

## Warfighting .... Peacebuilding – The Balance Imperative

Thursday March 20<sup>th</sup> 2003. That evening our “Building Your Own Theology” group – BYOT for short – would be meeting, but my attention was on Iraq. Limited bombing had begun the day before and full-scale invasion was now under way. “Operation Iraqi Freedom” it was called. We didn’t yet know that we’d be facing another six going on seven years of war that would bring us: “Shock and awe” bombing .... wholesale looting ... the sacking of the Babylonian, Mesopotamian and Assyrian treasures in the National Museum (but the oil fields would be safe at least) ... “Mission accomplished!” ... US troop deaths in the thousands, casualties in the tens of thousands .... God only knows how many Iraqi deaths and casualties ... and a cost of at least \$2Trillion and still climbing (according to the WAPO 3/9/08).

But we didn’t know any of that on Thursday, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2003. I did know that at BYOT later that evening we’d be giving our full attention to this new war. Oh, I did have one other thought that day. It was, “here we go again.” You see, I was leading another BYOT session on the evening of Wednesday, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1991 – the day Bush-41 launched the Persian Gulf War – Operation Desert Storm – against Iraq! Hard to believe.

Not a happy coincidence. Nothing about war and war-fighting is happy. But they did give us BYOTers a compelling reason to grapple with the issue of how we all felt about being at war. Not so much “felt” because to a person we all felt anguish. But in the context of a Building Your Own Theology program, the challenge is to explore one’s beliefs and the rationales for those beliefs. The questions before the BYOTers, therefore, were: Can there ever be any moral or ethical basis for war – and therefore being a war-fighter? And if there can, then is there a morally or ethically justifiable basis for this war – that is “Desert Storm’ in 1991 and “Iraqi Freedom” in 2003?

I’ll come back to the story of those two BYOT sessions in just a bit. But first let me share another coincidence that centers on the issue of war-fighting and gives some imperative for us at Restoration to begin a deeper exploration of the issues involved. Are you aware that in 2006 the UU General Assembly endorsed a study/action issue aimed at whether we – that is US Unitarian Universalists – should formally join the ranks

of what are known as “peace churches,” for example the Quakers, Mennonites, the Brethren and others. Here’s the actual wording:

“...should the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war...and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means.”

Those other denominations stand in absolute opposition to all war and war-fighting and their members – those in full-sympathy – are by definition objectors. That is the question before all UU congregations in America, and that question will be answered by the General Assembly in 2010.

So, today, I’d like to suggest that the Social Justice Ministry to consider launching some process whereby our congregation considers this study/action question to give guidance to our delegates to next year’s GA. And, I’d like to take this occasion of the 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary week of the launch of our current Iraq venture – many would say misadventure – to look at the history of American UU posture toward war, and discuss the principles that undergird the two main positions: pacifism, i.e. that war can never be justified, and “just war” pragmatism – i.e. that war is a reality and therefore the best we can do is assure that fighting war follows ethical criteria.

Let me start by acknowledging my indebtedness to Neil Shister, the Washington-based editor of the World Trade Magazine and UU, who wrote extensively about the Iraq war in its early days. I’m condensing his good history of Unitarian and Universalist stands. I thank also Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom at Virginia Wesleyan College and an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. He has been advancing what he calls a posture of prophetic non-violence and has written very thoughtful expositions on pacifism and ‘just war.’

Historically, ours is neither a peace church nor a militant church. On one hand, within the recent past three Unitarian Universalists have served as U.S. secretary of defense— Elliott Richardson, William J. Perry, and William S. Cohen. On the other hand, there is also a strong pacifist strain of thought in the Unitarian and Universalist traditions. These two contrasting approaches -- “pragmatism and pacifism”-- have roots back in our founding days here in America.

For example, the British decried Boston's Second Church as "a nest of hornets" and the Universalist minister John Murray was a chaplain in the Continental Army. On the other hand, most Unitarians opposed the War of 1812. Channing, who helped form the American Unitarian Association, also helped found the American Peace Society. The Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears wrote "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" as a peace hymn in protest of the Mexican–American war.

But Unitarians overwhelmingly supported the Union cause during the Civil War. Many ministers served as chaplains. Walt Whitman served in the sanitation corps. And "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which we sang earlier in its original words, was an anthem for the Union Army written by the poet and Unitarian, Julia Ward Howe.

World War I provoked a confrontation among Unitarians. Former president William Howard Taft presided over the General Assembly in 1917. That GA voted 236 to 9 to support the war as a "defense of democracy" – echoing Woodrow Wilson. (Remember that phrase.) Subsequently several principled pacifist ministers lost their pulpits.

