

“A future without war”

February 27 2014. Newcastle University.

Nick Megoran, Northumbria and Newcastle Universities Martin Luther King Peace Committee,

Introduction

By some estimates, there were 1 billion casualties of war in the twentieth century, making it the bloodiest in history. For people hoping for a better century, the 21st has got off to a bad start: the war in the DRC being the most bloody in the world since 1945, and closer to home our own governments have embroiled us in costly and controversial military adventures overseas. Thus the topic before us, ‘a future without war,’ is of the utmost importance.

The NUMLKPC was formed to honour King’s legacy by building cultures of peace. King came to this city, this university, in 1968 to receive an honorary degree. We were the only city in the UK and probably anywhere outside of the USA to award him this honour, and so for me this is one of the great moments of our city’s history and one worth celebrating.

When he came to Newcastle, he gave a speech in a room not far from this one, that is available on YouTube. He said that “There are three urgent and indeed great problems that we face not only in the United States of America but all over the world today. That is the problem of racism, the problem of poverty and the problem of war.” For King these problems were connected, and solving them necessitated the type of coalition we see here this evening – between churches, trade unions, peace movements.

In this talk, I want to honour King’s legacy by asking what his writing and example can show us of a Christian contribution towards building a future without war.

Origins of Christianity

Some may object ‘that’s a bit rich’ as Christians have been responsible for so much war in history! When I think of the crusades, and wars, and intercommunal violence, and inquisitions, and violent uprisings in which Christian people and ideas and institutions have played a roll, I am saddened and ashamed. The Bush-Blair era saw the most pious leaders of the US and UK for decades launch disastrous wars and revel in the supposed power of violence to effect change.

Now lots can be said about this. Wars are rarely caused by single factors, and greed for wealth, land, resources, power hunger, and nationalism usually play a role too, with religion adding an extra layer of conviction or passion; and the Iraq War was roundly condemned by notable Christian leaders across the world. But King – whose life was a contrasting and eloquent testimony to the role in justice and peace that followers of Jesus can have when they take him seriously - said ‘What more pathetically reveals the irrelevancy of the church in

present-day world affairs than its witness regarding war? In a world gone mad with arms build-ups, chauvinistic passions, and imperialistic exploitation, the church has either endorsed these activities or remained appallingly silent.’

I would argue that authentic Christianity is always in its essence anti-war. In the Biblical narrative war and violence are what is technically called *sin*; contrary to how God wants us to live with each other. Violence was absent from the creation narrative, and the Bible looks forward to a time when God will restore all things and humanity will ‘learn war no more.’ It was this vision that Marx translated into his five stages of historical development.

Christianity emerged under the violence of Roman rule. Rev Allan Boesak, one of the leaders of the anti-Apartheid movement and someone inspired by King, writing from a context that knew what it was like for one race to be oppressed and humiliated by another, said this:

“Jesus was born into a colonised people, ruled by strangers, conquered, afraid, bowed down, oppressed. Overrun, overtaxed, over-burdened. Stripped of honour, dignity and hope, they lived their lives between submission and rebellion, their resentment of their oppressors boiling over every now and then into a revolt, only to be ruthlessly crushed by the Romans.”

The New Testament, Christianity’s primary historical source material, records his first public address as Jesus saying:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
Because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor;
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
And the recovery of sight for the blind;
To release the oppressed,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (Luke 4: 18-19)

This was revolutionary talk, he was clearly challenging the violence of empire. He implicitly rejected the ideology of the Roman Empire that saw itself as God’s agent on earth by its armies fighting just wars to establish order and civilisation – ‘Pax Romana.’ He also rejected the violent revolutionaries who were, understandably, seething for revenge and for the overthrow of the system. Instead, he laid the foundations for a new alternative society, where people lived lives of equality, sharing, forgiving, loving God and their enemies. This was an international community of peacemakers, uniting former enemies like Jews and Romans in a new nation, with a new King. By his death and resurrection Jesus both paid the penalty of sins of the whole world, including war, breaking the ultimate hold of war and violence on our imaginations, and showed us how to live and treat our enemies.

The new community formed by this – the church – grew rapidly because peace was so central to it. In an age when Rome glorified violence and made it commonplace, Christians offered a radical alternative. They despised war and refused to serve as soldiers. They rejected the gladiatorial games and the infanticide that was commonplace. Peace was key to who they

were, and Christianity spread rapidly as people saw in it a higher ethic of life opposed to the culture of death.

