

Just Peace in Past and Present Context: Climate Change as Threat to Peace and Future

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Friends,

In speaking to the prospect of a World Council of Churches conference on JustPeace here in Iceland next year, I will have little to offer in the way of advice on funding or organizing support within the WCC itself. My friend, Dr. Rodney Petersen, with his long background of working in the WCC, will be the one for that. I can only bring some thoughts on topics the conference should address.

Just Peace

Our world lost a great theological pioneer earlier this week, with the death of the extraordinary Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen, whose teaching on Just Peace transformed our understanding of the ways of peace, superseding the accustomed dichotomy between pacifism and theories of Just War.

We all suffered a disappointment when we celebrated the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence campaign (DOV) from 2001-2011. The planners had observed the encouraging decade since the end of the Cold War in 1989-90, a decade marked by the end of apartheid, the Oslo Accord, the Good Friday Agreement, but also the tragedies of Rwanda and the countries of the former Yugoslavia. 2001 was an unfortunate time to begin the DOV, as the 9/11 event turned the world climate to the vengeful fear that marked the whole decade following. By the time of the Jamaica celebration when some thousand people came for the completion of

DOV, it was evident that violence had in no way been overcome. As the churches prepare again to address these themes of peace in the new World Council of Churches conference we hope to see in Iceland next year, our deliberations must be concentrated on the realities of threats to peace that exist even as we meet.

The nations, prompted largely by my own United States, fell into deadly assumptions, during that decade, that the proper response to any threat they faced was military. In the strategically pace-setting nations of the NATO alliance the dominance of corporate interests that profited from military production had never abandoned their program even through the period after the Cold War when world peace seemed most within reach. David Bacevich, of Boston University, has been our best teacher on that score, detailing the ways that American policy has been built on war preparations, without interruption, ever since World War II. The United States in particular, which the world has so much honored as its bastion of freedom and justice, has nurtured in its culture a readiness to impose on the rest of the world, by force when nothing else will do, its own institutional standards of democratic practice. German theologian Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, has given us, very lovingly, the best analysis of those inclinations, observing an American mentality that saw its country practically in terms of a quite secular Messiah. I would hope that, in the conference we hope to mount next year, those two will have prominent place.

The early 21st century has seen a dominance of the concept of a “war on terror.” Somehow, we needed a new enemy after the end of the Cold War. The United States, traumatized by the attacks of September 11th, 2001, spent the next years seeking for villains to be punished, even against the reluctance and often open opposition of its closest allies. Shortly before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq I had occasion to tell a gathering of leading military and political figures that, in our rejection of the judgment of our own best friends in the councils of

the United Nations, who had refused to approve our war plans, the United States had effectively ended the NATO alliance, which for some fifty years had been the main instrument of collective security for its members. The Europeans would be reluctant to be without that instrument and would seek to reinstate it, perhaps even including in some way its former enemies. It would still list the United States still among its members, but it would be organized principally for the containment of the United States.

Two massively destructive wars have since been effectively lost by this American policy, the one in Iraq and now the other in Afghanistan, which had long festered in neglect as the American Administration preferred its war in Iraq. The Middle East, plaything of arbitrary policies, has been left in disarray even as its peoples sought to find their own voice. The Arab voice, seeking to assert its own rights to live a democratic life, deserves our attention in the conference on JustPeace. And now the tentative efforts made to integrate Russia and the former satellites of the Soviet Union into a Western alliance have raised their own threatening military dangers. The Western powers of the NATO bloc have striven to surround Russia, admitting the former satellite nations and those that were part of the Soviet Union not only into close association with the European Union but eventually into the NATO alliance itself. Now that policy has backfired, and Russia suddenly alarms its former enemies with a new assertiveness. Are we far enough into a culture of Just Peace to bring about mutual recognition of the demands of justice for these competing major powers and work for a reconciliation of one another's true needs? We have our theologians to instruct us in these ways, but we need to invite to our conference practical statesmen who can give solid advice on assuaging these dangers.

Much of the Western world has fallen into the hands of a plutocracy which has no long-term interests but only a demand for short-term profit, and has turned over management of policy

to the military-industrial interests and the fear-mongers. That constitutes problems in itself which we have been slow to address, but we are now seeing in addition a reluctance to engage in more wars, more from tiredness and disappointment than from principle. Justice is not a primary concern of this hesitancy about war. Tiredness is not a real way to build peace. We can rejoice that the impetus to military adventurism has declined, but neglect of justice will only guarantee that the divisive issues that have wounded the peace will return more disruptive than ever.

This is the genius of JustPeace. The concept has not yet developed into the detailed list of criteria we can cite for theories of Just War. It is newer, and we have less experience in wielding it. The older Just War concepts were ways of discovering whether the resort to war could be justified, and we had developed detailed criteria as a way of limiting the cases in which we could see a war as just. If now we are to build a world that responds to the inchoate demands of Just Peace, we need to generate principles, in the U.S. and among all its more and more reluctant allies, by which we can pursue alternative real ways to bring about justice that do not appeal to force.