World War II was generally supported as a just war. In fact, the Rev. Frederick May Eliot, president of the AUA, proclaimed in 1942 that

"the churches of our Association stand together in full commitment to the overthrow of totalitarian power wherever it seeks to dominate free people or destroy the institutions of free nations, and in complete dedication to the establishment of a world order in which an enduring peace shall be possible,"

But he also issued this appeal on behalf of conscientious objectors:

"... it is fatally easy for us to forget that there is a basic respect for the rights of individuals to think and act in accordance with the dictates of their own consciences that no need for unity of national purpose or effort supersedes. . . . Our churches should make it a very special part of their business to watch for any infringement of this right."

Vietnam fractured the Unitarian Universalist community. Many ministers tended to become more politicized than their congregants, many of whom left the churches in response to what they took to be the absolutism of war opponents. When some congregations declared their churches "sanctuaries" for draft resisters, even some of those who opposed the war thought it wrong to put the church in direct conflict with the law.

Especially since Vietnam many UUs do their moral reasoning the way the historic peace churches do. But others, pragmatists, tend to believe the use of force is justifiable when it reduces the possibilities of violence in the world; when consistent with international law; when it minimizes the impact on civilians; and when it employs force proportional to the danger being encountered. Between these two positions stand many UUs who do not have a consistent way of doing their moral reasoning about these matters.

The critical question now – and hence the study/action issue – is this. Can Unitarian Universalism provide all of us, but especially those people in the middle, a more reliable, emotionally satisfying approach than situational responses to help us make choices of war and peace. And that struggle is well illustrated in the story of our BYOTers of 1991 and 2003.

A microcosm of Unitarian Universalists, the two dozen participants in those two programs had among them both some pacifists and more pragmatists. In both cases before us, the 1991 war to drive Iraqi invaders out of Kuwait, and the 2003 war to force regime-change in Baghdad, the pacifists were steadfast representatives of that moral position.

As you know, principled pacifists reject any form of participation in war. For many, pacifism is a personal stance, but not necessarily a political one. Pacifists might refuse to participate in war by becoming conscientious objectors, for example, but they may or may not advocate that others do the same. By the same token, pacifists do not always oppose a government's decision to go to war in particular cases, although they, themselves, will refuse to participate. Yet for probably most, pacifists, opposition to war is both a personal and a political commitment. They not only refuse to participate in war, they reject war itself as an option.

The courage of pacifist conviction is beyond dispute, but their position can be debated. As Rev. Razor points out, one of the more significant criticisms of pacifism is that it precludes prophetic critique because it offers no standards for critical evaluation of particular wars. If war is never justified, then no analysis of government policy is ever necessary, and no critical judgments need to be made--or can be made. If your answer is always the same, then there are no real standards, or rather there's only one standard,

which amounts to the same thing. If everyone already knows what you are going to say, it is hard to add much to the conversation. That is certainly the case with the greater majority in this country and in those two BYOT sessions. Most would have agreed with George Washington's position when he said that, "There is nothing so likely to produce peace as to be well prepared to meet an enemy."

The question before the pragmatic majority today ... as in 2003 ... as in 1991 ... is the same that has confronted humankind for millennia and it gave rise to the concept of "just war" some 1700 years ago. Just war theory as we know it today emerged in the writings of St. Augustine and which were formulated more precisely centuries later by St. Thomas Aquinas. Since the sixteenth century, it has also been part of Protestant thought, secular political and moral philosophy, and international law. Now, due in part to the Gulf War of 1991, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the rise of international terrorism, there has been a resurgence of interest in the just war tradition. Our Study/Action Issue process is part of this trend.

The most familiar part of the just war model is its criteria to determine whether the peace presumption might be overcome in specific cases, and they are intended to make this extremely difficult. To provide the BYOTers with some structure to inform their moral struggle, I offered them those time-tested criteria. Let me summarize them and, as I do, I'd ask you to reflect on their application to the situations of the 1991 Gulf War to oust Iraq from Kuwait, and the current Iraq war to oust Sadaam Hussein

- A just war can only be waged as a last resort. All non-violent options must be exhausted before the use of force can be justified.
- A war is just only if it is waged by a legitimate authority. Even just causes cannot be served by actions taken by individuals or groups who do not constitute an authority sanctioned by whatever the society and outsiders to the society deem legitimate.
- A just war can only be fought to redress a wrong suffered. In most just war discussions today, the only causes generally recognized as legitimate are self defense or defense of others in response to foreign aggression, or massive humanitarian crises such as genocide. Further, a just war can only be fought with "right intentions," ie to redress injury. Material or territorial gain or even maintaining economies are not. Right intentions also rules out war based on preserving some higher principle at all cost, such as "making the world safe for democracy," or "to rid the world of evil." These slogans can too easily turn a limited just war, into an unlimited or holy war.

