

Liberation Theology and the Gospel of Peace
Kevin F. Burke, S.J.

When there is justice, there is peace. If there is no justice, there is no peace. Peace is the product of the order desired by God, but which human beings have to succeed in attaining as a great good within society.

*Archbishop Oscar Romero*¹

On the evening of March 24, 1980, in the tiny Central American country of El Salvador, a hired gunman stole into the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital during the celebration of the Eucharist and fired a fatal bullet into the heart of the Catholic archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. In the eyes of many, Romero was a prophet whose ringing denunciations of injustice and vigorous defense of the poor placed him at odds with the right-wing ruling elites and led him to a martyr's death. Others, however, saw him as a well-intentioned but misguided dupe who fell under the spell of leftists fighting to overthrow the Salvadoran government. Woven through these various interpretations of his legacy one finds frequent references to a movement called "liberation theology." It, too, has garnered a wide range of assessments. Its enemies claim that it endorses violent revolution under the guise of redressing social injustices; as such, they conclude, it represents a (communist) wolf in (religious) sheep's clothing. By contrast, advocates insist that it embodies the values of Jesus; its ethical and apocalyptic sense of urgency reflects, they argue, the earliest spirit of Christianity. A full analysis of these conflicting interpretations exceeds the limits of this essay. However, noting them provides a fruitful context for addressing two questions relevant to the dialogue initiated by *Methodists United for Peace*

¹Monseñor Oscar A. Romero, "La Paz," homily of July 3, 1977, in *Su pensamiento: Colección Homilias y Diario de Mons. Oscar Arnulfo Romero*, vol. I-II (San Salvador: Imprenta Criterio, 2000) 116.

with Justice. What is liberation theology? What might it offer to Christians interested in pursuing peace with justice? I address these questions with the witness of Archbishop Romero in view.

Vatican II and Medellín. The phrase “liberation theology” came into vogue in the 1970s to describe a religiously-based social movement and a corresponding theological style that emerged in the Catholic Church in Latin America. However, it should be noted that liberation theology is neither a strictly Roman Catholic² nor an exclusively Latin American phenomenon.³ Indeed, liberation *theologies* (emphasis on the plural) have emerged in various parts of the world and within a number of Christian denominations, and these manifest striking similarities with one another and with various other contemporary theological approaches, including political, contextual, and feminist theologies.⁴

In the middle of the 20th century there occurred two seminal ecclesial synods that set the stage for the development of liberation theology in Catholic circles: Vatican II and Medellín. The Second Vatican Council met in four sessions between 1962 and 1965. It concluded its deliberations with a remarkable document, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*.) Among other things, that document called the whole church to the tasks “of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the

²A number of mainline Protestant churches have developed their own versions of liberation theology in and beyond Latin America. In addition, there are now Jewish and Muslim theologies of liberation. Among the earliest and most prominent Latin American liberation theologians is the Argentinean Methodist minister, José Miguel Bonino. Another United Methodist theologian, minister, and college president, Rebecca Chopp, is among the most important U.S. commentators on the achievement and legitimacy of liberation theology.

³Liberation theologies have sprouted in many parts of Africa, as well as in Korea, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, to say nothing of Europe and the United states.

⁴See Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1986); *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

Gospel.”⁵ In response to that call, national and international conferences of bishops met to examine “the signs of the times” embedded in their own histories in order to decide how best to implement the Council’s decrees. Accordingly, the bishops of Latin American gathered in Medellín, Columbia, for two weeks in 1968. Among the documents produced at this groundbreaking meeting, one of the most important focuses on peace. Citing *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops at Medellín proclaim:

Peace is, above all, a work of justice. It presupposes and requires the establishment of a just order in which persons can fulfill themselves as human beings, where their dignity is respected, their legitimate aspirations satisfied, their access to truth recognized, their personal freedom guaranteed; an order where persons are not objects but agents of their own history.⁶

The imperatives to read the signs of the time and to pursue peace as a work of justice are the founding insights of liberation theology. But just what is liberation theology?

Two Key Terms: Theology and Liberation. In the first place, the phrase “liberation theology” designates a particular approach to the reflective discipline of *theology*. It involves thinking about the contents of Christian faith in the light of Christian revelation. It springs from the fertile soil of scripture, especially the narratives of the liberating God recorded in Exodus, the dense and passionate prophetic tradition of Israel, and above all the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his proclamation of the reign of God. However, the phrase “liberation theology” is also used

⁵Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” No. 4, in W. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966) 201-202.

⁶Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, “Document on Peace,” cited in A. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 109; hereafter cited as “Medellín.”

to designate a broad *social movement* characterized by the emergence of base ecclesial communities (grass-roots churches) and the preferential option for the poor.⁷ This movement sought to bring the Gospel to bear on social realities and to read the Gospel in the light of those same realities. It is worth noting that many religious, political and cultural leaders associated with the liberation theology movement – people like Archbishop Romero – are not professional academic theologians. But while liberation theology values the importance of critical scholarship, it does not limit the category of “theologian” to university professors and scholar-monks. All Christians who reflect on and respond to the call to live a liberating, evangelical faith are in some sense “theologians.”

As a way of doing theology, the qualifier “liberation” distinguishes this method from other theological approaches in two essential ways. First, as an intellectual discipline, liberation theology takes the active faith of Christians as its point of departure. Ignacio Ellacuría makes this point in a dense passage that offers an excellent working definition of liberation theology.

The theology of liberation understands itself as a *reflection from faith on the historical reality and action of the people of God, who follow the work of Jesus in announcing and fulfilling God's Reign*. It understands itself as an action by the people of God in following the work of Jesus and, as Jesus did, it tries to establish a living connection between the world of God and the human world.... It is, thus, a theology that begins with historical acts and seeks to lead to historical acts, and therefore it is not satisfied with being a purely interpretive reflection; it is nourished by faithful belief in the presence of God within history, an operative

⁷See Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

presence that, although it must be grasped in grateful faith, remains a historical action.⁸

The key point is that liberation theology not only *reflects* on the meaning of Christian faith but facilitates *action* in response to the demands of faith. As such it participates in the mystery to which the Christian faith points: God's liberating actions on behalf of suffering human beings. From this theological perspective, Christian faith *is* a faith that *does* justice. Thus, liberation theologians often describe their approach as "reflection on praxis," that is, theological reflection on the specific practices or actions that spring from and embody the living faith.

Second, besides qualifying liberation theology's method, the term "liberation" draws specific attention to the central Christian motif of *salvation*. It reminds us that God desires to deliver his people from slavery and suffering (see Ex 3.7). It underscores Jesus' self-understanding as one anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim liberty to captives (Lk 4.18). Its manner of preaching insists that salvation cannot be regarded simply as one theme among others in the bible. Rather, salvation is the central unifying symbol used by the biblical authors to speak about who God is and what God is doing in history on behalf of his people. Liberation theology is critical of all domesticated forms of Christianity that render the vivid biblical understandings of salvation abstract or remove them from the heart of Christian life. In its criticism of other theological interpretations of faith, *a theology of liberation* thus simultaneously promotes *the liberation of theology*, a point captured by the titles

⁸Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation," in I. Ellacuría & J. Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994) 543, emphasis added.

of two of its classic texts.⁹ Finally, because Christian faith encounters God first and foremost in history and as the God of history, liberation theology emphasizes that God's salvation is a salvation *in and of* history, not a rescue *from* history.

Liberation Theology and the Option for the Poor. Liberation theology is reflection *on* the meaning of faith *from* the practice of faith in the God of Jesus Christ, the God whose salvation is revealed *in* history as nothing less than the concrete and ultimate salvation *of* history. For this reason, liberation theology emerged in the context of what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls the *irruption of the poor*, the awakening of vast numbers of people to the awareness that their condition of poverty and misery is not the product of "nature," much less God's will.¹⁰ The scandal of oppressive poverty is the product of human choices and human sinfulness. Liberation theology recovers the evangelical insight that God wills the liberation of all people from situations that dehumanize them. God desires to bring about a new heaven and a new earth founded on peace, social harmony, and justice in place of the violence, selfishness and oppression that currently reign in our world.

Liberation theology makes a *preferential option for the poor* in line with the scandalous evangelical preference for the poor found in the New Testament: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Lk 6.20,24). This option affects both the interpretation and practice of Christian faith. Its interpretive logic facilitates proclamation of the true Gospel. If we wish to hear the Gospel as Jesus wanted it to be heard, we must listen from the place where he proclaimed it and

⁹See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971); Juan Luís Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975).