The Massive Issue of Global Warming.

No other issue more threatens our future and its peace than the looming, much neglected and often denied, disaster of climate change. I think there may be some feeling among us that this is an alternative topic, distracting us from that of Just Peace, but in fact this is the paramount issue that now requires our attention if we are to have a world at peace. Its dimension exceeds any of those of the 20th century with the sole exception of the threat of nuclear catastrophe under which we all lived for some forty years. It was such a relief to everyone on earth to realize that the prospect of a total Mutually Assured Destruction was lifted. Now we face the melting of the

ice sheets of neighboring Greenland and Antarctica, while stream-feeding glaciers disappear all over the world, resulting in rising ocean levels, desertification of the most valuable agricultural lands and uncontrollable desperation in the quest for the most basic resources, not only among the poorest nations of the world but even among those now wealthy, and our world stands back in seemingly helpless apathy.

I don't know how conscious we may be in this gathering of this gathering threat to our peace and to our world. Certain climate events of recent years have caused general alarm: the frequency of major storms, perhaps notably the Sandy hurricane that so disrupted the East Coast of the United States two years ago, the devastating rains in Britain and Ireland this last winter, the deluge rains that have afflicted the perimeters of the Gulf of Mexico even in these last days, the frequency of tornadoes, the displacement of the Polar Vortex in this last winter that gave us record cold. It has to be granted that no single storm is sufficient evidence by itself of genuine climate change, but the cumulative record of such disruption is more convincing.

Against this, those who profit from the extraction and diffusion of fossil fuels, the largest and most lucrative industry that the world has ever seen and the issue over which so many of the wars of the last century were fought, have maintained a full-throttled denial of the very existence of the problem. They have had the financial means to silence dissent in our legislatures and governments.

The true evidence of a disastrous change in the whole earth's climate is in the saturation of the atmosphere with heat-trapping carbon dioxide, a process that has been cumulative since the beginning of the industrial age and has now come to acute crisis. The safe rise in mean

temperatures for the globe has been calculated at two degrees centigrade, though many earth scientists would say this is already far more than we could bear. Such figures have been bandied about at a series of global meetings of nations, such as the Kyoto conference, which established a Protocol in 1997, an international treaty under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), meant to enter into force among the nations in 2005. But major nations have failed to ratify the treaty and the decisions or recommendations of that and subsequent international meetings have largely been ignored. There is mutual reluctance between the long established industrial nations, which have poured the greatest amount of this carbon into the atmosphere, and the developing nations, such as Basil, India and especially China, whose industries are just now taking hold and who are most reliant on coal-fired plants. At present, the mean surface temperature of the globe has risen 0.8 degrees, with disruptive and alarming effects already apparent. But in fact, the major increase in the earth's heat is still trapped in the oceans, from which it will be released over coming decades. What is there already will account, once released, for a temperature rise of 2.4 degrees, well beyond tolerable limits.

I could rattle off statistics here, carbon dioxide emissions, saturation limits of carbon in the atmosphere, the triggering of further leaps in warming when the tundra are melted to the point that they release even more dangerous gasses such as methane, which bring the prospect of much higher temperature rises, to 4 or more degrees. But these are not the necessary information for this gathering, which is interested in the effects of these phenomena on the prospects of peace.

The culture of the scientific community militates against entering into political discussion or campaigns. The scientist will typically tell you that our sleeve is on fire, but will make no move to put it out. We need the contribution of ethicists and the law to deal with this paramount

threat. Our planetary world is threatened with changes that, within the lifetime of our younger generations, will make it virtually uninhabitable, and destroy the civilizations all our ancestors have built in many thousands of years. The present ruling generation will largely escape these disasters which they are actively causing, but their children will be catastrophically affected by them, and their own children much more so.

In the United States, I have been actively engaged with our university students, the first generation that will be catastrophically affected by this climate change, taking petitions in their name to the regulatory agencies that, in the American system, are able to deal with such future threats. I have also been, just a week ago, in Taipei, speaking to a conference of all the groups who find themselves marginalized in Chinese society. China, as it happens, with its rapidly growing industrial economy, dependent s all such new industrial ventures have been, on coal-fired energy, has become the prime polluter, exceeding even the United States which, along with Europe, as had a long head start and has saturated the atmosphere with far more such greenhouse gases than the Chinese. But the Chinese, while believing the Western nations should bear more of the responsibility to cut back on such emissions, is acutely aware of the problem and working hard at addressing it. My advice to these outsiders to Chinese society was that they contribute their skills and genius to this Chinese effort to pull back from this brink and so win a respected place in the view of Chinese authority.

But the World Council of Churches, seeking to promote a world of Just Peace, cannot ignore this greatest of all our challenges. It was even one of the themes of the DOV program, to establish peace with the earth. That has become a paramount issue now for the very survival of life on our planet.