

## **RESPONSE TO JOSEPH FAHEY**

*WB/Ten Turner*

When I was invited to address the Peace Rally, representing the Rochester, Minnesota Ministerial Association, it gave me a unique problem: How could I, a clear-cut Humanist, represent the Catholics, the mainline Protestants, and the Jewish congregation? Was there a core message? Was there a statement that should be made by religious leaders that couldn't just as well be made by a variety of other concerned citizens? Moreover, what could be said to the very, very pluralistic audience that would speak to their religious sensibilities? In short, was there a uniquely religious message that had completely non-sectarian imperatives?

It was the search for answers to the above questions that led me to the three main points of this paper. (In spite of the fact that a pundit once warned me that Unitarians ought never to have "three" points in a talk. Perhaps "one" representing "Unity" or "four or more" standing for "Diversity," but never a "Trinity." So today, I guess I'll have to say one or two is not quite enough, but three will definitely be plenty.)

So the thesis of this address has three parts:

1. The Christian Church is into Peace in a big way;
2. The movement is based on some special, but universal truths; and
3. This upsurge calls Humanists to become Peacemakers.

I asked a couple of ministers in the Twin Cities for a little bibliography on the subject of peace. What I got was a mountain of material. I soon discovered that *the Christian church is into peace in a big way*. Things are happening in respectable society now that would have been only found amongst radical peace-niks just a few years ago.

One note of disclaimer here, however. When I speak of "The Christian church," I'm obviously making a distinction between mainline Catholics and Protestants and the Far Right, born-again types. There is a very significant number of national Christian leaders who preach a militaristic civil religion in which peace means the absence of war while we develop a stronger and more successful armed force. The Democratic woman from Queens was on to something when she questioned Reagan's Christianity. She found out what it was when President, the darling of the National Association of Evangelicals, started joking about "starting the bombing in five minutes."

On the other hand, there are different messages being given by some Christians and what makes that even more significant is that speaking against war is a relatively new turn. In the first years after World War II, during the embryonic stages of the arms race, the established Church simply reflected what was happening in the government.

As Alan Geyer, executive director of the Churches' Center for Theological and Public Policy in Washington, D.C. states:

Most of the peace pronouncements of mainline churches for 20 years accommodated [the bipartisan] consensus [that dominated

U.S. foreign policy.] Church peace programs were preoccupied with rallying support for the UN and foreign aid which typically meant rallying around presidents of either party who were beset by a recalcitrant congress.<sup>1</sup>

John Bennett, Senior Contributing Editor of *Christianity and Crisis*, tells about a commission of which he was a member in 1950. Created by the Federal Council of Churches, a predecessor of the National Council of Churches, this group was "to advise the churches concerning the moral issues involved in the use of weapons of mass destruction..." Made up of prominent Christians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, the commission made a report which gave clear support to the strategy of nuclear deterrence. In fact, Bennett says he voted with the majority in an eight to two decision not to oppose "first use" of nuclear weapons under all circumstances.

However he goes on to say:

Today the rejection of the first use of nuclear weapons is coming to be one point at which... the churches... are beginning to move away from accepted assumptions about nuclear deterrence. Today I would vote against the policy of "first use."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, as Geyer says in another place,

...[S]ince 1980.. .most Protestant denominations have developed serious peacemaking strategies that focus on the arms race [and]... the churches' work for peace in the 1980's is unfolding in a context of both extreme peril and unparalleled opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

In the "mountain of material" that I mentioned above, was a little booklet compiled for The Fellowship of Reconciliation which has statements on peace by 15 major U.S. church bodies as well as the Greek Orthodox, German Federation churches, and the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. Many of the pronouncements are not surprising, especially the ones by the Society of Friends or the Unitarian Universalist Association, or even, by now, the Roman Catholic Bishops. But perhaps more significant is the resolution by the Southern Baptist Convention of 1978:

. . . Therefore be it resolved, that we support the continued efforts of our national leaders to achieve strategic arms limitations,

\* \* \*

Be it further resolved, that we urge our representatives in Washington. . . to seek mutual agreements with other nations to slow the nuclear arms race;

\* \* \*

Be it finally resolved that we urge our nation and other nations of the world to shift funds from nuclear weapon systems to basic

human needs, such as education, medicine, and relief from hunger.<sup>4</sup>

Of such momentum is this new peace movement, that when the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly meeting at Ohio State University two months ago, established a peace advocate position, it was a Johnny-come-lately. And that for a church body that has been noted for its "avant garde" social concern.