¹⁰Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983).

in solidarity with those to whom he gave it first as their “good news.” Its practical impulse shapes Christian ethics around a fundamental solidarity with the hungry and the despised. It actively seeks to be neighbor to all those who have fallen into the hands of robbers (Lk 10.30-37), that is, the more than two billion people in our world who live close to death. In the words of Jon Sobrino, liberation theology seeks to recover the Christian community’s identity as a *Samaritan church*: a church “de-centered by mercy,” a church that begins “to *think itself* from without, from *along the road*, where the wounded neighbor lies.”¹¹

Pursuing Peace with Justice. In February of 1980, just weeks before he fell to an assassin’s bullet, Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote an open letter to the president of the United States, Jimmy Carter. He wrote as a pastor to a fellow Christian committed to defending human rights. In it, he said:

I am very concerned by the news that the government of the United States is planning to further El Salvador’s arms race by sending military equipment and advisers to “train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence.” If this information from the newspapers is correct, instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, your government’s contribution will undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights.¹²

Archbishop Romero’s letter to President Carter did not emerge in a vacuum. Nor does it presume

¹¹Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994) 15-26.

¹²Oscar Romero, “Letter to President Carter,” in *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985) 188-189.

that peace is the mere absence of war. Rather, “the peace in which we believe is the fruit of justice.”¹³ Peacemaking constitutively involves the conversion of structures of injustice and repression. It cooperates with God’s grace to transform situations marred by a fundamental and blatant disregard for basic human rights. In these presuppositions Romero aligns himself with the interpretation of the faith put forth by liberation theologians and Catholic social teaching. The Christian faith acts to promote justice and to overcome injustice. It involves itself in the world so as not to abandon the world to the enemies of God.¹⁴ It seeks peace with justice, recognizing that “peace is not found, it is built,” and insisting that the “Christian is the artisan of peace.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, Jimmy Carter failed to heed the archbishop’s plea, and his successors positively ignored it. The United States poured over 5 billion dollars of military aid into El Salvador during the decade following Romero’s assassination, a decade in which over 75,000 Salvadorans were killed. Most of the victims were killed by the Salvadoran Army trained and funded by the U.S. Most of the victims were civilians, and many of these were tortured, mutilated, and massacred.¹⁶

Archbishop Romero’s Approach to Peace. During the three years he served as Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero increasingly identified peacemaking as a constitutive aspect of his ministry. Precisely as a peacemaker, he vigorously defended those most exposed to

¹³See Oscar Romero and Arturo Rivera y Damas, “The Church and the Popular Organizations,” in *Voice of the Voiceless*, op. cit., 109.

¹⁴See Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Historicity of Christian Salvation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, op. cit., 273.

¹⁵“Medellín,” 109.

¹⁶See The United Nations, “From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador,” *Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, April 1, 1993; Martha Doggett, *Death Foretold: The Jesuit Murders in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1993). Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

repressive violence and abasement: the poor of the land, urban workers, the widows and orphans left behind by assassinations and repression. Concretely, he supported labor unions and farmers cooperatives. He promoted the right of the people to organize to address their basic human needs. He challenged those who denied this right. Finally, in his homilies and pastoral letters, he articulated the crucial link between the commitment to peacemaking and the preferential option for the poor. Romero carefully analyzed the violence besetting El Salvador, distinguishing among six different categories of violence.¹⁷ (1) The primary form of violence is *institutionalized violence*. It appears in the business-as-usual of unjust economic and political systems where “the majority of men, women, and children... find themselves deprived of the necessities of life.”¹⁸ The violence of poverty and political marginalization defines structural injustice and represents the true enemy and antonym of peace. (2) *The repressive violence of the state* flows from institutionalized violence and is indeed its identical twin. Institutional violence deploys repressive state violence to smother the aspirations of the majority and to crush “any signs of protest against the injustices.”(3) As an almost inevitable consequence of repressive violence, *sedition or terrorist violence* erupts. This form seeks to organize itself into guerilla warfare in the mistaken belief that no other effective road to social change exists. (4) Similarly, *spontaneous violence*, although often understandable, “is marked by desperation and improvisation, and so cannot be an effective way of securing rights or bringing just solutions to conflicts.” (5) *Violence*

¹⁷For a more extensive treatment of this theme, see my essay, “Archbishop Oscar Romero: Peacemaker in the Tradition of Catholic Social Teaching,” *Journal for Peace & Justice Studies* (13/2, 2003) 105-124. See also <http://www3.villanova.edu/mission/peace/burke.htm> for an earlier version of this essay.

¹⁸Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this and the following paragraph are taken from the pastoral letter that Archbishop Romero co-authored with his auxiliary, Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas. See Romero and Rivera, “The Church and the Popular Organizations,” in *Voice*

in legitimate self-defense differs from the first four in that it can be viewed as justifiable under certain conditions. This affirmation indicates that Romero is not a strict pacifist. Like the majority of Latin American liberation theologians, he utilizes the “just war” tradition as it is articulated in the social teachings of the Catholic Church to evaluate the repressive atmosphere fanning the flames of revolution in countries like El Salvador. At the same time, he draws on a strict interpretation of that tradition to criticize and “Christianize” the revolution.¹⁹ (6) Romero’s final category in his analysis of violence calls attention to *the power of nonviolence*, what has sometimes been called “the violence of love.” In his second pastoral letter, “The Church, The Body of Christ in History,” Romero speaks eloquently of this “nonviolent violence.”

When there really is present a situation of permanent, structured injustice, then the situation itself is violent... [T]he church is aware that anything said in that situation, even something undoubtedly prompted by love, will sound violent. But the church cannot refrain from speaking out. It can in no way reject what Jesus said: “The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm” (Mt 11.12). For there is the violence of the struggle against one’s own selfishness, against the inertia of one’s own existence – more inclined, as it is, to dominate than to serve. And there is the violence with which one

of the Voiceless, especially pages 106-108.

¹⁹“The church allows violence in legitimate defense, but under the following conditions: (1) that the defense does not exceed the degree of unjust aggression...; (2) that the recourse to proportionate violence takes place only after all peaceful means have been exhausted; and (3) that a violent defense should not bring about a greater evil than that of the aggression – namely, a greater violence, a greater injustice.” Romero and Rivera, “The Church and the Popular Organizations,” in *Voice of the Voiceless*, 108.

denounces what is wrong in a violent situation.²⁰

The witness of Archbishop Romero demonstrates that liberation theology does not seek to justify revolutionary violence. However, it does call attention to institutional violence and repressive state violence and, in line with the Gospel mandate, it actively seeks to overcome these originating forms of social violence. In effect, liberation theology attempts to redirect the Christian imagination and conscience so that believers can more readily recognize and admit the truth about violence in our world. In this, it maintains the traditional rigor and limits of the just war tradition in order to recover its usefulness in moral discernment. In contrast to the way powerful nations use the rhetoric of just war to advance their own ideological interests, liberation theology recovers the radicalness of the just war doctrine by rooting it in the evangelical preference for the poor, understanding by “the poor” those who literally have no other means to defend life.

Conclusion. Archbishop Romero’s martyrdom at the hands of the violent provides us with his most radical and eloquent testimony to the Christian vision of peace. The peace that defends life unto death, does so from faith in the resurrection of the dead. It points to the hope that in God’s reign, every tear will be wiped away (Rv 21.4) and all will enjoy abundant life (Jn 10.10). One of his most famous declarations, uttered spontaneously in an interview with a journalist just weeks before his actual martyrdom, announces this radical hope.

I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. I say so without boasting, with the greatest humility. As a shepherd, I am

²⁰Oscar Romero, “The Church, the Body of Christ in History,” in *Voice of the Voiceless*, 77.

obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love, for all Salvadorans, even for those who may be going to kill me. If the threats are carried out, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and for the resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be a reality. Let my death, if it is accepted by God, be for my people's liberation and as a witness of hope in the future. You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God's church, which is the people, will never die.²¹

Christian peacemaking finds its deepest roots here: the love of God that empowers trust in the promise of life. Likewise, this trust undergirds the most radical expression of authentic Christian peacemaking: a willingness to die for peace rather than an eagerness to kill for it. History teaches that to actively confront injustice usually provokes conflict. History's peacemakers teach that to do so nonviolently requires a love that is both willing and able to suffer the cost of the conflict. In our violent world, Romero's life gave dramatic witness to precisely this vital hope, this paradoxical faith, this suffering love. In so doing, he embodied the concrete aspirations and deepest truth of liberation theology.

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²¹Interview with Archbishop Oscar Romero, reprinted in *Orientación* (April 13, 1980); quoted in James Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) 248.

