

SEEKING THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT

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A Threatened World

“All a round us today, depending on how you count, there are between 60 and 100 international, transnational, civil, and regional armed conflicts under way. The world is at war.” Philip Gold, “An Anti-War Movement of One” Seattle Weekly, September 20, 2002

We live in a seriously threatened world. During the 50 plus years since the end of World War II, conflicts have killed over 25 million people and, according to EarthAction, 90% of those war casualties are civilians¹. To further emphasize the gravity of these figures it must be pointed out that three out of 4 of these war fatalities are women and children; the ones least likely to cause or to carry out such devastating conflicts. In fact, in the wars of the last decade, more children were killed than soldiers. Some writers have suggested that, in the history of warfare, the twentieth century stands out as the bloodiest and most brutal – three times more people have been killed in wars in the last ninety years than in all the previous five hundred.²

Asia has not been left out of this chaos. Many countries in Asia today are facing serious conflicts, either internally or at their borders.

1. The conflict between the Tamil Elam and the Sri Lankan government continues. Some estimates of the number killed for the entire 17-year period of the war put the total at around 64,000. Countless homes have been destroyed, families divided and displaced and their economics thrown into shambles. Presently peace talks are underway but it is still not clear if they will be effective or not.
2. The India and Pakistan border war, especially the conflict over Kashmir, has yet to find a positive solution. This has raised fears of a possible nuclear confrontation in South Asia.
3. In Pakistan, different Islamic factions fight one another, and some Christians have become victims of violent attacks by radical Muslim groups.
4. In India, Hindu fundamentalists have attacked other communities, both Muslim and Christian.
5. Indonesia has experienced violent conflicts in many of its islands, especially in the independence struggles of Aceh and West Papua.
6. In Burma, many ethnic nationality groups continue to fight against the military junta for their ethnic rights and for an end to military abuses against their people. Terrible human rights abuses against civilians continue with only limited international concern being expressed.
7. In Philippines, the Moro people of Mindanao struggle for their rights to land and the protection of their identity.
8. The divided country of Korea continues to seek reunification but has to also deal with US political and military interests in the region.³

These and many other conflicts, both large and small, plague the people of Asia and cry out for positive and long-lasting solutions. And just when it seemed that things could get no worse, the events of 9/11 erupted and the United States launched its infamous “War on Terror.” This aggressive confrontation against all people, groups and countries deemed by

the US administration as “terrorist or terrorist supporters” has heightened tensions and affected virtually every human on earth in negative ways. More than ever before, one common denominator unites the global family, and that common denominator is the emotion of fear. We all live in fear: Fear of war, fear of being labeled, fear of terrorism in its multifarious forms, and fear of the war on terror. And because national, regional and global conflicts are now being labeled as “religious conflicts,” “conflicts of civilization,” “conflicts against freedom,” etc, a burgeoning fear and distrust of each other’s religious, cultural and ethnic differences is threatening any future of positive global communityhood.

Any hope for this fear to be brought to an end and a sense of peace and security flooding our lives seems bleak indeed. Instead, many of us watch in disbelief as war, violent confrontation, and increased militarization brazenly advertised as the way to create peace and security, creates ever-growing anger, hatred, frustration and division among our world’s citizens.

A world thus threatened needs alternatives; alternatives that will rekindle the flame of hope, dispel our fears and our distrusts, and infuse our world with a renewed sense of peoplehood and communityhood. Surely our various religious faiths, which cherish so many common values, are imbued with the spiritual wisdom and strength needed to bring out these alternatives.

For us to focus our collective wisdom and compassion for the purpose of identifying and building these much needed alternatives, perhaps first we need to spend some time looking at the realities of the beast we are facing.

Simplifying Down to the Disastrous

“And we ask ourselves this question, ‘Why do they hate us? Why do they hate us so much?’ Ladies and gentlemen, the answer to that is because we’re a Christian nation....” Lt. General William Boykin, US Deputy Undersecretary of State of Defense for Intelligence, speaking at Good Shepherd Church, Sandy, Ore., June 21, 2003

One of the great dangers facing us today is the growing tendency to create simplified answers to very complex issues, especially when those complex issues are ones in which people’s lives are threatened. To do so usually means that the roots of the issue may be ignored or obscured and any “solution” then concocted may well be a recipe for disaster. To confront an issue without fully understanding its root causes will, in worst case scenarios, further exacerbate the conflict and bring further violence and suffering.

