The Task and Challenge of Prophetic Peacemaking
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“The task of prophetic ministry,” says Walter Brueggemann, “is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” “Prophetic ministry consists in offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and his will for justice.”\(^1\) As a prophetic peacemaking community, the task and challenge of the Christian church is to offer “an alternative perception of reality” corrective of the dangerously erroneous “consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”

“The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking, and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.”\(^2\) This declaration by Albert Einstein witnesses to the reality of a new era and to the tragic unreality of most people’s perception of it. As early as 1946 Einstein had come to believe that “a new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels” and that to “maintain the threat of military power” was to “cling to old methods in a world which is changed forever.”\(^3\) Although claims that “we now live in a new era” may often be discounted as hyperbole, it is a fact that the American and Soviet superpowers now have a capacity unknown in previous generations—the capacity for the annihilation of civilization and for the devastation, if not extermination, of most human and animal life on this planet. The United States now has approximately 30,000 nuclear warheads, the Soviet Union 20,000. One 20-megaton bomb has a destructive capacity equal to 20 million tons of TNT which is four times the total of all bombs dropped in World War II. The weapons on a single submarine can devastate a great nation. There is a potential Auschwitz in every warhead both East and West; and if un-

whole of which we are a part.” It is war against the world, and in Cousin’s imagery is compared to inflicting a mortal wound against one’s own body or to seeing who can drill the biggest hole in the bottom of the boat on which we are all riding.

As proclaimers of a message that calls for repentance, clergy and laity of the Christian church are in the mind changing business. Our task as peacemakers is not only to confront idolatrous dependence upon military might and national power but also to expose and to seek to correct the archaic perceptions that enable our continued support of an irrational and immoral arms race that threatens the destruction of everything it is intended to defend. In Christ there are new perceptions with power to confront and correct this madness. We will later consider several of these “new modes of thinking,” but first we note briefly eight archaic ideas that are illustrative of ways in which “the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us” (and too often also within us) is out of touch with the realities of the nuclear era.

I. OBSOLETE IDEAS

1. *We defend ourselves and our freedom by killing our enemies.* Just war theory has supported killing in order to defend life and freedom. Now, however, instead of defending ourselves, the use of nuclear weapons against our major adversary will guarantee the destruction of both ourselves and our freedom. On the day after a nuclear war American liberty and democracy would be as dead as the more than 100 million immediate casualties. One ironic result of even a so-called “limited nuclear exchange” could well be the adoption of dictatorial policies, deemed essential for our security and survival, that would be similar to, if not worse than, those of the Soviet Union. Among the living, who likely would envy the dead, chaos and tyranny would reign supreme.

2. *Military superiority means increased national security.* In an age of vast overkill capacity, concepts of superiority and inferiority become meaningless. If I have a 20-gauge shotgun against your head, and you have a 10-gauge against mine, we are still essentially equal. If the purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter an aggressor, sufficiency is equal to superiority. In fact, minimal sufficiency to deter attack may produce greater security than superiority. This is especially true of superiority in “counterforce” weapons which are targeted against missiles and military installations. Since there is no sense in attacking empty missile silos, all counterforce weapons are inherently first strike weapons. Increased technological superiority in such weapons actually increases our insecurity by tempting an anxious enemy to strike first to prevent a threatened first strike against themselves. There would be far greater security in eliminating counterforce weapons altogether. We increase our security by helping them feel secure.

3. *Targeting missiles is more moral than targeting cities.* Targeting cities is preparation for retaliation. Targeting missiles is preparation for a first strike. The development of counterforce weapons, as noted above, raises the arms race to the hair trigger insecurity of first strike strategy. These strategies require “launch on warning” or even “launch on assessment” and lower the level of arms race morality by assuming willingness to destroy millions of so-called enemies (and to risk destruction of millions of one’s own people) without even having been attacked ourselves.

4. *The self-sufficient nation state is our best hope for security and survival.* As the self-sufficient city state was rendered insecure and obsolete by the development of cannon, so also
the self-sufficient nation state has been rendered insecure and obsolete by nuclear weapons. The
security of the nation has now become dependent upon the security of the planet. Just as there is
no safety in the most luxurious compartment of a sinking ship, there is no longer national
security without global security.

5. The only alternative to tyranny is military power. Power is capacity for achievement.
Although possessing enormous military might the Shah of Iran had no power to secure his
throne. The United States and the Soviet Union have abundant power to destroy each other, but
neither has the power to occupy or control the other. When confronting tyranny and the threat of
war, we need to be mindful of many options other than surrender or suicide.