In the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, peace concerns have taken on fresh urgency since the tenure of Dr. Fred Trost, its new "bishop," who has made public announcements that he is not paying a certain amount of his income tax in protest of military spending.

Jesuit, Richard T. McSorley, who teaches peace studies at Georgetown University in Washington, writes in the *U.S. Catholic*:

Does God approve of our intent to use nuclear weapons? I don't think so. Moreover, I do not believe God approves of even the possession of nuclear weapons.

\* \* \*

Even the possession of weapons which cannot be morally used is wrong. They are a threat to peace and might even be the cause of nuclear war. The nuclear weapons of communists may destroy our bodies. But our intent to use nuclear weapons destroys our souls. Our possession of them is a proximate occasion of sin.<sup>1</sup>

The cataloging could go on and on, but I think it is clear that the churches are swept up in a new peace movement. That part of the mainstream Christianity that decries both Jerry Falwell as well as the Chicago Seven, is now filled with an unprecedented concern for peace issues.

Because I am a humanist and a humanist leadership candidate hoping to form and lead a humanist congregation, this overwhelming evidence caused me to wonder if the Christians I had been reading about had a corner on the peace market. Or to put it more directly, so basic a concern and so comprehensive a problem could simply not be the purview of one group, no matter how diverse or widespread that group might be. Indeed, upon further reflection I found that *the Movement is based on some special but universal truths.*

But first, I had to deal with my emotional reaction to Christian proclamations. I can always find many reasons to reject Christian belief and practice. In many ways, the reason I am a Humanist is to make more clear the distinction between my present stance and my background in Methodist and UCC churches. But when faced with the incredible danger of nuclear arms, it struck me that listening to Christians couldn't hurt. Moreover, regardless of the basic premises of theology and/or philosophy, the final goal represented by the new peace movement takes a much higher precedence; a priority in which I had an even greater emotional investment.

My first and most significant discovery was that most of the groundwork for the Christian peace movement came from the Bible. One explanation for the radical departure of many Catholics from the just/unjust war theory of St. Augustine of the Fourth Century is that they began to take another look at the New Testament and there discovered that Jesus was a peacemaker. As McSorley asks, "Can we imagine Jesus pushing the button that would release nuclear weapons on millions of people?"<sup>6</sup>

The "universal truth" to be found here has to be approached obliquely. For at first glance, the strong emphasis on the Holy writ didn't seem to hold much hope for a Humanist message. But the more I read the more I realized that the Christian writers were working backwards to justify what had become a clear-cut imperative by other means. Or to put it another way, they seem to be saying, "We can justify the new peace movement by going back and setting up a Biblical foundation."

Note how this is done by the United Church of Christ in a little booklet written by M. Douglas Meeks, a Professor of Theology at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. Acknowledging that the motivation for this particular pamphlet was the question of draft registration, Dr. Meeks contrasts the UCC with the "absolute pacifism" groups such as the Quakers, Moravians, Brethren, and the Amish. But then he goes on to point out that the historical situation has changed. Now we face military parity with the USSR, the ever-expanding nuclear arms race, and the emerging clarity of the U.S. economic interests.

Thus:

[I]n the church it is not only historical conditions but also the history of the Holy Spirit which must determine our view of peace. The church is a function of God's trinitarian history with the world. Therefore we must ask what God the Father/Mother, Son and Holy Spirit is doing with peace. This history of the Holy Spirit, which makes us fully aware and sets us within world history, requires that we give new definitions today of a "peace church." This is because<sup>7</sup> the church of Jesus Christ can be none other than the peace church.

