



Resource Centre

From our Churches

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Why the Military is Not My Option

When the lawn is too dry, we water it. When the room is too cold, we turn up the heat. When the dessert is too sour, we sweeten it. When a solution is too acidic, we add a base. The concept is simple, even for a child. But in one respect at least, this concept is lost to most of humankind. While lamenting the countless wars and conflicts which make our planet so dangerous to human life, we arm our young men and women to the teeth and send them out to keep the peace. For some reason we cling to the notion that if we add just a touch more violence, just one more army to the battlefield, we'll find true peace. Violence plus violence produces peace? How logical is that?

My personal convictions regarding participation in and cooperation with military expressions of sovereignty are based to a great extent on the religious principles of the faith that I learned as a child and adopted as an adult. They are convictions which are admittedly uncommon, but which make sense to me. I recognize that in certain circumstances, they are extremely unpopular. I am also aware that I have not been tested in the fire when it comes to defending my convictions, but making an effort to express them is good practice, should that day come.

There are two significant arenas in which I cannot, with a clear conscience, support the use of military force against another country. They are: the "moral arena" and "the war isn't over when it's over" arena.

THE MORAL ARENA

I believe that the first casualty of war is Truth. It doesn't really matter who said it first. In a time of war, Truth is diluted, or twisted, or dismembered, or hidden. And once a nation's leaders have decided that Truth must be locked up in a filing cabinet somewhere (either because it's so ugly or because the ordinary citizen cannot be trusted to interpret it), the most important pillar of moral integrity has been removed. With Truth out of the way, there is nothing left to keep leaders from using any means they deem necessary either to carry out their ambitious plans to conquer, or to avoid the humiliation of defeat. With Truth out of the

way, it is possible to talk of the glory of war, ignoring the hellish disasters it creates. With Truth out of the way, it is possible to dwell on the courage and honour of the fallen, ignoring the destruction and chaos that follow in the wake of their patriotic duty.

I question the morality of recruiting young people, deliberately and skilfully unravelling every fibre of their psyche, and reweaving them as automatons that obey without question.

I question the morality of an organization that teaches young people to hate and then to kill human beings they've never met, and with whom, in other circumstances, they might have enjoyed a pleasant summer vacation.

I question the morality of an organization that claims to make boys into men (and girls into women, I suppose) but whose top brass would rather hang a private first class than to accept responsibility for a well-trained but hate-filled soldier going amok and losing control.

I question the morality of a system that allows the rich to avoid their patriotic duty in order to pursue lofty dreams, while the poor, whose dreams are much more modest, choose enlistment as a pathway to a good education and a decent meal.

I have learned that with good training, a good soldier can overcome the normal aversion to killing another human being, and learn to do so quickly and quietly and often. And, if he's really good, he can sleep at night – without pills. And I say: this does not reflect the moral standard to which I hold myself accountable.

I have learned that wars mutilate soldier and citizen, friend and foe alike, leaving the families of all to grieve deeply. And I say: I cannot be a part of it.

I have learned that wars poison the mind and open gateways to hate, breeding unquenchable desires for revenge. And I say: this is not the pathway to peace.

I have learned that wars poison the sky, the sea, the land. Wars drain a nation's economy of resources that could be used to feed its hungry, educate its youth, tend its sick, and rehabilitate its imprisoned masses. And I say: I can do better with my money.

I have learned that there is more money to be made from a war, and in more ways, than I could ever have imagined. I now understand why some people look for reasons to prolong wars rather than bring them to an end. And I say: we have completely lost our moral compass.

I have learned that the richest country in the world is also the one most closely tied to a military economy, and I cannot help but think that this is a public declaration about the moral state of affairs within such a nation.

I firmly believe that the form of human dialogue we call which 'war' is immoral.

WAR ISN'T OVER WHEN IT'S OVER

War is not over when the enemy surrenders and papers are signed. War always, always has a lingering taste. It is the taste of:

Unexploded ordnance: Long after the tanks have slithered back to their bases and the bombers have landed back on friendly tarmac, the Grim Reaper continues to lurk in the shadows of the forest and in the sunshine of open meadows, explosively reminding the unsuspecting traveler 'You should not have come this way!'

Unquenched hatreds: It is unlikely that the end of a war brings true peace. The victor looks down in vainglorious contempt on the vanquished, and the vanquished seethes with resentful hatred toward the victor, biding his time as he plans his revenge.

Unexplained diseases: Long after the army has retreated to the barracks, and the civilian has returned to routines of life, hospitals are treating 'survivors'. Some have psychological disorders as a result of what they've experienced. Others have social diseases acquired at some point in the conflict. Some are dying the slow death that comes from living on toxic soil, drinking polluted water, and breathing toxic air. Some are children born with unspeakable mutations.

Unwanted children: Wandering abandoned on the foggy periphery of every battlefield, one is almost guaranteed to find a large number of children born out of violence or lust. These are children born into circumstances which, for too many to count, will ensure that they never know the helpful wisdom of a loving dad or the benefits of a decent education. They will wander the streets of shantytowns, slums, and favelas. They will grow up with amazing survival skills. They will always wonder exactly who they are. They will live in the hope that someday someone will come along and claim them or they will die in despair of ever being wanted.

Unexpected costs: Wars are expensive – the most recent wars being the most expensive – and put the treasuries of nations in jeopardy. But it may be argued that the financial costs of a war are the very least of our concerns. How does one approximate the value of ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a million lost futures? How do governments justify the cost of managing increasing numbers of war veterans out on the street and unemployed, or suffering from addictions, or needing rehabilitation, or occupying prison cells? How can a father explain to a child the logic behind the cratered streets, shredded parks, broken statues, and the pockmarked shells of formerly beautiful structures? Where will a mother find the words to share her memories of special times and people and places that now exist only within her own mind? How will the only planet we'll ever live on recover after we've depleted its most valuable resources in order to rid it of 'the enemy'?

Unfulfilled goals: Choose a country, choose a time, choose a war. Choose the 'winner' or the 'loser'. Someone, somewhere, knows that it did not bring the freedom, the peace, the prosperity, the friendship, that it was claimed it would. Wise people at the top will always question whether or not it was all worth it.

Consider this: every backyard sandbox has rules – share your toys, do not hit sister over the head with your Tonka truck, do not throw sand in your brother's eyes. But somewhere between the sandbox and the desert, the rules are rewritten. Behaviour that has been so

patiently exorcised from the child is now systematically driven into the recruit. Behaviour not tolerated by a parent supervising the sandbox is praised by a president invading the desert. Behaviours which society has branded as criminal when committed by aggrieved individuals are considered heroic when done by an aggrieved nation. Why should this be so?

It comes down to this: humanity is addicted to violence. Wanton violence appears to be one of its distinguishing characteristics. I can think of nothing on earth that will change this. But this doesn't mean that I am obligated to participate.