Unfortunately, simplifying issues down to the disastrous has become all too common these days, especially from the world’s lone surviving superpower. Not only has President Bush, along with Lt. General Boykin, simplified the frustration much of the world has toward present exploitative economic and political issues down to the simple statement: “They hate our freedoms,” but he has further created a world of limited options. Following the 9/11 events, he told the world: “You are either with us or against us.” This simple statement effectively eliminated the democratic space needed to dialogue on deeper issues of the 9/11 events and seek mutually acceptable ways of transforming it. War became almost inevitable. The simplification of a very complex global issue became the foundation for disaster.

Attaching labels to people or to situations is a dangerous form of over-simplification. Once the mass media assigns a “comfortable” label to a conflict, the solution also seems clear and simple. If a conflict is labeled as a “religious” conflict, then the other religion is wrong, or even evil. A few months ago Lieutenant General William G. Boykin was quoted as saying about his Muslim opponent in a Somalia conflict: “I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol.” Dangerous labels: Labels that divide, create misunderstanding and instigate anger and hatred. Labels that eliminate the need to look deeper at root causes of anger and hatred. Labels that are used, often with great effect, by fundamentalists of all religions and political affiliations. These labels represent a simplistic “we are right and they are wrong” theology that rules out self-reflection and correction. They also cover over the responsibilities we ourselves might have as individuals or as nations in the creation and prolonging of conflicts. It also produces simplified solutions that deepen roots of conflict rather than transform them. And so war, the ultimate form of conflict, becomes a “solution” that is no solution at all: a solution that leads our global community ever deeper into disaster.

Yet, too often war is the only focus of discussions about conflict. Conflict and violence exist in our world in many forms, war being the most dramatic and media-grabbing. But war is not the first or most common form of conflict and violence. Thus it seems proper to spend some time looking at other forms of conflict and violence that impact on the lives of the vast majority of the global community, and which perhaps lie more deeply at the heart/roots of what we need to be grappling with.

Economic Violence

Economics is simply the way we organize scarce resources to meet human needs. Whether we like it or not, the world’s resources are finite. While they may be able to meet most of the needs of the human family, they begin to fall short when some, be they individuals, mega-corporations or governments, begin to hoard an excessive amount for their own personal use and power. Economic systems are designed to either allow this hoarding or to minimize the potential for it. If it is allowed, a gap grows between those who have the ability to hoard and those who lose out in the competition. Presently the system of globalization is pushing this gap to new limits. There is definitely a link between globalization and growing poverty levels that put enormous pressure on developing countries to liberalize their markets. This liberalization forces them to give up their indigenous trade to subsidized markets in the EU and US, and this leaves people like subsistence farmers, with absolutely nothing.

The following data highlights the economic violence afflicting our world today.

- The average income in the richest 20 countries is 37 times higher than the income in the poorest 20 countries.⁴
- There are 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty on incomes of less than US\$1 per day.⁵
- About 1.1 billion people lack access to adequate drinking water and 2.4 billion are without adequate sanitation.⁶
- Every day more than 30,000 children around the world die of preventable diseases.⁷
- It is estimated that 2.1 billion people die each year from diarrhea and most of the victims are children. Malnutrition contributes to the death of 11,000 children each day.⁸
- Nearly 1.3 billion live on less than US\$1 per day while the world’s 358 billionaires have assets exceeding the combined annual incomes of countries with 45 percent of the world’s people.⁹

- 113 million school-age children are not in school – 97% of them live in developing countries.¹⁰
- About 25 million people are internally displaced people (IDP) due to war. The overwhelming majority of IDPs – mainly women and children – struggle to survive with little hope of returning home, sometimes years after fighting has ended. Many still face threats to their safety, can not fulfil basic needs and lack prospects for development.¹¹
- Children in 87 countries live among 60 million land mines. As many as 10,000 children per year continue to become victims of mines. More than 300,000 youths and girls currently are serving as child soldiers around the world. Many are less than 10 years old. Many girl soldiers are forced into different forms of sexual slavery.¹²
- It is estimated that more than two million children were killed in conflicts in the last decade. Another six million are believed to have been wounded and one million orphaned.¹³
- Ten million children under the age of five die each year, the majority from preventable diseases and malnutrition.¹⁴
- Hunger continues to plague an estimated 841 million people around the world. Every day, 34,000 children under five die of hunger or preventable diseases resulting from hunger. The Indian subcontinent has nearly half the world's hungry people. Africa and the rest of Asia together have approximately 40%, and the remaining hungry people are found in Latin America and other parts of the world. Seventy percent of the world's poor are female.¹⁵
- According to the IMF, the total public external debt for low-income countries stands at some US\$460 billion. This is equal to less than 18 months of US military spending.¹⁶
- The total wealth of the world's three richest individuals is greater than the combined gross domestic product of the 48 poorest countries – a quarter of all the world's states.¹⁷