- A war can only be just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success. Deaths and injury incurred in a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable.
- The ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish the peace. More specifically, the peace established after the war must be preferable to the peace that would have prevailed if the war had not been fought.
- The violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered. States are prohibited from using force not necessary to attain the limited objective of addressing the injury suffered. Thus waging “total war” is unjust.
- The warfighting must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Civilians are never permissible targets of war, and every effort must be taken to avoid killing civilians.

Failure to meet any one of these criteria would render that war to be unjust. I should say that in recent times these criteria have come under attack from both the left and the right and I’ll summarize the main objections in a moment. And I’ll also share the conclusions of the two BYOT groups. But first, let me put it to you.

Think back to 1991 and the launch of the Gulf War/Operation Desert Storm. Do you think that war, waged by a broad international coalition of forces to oust the Iraqis from Kuwait met the criteria of a just war?

[Note: a show of hands indicated a divided congregation, though most thought it unjust.]

Now think back to 2003 and the launch of the Iraq War/Operation Iraqi Freedom. Do you think that war, waged – and let’s be honest about it – by American and British forces to oust Sadaam Hussein met the criteria of a just war?

[Note: a show of hands indicted a unanimous verdict that this war is unjust.]

As mentioned earlier, in more recent times just war principles have come under more sustained attack from both the right and the left. Some argue that in the modern reality of networked terrorism, the premise that only states can wage war is tragically naïve. Others point to the evolution of the military-industrial complex and argue that whole societies now play functional roles in warfare, making the distinction between combatant and non-combatant anachronistically naïve.

One of the most compelling criticisms of “just war” may be that the criteria inadvertently make war easier to justify by rationalizing it. This can happen if the criteria are viewed and used as nothing more than a check list to go through during the run-up to war. We can easily lose track of the peace presumption and focus instead on finding reasons to override it--a hurdle to get over rather than a moral boundary we should be reluctant to cross. But a deeper problem has to do not so much with the theory itself, but with the larger social context in which it is applied. A society that is preoccupied with war and violence – and it’s not hard to make the case that that’s us -- is largely unable to hear, much less absorb, the just war tradition's moral challenge to violence.

These are not reasons to abandon the tradition, but they do point to the critical importance of building a deeper culture of peace. The truth is that Just-war theorists need pacifists to remind them of their common starting point: the moral presumption against force and war. And pacifists need just-war theorists to provide a public framework for debates about particular wars and for the restraint of the practice of war.

This dynamic tension between pacifists and pragmatists was in bold relief in the two BYOT groups in 1991 and 2003. In each case, the groups tried to come to consensus on the respective wars. In 2003, the group returned quite quickly with a unanimous verdict that the Iraq War/Operation Iraqi Freedom did not meet the criteria and was an unjust war – failing that test at the outset on the basis that non-violent avenues had not been exhausted. But in 1991, the group could not come to a consensus. Their struggle demonstrates to me that we Unitarian Universalists see the world and its problems in levels of complexity too great to endorse as policy the rejection and use of any and all kinds of violence and war (as the GA resolution currently reads).

For this reason, I don’t see us formally becoming a pacifist church – and not being a pacifist myself, I’m fine with that. But if not that, then what? There is a middle way, as Rev. Paul Rasor points out. If we’re not to become a “peace church,” then let’s formally become a “peacebuilding” church. Let’s support the UUA officially allying itself with the international development community in “peacebuilding,” that is the processes and activities involved in resolving violent conflict and establishing a

sustainable peace. Let's call for Unitarian Universalism to become an ever more active player at all levels of peacebuilding:

In political peacebuilding, working on international agreements and legal issues that mitigate conflict and promote peace.

In structural peacebuilding, building economic, military, social and cultural systems that support a culture of peace through activities such as voter education, disarming warring parties, police training, building schools, and good governance.

And in social peacebuilding, advancing harmonious relationships by dealing with cross-cultural and cross-racial feelings, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and values through dialogue, community-building activities and training.

Some 50 years ago, paraphrasing George Washington, JFK said, "It is an unfortunate fact that we can secure peace only by preparing for war." Well, if we must accept that that for the foreseeable future war will be a recurring fact of life, then we must also develop a louder prophetic voice, demanding our leaders act in accord with the highest standards of the just war criteria, committing our warfighters only to just wars. If we must continue to maintain armies of warfighters for the present, then we must also raise armies of peacebuilders fighting to make war a thing of the past.

That is my hope for GA 2010. That is my hope for our children and their children. And let us hope, and pray – indeed, demand – that this new administration honor its pledge to bring this war to a speedy end – that lives may be spared – lives of our warfighters and lives of Iraqis and Afghans.

Blessed be.

## Sources

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