Over time the church in places forgot its Biblical moorings and was captured by the empire. Then it can be used as a tool of empire and war. But when it returns to them, it has the opposite effect. Far more Christians were involved in what we'd call today 'peace movements' than supported the Crusades. At every time in history you can find Christians involved in countering war both by actively opposing it, and by building alternative cultures of peace. One of the reasons that we can have this meeting, for example, is that the first modern peace societies were set up in 1815 in the USA and 1816 in London, growing out of the evangelical Christian movement against slavery and other social ills that transformed Britain in the 19th century.

King's challenge is one that personally I feel acutely. It is why the church needs the critiques of friends like the Unions and the peace-movement to help us keep our correct bearings. So what are implications of this Christian legacy, as King understood it, for building a future without war?

1) Humility, critique of arrogance.

Firstly, King's position, the Christian position, rejects the breath-taking arrogance and hubris of recent US and UK governments who believe they can use massive violence to take control of a territory and then form its political future like a potter forms a clay. The UN mandate for the US-led forces invading Somalia in 1993 was to 'take responsibility for the consolidation, expansion and maintenance of a secure environment throughout Somalia'. As if any human force has the ability to so confidently declare that it can do that – as events there showed! The USA called its Afghanistan War – the longest in US history – Operation Infinite Justice and then Operation Enduring Freedom. The USAF recently changed its motto to 'above all.' The idea is both that it is the greatest and most powerful force, and that physically all its powerful technologies allow it to float above anyone else and impose its will wherever and whenever. In Christian terms, this is idolatrous: only God is above all, only he can guarantee infinite justice and enduring freedom, and it is simply delusional for anyone to think that they have the power and foreknowledge and ability to predict and control events to do that.

Recent US-UK overseas interventions demonstrate this. In the 1980s the US, UK, Pakistan and Saudis essentially created Al Qaeda in order to give the USSR a bloody nose in Afghanistan. After that war, these trained and armed jihadists turned against their former masters with devastating consequences that we still feel today. For example, when jihadists attacked the World Trade Centre in 1993, they were found to be using explosives training manuals originally given them by the CIA! In Iraq, the breathtaking neoconservative delusion that we could by 'shock and awe' simply replace a tyranny with a western democracy of our making collapsed in catastrophic fashion – instead we created a bloody civil war that has had unintended repercussions across the world from Baghdad to Damascus, from London to

Madrid. The Libyan intervention has exported jihadist violence throughout North Africa. Peter Hitchens was right to denounce David Cameron as a 'vainglorious fantasist' for his reckless attempt to do the same in Syria. In cases like these the short-term advantages of removing a vile dictator, punishing someone for the use of hideous weapons, or stopping drugged-up teenagers amputating their enemies in the name of divine justice seem to blind our leaders into thinking they have god-like powers to predict and control the future of countries they barely understand.

This seems to prove the point Jesus made to Peter when he was arrested he told his disciple: "Put away your sword, for those who live by the sword will die by the sword". Martin Luther King commented on that in a sermon, 'A Voice, echoing through the corridors of time, says to every intemperate Peter 'Put up thy sword'. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations that failed to follow Christ's command.'

2) Critique of nationalism.

Secondly, King's Christian vision enabled him to stand back from the nationalism of his age – something we need to do again today.

Nationalism is the word used to describe how we organise the world into a system of countries that each have a border, a flag, a government, and are said to represent a nation. It is a recent system, it barely goes back beyond the 18th century in Europe and in most of the rest of the world it is a late 20th century phenomenon. It can be very progressive: it is only under nationalism that we can, for example that we have the idea that anyone can be elected to government rather than aristocrats, that there should be wealth redistribution through taxation, benefits, health care, education, etc. But it has a darker side: modern states have historically unrivalled power to wage war, and when they do so they often create attachments that fuel violence.

It is here that the church as an alternative, trans-national community of peace can stand back and critique nationalist wars. King was able to do this, condemning the US government as 'the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today' and his country as 'a society gone mad on war.' This was a difficult move, and lost him lots of support amongst liberals opposed to racial injustice but patriotically supportive of the Vietnam War. But for King, who moved widely in international Christian and particularly Baptist circles, his vision of a global community of peacemakers was greater than that of his country, however much he loved its ideals. It also helped him look towards the building of what he called 'the beloved community', of a world based on sharing, justice and peace, in contrast to the resource grab of neoliberal globalisation. So King's Christian vision of peacemaking helps us look beyond nationalism.