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A full analysis of these conflicting interpretations exceeds the limits of this essay. However, noting them provides a fruitful context for addressing two questions relevant to the dialogue initiated by *Methodists United for Peace with Justice*. What is liberation theology? What might it offer to Christians interested in pursuing peace with justice? I address these questions with the witness of Archbishop Romero in view.

Vatican II and Medellín

The phrase "liberation theology" came into vogue in the 1970s to describe a religiously-based social movement and a corresponding theological style that emerged in the Catholic Church in Latin America. However, it should be noted that liberation theology is neither a strictly Roman Catholic² nor an exclusively Latin American phenomenon.³ Indeed, liberation *theologies* (emphasis on the plural) have emerged in various parts of the world and within a number of Christian denominations. They manifest striking similarities with one another and with various other contemporary theological approaches, including political, contextual, and feminist theologies.⁴

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The Second Vatican Council met in four sessions between 1962 and 1965. It concluded its deliberations with a remarkable document, "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*). Among other things, that document called the whole church to the tasks "of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel."⁵ In response to that call, national and international conferences of bishops met to examine "the signs of the times" embedded in their own histories in order to decide how best to implement the Council's decrees.

Accordingly, the bishops of Latin America gathered in Medellín, Columbia, for two weeks in 1968. Among the documents produced at this ground-breaking meeting, one of the most important focuses on peace. Citing *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops at Medellín proclaim:

Peace is, above all, a work of justice. It presupposes and requires the establishment of a just order in which persons can fulfill themselves as human beings, where their dignity is respected, their legitimate aspirations satisfied, their access to truth recognized, their personal freedom guaranteed; an order where persons are not objects but agents of their own history.⁶

The imperatives to read the signs of the time and to pursue peace as a work of justice are the founding insights of liberation theology. But just what is liberation theology?

Two Key Terms: Theology and Liberation

In the first place, the phrase "liberation theology" designates a particular approach to the reflective discipline of *theology*. It involves thinking about the contents of Christian faith in the light of Christian revelation. It springs from the fertile soil of scripture, especially the narratives of the liberating God recorded in Exodus, the passionate prophetic tradition of Israel, and above all the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his proclamation of the reign of God. However, the phrase "liberation theology" is also used to designate a broad *social movement* characterized by the emergence of base ecclesial communities (grass-roots churches) and the preferential option for the poor.⁷ This movement sought to bring the Gospel to bear on social realities and to read the Gospel in the light of those same realities.

It is worth noting that many religious, political and cultural leaders associated with the liberation theology movement (people like Archbishop Romero) are not professional academic theologians. But while liberation theology values the importance of critical scholarship, it does not limit the category of "theologian" to university professors and scholar-monks. All Christians who reflect on and respond to the call to live a liberating, evangelical faith are in some sense "theologians".

As a way of doing theology, the qualifier "liberation" distinguishes this method from other theological approaches in two essential ways. First, as an intellectual discipline, liberation theology takes the active faith of Christians as its point of departure. Ignacio Ellacuría makes this

point in a complex passage that offers an excellent working definition of liberation theology.

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The key point is that liberation theology not only *reflects* on the meaning of Christian faith but facilitates *action* in response to the demands of faith. As such it participates in the mystery to which the Christian faith points: God's liberating actions on behalf of suffering human beings. From this theological perspective, Christian faith *is* a faith that *does* justice. Thus, liberation theologians often describe their approach as "reflection on praxis", that is, theological reflection on the specific practices or actions that spring from and embody the living faith.

Second, besides qualifying liberation theology's method, the term "liberation" draws specific attention to the central Christian motif of *salvation*. It reminds us that God desires to deliver his people from slavery and suffering (see Ex 3.7). It underscores Jesus' self-understanding as one anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim liberty to captives (Lk 4.18). Its manner of preaching insists that salvation cannot be regarded simply as one theme among others in the bible. Rather, salvation is the central unifying symbol used by the biblical authors to speak about who God is and what God is doing in history on behalf of his people.

Liberation theology is critical of all domesticated forms of Christianity that render the vivid biblical understandings of salvation abstract or remove them from the heart of Christian life. In its criticism of other theological interpretations of faith, *a theology of liberation* thus simultaneously promotes *the liberation of theology*, a point captured by the titles of two of its classic texts.⁹ Finally, because Christian faith encounters God first and foremost in history and as the God of history, liberation theology emphasizes that God's salvation is a salvation *in and of* history, not a rescue *from* history.

Liberation Theology and the Option for the Poor

Liberation theology is reflection *on* the meaning of faith *from* the practice of faith in the God of Jesus Christ, the God whose salvation is revealed *in* history as nothing less than the concrete and ultimate salvation *of* history. For this reason, liberation theology emerged in the context of what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls the *irruption of the poor*, the awakening of vast numbers of people to the awareness that their condition of poverty and misery is not the product of "nature", much less God's will.¹⁰

The scandal of oppressive poverty is the product of human choices and human sinfulness. Liberation theology recovers the evangelical insight that God wills the liberation of all people from situations that dehumanize them. God desires to bring about a new heaven and a new earth founded on peace, social harmony, and justice in place of the violence, selfishness and oppression that currently reign in our world.

Liberation theology makes a *preferential option for the poor* in line with the scandalous evangelical preference for the poor found in the New Testament: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." (Lk 6.20,24).

This option affects both the interpretation and practice of Christian faith. Its interpretive logic facilitates proclamation of the true Gospel. If we wish to hear the Gospel as Jesus wanted it to be heard, we must listen from the place where he proclaimed it and in solidarity with those to whom he gave it first as their "good news". Its practical impulse shapes Christian ethics around a fundamental solidarity with the hungry and the despised. It actively seeks to be neighbor to all those who have fallen into the hands of robbers (Lk 10.30-37), that is, the more than two billion people in our world who live close to death. In the words of Jon Sobrino, liberation theology seeks to recover the Christian community's identity as a *Samaritan church*: a church "de-centered by mercy", a church that begins "to *think itself* from without, from *along the road*, where the wounded neighbor lies." ¹¹

Pursuing Peace with Justice

In February of 1980, just weeks before he fell to an assassin's bullet, Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote an open letter to the president of the United States, Jimmy Carter. He wrote as a pastor to a fellow Christian committed to defending human rights. In it, he said:

I am very concerned by the news that the government of the United States is planning to further El Salvador's arms race by sending military equipment and advisers to "train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence." If this information from the newspapers is correct, instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, your government's contribution will undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights.¹²

Archbishop Romero's letter to President Carter did not emerge in a vacuum. Nor does it presume that peace is the mere absence of war. Rather, 'the peace in which we believe is the fruit of justice.'¹³ Peacemaking constitutively involves the conversion of structures of injustice and repression. It cooperates with God's grace to transform situations marred by a fundamental and blatant disregard for basic human rights. In these presuppositions Romero aligns himself with the interpretation of the faith put forth by liberation theologians and Catholic social teaching. The Christian faith acts to promote justice and to overcome injustice. It involves itself in the world so as not to abandon the world to the enemies of God.¹⁴ It seeks peace with justice, recognizing that

"peace is not found, it is built," and insisting that the "Christian is the artisan of peace." ¹⁵

Unfortunately, Jimmy Carter failed to heed the archbishop's plea, and his successors positively ignored it. The United States poured over 5 billion dollars of military aid into El Salvador during the decade following Romero's assassination, a decade in which over 75,000 Salvadorans were killed. Most of the victims were killed by the Salvadoran Army trained and funded by the U.S. Most of the victims were civilians, and many of these were tortured, mutilated, and massacred. ¹⁶

Archbishop Romero's Approach to Peace

During the three years he served as Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero increasingly identified peacemaking as a constitutive aspect of his ministry. Precisely as a peacemaker, he vigorously defended those most exposed to repressive violence and abasement: the poor of the land, urban workers, the widows and orphans left behind by assassinations and repression. Concretely, he supported labor unions and farmers cooperatives. He promoted the right of the people to organize to address their basic human needs. He challenged those who denied this right. Finally, in his homilies and pastoral letters, he articulated the crucial link between the commitment to peacemaking and the preferential option for the poor. Romero carefully analyzed the violence besetting El Salvador, distinguishing among six different categories of violence. ¹⁷

(1) The primary form of violence is *institutionalized violence*. It appears in the business-as-usual of unjust economic and political systems where "the majority of men, women, and children... find themselves deprived of the necessities of life." ¹⁸ The violence of poverty and political marginalization defines structural injustice and represents the true enemy and antonym of peace.