The purpose of this citation is not to discredit that new stance or to undermine the final position of the UCC. It is to affirm the aspect of this approach that is what I have called a Humanist core or a universal truth: namely, "realistic observation of the historical situation." In more Humanist terms we might say that humans have to begin with the here and now and have as the most important priority, the impact on human beings. That the churches have worked so hard and have gone into such detail to lay a Biblical basis only serves to emphasize the clear urgency and precedence involved with the peace issues.

In short, the fervor of the Biblical and Theological activity points more to the crisis than anything else they could do.

Another universal truth that comes through all of this information is the

awful "nuclear world view" that has replaced all of our semi-comfortable images of the patriotic marines fighting the "— .. (here insert a racist term for one of our old enemies).

A retired Army chaplain, George Zabelka, tells of his deep feelings that have ebbed and flowed over the 38 years since he was assigned to the squadron that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

You have studied moral theology. It is intrinsically evil to directly kill innocent human beings, and that is all that modern nuclear weapons can do. Collateral damage and just war language belong to another, past era, an era that is gone forever. We are in a new age in which the past designations no longer fit. It's either nonviolence or non-existence, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said. It is up to us, you and me, with the help of God, to make our day a resurrection to life - a new life, the life that Jesus promised us if we are faithful to him and his teachings.<sup>8</sup>

If we have not been convinced by our colleagues in Humanism who through scientific methods predict nuclear winter, perhaps we can hear it in these kind of plaintive cries. The Humanist core is that regardless of past experience, nuclear weapons make war a completely unacceptable alternative.

A third universal truth that emerges is about pacifism. I discovered that complete pacifism is probably the most authentic position for Christians dating back to New Testament times. Regardless of the existence of Jesus or of the accuracy of his peace sayings, the early Church practiced pacifism in relation to the Romans.

But it was when this particular religion was nationalized by Constantine that this element, and many others for that matter, changed. As the official religion Christianity was now the label for the soldiers as well as the monks. After this and ever after there were several viable options offered by the apologists.

The same basic argument carries into this present day and the writers talk of things like a "Just Security Ethic"<sup>9</sup> and "Nuclear Pacifism"<sup>10</sup> as I mentioned above. But a so-called universal truth is the recognition by the most urgent peace activist in the churches that there are many non-pacifists who are also concerned about the peace issue.

Charles P. Lutz, co-editor of a Lutheran peace handbook, quotes Gary J. Quinn, "Proper understanding of just-war theory will no more make one a war-monger than proper understanding of pacifism will turn one into a coward," and Roland Bainton, who was one of the great pacifist Christian thinkers of our country , "World peace will not come through the efforts of pacifists alone - there are not enough of us. Therefore we need to enlist non- pacifists in the struggle."<sup>11</sup>

What has happened is that peacemaking now, by general Christian consensus, encompasses all who deplore nuclear war. That should qualify as a universal truth.

I want to mention one final note before moving to the final section of this paper. If nothing else in all this material, I have discovered anew the powerful motivation of "faith".

This is probably self-evident, but a Humanist core message nonetheless. Whether perceived as the initiator of the action or as an after-the-experience justification, the rooting of this imperative in the Will of God makes its significance equal to the nature of the crisis. As I will point out in the final part of this paper, there is an analogy there for we who are not theists as well. Simply put, it is that the ultimate interior value empowers us to deal with the ultimate exterior danger.

The barrage of information and invective about peace made me realize that we are talking about the life and death of all Humanity; the Christian peace movement challenges us. This upsurge calls Humanists to become peacemakers.

