Christianity and Peace

Christian understanding of world peace must start with the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth himself. In his Sermon on the Mount, recorded in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 5, he enunciated eleven categories of those blessed in God's sight - the 'Beatitudes'. They include "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (verse 6) and "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (verse 8). Among those special categories of blessedness are the peacemakers: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (verse 9). Jesus declared that those dedicated to overcoming conflicts and making peace between individuals, within and between families, in the wider society, and between the nations of humanity, are both blessed by God and especially close and dear to him, as children to a father. If we ask why this should be so, it is because the 'grand narrative' of Christian theology tells of humanity dwelling in an ideal 'Garden of Eden' in peace and harmony among one another, with Nature and with the Creator God. However one interprets the Genesis story - for me it is symbolic for all time, rather than literally for a specific prehistory time - this is clear: The divine purpose for humanity is peace and harmony, but this is frustrated by human rebellion against God's purpose, in wars and conflicts. So Jesus said those who strive to achieve God's peaceful purposes for humanity are blessed, and God's children, acting in line with the divine will. In the same sermon, he set forth a concept truly revolutionary for his time (verse 43 onwards) in verse 44 declaring: "I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your heavenly Father" (verse 44). This declaration of radical non-violence and reconciling love finally rendered obsolete the primitive notions of God found in the early books of the Old Testament, as a warrior deity fighting for his chosen people, even authorising genocide to gain their 'promised land'. Jesus was addressing fellow Jews, who were under Rome's occupation: he did not support guerrilla warfare against the Romans; among his disciples was Simon, an ex-Zealot (freedom fighter/terrorist); another was Matthew, a former tax-collector, an agent of the Romans. That both were in Jesus' close disciple-group is a very significant sign of a central aspect of Jesus' peace-making - that he acted and preached reconciliation between divided people and separated communities (also illustrated by the Good Samaritan story and the healing of the Roman

centurion's servant).

EARLY CHURCH
So Jesus was clearly a preacher of radical non-violence, peace and reconciliation - all expressing God's love for all humanity. This was clearly understood by the Early Christian

Church, whose martyrs included those who refused to continue as soldiers when they became Christians (believing all humans are made in the divine image, they could not kill their fellow-humans). They declared God forbids killing even in a just cause, for all human life is sacred. Furthermore, the early churches were 'communities of reconciliation' - in Christ, there was 'neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave or freeman' - and all prevailing divisions were broken down. This unity through reconciliation was to be a sign to the world of God's purpose for human unity and peace.

HISTORY
The Church down the ages has struggled to stay true to Jesus' peace vision, and has mostly compromised his teaching with worldly power. When the Roman Empire became officially Christian under the Emperor Constantino (early 4th century), it was allowed for Christian men to bear arms, but it was not compulsory, and for another 2-3 centuries many refused. 'Just War' theology was steadily developed as a means of limiting the outbreak of wars between Christian kings; mediaeval Popes tried to stop such inter-Christian warfare, even to limit weapons, eg. they tried to ban the crossbow. The Middle Ages saw great peace movements eg. Peace of God, but the Crusades were partly an attempt to divert the European martial spirit for re-conquest of the Holy Land. After the Reformation, nationalism led to increased militarism: it was a tragic contradiction that World War One was fought almost entirely between nominally Christian nations - a monumental failure of Christianity to prevent war.

TODAY
Late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen USA, in churchgoing terms the most 'Christian' country, as the most aggressive and militaristic state in the world (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan etc); but in many countries the Church has been increasingly anti-war. The radical Baptist preacher and US Civil Rights leader, Rev. Martin Luther King, has been an inspiration for non-violent struggle across the globe. In UK, the Churches generally opposed the Iraq War, and advocate non-military solutions to disputes with the emphasis on diplomacy and action through UN. The World Council of Churches has declared that modern warfare is so destructive that participation in it is incompatible with Christian faith. In recent decades the Vatican has become increasingly anti-war: Pope Paul VI declared:

"Arms and wars must be excluded from any programme of civilisation." Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have called for the abolition of nuclear weapons; both opposed the Iraq War.

PROSPECT

The world currently spends some $1.6 Trillion on wars and the military machine - over 50% of this being spent by USA. The Iraq War has cost $ several trillion. Such expenditure, and the suffering and destruction caused by the military machine, is simply wicked and immoral - doubly so in a world where 1 billion people go to bed hungry. The Biblical 'Shalom' -peace - is a holistic vision of material and spiritual fulfilment for humanity. With great reductions in global military expenditure, and with the vast resources thus saved transferred to peaceful economic and social development, it would be possible to achieve the elimination of world poverty, and the provision of the essentials of life - food and water, shelter, health services, education - for all. All faith communities should support this high ideal, which represents the practical expression of the ethical teachings of the founders of the world's religions, for today's inter-dependent world. All faiths should work together to advance this global justice agenda. (This is set out in the Uniting for Peace '4D Charter for World Peace: Disarmament, Demilitarisation, Development and Democracy'). Pope John Paul II, speaking at Hiroshima, declared:

"Let us embark upon the steep and difficult path of peace, the only path that benefits human dignity and the true fulfilment of the human destiny, the only path to a future in which equity, justice and solidarity are realities and not distant dream"

Rev. Brian G Cooper- December 2011

This is an edited version of the speech on 'Christianity and Peace' given by Rev. Brian G Cooper, Churches & Inter-Faith Secretary of Uniting for Peace, at the inter-faith Peace Conference held in Edinburgh on Sunday October 9 2011 by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Edinburgh on the theme 'Love for All, Hatred for None'. Addresses were also given by Ahmadiyya, Baha'i, and Liberal Jewish faith speakers, and the Chief Inspector of the Lothian Police responsible for Safer Communities. The occasion was televised on a dedicated Ahmadiyya TV Channel.