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Just Peacemaking: Canadian Church Perspectives and Contributions

February 2-3, 2012
Waterloo, Ontario
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Response to:²

An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace (World Council of Churches, 2011) -
www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1729

Just Peace Companion (World Council of Churches, 2011) -
www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1730

A brief reflection:

Luke's gospel poignantly articulates the ongoing dilemma represented in the WCC documents currently under review.

Zechariah's prophecy that his son, John, will be an instrument of the Lord to "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79) generates an initial spirit of hope and anticipation. The song of the angels announcing Jesus' birth to the lowly shepherds points to the spirit and purpose of the messianic baby in the manger: "Glory to God in the highest heavens, and on earth peace among those whom he favors" (Luke 2:14). This song is repeated, virtually verbatim, by the multitudes that applaud Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to begin the final week of his life. The excitement and anticipation is palpable: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in

¹ I am here as a representative of Mennonite Church Canada. However, my comments and this paper have not been vetted by that organization in any way. I know that there is considerable diversity of understanding in our denomination, as, I suppose, there would be in most others. I also do not understand my presentation as formally reflecting the "Historic Peace Churches," although I do speak as a person shaped by that tradition.

² Abbreviations used in this document: World Council of Churches (WCC); Just Peace Companion (JPC); An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace (ECJP); Historic Peace Church (HPC).



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the highest heaven!" (Luke 19:38). The multitude anticipates the fulfillment of the good news of the angels.

This excitement is immediately tempered by the response of the Pharisees who demand that Jesus impose a restriction order on his disciples: ordering them into silence (Luke 19:39). The high anticipation is then crushed by Jesus himself in one of the saddest scenes of the New Testament. Luke reports:

As he came near and saw the city [Jerusalem], he wept over it, saying,
If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!
But now they are hidden from your eyes (Luke 19:41-42).

The interplay of the peace anticipated by Zechariah, celebrated by the angels, applauded by the multitude, and proclaimed by the disciples is the source of extreme sadness and discouragement for Jesus. And even when Luke reports Jesus' post-resurrection attempt to bless his disciples with "peace," they are startled, terrified, frightened, and doubtful, thinking this must be a ghost speaking to them (Luke 24:36-38).

"Peace" is clearly a complex issue. It seems like the gulf in the understandings of "the things that make for peace" couldn't be wider or deeper. We continue to grapple with the same complexities. I wonder: if Jesus were to "see the documents" we have before us, would he now sing with the angels, or again "weep" with sadness because we too have not yet adequately "recognized the things that make for peace?" Are we now at the point of celebration, or are some things still "hidden from our eyes?" Would the multitudes and disciples now applaud our documents? We continue to grapple with the same complexities.

A First Response:

The WCC documents before us are truly remarkable for several reasons:

- 1) The trajectories traced in Chapter 3 of the JPC are encouraging. It is striking how the understandings of war, violence, peace, and nonviolence have shifted substantially over the years. These shifts have become bolder and clearer in their critique of "just war" and in their understandings of nonviolence as an essential path to just peace.
- 2) The documents help us to understand, in a comprehensive way, the very broad, pervasive, and insidious realities of violence in every nook and cranny of our lives and in the world. Violence is not easily categorized, and therefore not easily addressed or resolved.
- 3) A consensus is emerging in understanding the nonviolent intentions of Jesus and their normative relationship to the Christian life and the ecclesial vocation. These intentions

are to be prototypical for the life of the church, and the document acknowledges that they indeed were so in its early life.

- 4) The document helpfully outlines how the Constantinian reality, particularly the introduction of the just war criteria, was discontinuous not only with New Testament understandings of the vocation of the church, but were also with the identity of the early church in the first centuries after the death of Jesus.

A Second Response:

These documents challenge the traditional HPC understandings and assumptions. These challenges are welcome, but require additional, substantive and diligent discernment by us. In these ways, this document is very helpful for us. I will point to only a few challenges:

- 1) The document appears to suggest (overstate?) that the Mennonite-Catholic dialogue has brought us to a common mind in terms of “just policing,” which can serve as a basis to overcome the tensions between just war and of Christian pacifism.³ This requires additional discussion.⁴
- 2) Related to just policing is the Responsibility to Protect doctrine and the justification of military intervention as Peacekeepers under the United Nations. Whether these are truly a new path forward or simply some more manifestations of just war, which is declared obsolete, is not yet a newly gained consensus within our church.⁵

A Third Response:

I would be remiss in not also pointing to some causes of disquiet in the document. I will sketch these in a bit more detail.