(2) *The repressive violence of the state* flows from institutionalized violence and is indeed its identical twin. Institutional violence deploys repressive state violence to smother the aspirations of the majority and to crush "any signs of protest against the injustices."

(3) As an almost inevitable consequence of repressive violence, *sedition or terrorist violence* erupts. This form seeks to organize itself into guerilla warfare in the mistaken belief that no other effective road to social change exists.

(4) Similarly, *spontaneous violence*, although often understandable, "is marked by desperation and improvisation, and so cannot be an effective way of securing rights or bringing just solutions to conflicts."

(5) *Violence in legitimate self-defense* differs from the first four in that it can be viewed as justifiable under certain conditions. This affirmation indicates that Romero is not a strict pacifist. Like the majority of Latin American liberation theologians, he utilizes the "just war" tradition as it is articulated in the social teachings of the Catholic Church to evaluate the repressive atmosphere fanning the flames of revolution in countries like El Salvador. At the same time, he draws on a strict interpretation of that tradition to criticize and "Christianize" the revolution. ¹⁹

(6) Romero's final category in his analysis of violence calls attention to *the power of nonviolence*, what has sometimes been called "the violence of love."

In his second pastoral letter, "The Church, The Body of Christ in History", Romero speaks eloquently of this "nonviolent violence".

When there really is present a situation of permanent, structured injustice, then the situation itself is violent... [T]he church is aware that anything said in that situation, even something undoubtedly prompted by love, will sound violent. But the church cannot refrain from speaking out. It can in no way reject what Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm" (Mt 11.12). For there is the violence of the struggle against one's own selfishness, against the inertia of one's own existence -- more inclined, as it is, to dominate than to serve. And there is the violence with which one denounces what is wrong in a violent situation.²⁰

The witness of Archbishop Romero demonstrates that liberation theology does not seek to justify revolutionary violence. However, it does call attention to institutional violence and repressive state violence and, in line with the Gospel mandate, it actively seeks to overcome these originating forms of social violence. In effect, liberation theology attempts to redirect the Christian imagination and conscience so that believers can more readily recognize and admit the truth about violence in our world. In this, it maintains the traditional rigor and limits of the just war tradition in order to recover its usefulness in moral discernment. In contrast to the way powerful nations use the rhetoric of just war to advance their own ideological interests, liberation theology recovers the radicalness of the just war doctrine by rooting it in the evangelical preference for the poor, understanding by "the poor" those who literally have no other means to defend life.

Conclusion

Archbishop Romero's martyrdom at the hands of the violent provides us with his most radical and eloquent testimony to the Christian vision of peace. The peace that defends life unto death, does so from faith in the resurrection of the dead. It points to the hope that in God's reign, every tear will be wiped away (Rv 21.4) and all will enjoy abundant life (Jn 10.10). One of his most famous declarations, uttered spontaneously in an interview with a journalist just weeks before his actual martyrdom, announces this radical hope.

I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people. I say so without boasting, with the greatest humility. As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love, for all Salvadorans, even for those who may be going to kill me. If the threats are carried out, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and for the resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be a reality. Let my death, if it is accepted by God, be for my people's liberation and as a witness of hope in the future. You may say, if they

succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God's church, which is the people, will never die.²¹

Christian peacemaking finds its deepest roots here: the love of God that empowers trust in the promise of life. Likewise, this trust undergirds the most radical expression of authentic Christian peacemaking: a willingness to die for peace rather than an eagerness to kill for it. History teaches that to actively confront injustice usually provokes conflict. History's peacemakers teach that to do so nonviolently requires a love that is both willing and able to suffer the cost of the conflict. In our violent world, Romero's life gave dramatic witness to precisely this vital hope, this paradoxical faith, this suffering love. In so doing, he embodied the concrete aspirations and deepest truth of liberation theology.

¹Monseñor Oscar A. Romero, "La Paz," homily of July 3, 1977, in *Su pensamiento: Colección Homilias y Diario de Mons. Oscar Arnulfo Romero*, vol. I-II (San Salvador: Imprenta Criterio, 2000) 116.

²A number of mainline Protestant churches have developed their own versions of liberation theology in and beyond Latin America. In addition, there are now Jewish and Muslim theologies of liberation. Among the earliest and most prominent Latin American liberation theologians is the Argentinean Methodist minister, José Miguel Bonino. Another United Methodist theologian, minister, and college president, Rebecca Chopp, is among the most important U.S. commentators on the achievement and legitimacy of liberation theology.

³Liberation theologies have sprouted in many parts of Africa, as well as in Korea, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, to say nothing of Europe and the United States.

⁴See Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1986); *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

⁵Second Vatican Council, "Gaudium et Spes," No. 4, in W. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966) 201-202.

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⁸Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation," in I. Ellacuría & J. Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994) 543, emphasis added.

⁹See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971); Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975).

¹⁰Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983).

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¹⁴See Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation", in *Mysterium Liberationis*, op. cit., 273.

¹⁵"Medellín", 109.

¹⁶See The United Nations, "From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador", *Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, April 1, 1993; Martha Doggett, *Death Foretold: The Jesuit Murders in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1993). Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

¹⁷For a more extensive treatment of this theme, see my essay, "Archbishop Oscar Romero: Peacemaker in the Tradition of Catholic Social Teaching," *Journal for Peace & Justice Studies* (13/2, 2003) 105-124. See also <http://www3.villanova.edu/mission/peace/burke.htm> for an earlier version of this essay.

¹⁸Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this and the following paragraph are taken from the pastoral letter that Archbishop Romero co-authored with his auxiliary, Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas. See Romero and Rivera, "The Church and the Popular Organizations," in *Voice of the Voiceless*, especially pages 106-108.

¹⁹"The church allows violence in legitimate defense, but under the following conditions: (1) that the defense does not exceed the degree of unjust aggression...; (2) that the recourse to proportionate violence takes place only after all peaceful means have been exhausted; and (3) that a violent defense should not bring about a greater evil than that of the aggression: namely, a greater violence, a greater injustice." Romero and Rivera, "The Church and the Popular Organizations," in *Voice of the Voiceless*, 108.

²⁰Oscar Romero, "The Church, the Body of Christ in History," in *Voice of the Voiceless*, 77.

²¹Interview with Archbishop Oscar Romero, reprinted in *Orientación* (April 13, 1980); quoted in James Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) 248.

This article is part of a project on "The Theology of War and Peace". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofwarandpeace.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at mupwj@mupwj.org

Liberation Theology and the Gospel of Peace

Kevin F. Burke, S.J.

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When there is justice, there is peace. If there is no justice, there is no peace. Peace is the product of the order desired by God, but which human beings have to succeed in attaining as a great good within society.

*Archbishop Oscar Romero*¹

On the evening of March 24, 1980, in the tiny Central American country of El Salvador, a hired gunman stole into the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital during the celebration of the Eucharist and fired a fatal bullet into the heart of the Catholic archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. In the eyes of many, Romero was a prophet whose ringing denunciations of injustice and vigorous defense of the poor placed him at odds with the right-wing ruling elites and led him to a martyr's death. Others, however, saw him as a well-intentioned but misguided dupe who fell under the spell of leftists fighting to overthrow the Salvadoran government.

Woven through these various interpretations of Romero's legacy one finds frequent references to a movement called "liberation theology". It, too, has garnered a wide range of assessments. Its enemies claim that it endorses violent revolution under the guise of redressing social injustices. As such, they conclude, it represents a (communist) wolf in (religious) sheep's clothing. By contrast, advocates insist that it embodies the values of Jesus; its ethical and apocalyptic sense of urgency reflects, they argue, the earliest spirit of Christianity.

A full analysis of these conflicting interpretations exceeds the limits of this essay. However, noting them provides a fruitful context for addressing two questions relevant to the dialogue initiated by *Methodists United for Peace with Justice*. What is liberation theology? What might it offer to Christians interested in pursuing peace with justice? I address these questions with the witness of Archbishop Romero in view.

Vatican II and Medellín

The phrase "liberation theology" came into vogue in the 1970s to describe a religiously-based social movement and a corresponding theological style that emerged in the Catholic Church in Latin America. However, it should be noted that liberation theology is neither a strictly Roman Catholic² nor an exclusively Latin American phenomenon.³ Indeed, liberation *theologies* (emphasis on the plural) have emerged in various parts of the world and within a number of Christian denominations. They manifest striking similarities with one another and with various other contemporary theological approaches, including political, contextual, and feminist theologies.⁴

In the middle of the 20th century there occurred two seminal ecclesial synods that set the stage for the development of liberation theology in Catholic circles: Vatican II and Medellín.