This burden of poverty on the shoulders of the world's poor has become much too heavy for them to bear and represents one of the great evils of our modern world. With such vast numbers, the poor do represent a serious threat to those who control such a large percent of global resources. Larger and more sophisticated military machines are required to assure the “stability” of the present status quo and to keep the poor submissive.

Violence of Militarization

- Global military expenditure and arms trade form the largest spending in the world at approximately 780 billion dollars annually. That's about US\$2.1 billion every day. If you were to lay one one-dollar bill down on the table every second, it would take you 64 years to place the entire \$2.1 billion the world spends on weapons in one year on the table (providing you could find a large enough table)!¹⁸
- The UN and all its agencies and funds spend about US\$10 billion each year, or about US\$1.70 for each of the world's inhabitants. This is a very small sum compared to most government budgets and it is just a tiny fraction of the world's military spending. Yet for over a decade, the UN has faced a debilitating financial crisis and it has been forced to cut back on important programs in all areas.¹⁹
- The UN's entire budget is just a tiny fraction of the world's military expenditure, or about 1.25%.²⁰
- In the period 1999-2002, the US made nearly US\$37.8 billion in arms transfer agreements with developing nations.²¹
- Permanent UN Security Council members responsible for maintaining global peace and security – the USA, England, France, Russia and China – dominate the world trade in

arms. Together they are responsible for eighty eight percent of reported conventional arms exports.²²

- The war on terror has seen the US selling weapons or training to almost 90% of the countries it has identified as harboring terrorists.²³
- The arms trade is a major cause of human rights abuses. Some governments spend more on military expenditure than on social development, communications, infrastructure and health combined.²⁴
- In 1997 alone, half of USA's aid was related to military aid/trade – and most of that was to countries that are already wealthy like Israel, or Turkey (which has often been one of the largest recipients).²⁵
- The following chart provides figures for arms sales and arms purchases in 2002.²⁶

| ARMS SALES | | ARMS PURCHASES | |
|------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| COUNTRY | AMOUNT | COUNTRY | AMOUNT |
| USA | 10.241 billion | Saudi Arabia | 5.2 billion |
| England | 4.700 billion | Egypt | 2.1 billion |
| Russia | 3.100 billion | Kuwait | 1.3 billion |
| France | 1.000 billion | China | 1.2 billion |
| China | 800 million | Taiwan | 1.1 billion |
| Ukraine | 600 million | Arab Emirates | 900 million |
| Germany | 500 million | India | 900 million |
| Italy | 400 million | Israel | 700 million |
| Israel | 300 million | South Korea | 600 million |
| Brazil | 200 million | Pakistan | 600 million |

- The following chart shows the military budget for selected countries.²⁷

| COUNTRY | MILITARY BUDGET (\$Billions) | COUNTRY | MILITARY BUDGET (\$Billions) |
|--------------|------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------|
| USA | 399.1 | Sweden | 4.5 |
| Russia | 65.0 | Egypt | 4.4 |
| China | 47.0 | Norway | 3.8 |
| Japan | 42.6 | Greece | 3.5 |
| England | 38.4 | Poland | 3.5 |
| France | 29.5 | Argentina | 3.3 |
| Germany | 24.9 | UA Emirates | 3.1 |
| Saudi Arabia | 21.3 | Colombia | 2.9 |
| Italy | 19.4 | Belgium | 2.7 |
| India | 15.6 | Pakistan | 2.6 |
| South Korea | 14.1 | Denmark | 2.4 |
| Brazil | 10.7 | Viet Nam | 2.4 |
| Taiwan | 10.7 | North Korea | 2.1 |
| Israel | 10.6 | Czech Rep. | 1.6 |
| Spain | 8.4 | Iraq | 1.4 |
| Australia | 7.6 | Philippines | 1.4 |
| Canada | 7.6 | Portugal | 1.3 |
| Netherlands | 6.6 | Libya | 1.2 |
| Turkey | 5.8 | Hungary | 1.1 |

| | | | |
|-----------|-----|------------|-----|
| Mexico | 5.9 | Syria | 1.0 |
| Kuwait | 3.9 | Cuba | 0.8 |
| Ukraine | 5.0 | Sudan | 0.6 |
| Iran | 4.8 | Yugoslavia | 0.7 |
| Singapore | 4.8 | Luxembourg | 0.2 |

