international justice and good international citizenship, notably non-aggressive 3) satisfy the human rights of its individual members to security, subsistence, liberty, equality and recognition.

I suggest that defining a minimally just society is the place for us to begin a conversation. I also would suggest that finding the answer to this would give us a template for avoiding conflict.

Thank you very much.