1) The irony and addiction of Christendom:

The vestiges of Christendom continue to permeate the logic of the document. The church today is not a territorial regime: it governs no geographical space; it has no emperor, king/queen, or Prime Minister; it has no parliament; it neither has or controls any military forces; it builds no weaponry of war; it engages no police; it deploys no troops; it fights no wars; it invades no countries; it recruits no military troops; it does not train for violence or war. In its own immediate life, vocation, and organization the vision of the prophet has already, in many ways, become reality:

³ cf. Par.s 52-54, pp.s 93-94 (JPC).

⁴ Many of our Confessions would not yet reveal such a shift.

⁵ I can't speak for other HPC churches, but the responses from the HPC committee referenced in this document would suggest that this is true also for them. The discussions about the R2P doctrine and overcoming the historic divide between just war and pacifism focus the continuing dis-ease among us in a healthy way. In this way, the documents are helpful to our church.



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... and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4).

And yet we struggle with persistent and nagging questions of *nations lifting swords against nations* and the role of the church in that. In that conversation the pruning-hooks are still spears, the plowshares are still swords, and we keep learning war better. As such, the prophet's vision is far from realized, and the church's complicity is everywhere evident. It seems as though in this part of the vision, the church has simply out-sourced its involvement to the state: still involved, but at arms-length – paying for and supplying the personnel needed and, in some ways, desiring to control the strategies and resulting activities.⁶

When and how should the church support: invasion of geographical empires; regime change of nation-states; assassinating dictators; deployment of troops; fighting wars; killing the enemy; engaging police; protecting victims with weaponry; encouraging the recruitment and sending of its young people as agents of violent systems to fight even more violent evil? By declaring the "just war" tradition obsolete, as the JPC does, these questions, theoretically, have been answered. These are not the ways the church envisions peace to come. The church has not prepared itself to execute any of these options. And yet it wants to speak into these questions, and the non-church wants it to speak into it too. It is somewhat akin to the horse and buggy Amish advising Chrysler how to build better cars, and being expected by others to do so with high levels of expertise.

The irony is that the church is somehow holding itself responsible to be something that it is not. More seriously, the church is held responsible by what it is not to be what it can

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Scribner, 1993) p. 17. This study estimates that 167-175 million persons were killed in the 20th century due to "politically motivated carnage." These numbers do not include killing by crime or other forms of murder. While it is not part of his study, we are aware how much of this was made possible via the willing participation of individual Christians as instruments of war, and the pedagogical and theological support of the church in these endeavours.

Another example: 77% of the military forces of the USA are Christians (compared to 80% of the entire population that designates itself as Christian). Of these 77% about two-thirds are Protestant/Evangelical. A recent article in the Kitchener-Waterloo Record, highlighted a sniper of the USA military after 4 tours of duty in Iraq. He is proud to have killed 160 persons. He is an Evangelical Christian. When asked whether he feels any remorse, he replied that the only thing he is sorry about is that he didn't kill more. When asked if he ever felt any tension between his activities and his faith, he said absolutely not. In the Bible God sends his people to kill in war all the time. I suspect that although he was overtly identified as an "Evangelical Christian," some modified version of his testimony would ring true in a large majority of the 77% indicated above.

not and should not be. But, perhaps most serious is the assumption that the church is responsible to eliminate strategic contradictions between church and state because God is active in both. Logically, this translates into the hermeneutical and ethical unity of the church and the state. Somehow we cannot bring ourselves to trust that God is active also in the decisions of the state, even when the state chooses strategies that are incompatible to the participation of the church. We have difficulty believing that the church and the state are not synonyms, because God, after all, is present in both. This refusal to believe is akin to an addiction: even when we want to let go, it will not let go of us.

This irony and addiction are best addressed by understanding more fully that the primary responsibility of the church to the state is the pedagogical incarnation of its proclamation; it is not adherent imitation of nation-state strategic preferences. When the assumptions of ecclesial incarnation and nation-state imitation clash, the vocation of the church is to discern the distinction and to be true to who it is.