The Second Vatican Council met in four sessions between 1962 and 1965. It concluded its deliberations with a remarkable document, "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*). Among other things, that document called the whole church to the tasks "of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel."⁵ In response to that call, national and international conferences of bishops met to examine "the signs of the times" embedded in their own histories in order to decide how best to implement the Council's decrees.

Accordingly, the bishops of Latin America gathered in Medellín, Columbia, for two weeks in 1968. Among the documents produced at this ground-breaking meeting, one of the most important focuses on peace. Citing *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops at Medellín proclaim:

Peace is, above all, a work of justice. It presupposes and requires the establishment of a just order in which persons can fulfill themselves as human beings, where their dignity is respected, their legitimate aspirations satisfied, their access to truth recognized, their personal freedom guaranteed; an order where persons are not objects but agents of their own history.⁶

The imperatives to read the signs of the time and to pursue peace as a work of justice are the founding insights of liberation theology. But just what is liberation theology?

Two Key Terms: Theology and Liberation

In the first place, the phrase "liberation theology" designates a particular approach to the reflective discipline of *theology*. It involves thinking about the contents of Christian faith in the light of Christian revelation. It springs from the fertile soil of scripture, especially the narratives of the liberating God recorded in Exodus, the passionate prophetic tradition of Israel, and above all the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his proclamation of the reign of God. However, the phrase "liberation theology" is also used to designate a broad *social movement* characterized by the emergence of base ecclesial communities (grass-roots churches) and the preferential option for the poor.⁷ This movement sought to bring the Gospel to bear on social realities and to read the Gospel in the light of those same realities.

It is worth noting that many religious, political and cultural leaders associated with the liberation theology movement (people like Archbishop Romero) are not professional academic theologians. But while liberation theology values the importance of critical scholarship, it does not limit the category of "theologian" to university professors and scholar-monks. All Christians who reflect on and respond to the call to live a liberating, evangelical faith are in some sense "theologians".

As a way of doing theology, the qualifier "liberation" distinguishes this method from other theological approaches in two essential ways. First, as an intellectual discipline, liberation theology takes the active faith of Christians as its point of departure. Ignacio Ellacuría makes this point in a complex passage that offers an excellent working definition of liberation theology.

The theology of liberation understands itself as a *reflection from faith on the historical reality and action of the people of God, who follow the work of Jesus in announcing and fulfilling God's Reign*. It understands itself as an action by the people of God in following the work of Jesus and, as Jesus did, it tries to establish a living connection between the world of God and the human world.... It is, thus, a theology that begins with historical acts and seeks to lead to historical acts, and therefore it is not satisfied with being a purely interpretive reflection; it is nourished by faithful belief in the presence of God within history, an operative presence that, although it must be grasped in grateful faith, remains a historical action.⁸

The key point is that liberation theology not only *reflects* on the meaning of Christian faith but facilitates *action* in response to the demands of faith. As such it participates in the mystery to which the Christian faith points: God's liberating actions on behalf of suffering human beings. From this theological perspective, Christian faith *is* a faith that *does* justice. Thus, liberation theologians often describe their approach as "reflection on praxis", that is, theological reflection on the specific practices or actions that spring from and embody the living faith.

Second, besides qualifying liberation theology's method, the term "liberation" draws specific attention to the central Christian motif of *salvation*. It reminds us that God desires to deliver his people from slavery and suffering (see Ex 3.7). It underscores Jesus' self-understanding as one anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim liberty to captives (Lk 4.18). Its manner of preaching insists that salvation cannot be regarded simply as one theme among others in the bible. Rather, salvation is the central unifying symbol used by the biblical authors to speak about who God is and what God is doing in history on behalf of his people.

Liberation theology is critical of all domesticated forms of Christianity that render the vivid biblical understandings of salvation abstract or remove them from the heart of Christian life. In its criticism of other theological interpretations of faith, *a theology of liberation* thus simultaneously promotes *the liberation of theology*, a point captured by the titles of two of its classic texts.⁹ Finally, because Christian faith encounters God first and foremost in history and as the God of history, liberation theology emphasizes that God's salvation is a salvation *in and of* history, not a rescue *from* history.

Liberation Theology and the Option for the Poor

Liberation theology is reflection *on* the meaning of faith *from* the practice of faith in the God of Jesus Christ, the God whose salvation is revealed *in* history as nothing less than the concrete and ultimate salvation *of* history. For this reason, liberation theology emerged in the context of what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls the *irruption of the poor*, the awakening of vast numbers of people to the awareness that their condition of poverty and misery is not the product of "nature", much less God's will.¹⁰

The scandal of oppressive poverty is the product of human choices and human sinfulness. Liberation theology recovers the evangelical insight that God wills the liberation of all people from situations that dehumanize them. God desires to bring about a new heaven and a new earth founded on peace, social harmony, and justice in place of the violence, selfishness and oppression that currently reign in our world.

Liberation theology makes a *preferential option for the poor* in line with the scandalous evangelical preference for the poor found in the New Testament: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." (Lk 6.20,24).

This option affects both the interpretation and practice of Christian faith. Its interpretive logic facilitates proclamation of the true Gospel. If we wish to hear the Gospel as Jesus wanted it to be heard, we must listen from the place where he proclaimed it and in solidarity with those to whom he gave it first as their "good news". Its practical impulse shapes Christian ethics around a fundamental solidarity with the hungry and the despised. It actively seeks to be neighbor to all those who have fallen into the hands of robbers (Lk 10.30-37), that is, the more than two billion people in our world who live close to death. In the words of Jon Sobrino, liberation theology seeks to recover the Christian community's identity as a *Samaritan church*: a church "de-centered by mercy", a church that begins "to *think itself* from without, from *along the road*, where the wounded neighbor lies." ¹¹

Pursuing Peace with Justice

In February of 1980, just weeks before he fell to an assassin's bullet, Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote an open letter to the president of the United States, Jimmy Carter. He wrote as a pastor to a fellow Christian committed to defending human rights. In it, he said:

I am very concerned by the news that the government of the United States is planning to further El Salvador's arms race by sending military equipment and advisers to "train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence." If this information from the newspapers is correct, instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, your government's contribution will undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights. ¹²

Archbishop Romero's letter to President Carter did not emerge in a vacuum. Nor does it presume that peace is the mere absence of war. Rather, 'the peace in which we believe is the fruit of justice.' ¹³ Peacemaking constitutively involves the conversion of structures of injustice and repression. It cooperates with God's grace to transform situations marred by a fundamental and blatant disregard for basic human rights. In these presuppositions Romero aligns himself with the interpretation of the faith put forth by liberation theologians and Catholic social teaching. The Christian faith acts to promote justice and to overcome injustice. It involves itself in the world so

as not to abandon the world to the enemies of God.¹⁴ It seeks peace with justice, recognizing that "peace is not found, it is built," and insisting that the "Christian is the artisan of peace."¹⁵

Unfortunately, Jimmy Carter failed to heed the archbishop's plea, and his successors positively ignored it. The United States poured over 5 billion dollars of military aid into El Salvador during the decade following Romero's assassination, a decade in which over 75,000 Salvadorans were killed. Most of the victims were killed by the Salvadoran Army trained and funded by the U.S. Most of the victims were civilians, and many of these were tortured, mutilated, and massacred.¹⁶

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Conclusion

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¹⁹"The church allows violence in legitimate defense, but under the following conditions: (1) that the defense does not exceed the degree of unjust aggression...; (2) that the recourse to proportionate violence takes place only after all peaceful means have been exhausted; and (3) that a violent defense should not bring about a greater evil than that of the aggression: namely, a greater violence, a greater injustice." Romero and Rivera, "The Church and the Popular Organizations," in *Voice of the Voiceless*, 108.

²⁰Oscar Romero, "The Church, the Body of Christ in History," in *Voice of the Voiceless*, 77.

²¹Interview with Archbishop Oscar Romero, reprinted in *Orientación* (April 13, 1980); quoted in James Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) 248.

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History of the Role Played by the United Methodist Church in the Reconciliation of Conflicts in the Kitenge District, Congo

**by Rev. Mujinga Muamba Kora,
Superintendent of Kitenge District**

History

Everything began in 1998 in Kitenge, Congo, headquarters of the ecclesiastic district of Kitenge, where I was assigned as pastor in order to form a second parish. Although this village had had only one parish for more than 20 years, at the suggestion of the District Superintendent, Rev. Kabonga Ilunga, it was proposed that, with my assignment there, we start a second parish, to be named "Mount Carmel."