- The Project for a New American Century (PNAC) is a right-wing think tank that heavily influences the present Bush administration. Proposals by the PNAC and its predecessors and members have called for the United States to abandon the ABM Treaty. The group states that when America alone decides that diplomacy has failed, military action is the best course of action against any country that stands in the way of America's goals. PNAC also advocates the installation of permanent military bases around the world for the establishment of a United States *Global Constabulary*. This global police force would have the power to keep law and order around the world in accordance with rules that the United States would establish as being proper and just.²⁸ The entire PNAC proposal can be read at <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>.

The Insanity of this Violence

Human suffering is not always avoidable. Natural disasters do occur which the human family is not capable of effectively dealing with immediately. However, when human suffering can be avoided or ended but continues to be ignored, or perhaps even propagated, then it turns into violence and, in many cases, breeds a growing violence that envelops a wide and often innocent community of people. This suffering can also become a fertile field in which religious and/or political fanatics can plant their seeds of discord, hatred and vengeance and build their personal movements.

Let us look, just briefly, at some of this violence.

- The richest fifth of the world's people consumes 86% of all goods and services while the poorest fifth consumes just 1.3%. Indeed, the richest fifth consumes 45% of all meat and fish, 58% of all energy used and 84% of all paper, has 74% of all telephone lines and owns 87% of all vehicles.²⁹
- The UN calculates that the whole of the world population's basic needs for food, drinking water, education and medical care could be covered by a levy of less than 4% on the accumulated wealth of the 225 largest fortunes.³⁰
- Europeans spend \$11 billion a year on ice cream -- \$2 billion more than the estimated annual total needed to provide clean water and safe sewers for the world's population.³¹
- Americans spend \$8 billion a year on cosmetics - \$2 billion more than the estimated annual total needed to provide basic education for everyone in the world.³²
- Americans and Europeans spend \$17 billion a year on pet food -- \$4 billion more than the estimated annual additional total needed to provide basic health and nutrition for everyone in the world.³³
- It is estimated that the additional cost of achieving and maintaining universal access to basic education for all, basic health care for all, reproductive health care for all women, adequate food for all and clean water and safe sewers for all is roughly \$40 billion a year – or less than 4 percent of the combined wealth of the 225 richest people in the world and less than the wealth of Bill Gates!³⁴
- To satisfy the entire world's sanitation and food requirements would cost only 13 billion.³⁵

- There is already enough food being produced to provide each of the earth's inhabitants with at least 2,700 calories each day.³⁶
- World harvests of wheat, corn, rice and other grains produce enough to meet the minimum nutritional requirements for every child, woman and man in the world.³⁷
- If just 5% (\$40 billion) of the annual \$780 billion global military budgets were channeled into anti-poverty programs over the next decade, the whole world could have basic social services. A further 5% over ten years could provide everybody on the planet with an income above the poverty line.³⁸
- UNICEF estimates that spending just \$7 billion a year for the next decade could educate every child on earth.

Based on the above figures, we can compare military spending to the money needed to meet some basic global human needs. This is a stark dramatization of the violent injustice our world now lives with.

1. The amount of money needed to meet all sanitation and food needs in the world for one year is equal to about 12 days of US military spending or 6 days of global military spending
2. The amount of money needed to solve poverty in the world for one year is equal to about 37 days of US military spending or 19 days of global military spending.
3. The amount of money needed to solve global education needs for one year is equal to about 6 and a half days of US military spending or 3 days of global military spending.

This suggests that a budget equal to only two months of US military spending (or less than one month of global military spending) could help the entire world meet all its sanitation, food, anti-poverty and education needs for one year. Redirecting funds in this way might do more to end global conflicts than the most modern and destructive of present-day weapons.

Ending the violence that is ripping apart the lives of billions of this earth's inhabitants is not impossible. It simply takes the political will to redistribute the world's wealth and to make use of global venues such as the UN to develop more democratic economic structures. The resources are there. The willingness to share those resources and break down the systems that create oppression is all that is lacking. This is violence in its most raw form.