3) War and poverty

Thirdly, King insisted that war and poverty and racism are linked: in his Newcastle speech he called them the three ‘great and grave problems that pervade our world.’ King was a lifelong critic of the form of US capitalism that kept black and white working classes poor in part by setting them against each other. He opposed the Vietnam war because it created poverty abroad whilst draining the US of the resources needed to fight poverty at home. He said he was against ‘taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia that they had not found in Southwest Georgia and east Harlem.’ He was of course murdered in Memphis, Tennessee where he had travelled to speak in support of striking sanitation workers who existed on a miserly wage enduring harsh working conditions.

These linkages continue today. It is the poorest communities who are targeted by military recruiters. Our public services, and the welfare system that exists as a safety net for the least fortunate, are being drastically cut back because we are told we can’t afford them. More seriously, UNICEF reckons that under-nutrition contributes to the deaths of 2.6 million children under five each year globally. At the same time the government has committed us to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system, at an estimated cost of at least £100bn over its lifetime. The human race annually spends around a trillion pounds on arms. The world is over-armed and underfed. The two are linked – and our struggle for a world without war is also a struggle for a world without hunger, as King reminds us.

4) Valorisation of value of human life

Fourthly, King’s vision was based on a conviction of the sanctity of human life.

We all have within us what philosopher Charles Taylor calls ‘an ineradicable sense that human life is to be respected.’ Only by overcoming that can we justify killing. Killers do that by saying that some lives are worthless, or that they count less than other lives.

We have heard this in countless ways. For imperialists, colonised people were savages whose land could be grabbed. For the Nazis, non-Aryans were subhumans, to be enslaved or destroyed. For the state atheist projects of the Soviet Union, Cambodia, and the like, people were expendable raw material in the great project of building some nightmarish earthly paradise. Grind them up and spit them out if they get in the way.

In Christopher Hitchens advocacy of Bush’s ‘war on terror’, Muslims were irrational beasts who it was ‘heartening’ to kill. Bush himself repeatedly said, ‘We are not at war with Islam: we are at war with evil’ – and thus by extension we can justify killing and torturing these people because we are good and they are evil. So in 2003 Tony Blair greeted the news of the killing of Saddam Hussein’s sons as ‘great news.’ That’s a dangerous mindset. In

modern liberal interventionism – invading other countries to impose the supposed benefits of democracy and free markets – anyone daring to oppose us is by definition an enemy of progress and human rights and so is deserving of nothing better than being blown up by a cruise missile or a drone strike.

Even the very strategies of US and UK warfare are based on these assumptions. In Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere the US and UK armed forces used air-strikes, guided missile attacks, and remotely-piloted unmanned ‘drone’ warfare to attack targets. These cause more civilian casualties than would conducting the same attacks with ground forces, but reduce the number of American or British troops killed. That is like saying that the lives of people of the enemy nation are less valuable than those of our own. They matter less. Modern war is predicated on this division of the world into superior and inferior.

For King, such a view is anathema. The Bible asserts that every human being is made in the ‘image of God’ by a loving Creator. Therefore ‘every person who crosses our path, is a gift from the Creator’s hands, to be treasured, honoured, treated with respect. He thus opposed the violence of white racism not only because black Americans suffered, but because it deformed the humanity of white Americans who inflicted the suffering. He likewise opposed the Vietnam war, because of what it did both to poor Vietnamese and to poor Americans fighting them. Every human being matters equally to his or her Creator, and to assert this is to resist and oppose warmongers who want to justify killing those they regard as inferior. As King insisted in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: ‘I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life.’

5) Method – breaking the cycle of violence

For King, nonviolence is a method of engagement that is powerful politically and spiritually because enemy love is crucial for *breaking the cycle of violence*.

The idea of a chain or cycle of violence was important for King’s understanding of racial and international violence. It helps us understand the wars our state has been involved in. The London bombs were responses to the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; which were responses to the 9/11 attacks; which were responses to the US/Saudi war on Iraq in 1991; which was a response to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990; which was a response to the theft of oil revenues; and so on and so on. Closer to home, we have seen it so painfully in Northern Ireland. Everyone’s war or struggle is just from their perspective.

Miroslav Volf, a Croat theologian writing as his country was invaded by Serb forces, wrote that on the cross Jesus broke the cycle of violence: absolutely innocently, he refused to fight back against his killers, but loved them and in so doing opened the way to life and peace for all.

King believed this too: ‘only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear.’ King’s method of nonviolent protest was confrontational, demanded bravery, was threatening to entrenched interests.