As I have done at the beginning of both previous sections, once again I must remind you and me that just because the call comes from Christians, it is not automatically suspect, especially in light of the critical nature of the peace issue. While, as Howard Radest put it in a recent talk, "...it would be inappropriate for any leader, rabbi, or minister to declare a moral agenda for others,"<sup>2</sup> it still would be even more inappropriate to ignore that declaration simply because it came from a Christian/Theist. It is like Radest puts it later:

...The irony and the challenge for us is to reach past the surround of their Ghandi's or Martin Luther King's theologies to the model of active identity these and others present, to search out the Humanist core.<sup>13</sup> (Emphasis mine)

So recognizing that we would never begin at (or work back to) the same place as the Christian peacemakers, we are still forcefully challenged to reconsider ourselves in relation to peace issues.

I want to propose five basic elements to the Humanist peace-making imperative. There are more - in fact I hope this will spark many in your minds - but this is where I begin.

*Peacemaking Identity:*

The pluralism that has been critical in terms of the value of diversity must be put aside in this case. A unity based on the simple fact of nuclear impossibility. Let us make an "irrational" commitment to stand together on this one theme, even if we never again agree to agree on anything.

*Scientific Power:*

Intelligent and very far ranging people in all areas of science make up the better part of Humanist groups. Let us seize the opportunity to use the

minds and vision of these Humanists to assert with a different kind of clarity than the Christian text-proofs that nuclear war will destroy us for all time.

*Political Reality:*

It has been shown that militarists and fundamentalists can be very adept at the use of our democratic processes. Are we to let that happen without making our very own system work for the good of humanity? Let us be political even if the hard work and the dirty hands are uncomfortable.

*Innovative Action:*

Humanists bring a world of creativity and scholarship to the life of the world. It is critical that this very same freshness be applied to the arena of world peace. Let us try new things: Peace Academies, Peace Bonds, Nuclear Free Zones, and many others to discover that which will work.

*Justice and Human Rights:*

Civil Libertarians and social advocates have no more important priority than to insure the existence of the environment and the inhabitants. Clearly stating that all our concerns are tied together and insisting on their value will lead us into power. Let us welcome all those in need and move together toward peace.

What I have called the Humanist Challenge is simply put. We must now act, refusing to take for granted that "things will solve themselves."

It almost seems anti-climactic to suggest that the preservation of the world and all the people in it is *the* Humanist issue. Whereas those who would look to supernatural means of salvation might even in extreme cases rely on the next life, we find ourselves in a different position. If we are going to talk about the betterment of the world and the future of our children, it will have to be in the Humanist context: this world.

Our Challenge is like this from the Meditation Services for Humanistic Judaism:

The prophets of Israel dreamed a strange dream. Amid the horrors of defeat, exile and captivity they saw the vision of a world without war. Swords would be changed to plow-shares. Spears would be transformed into pruning hooks. Nations would forget the art of killing. In their fantasy the prophets expressed a universal hope that disappointment is powerless to destroy. We may plead the virtues of experience and realism. We may pride ourselves on our willingness to see [humans] and nations as they really are. But we cannot dismiss the dream. We cannot refuse the vision. Senseless brutality may be the theme of human history. Murderous vengeance may be the author of its bloody tales. We may even try with all our might and fail to achieve the peace we need. Yet we cannot resist the trying.

\* \* \*

[Because] [p]eace is the gift of personal action. It is not inevitable. No Messiah can guarantee it. No historic force can promise it for sure. War is a human creation. People invented the armed battle. Only people can devise its alternative. When the rewards of war are less than the rewards of peace, [we] will change.<sup>14</sup>

Or perhaps having seen the movement of other religious people we will remember that "religious" means deeply committed to ultimate values. As Humanists, with that kind of "religion" we can join with them to pledge:

IN LIGHT OF MY FAITH, I AM PREPARED  
TO LIVE WITHOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN  
MY COUNTRY"

and then as an incredibly talented force, make it come to pass.

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9. Cf. No. I, Pages 143 ff.
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12. Howard Radest, "Doing the Good-Humanist Style," A paper for use in the August 1984 Session of The Humanist Institute, Page I.
13. Ibid. Page 8.
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15. The World Peace Pledge developed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and available for use by all peacemakers. Copies available: Covenant Peacemaking Program, Fellowship for Reconciliation, Box 271, Nyack, N.Y. 10960.