6. Since we will always have war, it is futile to oppose it. Biblical references to “wars and
rumors of wars” (Matt 24:6; Mark 13:7) witness to the fact that we shall always have conflict in
a sinful world. But that does not mean that we shall always have war as the accepted institution
for ultimate resolution of international conflict. War as an accepted institution for conflict
resolution will be abolished either before or after the next world war. There may, for example,
still be isolated cases of slave labor in the United States, but slavery as an accepted institution
of American society has been abolished. So too will the institution of war be abolished. We shall
either find a cure for war, or—like a cancer—it will finally destroy itself by killing the body in
which it lives.

7. Communism (or since we have become friendly toward the Chinese communists, is it
now “Soviet communism”?) is the greatest evil in the world. Like all historic phenomena the
present forms of communism and capitalism will have their day and be succeeded by new
economic and political systems. There is no evil within history that justifies ending history.
Humanity is not in such a state of terminal illness that global euthanasia is justified. Even at its
tyrranical worst communism is a lesser evil than nuclear war. Had they a vote in the matter,
those living under the most repressive tyranny on earth would not ask to be “saved” from it by
atomic annihilation. An individual may prefer to be dead than red, but in terms of humanity as a
whole it is obviously preferable to be red than dead. Where there is life there is hope. Survival
isn’t everything, but it is the necessary precondition to all human fulfillment. Devastating
humanity with nuclear incineration and radiation to cure it of communism is as irrational and
immoral as curing our headaches by cutting off our heads.

8. As a nonpacifist it is inconsistent for me to oppose the arms race. Being grateful
for the police officer on the corner does not necessitate support of a police plan to rid the city of
criminals by burning it down. Nor need I as a patriotic American and “just/unjust war” Christian
favor a plan to save America by destroying the world.

II. “OUR CASE IS NEW”

In his address to the Congress on December 1, 1862, Abraham Lincoln declared that “the
dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with
difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and
act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.” So too in relation
to the nuclear arms race “we must think anew and act anew.” “We must disenthrall ourselves” of
archaic notions that propel us toward “unparalleled catastrophe,” for only then shall we save
humanity.

George Kennan states well the danger and challenge of our time:
Modern history offers no example of the cultivation by rival powers of armed force on a huge scale that did not in the end lead to an outbreak of hostilities. And there is no reason to believe that we are greater, or wiser, than our ancestors. It would take a very strong voice, indeed a powerful chorus of voices, from the outside, to say to the decision-makers of the two super powers what should be said to them:

“For the love of God, of your children, and of the civilization to which you belong, cease this madness. You have a duty not just to the generation of the present; you have a duty to the civilization’s past, which would threaten to render meaningless, and to its future, which would threaten to render nonexistent. You are mortal men. You are capable of error. You have no right to hold in your hands—there is no one wise enough and strong enough to hold in his hands—destructive power sufficient to put an end to civilized life on a great portion of our planet. No one should wish to hold such powers. Thrust them from you. The risks you might thereby assume are not greater—could not be greater—than those which you are now incurring for us all. “

But where is the voice powerful enough to say it?  

I believe that there is such a voice powerful enough to say, “Cease this madness”—a voice strong enough to offer “an alternative perception of reality”—to correct the deadly thinking that now threatens to drive us all like lemmings to the sea. This is the voice of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, calling his people to become “a powerful chorus of voices” united (1) to stop and to reverse the arms race; (2) to create alternative structures of global as well as national security; and (3) to learn new non-violent means of winning freedom from tyranny, oppression, and war.

The newness of these “new” modes of thinking is in one sense no newer than the New Testament. But in terms of their emergence into our current “consciousness and perception,” as well as in their application to the crisis of military madness that for the first time in history portends the end of history, they are as new as they are essential to the survival and fulfillment of humanity. Among these new perceptions are such as the following, each of which is an affirmation taught or implied by the witness and work of Jesus.

III. NEW MODES OF THINKING

1. We are stewards of the life of this planet. Christian stewardship involves much more than individual management of time, talent, and treasure. In Christ we are stewards of life itself. Helen Caldicott, leader of Physicians for Social Responsibility, suggests that we should regularly look out into the starry sky and wonder, “Is there life anywhere else in this vast universe?” Maybe there is. Maybe there isn’t! Ours may be the only life in all of God’s great creation! We are stewards of that life and can therefore neither support nor condone weapons procurement and military planning that can destroy it. Such stewardship may affirm responsible and limited police power in a sinful world, but it must renounce both the use and building of all...
forms of nuclear, chemical, biological, and other doomsday weapons which threaten human survival.