2) **The hermeneutics of the Christendom irony: “The gift of law, law, and the rule of law:”**

The irony identified above requires a substantive hermeneutic: hitching posts, if you will. For 1,800 years these hitching posts have been Constantinianism and the related just war criteria. Now that both of these are declared obsolete, new hitching posts are needed and they have been devised: they are the United Nations and the rule of law. I will outline the challenges of this briefly, and then identify some of the corollaries evident.

The document assumes the equivalence of biblical *torah*, law of all cultures, and modern understandings of the rule of law. This is best seen in the following statement:

*The brief survey of the biblical tradition has pointed to the **gift of law** as God’s primary means of reducing and limiting violence. Indeed, in all cultures **law** is the central instrument for nonviolent resolution of conflict. Supporting and strengthening the “**rule of law**”, therefore, has to be considered an essential ethical guideline for the Christian community (par.35, p.38 JPC; emphasis added).*

Much of the document continues, then, to center on the foundational nature of the “rule of law” for human welfare and for Christian ethics. I will highlight only one of the more than 25 uses of this concept in the documents:

The fundamental challenge for an international order of peace is to bind together the basic aims of peace and justice, the concern for security and the recognition of human rights under the universal rule of law (JPC par. 83, p.108).

The portrayal of the “rule of law,” and nation-state law, as the primary contemporary manifestations of the “gift of law - *torah*” is not a firm biblical foundation.

The argument of the document is something like this:

- i) Because “rule of law” is foundational for international peace,

- ii) Because the nation-state (or its amalgam such as the United Nations) is the primary vehicle for the enforcement of the rule of law,
- iii) Because R2P is also founded on our commitment to rule of law,
- iv) Because peace-keeping based on military intervention functions through the rule of law,
- v) Because rule of law is equivalent to the biblical “gift of law – *torah*,”
- vi) Therefore Christians and the church should support the R2P doctrine and military peace-keeping,
- vii) In order to maintain our commitment to and be congruent with biblical understandings of the “gift of law.”

Allow me to point to only a few elements that make this hermeneutical leap suspect.

- a) Modern rule of law is state, empire, or regime-based. In this document, the regime has migrated to include also the international regime of the United Nations as the authoritative international body to enforce the rule of law. As such rule of law is the critical tool needed to govern the nations and the world.
 - The biblical “gift of law –*torah*” is people-hood based. It is not so much designed to rule nations, as it is to order the internal life of God’s people.
- b) Modern rule of law is universal. It is designed to rule all people, regardless of religious conviction or non-conviction.
 - The biblical “gift of law” also embraces the universe, but it does so by incarnating particularity. It is not assumed that everyone will obey this law, although it would be good if they did. Obedience is integrally connected to commitment to the particularity of this people-hood.
- c) Modern rule of law is at its best when it is compulsory, i.e. governance ensures that it is obeyed by all.
 - The biblical “gift of law” is at its best when it is voluntary: committed to by those who wish to follow, as a community, the intentions of God for the creation.
- d) Modern rule of law as a universal tool for governance needs to be religiously neutral in order for it to be genuinely just and effective.
 - The biblical “gift of law” is understood as particular for obedience to God. It is related to the religious self-understanding, commitment, and identity of God’s people. Indeed this “gift” can’t be known without knowing the God of the gift.
- e) Rule of law is included in the JPC as “the primary instrument for nonviolent resolution of conflict.” Reconciliation and peace under the rule of law are the fruit of the implementation of a code or a doctrine imposed by a regime.
 - Biblically, the primary instrument for reconciliation and blessing is not law at all, or at least not alone. The primary instrument is the “family” of blessing that will be used to bless all families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). This family can be a blessing to all, because it embodies the gift of law. Or said differently: the gift of law can function as reconciliation and peace only because it is embodied in people-hood; it does not function via codes enforced by regimes.

The attempted merger of the rule of law with the gift of law is not a true merger at all: it is a take-over. In it the urgent necessity of universality rules over the apparent foolishness of particularity. The gift of law also has universal pretensions, but it comes through the multiplicity of incarnational particularities.

The distinction between the rule of law and the gift of law is at the heart of the historic rift between the “just war” churches and the “pacifist” churches. When rule of law is primary, the ecclesial vocation of incarnated *torah* is not. It is subsumed into helping the regime do better what it is trying to do,⁷ and the church effectively becomes a handmaiden of the state (or its amalgam). When gift of law is primary then the particularity of incarnational communities, who by their life are the active presence of just peace, becomes the priority and as such the primary vehicle of establishing peace and justice.