In a speech on April 16, 1953, former U.S., President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was by no means a pacifist, made the following statement. "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron." The roots of conflict could not have been stated more succinctly.

Voices from the Victims of Violence

"How loud do you expect us to yell and cry out? How much pain and suffering do you think we are able to bear? How many heads and arms will be cut off by rockets before someone can give us a listening ear?" Emily Baker whose husband was killed in fighting in Liberia, 2003

While the mass media focuses our attention on specific and carefully selected forms of violence, there are loud voices from the sufferers of other forms of violence that are much closer to the actual roots of conflict in our world. Do we have ears to hear them? Or is the collateral damage of multinational companies and economic injustice simply unable to compete with the devastation inflicted by war? Is death from dehydration any less painful than being killed by a bullet?³⁹

Violence painfully flails the precious lives of people who are forced to exist their entire lives as IDPs or in refugee camps, unable to return to their old homes and given no chance to go to new ones. Their spirits struggle vainly to hang on to hope when no hope is offered to them and dreams of a happier future are too ephemeral to remain etched in their minds long enough to become a lasting part of memory. What a debilitating weight this violence is, especially on the hundreds of thousands of children who never know the luxury of hope and the excitement of having a childhood.

Violence wrenches screams of pain and anger from the lips of those who slave long days and nights but can not earn sufficient to provide their families a decent meal, proper health care or education. Their eyes burn with frustration and revulsion when they see an economic system that allows one man to gain a personal fortune so big he can buy countries while more than a billion others live in abject poverty, receiving so few calories each day that their bodies and minds become stunted and sickly. When one country sits at the world's table of resources, consuming and wasting at will while over half the world's population struggles to maintain a meager survival on the pitiful crumbs that drop to the floor, violence is surely the only winner.

Violence is thrust down the throats of women and children when their lives are destroyed by war, they become soldiers at an age when they should be playing harmless games in the school yard, or when they are dragged into military camps to serve as sex slaves. Who, in all honesty, can close their eyes to such violence and claim that it is normal or natural or that it is necessary. Humankind creates this violence and it is only the human family, working in mutual respect and determination that can bring it to an end so that all may enjoy life in its fullness.

The mass media often focuses the attention of the world on refugees who, after years of living in a dehumanizing situation, fight back with whatever weapons they have at hand. This, we are told, is violence. Televisions and newspapers often portray the liberation struggles of the economically alienated as violence without providing us the stories behind the lives of the people who have found their suffering so unbearable while there is so much extravagant waste going on around them. We are assured that these struggles of the poor and oppressed are unnecessary violence. But there is something we must be clear of: The reaction of those whose lives are being destroyed by the present global economic, political and social systems should be seen as a reaction against violence, not a reaction of violence. To understand this helps us to go deeper into the real roots of conflict.

And perhaps now we can state with some confidence that the root causes of the chronic warfare enslaving our world are not primarily religious or ethnic by nature, but rather are the result of greed and the insatiable hunger for power that a few people in the world can manipulate. Such greed and hunger for power invites a backlash from others, especially from

those who become most marginalized and exploited. Injustice, left unattended and untransformed, is at the root of our global conflicts.

A Modest Proposal

Once again, I heard a radio commentator speak of “the root causes of war: poverty and oppression.” I beg to differ. It makes more sense to say that the root causes of war are wealth and freedom. ...war is a phenomenon of wealth, or at least of something other than crushing poverty.⁴⁰

Now I wish to move on to a modest proposal for what can be done to transform the present era of conflicts and violence into a potentially hopeful time of security and peace.

The information we have been looking at suggests that a major cause of conflict in our world today boils down to injustice in the form of arrogant greed and the exploitative use of power to maintain and expand that greed. Power is essential to accumulate and hold control over the limited resources our environment offers and this includes the power to control the people who labor to produce goods from those resources. Power thus misused for limited selfish gain results in unjust economic and political systems designed to benefit a few at the expense of the majority. Tremendous disparity develops and the introduction of new systems, such as global free-market trade through the WTO, increases that disparity and results in resistance from those whose existence is left to deteriorate. Increased militarization to maintain the position of superiority and control by those with the power and with the means to do so grows at an alarming rate as threats to the economic and political status quo increase.