A month after my arrival, Kabalo fell into the hands of the rebels during the Rwanda/Congo war of aggression. With the dispersal of everyone in Kitenge, I was left alone. Everyone had fled, not knowing what else to do. Being a pastor, I couldn't stand around doing nothing. I got myself assigned as Chaplain for the almost 16,000 soldiers who were regrouped in Kitenge. My work as a chaplain lasted from November 1998 to January 1999.

In January the people gradually began to come back, and we restarted activities with 30 members. During that 3-month period, I had the opportunity to learn the military life. The soldiers, too, in their camp, had need of divine help -- and a good number of them were converted.

Kitenge is a village of at least 24,000 people. Since there were so many, food became more and more scarce and expensive. Many were hungry. we couldn't stand around. Everyone anxiously searched for something to eat. I myself was not spared this misery. One day I decided, like many others, to go look for food more than 45 km. away. We arrived in Ngende at 5 p.m. Since troubles never come singly, that same night, September 22, 1999, we were encircled by the Congolese-Rwandan rebels, who took everything from us (money, clothes, bikes), but I got out of it alive. I came back on foot.

Having gotten out of that, we encountered still more difficulties, this time inflicted by our Simba-May May brothers. We were obliged to flee three times in three years to take refuge from the fighting. There was general insecurity in the whole ecclesiastical district of Kitenge.

Of the nine circuits that made up our district, only three were prepared to work; not the others. The churches were closed because the whole population was scattered either in the forest or in the villages on the other bank of the Lomani River. To visit the faithful, we were exposed to much danger; we wasted money to clear our way, negotiating with both sides (the May May and the government soldiers).

This ministry, in which our lives were always in peril, lasted almost three years. But in everything the hand of God was with us, and there were no major incidents for any of the teams which went out on evangelization tours. Since there were two camps, the center of Kitenge was protected by the government soldiers, and all the interior was inhabited by the May May, led by General Tsinga Tsinga. So the people were between the hammer and the forge, and they didn't

know on which foot to dance. If you supported the military, you were the enemy of the May May. If you supported the May May, you were the enemy of the military.

Even knowing that the church is apolitical and neutral, we couldn't do nothing and let the evil continue. We were obliged to get into it in spite of the possible cost to us. We sought a way to bring the two enemy brothers together around a single negotiation table. Although it was difficult, with God everything was possible. After two years of waiting, God answered our prayers. Because this was not only the concern of the churches, it had become the preoccupation of everyone. Together with the politico-administrative authorities, the military and the Congolese National Police (PNC), we tried to meet together to discuss the ways and means to put an end to police harassment, killings and general insecurity that was at its height.

The Administrator in the person of Mr. Pierre Damier Ndombe, the Commander of the 941st Battalion who was at Kitenge and the Commander of the Congolese National Police all came to my house to ask me if our church could be the locale of the negotiations since we were deeply involved. We did not hesitate to respond to them positively about this meeting. And I was chosen as preacher for this meeting we had waited for so long. The work was well done, all the parties agreed to bury the hatchet. Where the politicians failed, God alone is ready to provide the solution.

To understand these events, here are the reports of the work we accomplished:

Monday, March 24, 2003

Discussion with all the parties implicated in the re-establishment of the peace: the Assistant Administrator of the Territory of Kitenge, the Battalion Commander of the Congolese Armed Forces at Kitenge (Cmd Bn FAC), the Commanders of Battalions 2, 3 and 5 of FAC, Commander of the PNC, FAP, President of the CPP and his committee, the Chef Sous Poste ANR, the Representative of the Chief of the Nyembo Group, the Representative of the Catholic Church, the Representative of the Teachers' Union of Kitenge and the wise men and the Counselors of the Simba May May fighters came to the meeting organized in the locale of the United Methodist Parish of Kitenge. A group of May May fighters came, too, to help us prepare the welcome for their General Chinja Chinja. Unfortunately the General didn't come this Monday. However, we noticed that the May May fighters were more numerous than the FAC soldiers at the reconciliation place as well as in the city of Katenge.

Tuesday, March 25

About 7:05 a.m., Mr. Jackson Kabamba, the Administrator of Kabongo, came to join the meeting. It was only at 2:15 p.m. that General Chanja Chanja arrived at the meeting place. Thirty minutes later, some May May fighters (estimated at 6,000) came to join the reconciliation team. They invaded the court of the parish with the FAC soldiers. So we were all pressed to begin the ceremony of reconciliation which began at 2:15 p.m.

Mr. Pierre Ndombe, the Assistant Administrator, spoke first to introduce the meeting. He began by rendering glory to God for having permitted the holding of the meeting. He praised the meeting between brothers and so asked the Superintendent of the United Methodist Church, Rev,

Mujinga Mwamba Kora, to pray for the meeting and to preach the word of God before the discussion began.

Our intervention was based on the following points:

- The prayer
- The message: Luke 15:17-24
Theme: "We were all lost and we need to repent."

After my sermon, Mr. Ndombe took up the theme of this reunion by insisting on the fact that we are all lost as we said in our message. He proceeded to the presentation of the participants, beginning with Brigadier General Chinja Chinja and his suite, the Commander of the FAC Battalion and his suite, the FAP and the PNC and other members. He retraced the history of the war of aggression and the creation of the Forces of Popular Self-defense (FAP) and the movements of the May May. He also evoked the troubles between FAC and the May May and the resulting destabilization of villages and especially the loss of human lives, villages burned and massive displacement of the population.

Today, he said, we do not want to set up a court to find out who is right and who is wrong. But together let us seek the true causes which each time cause troubles so that we can talk together and find solid bases for the survival of our agglomeration which has suffered so much.

The declarations of Brigadier General Chinja Chinja: Me, I am a civilian. What sometimes shocked us was FAC's harassment and the lack of understanding on each side, the false reports about the population by both sides. Today is the first and the last meeting for me. I can't fight the FAC anymore because FAC is our father who beats us all. We owe it respect. In my village, there is no court. I ask everyone to go and pose their problems to the PNC instead. We recognize the State and all its force.

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Long live the United Methodist Church which sheltered the belligerents and which played a catalyst's role through its servant, Rev. Mujinga Mwamba Kora.

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**Par Rev. Mujinga Mwamba Kora,
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I. HISTORIQUE.

Tout à commencer en 1998 à Kitenge, Congo chef lieu du district ecclésiastique de Kitenge, là où j'étais affecté comme pasteur afin de commencer la deuxième paroisse, alors qu'il y a eu plus de 20 ans ce village n'avait qu'une seule paroisse, avec mon affectation et sous l'initiative du Surintendant de District le Rév. KABONGO ILUNGA, il a été proposé que nous commençâmes la deuxième paroisse nommée « Mont Carmel ».

Un mois après mon arrivé, Kabalo tomba dans les mains de rebelles pendant la guerre d'agression « Rwanda/ RDC ». Dispersion à Kitenge, je suis resté seul. Tout le monde s'était enfui ne sachant que faire. Etant pasteur, je ne pouvais pas croiser les bras, je me suis fait Aumônier de militaires presque 16000 militaires qui étaient regroupés à Kitenge. Mon travail d'aumonie a commencé de novembre 1998 à Janvier 1999.

En janvier la population commençait à rentrer progressivement et nous avons commencé les activités avec 30 membres.

Dans ce trois mois, j'ai eu l'ocassion de connaître la vie d'un militaire, eux aussi dans leur camp avaient besoin du secours divin et bon nombre d'entre eux se sont convertis.

Kitenge est un village d'au moins 24000 âmes, comme il y avait une surpopulation, la nourriture devenait de plus en plus rare et cher, la faim battait son plein, il ne fallait pas croiser les bras chacun se tracassait de tous coté pour trouver quoi mettre sous la dent. Moi non plus n'étais pas épargné à cette situation de misère.

Un jour je suis décidé comme tous les autres, d'aller chercher à manger à plus de 45 Kms. Arrivé à Ngende à 17 hoo', comme le malheur ne vient jamais seul, la même nuit du 22 septembre 1999, nous étions encerclé par les rebelles Congolo-rwandais, ces derniers nous ont tout pris, (argent , habits, vélos ...) mais j'en suis resté la vie sauve. J'ai fait le pied dans mon chemin de retour.

Sorti de là, nous avons encore rencontré quelques difficultés nous infligées par nos frères ' SIMBA - MAY MAY'. Nous étions obligé de fuir trois fois dans trois ans, nous nous refugions contre les inciviques. L'insécurité était généralisée dans tout le district ecclésiastique de Kitenge.