2. **We reverence the lives of individuals even when numbered in millions.** In Christ we reject the mathematical immorality of Joseph Stalin who is attributed to have said, “One death is a sorrow, ten deaths is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.” Military planning that regards “limited nuclear war” in which only 10 to 20 million would die to be “acceptable” and “winnable” must be rejected as an abominable irreverence for life.

Roger Fisher, professor of law and director of the Harvard Negotiation Project, has suggested one satirical solution to this statistical lack of reverence for life. He recommends that the code necessary to start a nuclear war no longer be carried in a briefcase by a military officer who accompanies the President, but that instead, he says:

> Put that needed code number in a little capsule, and then implant that capsule right next to the heart of a volunteer. The volunteer would carry with him a big, heavy butcher knife as he accompanied the President. If ever the President wanted to fire nuclear weapons, the only way he could do so would be for him first, with his own hands, to kill one human being. The President says, “George, I’m sorry but tens of millions must die.” He has to look at someone and realize what death is—what an innocent death is. Blood on the White House carpet. It’s reality brought home.

> When I suggested this to friends in the Pentagon they said, “My God, that’s terrible. Having to kill someone would distort the President’s judgement. He might never push the button.”

That such an encounter with reality is perceived to “distort the President’s judgement” is witness to the unreality of those who calmly calculate acceptable casualties in the tens of millions. Christ-like reverence for life rejects the immoral-

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3. **We love our enemies.** In Christ we can neither support nor condone the dehumanization, and even demonization, of those who are perceived or presented to be our current adversaries. They too are persons loved of God with worth and value equal to our own. As God wills and works for their joy, so we too are to will and to work for their life fulfillment and eternal salvation.

However we may see any isolated act of killing in a situation of tragic circumstance to be an act of love, there is no way to so regard the use of genocidal weapons of mass murder. As it was loveless contempt for human beings that enabled the building and use of Hitler’s gas chambers, so also it is a loveless contempt for human beings that enables the building and willingness to use weapons that can create a holocaust far worse than Hitler could ever devise or even imagine.

In Christ we are to “destroy” our enemies by reconciliation rather than annihilation. If we have any sense not only of history, in which friends become enemies and enemies friends, but
also of our own sinfulness and need of mercy, and of the reconciling power of Christ, we must regard the nuclear annihilation of our “enemies” as an utterly unacceptable and totally abhorrent “final solution” to any international problem.

Far from being times to cut off communication and to eliminate cultural and educational exchanges, times of international crisis should be occasions for greatly increased communication and accelerated programs of citizen exchange. What might happen, for example, if a program of cultural and educational exchange involving 100,000 Soviet and 100,000 American citizens were to be established to enable this many people to spend a year of study or work in the “enemy” country. The cost per year of such a program would be only a tiny fraction of present military spending. It is difficult to imagine that such an annual exchange could do much harm, and it would certainly do much to help eliminate the dehumanized and demonized images we too often have of each other.

4. We live with the global rather than only tribal or national perspective. As our supreme allegiance is not to Uncle Sam but to Jesus Christ, so also our chief citizenship is not to America but to humanity. In Christ we live beyond the distinctions of race, class, and nation and are thus uniquely called to be among the vanguard of a new global community. This is not to exclude national patriotism and love of country but to put them in proper global perspective. Total subservience to the will of any nation is not patriotism but idolatry. True love of nation says in effect, “I love my country too much to be a narrow nationalist.”

For too long “the dominant intelligence...has been trained on tribal business rather than on the operation of human society as a whole.” There is therefore “the need for a new consciousness. It is a consciousness that can take into account the condition of the species rather than only the condition of any of its subdivisions.” As our loyalty to the city and state is superseded by loyalty to the nation, so loyalty to the nation must now be superseded by loyalty to humanity.

If humanity is to survive and move toward greater fulfillment, the territorial morality that regards me as a criminal for killing my adversary across the street and as a hero for killing my adversary across the border must be replaced by a new sense of global morality that makes it equally criminal to settle international as well as internal disputes by killing one another. The efforts of those who seek “World Peace Through World Law” within new structures of world federalism which will provide for both national diversity and global security are therefore worthy of our support.

