

A Newcomer's Guide to Today's Pacifism

By Michael Meade

Member, Chappaqua Friends Meeting

Recent events have drawn stark contrasts and exposed dialectic contradictions in Quaker's proper response to a new doctrine of knee-jerk military response to complicated global conflicts. Intentional or not, the philosophical underpinnings of "pacifism" maintain a constant thread within news reports of recent events as expressed in the questioning of moral justification. How are Quakers to frame "pacifism" in a new global paradigm? Is rejection of a "justified war" model the same as "pacifism?" When commentators find military response to humanitarian crises appropriate (or not) do they assume a stance on "pacifism?" The application of a "pacifist" standard can tend towards "absolutism" or "relativism," and an understanding of the difference helps us navigate today's troubled waters.

The political discourse in our United States of America has drawn sharp contrasts between diametrically opposed views on the subject since William Penn set up shop in what we now know as Pennsylvania. Inherent to this influence is the doctrine of "justified war," which held, until George W. Bush declared the so-called "Bush Doctrine," that the USA would not engage in aggressive war-like behavior unless it was a response in-kind towards attacks against "America." The "Justified War" doctrine, however managed or manipulated, drew the USA into many wars and state-sponsored acts of violence throughout our

history. Much of the time, Quakers found it suitable to the consciences of their beliefs to object in various ways to much of this violence. It has become understood, since it became a more sharply drawn issue in WWII, that Quakers can seek an exemption from fighting in the military with a Conscientious Objector (CO) status. Being close to my generation, I knew several young men during the Vietnam draft era (not Quakers) who went to great lengths to achieve this status to varying degrees of success. The only guarantor of receiving a CO status was a lifelong participation in Quakers. Since the Korean conflict (don't call it a WAR!), a relativist accommodation has been made in official USA policy which allows CO's to serve in support roles which emphasize saving lives, such as; nurses, doctors, medics, rescue swimmers and the like. But, an increase in jingoistic "patriotism" has pressed Quakers into reconsidering the issues with contradictions and dilemmas revolving around a generalized ideal of "pacifism."

Although some of this discussion is based on scholarly articles, which I could credit with the footnote process, this is not a scholarly paper which requires such credits. But, I must admit that the writing of Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr covers this subject extensively, as well as endless responses to his comments, and much of my thinking comes from those scholarly exchanges. A history of non-violent disobedience runs from Thoreau, Gandhi, to The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and one cannot help but to also consider that in this discussion. In an attempt to address the matter "realistically" (excuse the oblique reference to the doctrine of "Christian Realism"), I will attempt to frame the dialectics in accessible terms.

A commitment to “pacifism,” by all accounts, begins within the conscience of an individual and translates to action either by oneself or in participation within a social order. Individuals can maintain a commitment to “pacifism,” sometimes at a cost, by honoring a Biblical admonition to “turn the other cheek.” The dilemma comes when a social order (nation), is challenged and a response is required (as perceived by policy makers) to KEEP the peace. (This concept enabled Ronald Reagan, in an exercise in oxymoronic expression, to name a missile system the “Peacekeepers.”) An unquestioning response, referred to as “absolutism,” can hold that the only valid adherence to a pacifist principle is complete disavowal of any association with violent response to a challenge to the social order. Indeed, many Quakers hold that this “absolute” belief is the only true expression of the historic tradition of the faith.

But a more thoughtful consideration begins to flirt with what is known as “relativism.” Relativists hold that a proper response to threats or violence is measured and calibrated. Volunteering for military service as a CO is widely accepted among Quakers and is the most visible form of “relativism.” Voting for politicians who believe in aggressive postures in order to “keep the peace” can be argued as being consistent, in a “relativist” manner, with Quakers. Placing bumper stickers on our cars which say, “War is never the answer,” engage in a simple form of “absolutism.” But, how many Quakers felt like removing those stickers as they watched the three WTC towers fall at nearly free-fall acceleration into a cloud of dust?

“Pacifism,” as practiced by individuals and sometimes by a segment of the social order, has always been measured against the requirements of the social order (nation) as a matter of policy. It is a kind of sliding scale, actually, the very essence of “relativism.” For some, I have heard it argued, where one falls on this sliding scale can define one as being a “real” Quaker or not a “real” Quaker. To be challenged this way has led to many an argument among “Friends,” has it not? For many, a demonstrable commitment somewhere along this “relativist” scale is sufficient to call oneself “Quaker.”

An acceptance that the “relativist” view of “pacifism” is consistent with Quaker ideals begs questions like the following. What are the criterion which justify a national response which includes a measure of violence? Do dead bodies of children killed by chemical agents meet the criterion for a measured violent response? Is it intellectually convenient to ignore “relativist” arguments and renounce any violent response in a blanket denunciation? Is a huge increase in military spending, along with reductions in NGO and “soft power” expenditures, inconsistent with Quaker ideals, even if the consequence is curbing violence by rogue states against innocents around the globe?

In the process whereby individual commitment to “pacifism” coalesces through political action into policy, objectives and consequences become meaningful if an underlining thread of “pacifism” is determinant and results are measurable. Did a peace take hold in South

Sudan which allowed relief agencies to increase agricultural production and reduce famine? Were the human rights of Palestinians respected in the West Bank and Gaza due to a common belief in pacifist principles of human dignity? One could ask if there is an “intrinsic” aspect of “good will” which drives policy, objectives and results in consequences. For Quakers, the issue is framed this way: has the Spirit moved individuals to collective advocacy which results in policy with measurable objectives which are intrinsically based on “goodwill?”