Dans 9 circuits que composaient notre district, trois seulement étaient disposés à travailler, les autres non. Les églises étaient fermées car toute la population était éparpillée soit dans la forêt soit dans les villages de l'autre rive de la rivière lomami. Pour visiter ces fidèles, nous étions exposé à toput danger, nous gaspillions l'argent pour se frayer le chemin et surtout savoir négocier de tous les deux cotés (May May et Soldats gouvernementaux) Ce ministère a duré presque 3 ans au péril de notre vie mais dans tout cela la main de Dieu nous accompagnait et il n'y avait pas des incidents majeurs pour toutes les équipes qui partaient en evangélisation. Comme il y avait deuxcamps, le centre de Kitenge était abrité par les soldats du gouvernement et tous l'intérieur étaient habité par les May-May sous la responsabilité du Général TSHINJA TSHINJA ; Dans tout ceci, la population était entre le marteau et l'enclume et l'on ne savait pas sur quel pied danser.

Etre dans le camp de militaires, c'est être ennemi de May-May et être dans le camp de May-May c'est être ennemi de militaires.

Sachant que l'Eglise est apolitique et neutre, nous ne pouvions pas croiser les bras et laisser le mal continuer. Nous étions obligés de s'y impliquer malgré le coût que nous allions payer. Nous cherchions comment rassembler les deux frères ennemis pour les mettre autour d'une même table de négociation, quoique s'était difficile, auprès de Dieu, tout était possible, après deux d'attente, pour cela, Dieu avait exhaussé notre prière car ce n'était pas le seul souci des églises, cela était devenu la préoccupation de tout un chacun. Ensemble avec les autorités politico-administratives, les militaires et la Police Nationale Congolaise (PNC) , nous cherchions partout nous retrouver pour discuter et chercher les voies et moyens pour mettre fin aux tracasseries policières, à des tueries et l'insécurité qui battait son plein.

L'Administrateur en la personne de Mr Pierre DAMIER NDOMBE, le Commandant Bataillon de 941° bataillon qui était à Kitenge, le Commandant de la Police Nationale Congolaise sont venus chez moi à la maison me demander si notre Eglise pouvait être la cible de notre négociation comme c'était notre préoccupation. Nous n'avions pas hésiter à leur répondre positivement pour cette rencontre. Et j'ai été choisi comme prédicateur dans cette réunion tant longtemps attendu. Le travail était bien fait et présenté , toutes les parties se sont mises d'accord pour enterrer la hache de guerre.

Là où les politiciens échouaient, Dieu seul est prêt à donner la solution, pour vivre ces événements, voici le rapport du travail que nous avons accompli :

LUNDI 24 MARS 03

Entretien avec toutes les parties impliquées au rétablissement de la paix : Mr l'Administrateur de Territoire Assistant de Kitenge, le Commandant Bataillon de Forces Armées Congolaises à Kitenge (Cmd Bn FAC), Cmd Bn2, Cmd Bn3 et Cmd Bn5 FAC, Cmd PNC, Cmd FAP, Président CPP et son Comité, le Chef Sous Poste ANR, le Représentant du Chef de Groupement Nyembo, le Représentant de l'Eglise catholique, le Représentant de l'Union des Enseignants de Kitenge et les sages et Conseillers de combattants Simba May-May sont venus à la rencontre organisée dans l'enceinte de la paroisse Méthodiste Unie de Kitenge. Un groupe de combattants May May est venu aussi se joindre à nous pour préparer les conditions d'accueil de leur Général CHINJA CHINJA ; Malheureusement ce dernier n'est pas venu ce lundi ; Ce pendant nous avons remarqué que les combattants May-May étaient plus nombreux que les soldats FAC sur le lieu de réconciliation ainsi que dans la cité de Kitenge.

MARDI 25 MARS 03

Vers 7h05, Mr Jackson KABAMBA l'Administrateur de Kabongo est venu se joindre à la rencontre. C'est seulement vers 14h15 que le Général CHINJA CHINJA est arrivé sur le lieu de la rencontre. Trente minutes après, quelques combattants May-May estimés à 6000 sont venus rejoindre l'équipe de réconciliation. Ceux-ci ont envahi la cour de la paroisse avec les soldats FAC. Nous étions alors tous présents pour débiter la cérémonie de réconciliation qui avait débuté à 14h15.

Mr Pierre Damien NDOMBE l'ATA de la place, a pris la parole le premier pour donner l'introduction à la rencontre.

Il a commencé par rendre gloire à Dieu pour avoir permis la tenue de réunion. Il s'est rejouit de cette rencontre entre frères. Il a ainsi demandé au Surintendant de l'Eglise Méthodiste Unie, le Rév. MUJINGA MWAMBA KORA de prier pour la circonstance et prêcher la parole de Dieu avant de commencer le dialogue.

Notre intervention était taxée sur les points suivants :

- La prière
- Le message : Luc 15 : 17 – 24
- Thème « Nous étions tous perdus et nous avons besoin de la repentance »

Après mon sermon, Mr l'ATA a repris le thème de cette réunion en insistant sur le fait que nous sommes tous les perdus comme est le sujet d notre prédication. Il a procédé à la présentation des participants en commençant par le général de Brigade Chinja Chinja et sa suite, le Cmd Bn FAC et sa suite, la FAP et la PNC ainsi que les membres.

A l'intervention de l'AT : il a retracé l'historique de la guerre d'agression et la création des Forces d'Autodéfenses Populaires FAP et il est arrivé des mouvements de May-May. Il a aussi évoqué, les troubles entre FAC et May-May et la déstabilisation de villages et surtout la perte en vie humaine, le villages incendiés et le déplacement massif de la population.

Aujourd'hui nous ne voulons pas faire le tribunal dit-il pour chercher qui a raison et qui n'en a pas, non ! Mais ensemble chercons les vraies causes qui fassent chaque fois causer des troubles enfin que nous parlions et trouver de bases solides pour la survie de notre agglomération qui a tant souffert.

B. Les déclarations du général de Brigade Chinja Chinja : Moi, je suis un civil, ce qui nous est parfois choqué, c'est la tracasserie de Fac et la mauvaise compréhension de part et d'autres, les faux rapports de la population de tous les deux cotés. Aujourd'hui ce jour, c'est la première et la dernière réunion pour moi. Je ne peux plus encore combattre les Fac, car FAC est notre père qui nous chapeaute tous. Nous lui devons du respect chez moi, il n'ya pas de tribunal, je demande à tout le monde d'aller déposer leurs problèms au tribunal secondaire, à la PNC. Nous reconnaissons l'état et toute sa force.

Après ce meeting, Dieu s'est vraiment manifesté, l'attitude des Simbas s'est vite chanchée. Ils se sont conformés aux paroles de leur chefs. La tracasserie était terminée. Nous attendons bientôt à avoir nîatre la paix.

Que vive l'Eglise Méthodiste Unie qui a hébergé les belligérants et qui avait joué un rôle de catalyseur à travers son serviteur Rév. Mujinga Mwamba Kora.

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de Kitenge était abrité par les soldats du gouvernement et tous l'intérieur étaient habités par les May-May sous la responsabilité du Général TSHINJA TSHINJA ; Dans tout ceci, la population était entre le marteau et l'enclume et l'on ne savait pas sur quel pied danser. Etre dans le camp de militaires, c'est être ennemi de May-May et être dans le camp de May-May c'est être ennemi de militaires.

Sachant que l'Eglise est apolitique et neutre, nous ne pouvions pas croiser les bras et laisser le mal continuer. Nous étions obligés de s'y impliquer malgré le coût que nous allions payer. Nous cherchions comment rassembler les deux frères ennemis pour les mettre autour d'une même table de négociation, quoique s'était difficile, auprès de Dieu, tout était possible, après deux d'attente, pour cela, Dieu avait exhaussé notre prière car ce n'était pas le seul souci des églises, cela était devenu la préoccupation de tout un chacun. Ensemble avec les autorités politico-administratives, les militaires et la Police Nationale Congolaise (PNC) , nous cherchions partout nous retrouver pour discuter et chercher les voies et moyens pour mettre fin aux tracasseries policières, à des tueries et l'insécurité qui battait son plein.

L'Administrateur en la personne de Mr Pierre DAMIER NDOMBE, le Commandant Bataillon de 941° bataillon qui était à Kitenge, le Commandant de la Police Nationale Congolaise sont venus chez moi à la maison me demander si notre Eglise pouvait être la cible de notre négociation comme c'était notre préoccupation. Nous n'avions pas hésité à leur répondre positivement pour cette rencontre. Et j'ai été choisi comme prédicateur dans cette réunion tant longtemps attendu. Le travail était bien fait et présenté , toutes les parties se sont mises d'accord pour enterrer la hache de guerre.