There are obvious difficulties in trying to create a new global security system strong enough to outlaw war as an accepted institution of national policy and yet sufficiently limited so that it cannot in itself become a force for tyranny. Granting such difficulties, a sense of global perspective expressed through an adequate but limited structure for global security now seems the only rational alternative to the narrow and often idolatrous nationalism that propels the great powers toward mutual and global annihilation.

5. We see our security in larger than military terms. As “a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15), so also our security does not consist in the abundance of our weapons. In Christ we see our ultimate eternal and temporal security not in more and more weapons but in the goodness and grace of God and in the qualities of life.
revealed in Jesus. Our motto is not “peace through strength” but “peace through justice.”

We realize that there can be no lasting peace in a world that is “half stuffed and half starved.” Nor can we provide lasting security for ourselves and our children by building a military fortress on an island of wealth in the midst of a sea of poverty. As one condition, for example, for peace to prevail, new sources of safe, renewable energy must be developed before frantic nations go to war over the remnant of resources that remain. Would not, therefore, a shift of only 100 billion dollars from the proposed 1,500 billion for military spending over the next five years to energy creation and conservation do more to enhance American security and world peace than all the Rapid Deployment Forces we could ever send to protect the Mideast oil which we have now come to consider our own?

Since World War II national security has acquired an overwhelmingly military character. Underlying this definition is the assumption that principal security threats come from other countries. Yet, the threats to security may now arise less from the relationship of nation to nation and more from the relationship of humanity to nature....

The erosion of soils, the deterioration of the earth’s basic biological systems, and the depletion of oil reserves now threaten the security of countries everywhere. Ecological stresses and resource scarcities have already given rise to economic stress—inflation, unemployment, capital scarcity, and monetary instability. Ultimately, these economic stresses will translate into social unrest and political instability....

By focusing on military threats to security, governments not only deflect attention from less obvious and more dangerous threats. They may also make an effective response to new nonmilitary threats more difficult. The military can absorb the budgetary resources, management skills, and scientific talent that are needed to respond effectively to the emerging nonmilitary threats....

In the late twentieth century, the key to national security is sustainability. If the biological underpinnings of the global economic system cannot be secured, and if new energy sources and systems are not in place as the oil wells begin to go dry, then economic disruptions and breakdowns are inevitable. In effect, the traditional military concept of “national security” is growing ever less adequate as nonmilitary threats grow more formidable. The purpose of national security deliberations should not be to maximize military strength, but to maximize national security.8

6. Living the way of the cross, we renounce the way of the sword. The cross of Jesus reveals the Christ-like way of confronting evil. Where love meets sin and keeps on loving there is the place of the cross. The cross symbolizes not only the way of our eternal salvation but also the way of our daily life. The cross of Jesus also reveals the cost of Christ-like loving in a sinful world.
Looking to Christ on the cross not only evokes our trust in the suffering, saving love of God; it also instructs and empowers us to confront sin with love rather than with hate and to “overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21) rather than with another, and sometimes greater, evil. In Christ we pray for strength to meet sin with active love and for courage to match our capacity to endure suffering against the capacity of others to inflict it.

So-called “realists” dismiss such talk as sentimental idealism and regard its advocates as hopelessly naive concerning the ability of anything as weak as love to triumph over anything as strong as evil. We must, they say, meet physical force with physical force and above all be prepared to combat evil with the ultimate human sanction—institutionalized violence in the form of military power to kill and to destroy.

Yet as such “realism” brings humanity ever closer to economic and moral bankruptcy and increasingly likely self-annihilation by accident, miscalculation, or malicious intent, we must at least wonder if Jesus spoke of the ultimate end of the arms race when he said “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52).

Must we wait to renounce the sword until those words of Jesus are chiseled by a lonely survivor as a fitting epitaph on the tombstone of civilization? Must a radiated remnant of humanity one day cry out in its dying lament “Why didn’t someone do something to stop this madness before it was too late?”

But what can we do? The common consciousness and perception sees no alternative to war as the final arbiter of human conflict. “The abolition of war,” said Walter Lipmann, “depends primarily upon inventing and organizing other ways of deciding those issues which hitherto have been decided by war.”

The voice of Christ and the peril of the unfolding arms race unite in calling us to seek those ways. One such way—the development of alternative structures of global rather than national security—has already been mentioned. Another step in the right direction would be the establishment of a “National Academy of Peace and Conflict Resolution.”

The fulfillment of the prophetic vision of a world in which “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isa 2:4) must also include disciplined study of “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:41).