For Friends, the global (or national) response to this question resides in AFSC (American Friends Service Committee). As members, or congregants, are we keeping a watchful eye, or supporting, or participating in any way with AFSC? I am, and I could argue that for the most part I agree with their activities with one glaring exception (perceptive readers may have caught my hint where I disagree!). In more direct support, I belong to Amnesty International, the ACLU, Jewish Friends of Peace and other organizations which can pool resources to affect policy, objectives and consequences. We probably all have our own list of similar organizations to which we give generously. Thank you! I do believe that there is something “intrinsically good” about supporting similar organizations, and something “intrinsically evil” about supporting the NRA, the Heritage Society and any organization which does not respect the dignity and rights of all people to be themselves. The ideals expressed by constructs of social coalescing (lobbies, associations) must be judged by the intended consequences of their advocated policies and objectives. In this way, idealistic values can result in real, measurable consequences.

If it only were that easy. “Relativism” (or its cousin “Realism”) recognizes that consequences can be indeterminate, or measured as a contradictory set of opinions regarding the results. Hence, an argument can be framed whether or not limited airstrikes on a partially abandoned military target had measurably positive or negative consequences. Progress towards “good will” can only be measured by weighing the benefits and damage of policy in action. Intellectual engagement requires a measured, or “relativist” assessment of consequences in a nuanced (or careful) examination of results. Too often, the assessment of results is left to “history,” providing a convenient excuse for inaction when it matters. Have we (as Quakers) gone through this process, or have we responded in an intellectually lazy blanket condemnation of a policy by applying an “absolutist” reaction? Perhaps there are those who honestly believe that an “absolutist” response is the only appropriate “Quaker” response, and whereas I respect the rights and commitment to ideals, I think it ignores uncomfortable “realities.” The consequence of an “absolutist” standard needs to be judged on “relativist” grounds, because results are rarely absolute as to ethics, and can only be judged by a nuanced, balanced assessment. I believe this presses us into addressing a problem which will only be judged on “relativist” grounds with a “relativist” approach.

For “justice is love in action,” as The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often said. Justice cannot wait for history’s vindications, and it demands action based on an assumption of the “good will” of those charged with

determining “justice.” Our entire justice system is built on this assumption. In today’s terms, whether or not it receives respect, the United Nations Security Council attempts to mete out “justice” in international affairs. Unfortunately, the “good will” of that body can be questioned!

Actions by the international community which pursue peace can have results, whereas mere words will surely have little impact. Actions which are based in policy need to be judged by not only intent, but by objectives and consequences. I do not believe there has ever been an action in the international arena which was solely “absolutist,” and not in some manner “relativist.” Measures which promote human rights and respect across boundaries sometimes are, at their core, violent. There should be no way that support for policy which promotes objectives (and consequences) which advocate “good will” by state agents can be considered “evil” without an application of “absolutist” standards.

“Realism,” or “relativism,” therefore dismisses “absolutism” with an objective of achieving (measured on the whole) positive consequences. One could say this was an essential difference in tone between the Clinton campaign (advocating “realism”) and the Sanders campaign (advocating “absolutism”) in our recent election cycle. One could argue that Sanders gave subtle signs (without offending the purely ideological) that he would accommodate “realism” once in office, but we will never know.

In order to be a “bona fide” pacifist, though, an “absolutist” view on narrowly defined violent acts is necessary. This can be an appropriate standard for who can be deemed a “real” Quaker. In such cases, I do think there can be an “absolutist” objection, but, who am I to say? But one way or another, armed response to global threats which are clearly based on “evil” intent (as judged by an individual’s conscience) is a matter which should demand a “relativist” consideration - but which could follow with an “absolutist” condemnation of specific violent acts once judgment is made on the consequences. But waiting for this process to work out tends to absolve individuals of THINKING about it in advance of action, and tends to allow the reflexive and intellectually lazy “absolutist” response to prevail (in one’s own judgment) where a more timely, yet “relativist” advocacy might be more consequential. This is the essence of the modern “pacifist’s” dilemma - adherence to a high ideal weighed against the efficacy of timely action. Therefore, I hold that whereas an “absolutist” ideal has merit, it needs to be tempered by “realism” or “relativism” in order to be effective.

Media reports which question actions based on “justified war” theory sometimes give passing reference to the “pacifist” agenda, and it is always implied. But, given that a “pacifist” agenda need not be “absolutist,” there remains a shade of difference between objections to actions based on the “justified war” defense as opposed to an “absolutist/pacifist” defense: “Pacifist” agendas should draw an “absolutist” argument on SOME forms of violence. An easy one to make, and it is often referenced, is the bombing of “civilians” or “hospitals.” There ARE public figures who excuse these actions as “collateral damage.” I think an “absolutist” objection in these cases is

an example of a proper “Quaker” view. On the other hand, intervention which requires a measure of force to deliver food supplies to Somali famine victims should be excused – but – there have been times in our history when even this has been questioned. What happens when a mercenary army stands in the way of famine relief, and a commander must decide to shoot or feed? The slippery slope of “relativism” becomes relevant in these arguments.

Whether or not the dialectics of these arguments are consciously considered when applying one’s “pacifism” to current events, I believe they all simmer below the surface. I hope that this examination of modern “pacifism” and how it may be applied by individuals to advocacy, policy and consequences gives the reader a framework by which to consider action in a pacifist agenda, whether as advocated by AFSC or other agencies of “good will.” Regardless of intent, all members of a social order choose to engage in these considerations, or not to. I hope that these musings will focus the reader’s efforts TO engage, and to contribute (as guided by the Spirit and conscience) to a common effort to promote “pacifism.”

Sincerely, Michael Meade

Member, Chappaqua Friends Meeting