Total equality in a world of over six billion people is, of course, probably not possible but when a few countries, a small handful of mega-corporations or even a few individuals control the vast majority of the world’s wealth and resources, violence already exists. Discontent and anger among the many millions of people who do not have access to sufficient food, medical care, schools, decent housing, clean water, sanitation and security but who can see the excesses of the minority rich will grow. The disenfranchised may live with this injustice in silence for a time, convinced by the elite that things are improving, or if they work hard enough they too can benefit, or that their poverty is due to their own lack of good faith and/or karma. But such arguments soon turn sour when they see no hope in the future - no possibility of their dreams for them and their children becoming reality. Conflict grows and the economic, political and social violence silently thrust upon the marginalized becomes open and aggressive action against oppressive systems and the people who maintain and benefit from those systems. Labeled as “religious” or “ethnic” conflicts, they are in most cases rather reactions against the violence of greed, misused and arrogant power, and disparate unequal sharing of global resources.

We, as bodies of religious faith, have a very crucial role to play in dealing with these conflicts. As bodies of religious faith, we also have many common values and instructions passed on to us through our various Holy Scriptures that can help us work in harmony to end this violence.

Let me make several rather general suggestions for our role as people of faith with a deep commitment to nonviolence.

1. We must be prophetic communities of faith.

"Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?" Ezekiel 13: 10-12

Our different religious faiths must speak out truth by making serious efforts to strip the whitewash from the walls of deceit erected by the political and economic elite as well as by religious and political dogmatists. Truth is liberating and helps move people out of lethargy and submissiveness into action for change. To speak out this truth, we must address our prophetic messages to:

- a. Religious fanatics of all faiths. They are the people Ezekiel spoke about when he said, "Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, 'The LORD declares,' when the LORD has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled. Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, "The LORD declares," though I have not spoken?" (Ezekiel 13, 6-7) The so-called prophets with their false representations of all our Holy Scriptures must be laid bare and they must be called to repentance.
- b. Those who build the economic and political walls that create a gigantic division between the world's haves and have-nots. The greed and lust for power that perpetuates this injustice must be identified and then challenged by all people of faith. We must boldly proclaim the truth about these systems and join in struggle for liberation from their tight grip over our world. We must also prophetically call for a transformation of these systems into ones of justice and compassion.

2. We Must Build New Alternatives

"One day as I was observing how wisdom fares on this earth, I saw something that made me sit up and take notice. There was a small town with only a few people in it. A strong king came and mounted an attack, building trenches and attack posts around it. There was a poor but wise man in that town whose wisdom saved the town, but he was promptly forgotten. (He was only a poor man, after all.) All the same, I still say that wisdom is better than muscle, even though the wise poor man was treated with contempt and soon forgotten. The quiet words of the wise are more effective than the ranting of a king of fools. Wisdom is better than warheads, but one hothead can ruin the good earth." (Ecclesiastes 9)

There is little hope that we can ever totally rid the world of greed, lust for power or fanaticism. These seem to be, in lesser or greater quantities, a normal part of the human community. Along with our efforts to confront and limit these negative, conflict-causing realities in human relationships, we need also to make serious efforts to develop and build new economic and political systems that are truly democratic and can maximize global participation while minimizing the influence of those prone to greed, lust for power and fanaticism. To do so we will need to expose the truth of the existing systems by stripping away their whitewash, reveal how flimsy they are and show that they can never create a healthy and happy future for all.

Secondly, I wish to suggest that the way for us as faith communities to start is to go to the most marginalized, poor and oppressed of our communities for wisdom in how these new systems can be created. Their quiet words of wisdom are certainly much more credible than the rantings of the world's foolish kings.

Starting with the marginalized of our world is important for several reasons.

- a. We can help bring the cries of the oppressed to the attention of the world. This does not mean that we are to become the "voice of the voiceless." The oppressed are by no means voiceless. Their voices are constantly raised in protest to the myriad injustices they suffer each day and in calls for transformation. No, they are not voiceless, but rather the broader society often simply refuses to hear them. Therefore, rather than trying to become the voice of the voiceless, we must become the ears for a world deaf to the realities of the majority of our communities who live without adequate food, water, medical care, education and housing. We must hear these voices clearly, empathize with them, shout their message out to our neighbors and then join with the marginalized in the work of transformation and renewal.
- b. We can learn much from the marginalized of the world about just forms of economics and politics. They can provide us with wisdom and dreams about new ways of organizing our economic and political systems so that they too can participate freely, openly and effectively. They are often still in touch with the traditional economic and political forms that place more emphases on community than on profits, control and power. We need to reincorporate these traditional forms into our lives once again, placing the human element above profits, community above individual, spirituality above arrogant power.