But now, as we focus on the suffering love of Christ, we are especially challenged to seek nonviolent means by which to confront and overcome oppression, tyranny, and war. There is a functional alternative to war which in theological terms is the way of the cross. In non-theological, political terms one form of its possible concrete expression is described in Gene Sharp’s proposal for the development of nonviolent “civilian-based defense.”

Sharp demonstrates that the power of all leaders, including tyrants, does not reside in themselves but derives from the cooperation of their subjects. Citizens therefore have great, though often unrecognized, power over those who would rule or oppress them. Sharp cites many examples of significant nonviolent noncooperation, such as the movements led by Ghandi and Martin Luther King and the Norwegian resistance to Quisling, as being illustrative of apolitically and morally viable alternative to war. He believes that through careful study and thorough preparation, methods of nonviolent action and noncooperation could provide a “civilian-based defense.”

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defense” which would be “the political equivalent of war,” and says that “under the present international and technological conditions, civilian-based defense offers a much greater chance of success than does military defense.”

Civilian-based defense is not a Utopian plan for painless peace. It is, in fact, a kind of war without killing and, like war itself, holds the prospect of suffering and even death for those who wage it. Although Sharp’s argument is entirely political and pragmatic, his proposal for nonviolent civilian-based confrontation with evil is certainly more compatible with the way of suffering love than is the way of violence institutionalized in war. Understood and lived out in Christ, it can be a specific expression of the way of the cross and a concrete, functional alternative to war.

Like every other human endeavor, including war, methods of nonviolent action do not promise victory in every circumstance. But “...even failure after an heroic struggle by civilian-based defense is preferable to any outcome of a major nuclear war. At worst it would mean a long, difficult, and painful existence under severe tyranny, but life would still remain and with life the hope for eventual freedom....Nonviolent action is not a course for cowards. It requires the ability to sustain the battle whatever the price in suffering, yet would, in any case, allow a future for humanity...in this type of struggle, the failure to achieve total victory does not mean total defeat.”

In spite of the sacrifice of millions of lives, the expenditure of billions of dol-

10For more information contact the National Peace Academy Campaign, 1625 I Street, N. W., Suite 726, Washington, D.C. 20006.
12G. Sharp, Social Power and Political freedom, 247.
13Ibid., 246-247.

...lars and generations of human energy and brain power, war making has failed to produce either a safer or a saner planet. What would happen if similar resources were to be invested in the systematic development of civilian-based defense, in the creation of a new global security structure, and in the study and practice of peaceful resolution of conflict? Such an investment would surely brighten the human prospect not only for ourselves and for our children but for all humanity now and for generations yet to be.

IV. PEACEMAKING IN THE CHURCH

In keeping with Brueggemann’s understanding of the prophetic task, this article has approached peacemaking in the church in terms of offering a consciousness and perception of reality alternative to that of most of our leaders and fellow citizens. It is hoped that these pages will inspire reflection and study and perhaps even a few sermons creative of the new modes of thinking that are now essential for human survival and fulfillment. Sparked by a new awareness of the realities of the nuclear era and by the call of Christ to be not only peacekeepers but “peacemakers” (Matt 5:9), congregational and ecumenical peacemaking groups are being formed across the country and around the world. Letters are being written to our leaders, and meetings are being held to inform our senators and congresspersons of the intensity of our commitment.
and the urgency of our concern. An increasingly global movement is working for a USA/USSR “freeze” in the development, production, and deployment of new nuclear weapons, to be followed by the negotiated reduction and eventual elimination of all doomsday weapons.

As money-power becomes even more significant to war making than human-power, many are working for the establishment of a “World Peace Tax Fund” that will permit “people morally opposed to war to have the military part of our taxes allocated to peace projects.”

Some, acting in conscientious civil disobedience, are covenanting together to refuse to pay a portion of their taxes as a token of the sincerity of their opposition to the irrational, immoral, idolatrous militarization of the world.

As we approach the end of the second millennium of Christian history, the human prospect is full of peril and full of promise. May God give us the wisdom, strength, and courage to be true to the task of prophetic peacemaking in our time. May we so live today that we give grounds for gratitude to those who live beyond us and who will live long after us. To so live is a vital part of our faithfulness to Christ who came not “to steal and kill and destroy” but “that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

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14For information contact the National Council for a World Peace Tax Fund, 2111 Florida Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.
15For information contact “Conscience and Military Tax Campaign,” 44 Bellhaven Road, Bellport, NY 11713.