King said that ‘Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, and Ghandi the method.’ His method of nonviolence was learnt both from Ghandians and from the Trade Union movement. He saw it not just as a method, but as a ‘philosophy’ about how we live. It is no good saying we are for world peace if we are consumed with enmity towards whites, blacks, Americans, The British, the terrorists, the Iraqis, Obama, Cameron, or even Bush and Blair. Be yourself the type of world you want to live in. Christian peacemaking begins with inner transformation, made possible by the cross. ‘To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe,’ said King. As he said, the nonviolent resister not only refuses to hate his opponent but he refuses to shoot him.

Our governments need to hear this. They remain convinced that massive military violence against those it despises and demonises is a sure fire way to build the foundations of just and peaceful societies. We have seen the disastrous processes this dangerous reasoning unleashes. King insisted that ‘the end represents the means in process and the ideal in the making.’ You launch a violent insurgency and you ensure the violence will continue after it succeeds. You invade Iraq with the terror of ‘shock and awe’ and you sow the seeds of more terror. King doesn’t just criticise the violence of others – that is easy – he provides a method and a philosophy for positively building, ‘a future without war.’

6) Hope

Finally, King’s vision gives us that most precious of resources, *hope*. ‘The method of nonviolence is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice’, he said. No one without hope can really do anything useful for the cause of justice and peace. A biography of King’s life, with the incessant death threats he and his family lived under and the great obstacles so many put in his way, is testimony to the power of his hope and faith in a God of peace. “I am convinced”, he wrote, “that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship.”

That view has empowered and envisioned the church throughout history to challenge war and make peace – through preventing or de-escalating violence, or promoting reconciliation after conflict. For example, in the Sudanese civil war, Christians worked behind the scenes to get both sides together for a treaty that eventually ended the war. In 1978 in the Beagle Channel dispute, when Argentina and Chile were poised on the brink of war, the Pope intervened as an intermediary. Following the end of World War 2, the Christian organisation Moral Re-Armament invested in building links between the new and future leaders of France and Germany, helping pave the way for what eventually became the European Union. Their later work in decolonisation helped avert violence in a number of newly-independent countries. In the 1980s, US Christians travelled to Nicaragua to take part

tin ‘protective accompaniment’ – using their own bodies to shield potential victims of paramilitary violence, and then working politically back at home to end US support of the paramilitaries. I could spend all night giving examples. Such actions are possible if we believe that we live in a moral universe where justice and peace ultimately make more sense because violence runs against the grain of how the world and humanity was created – that is, a universe with hope in it. It might not happen quickly and easily – as Bush and Blair *et al* believed they could do it with violence – but it will happen. As King put it: ‘the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.’

Conclusion

Almost exactly two centuries after the first modern peace societies were formed, it is entirely appropriate that we continue their legacy by meeting as a coalition representing three different but intertwined traditions. It might seem that the task before us, to build a world without war, is immense. But let us not give up. In those two centuries we have seen great progress: we no longer think it acceptable to execute or torture criminals, to rape wives, to maintain slaves, to beat schoolchildren, to launch wars for the sake of claiming territory. We have begun the shaky process of building international systems of law that, in the words of the United Nations charter, see war as ‘a scourge’ rather than a glory. The traditions we represent – trade unions, peace movement, churches - have all played a part in that, traditions represented in many ways in the person of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. King’s legacy reminds us that entrenched systems of violence and oppression can be changed through personal transformation, vision, collaboration and hard work.

But at the same time, we have seen regression. We have seen the invention of terrifying new weapons of death, and the creation of modern capitalist and communist economies to the service of ‘total war’; we have seen technologies of movement fuel the development of global people trafficking; we have seen the creation of untold wealth but simultaneously the unprecedented violence of its unequal distribution; we have seen the rise of ideologies fused to powerful new states that murder their own populations and others in the name of progress, the nation, liberation, democracy, religion, socialism, human rights, or atheism.

We shouldn’t be surprised at that at all. King said that ‘there is no easy way to create a world where men and women can live together, where each has his own job and house and where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb.’

But I do believe this. In the Christian faith, the reality of the death and resurrection and future return of Jesus Christ means that although darkness and violence may appear to triumph temporarily, the last words in history are not war, violence, oppression, injustice, and death. No, they are peace, equality, justice, harmony, abundant life.

I want to conclude this talk the way that King concluded his speech at Newcastle, with a quote from the Biblical prophet Amos. Amos lived in mid 8th century BC, and railed against the violence and injustice of the elites of his own day who had built a large empire overrunning Syria whilst neglecting justice at home. King said, by living in the light of the vision he sketched out, “we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation, and of all the nations in the world, into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood and speed up the day when all over the world “justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Thank you.