Finally let me suggest that we need to seek new ways to affirm our own unique faith without denigrating the faith of others. We must understand that our religious faith is not inherently dialectic, in other words one that pits the truth of my faith against the "truth" of all other faiths. Rather we must seek an inclusivist religious faith that assumes unity between God and God's creation and thus is a source of unity among all the diverse people of our world. This is an assertion that our religious faith is not about conflict, but about love. James Carroll states in an article entitled "Warring with God" and printed in the Boston Globe on October 21, 2003: "A respectful religious pluralism is no longer just a liberal hope, but an urgent precondition of justice and peace. In the 21st century, exclusivist religion, no matter how "mainstream" and no matter how muted the anathemas that follow from its absolutes, is a sure way to religious war."

Conclusion

If we learn but one important lesson from the numerous wars of the past century and the unspeakable violence of the present, let it be this: We can not douse the flames in a burning house by pouring petrol on them. We can not end the scourge of war by devoting large portions of our resources to preparing for and waging new wars. We can not end terrorism by exacerbating those things that create the anger, pain and frustration fueling terrorism. We can not build democratic societies by limiting the democratic space people need to express themselves and participate freely, by demanding that our way is right and all must follow it or be labeled as enemy, by acts that divide rather than by compassion that unites and heals, or by manipulating our religious faiths to justify selfish deeds and desires.

Instead, we must learn to listen sincerely and deeply to those whose voices cry out to us from the wilderness of hopelessness, fear, hunger, sickness and depravity because we can not possibly hope to transform our violent world into a peaceful one if we do not make a serious effort to understand how others think and feel? When we truly learn to listen to others, especially those most marginalized, exploited, angry and frustrated, we can begin to know how to build new economic, political and social systems that respect justice, freedom and human rights. Then we will also truly realize that terrorism, in all its different forms, can only continue to thrive and grow in a world where inequality is not taken seriously and genuine efforts made to end such inequality.

Here, the power of our religious faiths plays a crucial role, for religion is a very powerful force that can either stand for truth or destroy it, can hear the cries of the oppressed or can silence them, can stand with the suffering or stand against them. Which role the religious faith plays depends greatly upon the awareness of its adherents and the courage of its leaders. Indeed, it does take courage to stand for truth, seriously heed the words of the oppressed and empathize with the suffering because such acts may well bring harsh criticisms and actions against the religious faith by those who would protect the status quo. It also takes great courage for all members of a religious faith to differentiate between the true teachings of their faith and blind nationalism and consumerism. Yet, this is what we all must do if true justice is to finally flourish and peace be freed from the bonds of injustice that now entrap it.

The vision we must hold in our spirits is this: Militarization and preemptive wars will give way to united efforts to end economic slavery, heal the sick, free the imprisoned and bring all people into harmonious relationships. Resources used to produce weapons of mass destruction will be used to build weapons that destroy poverty, disease, hunger, inequality, and illiteracy. Technology used to develop systems to deliver missiles and “smart bombs” to any part of the world at a moment’s notice, changed into systems that can deliver necessary food, medical and other resource assistance at a moment’s notice to any part of the world facing a crisis. Swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Mouths that speak out propaganda and falsehoods meant to divide and conquer will turn into ears that listen and spirits that empathize.

We must not allow the immense size and complexity of this vision to discourage us for we must believe with every fiber of our being and faith that conflicts can be ended and justice allowed its victory. To bend before this gigantic task is to allow skepticism to obscure the way ahead and prevent progressive or revolutionary victory. Skepticism breeds apathy and apathy is a close comrade of oppression and exploitation. We must believe that this vision can become reality, and we must believe in this vision as an inclusive community of different faiths, different languages, different races and different genders. The prophet said in Ecclesiastics 3, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ...A time to kill and a time to heal...A time to tear down and a time to build up...A time for war and a time for peace.” Surely this is the time to heal the wounds of poverty and injustice. It is the time to build up new and just forms of economic, political and social relationships. It is the time to end war and bring about a peace based on justice.

A true love of justice be with each of us
That we may be one in our diversity.
A true love of justice flow through each of us
To a world desperate for a time of unity.

A true love of justice focus our lives and our actions
As a lens focuses the rays of the sun into power
A true love of justice generate energy in us
So the world may finally know peace.

Thank you.

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