This document opts for the rule of law and, predictably, the ecclesial vocation is largely invisible. As such, this document continues to be steeped in the logic of Christendom. In this option, when the inevitable clash comes between imposing the rule of law with violence and living the gift of law as Jesus taught, the regime will need to do what it must do, and the church will need to participate in and support it.⁸

3) Corollaries of this hermeneutical framework:

a) The Vocation of the Church as handmaiden:

The document rightfully lauds the important activities and just peace efforts: some of them via the church. It makes special mention of Christian Peacemaker Teams; The Foundation for Reconciliation; Peace-builder Communities in the Philippines; The Popular Committee of Bel'in; Martin Luther King; Gandhi; Alternatives to Violence Program; etc. The overarching impression is that just peace will come from the efforts of the nation-states, separately and jointly, and from creative initiatives and programming from civil society and the church, separately or jointly. It is difficult to articulate what is missing in this picture, but allow me to try. I can do so only by an appeal to creative imagination.

We estimate that that there are 14,000 communities of faith in the world, overtly connected to the Anabaptist faith. For a tiny denomination, this is substantial. Each one of these communities is a potential instrument for just peace – not simply because they

⁷ In other times and places, other understandings, current at the time, were understood to exercise this primary role of ensuring peace and justice. Benevolent dictators, theocratic regimes, and the consolidation of empires are but a few of these.

⁸ This in spite of the portrayal of Constantine and Christendom in pars. 36-39: pp.s 85-86; par. 55; p. 94.



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sponsor particular programs, but in the way they engage each other and the contexts they inhabit. In many ways - too numerous to mention - the mere existence and life of these communities already contain the seeds of just peace. They are also a potential tool for just peace in what they refuse to do, and what they refuse to support. Their existence is profoundly political, and could be even more so if the ecclesial vocation were more fully understood. The WCC document acknowledges none of these 14,000 communities as primary or even significant vehicles for just peace in the world. The vision presented, thus, is not yet profoundly ecclesial. The vocation of the church is subsumed in its inclusion in geographical and partisan politics or by program-itis.

How many such unacknowledged communities are there that proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord? I don't have a number. About 2 billion people in the world are identified as Christian (about 33% of the entire population). If they participate in communities averaging 1,000, there would be 2 million such communities of potential just peace. If the average were 100, then there would be 20 million. These communities are found in every imaginable context, culture, language, and tradition the world. None of these communities, and thus none of this potential, is acknowledged adequately in this document. This is due, at least in part, to the vision of the church as a handmaiden to the state – an important handmaiden, but still a handmaiden.

b) The Potential Impact:

I'm not sure that we can imagine the inverse of what we have described above. Perhaps what I miss most in the document is the lack of trying. By putting the eggs in the basket of the rule of law, we ignore the primary habitat of the eggs: the incarnational community. The vocation of the 2 billion; the ___ millions of communities, has not yet been acknowledged. They seem to be invisible by-standers on the stage of others. We speak ecclesial language, but when push comes to shove, we opt for a non-ecclesial plan. There is no concerted call for the church to be the church – in this sense. There is the call for the church to continue its role as the handmaiden of the state. Biblical insight inverts this reality, and this inverted path to peace needs to be strengthened. Without that, the Christendom logic continues to reign in the soul of the church and society. My hope would be that a "just peace" document that arises out of the World Council of *Churches* would indeed suggest a vision for the *church* that takes the 2 billion and the ___ millions seriously as primary actors in God's plan for the reconciliation of creation. As long as these 2 billion/ ___ millions remain invisible, the task of the WCC as a voice of the church for just peace is not yet satisfactory.



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It is evident from Genesis to Revelation that God can indeed imagine the potential of this inverted vision for peace. I would encourage us to challenge each other more profoundly with the contemporary relevance and the normative implementation of this imagination.

The words, circulated by Richard Rohr, of an anonymous writer speak poignantly to the dilemma before us, especially if we understand these words as addressed to the church:

Watch your thoughts; they become words.

Watch your words; they become actions.

Watch your actions; they become habits.

Watch your habits; they become character.

Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

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