Là où les politiciens échouaient, Dieu seul est prêt à donner la solution, pour vivre ces événements, voici le rapport du travail que nous avons accompli :

LUNDI 24 MARS 03

Entretien avec toutes les parties impliquées au rétablissement de la paix : Mr l'Administrateur de Territoire Assistant de Kitenge, le Commandant Bataillon de Forces Armées Congolaises à Kitenge (Cmd Bn FAC), Cmd Bn2, Cmd Bn3 et Cmd Bn5 FAC, Cmd PNC, Cmd FAP, Président CPP et son Comité, le Chef Sous Poste ANR, le Représentant du Chef de Groupement Nyembo, le Représentant de l'Eglise catholique, le Représentant de l'Union des Enseignants de Kitenge et les sages et Conseillers de combattants Simba May-May sont venus à la rencontre organisée dans l'enceinte de la paroisse Méthodiste Unie de Kitenge. Un groupe de combattants May May est venu aussi se joindre à nous pour préparer les conditions d'accueil de leur Général CHINJA CHINJA ; Malheureusement ce dernier n'est pas venu ce lundi ; Ce pendant nous avons remarqué que les combattants May-May étaient plus nombreux que les soldats FAC sur le lieu de réconciliation ainsi que dans la cité de Kitenge.

MARDI 25 MARS 03

Vers 7h05, Mr Jackson KABAMBA l'Administrateur de Kabongo est venu se joindre à la rencontre. C'est seulement vers 14h15 que le Général CHINJA CHINJA est arrivé sur le lieu de la rencontre. Trente minutes après, quelques combattants May-May estimés à 6000 sont venus rejoindre l'équipe de réconciliation. Ceux-ci ont envailli la

cour de la paroisse avec les soldats FAC. Nous étions alors tous présents pour débiter la cérémonie de réconciliation qui avait débuté à 14h15.

Mr Pierre Damien NDOMBE l'ATA de la place, a pris la parole le premier pour donner l'introduction à la rencontre.

Il a commencé par rendre gloire à Dieu pour avoir permis la tenue de réunion. Il s'est rejouit de cette rencontre entre frères. Il a ainsi demandé au Surintendant de l'Eglise Méthodiste Unie, le Rév. MUJINGA MWAMBA KORA de prier pour la circonstance et prêcher la parole de Dieu avant de commencer le dialogue.

Notre intervention était taxée sur les points suivants :

- La prière
- Le message : Luc 15 : 17 – 24
- Thème « Nous étions tous perdus et nous avons besoin de la repentance »

Après mon sermon, Mr l'ATA a repris le thème de cette réunion en insistant sur le fait que nous sommes tous les perdus comme est le sujet d notre prédication. Il a procédé à la présentation des participants en commençant par le général de Brigade Chinja Chinja et sa suite, le Cmd Bn FAC et sa suite, la FAP et la PNC ainsi que les membres.

A l'intervention de l'AT : il a retracé l'historique de la guerre d'agression et la création des Forces d'Autodéfenses Populaires FAP et il est arrivé des mouvements de May-May. Il a aussi évoqué, les troubles entre FAC et May-May et la déstabilisation de villages et surtout la perte en vie humaine, le villages incendiés et le déplacement massif de la population.

Aujourd'hui nous ne voulons pas faire le tribunal dit-il pour chercher qui a raison et qui n'en a pas, non ! Mais ensemble chercons les vraies causes qui fassent chaque fois causer des troubles enfin que nous parlions et trouver de bases solides pour la survie de notre agglomération qui a tant souffert.

B. Les déclarations du général de Brigade Chinja Chinja : Moi, je suis un civil, ce qui nous est parfois choqué, c'est la tracasserie de Fac et la mauvaise compréhension de part et d'autres, les faux rapports de la population de tous les deux cotés. Aujourd'hui ce jour, c'est la première et la dernière réunion pour moi. Je ne peux plus encore combattre les Fac, car FAC est notre père qui nous chapeaute tous. Nous lui devons du respect chez-moi, il n'ya pas de tribunal, je demande à tout le monde d'aller déposer leurs problèms au tribunal secondaire, à la PNC. Nous reconnaissons l'état et toute sa force.

Après ce meeting, Dieu s'est vraiment manifesté, l'attitude des Simbas s'est vite chanchée. Ils se sont conformés aux paroles de leur chefs. La tracasserie était terminée. Nous attendons bientôt à avoir nâatre la paix.

Que vive l'Eglise Méthodiste Unie qui a hébergé les belligérants et qui avait joué un rôle de catalyseur à travers son serviteur Rév. Mujinga Mwamba Kora.

[end box]

The Absence of War does not mean Peace

**F. Douglas Powe, Jr.
Saint Paul School of Theology**

Many discussions on war and peace address just war theory, pacifism, or a combination of both. The usual goal of these discussions is to figure out how we can avoid war and sustain peace. The term peace in these instances is being implicitly defined as a time free from war. The word peace can be misleading if it is only understood as the absence of war. In the United States there are periods when the country is not at war, and many whites probably believe during these times the country is at peace.

For many African-Americans historically, however, even during the times when there is an absence of war, an absence of peace still exists. The threat of harm is an on-going reality for many African-Americans during so called peaceful interludes. To better understand why the absence of war does not mean peace for many African-Americans the following four themes will be explored:

1. the contradiction of the American promise;
2. an unjust peaceful existence;
3. King and Vietnam; and
4. reclaiming shalom as a true model for peace.

The Contradiction of the American Promise

The contradictions African-Americans face in the United States are well documented. Historically within the military, one such contradiction was the segregation of troops during World War II (WWII). Although African-Americans fought for their country and died for their country, they did not enjoy the same rights as their white counterparts. The Tuskegee Airmen is just one example of African-Americans who trained separately and fought for their country.

The importance of the contradiction experienced by troops like the Tuskegee Airmen sets the stage for the Civil Rights Movement and the fight for rights. The struggles of individuals like the Tuskegee Airmen pushed America to answer questions like, "If someone is qualified to fight for her/his country, then why don't they enjoy the same benefits as their white counterparts?" The contradiction between what America promises and what it practices has been an on-going dilemma for African-Americans. Theologically one way to express this contradiction is the call to justice within the prophetic tradition when Israel went astray. Israel often claimed one thing based upon its covenant with God, but practiced another. This is one of the reasons Martin Luther King, Jr. often pointed out the theological contradiction of the American ideal. King stated:

Ever since the Founding Fathers of our nation dreamed this noble dream, America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself. On the one hand we have proudly professed the principles of democracy,

and on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles.¹

An Unjust Peaceful Existence

The contradictions experienced by many African-Americans culminated in over twenty race riots between 1960 and 2005. These riots point toward the uneasy existence experienced by many African-Americans during the past forty years. Two of the worst riots were Watts in 1965 and Detroit in 1967. In both situations an infantry division was called in to keep the “peace.” These two riots resulted in over seventy people killed and hundreds injured. Many underlying reasons were given for the riots, including rage, disappointment and the lack of economic means. Many African-Americans were frustrated with the status quo and the lack of progress on race matters.

Adding fuel to the fire for many blacks was the willingness of many whites to get involved in conflicts like Vietnam, but their (whites) unwillingness to address racial injustices in their own backyard. The status quo continued to be maintained in the United States even as America sought to change the circumstances of others in foreign lands. This is not a critique against challenging injustices wherever they occur, but it is to point out the hypocrisy experienced by blacks in the United States. The contradictions of segregation and the lack of economic opportunity were creating an uneasy existence for many African-Americans. In biblical language, many African-Americans felt like they were already barred from the Garden of Eden and had to watch while some whites wallowed there in peace.

Although progress has occurred in the past forty years, America still remains just an incident away from another race riot.² The failure to address the deeper issues of racism embedded in American society during times of war or peace continues to create an uneasy tension for many African-Americans in this country. During times of war, like the present Iraq conflict, the unjust existence remains for many African-Americans, but is subsumed under the banner of “patriotism.” By patriotism, I do not mean supporting the troops during conflicts, but the more insidious notion of a blind allegiance to American empiricism.

Just as dangerous a mindset is the belief that the absence of war means all Americans are experiencing peace. There may be a false sense of peace in some white suburbs, but black urban ghettos are continuously under attack. James Cone supports this sentiment by arguing that the comfortable theologies of Euro-Americans cannot speak to the conditions faced by African-Americans living in urban ghettos.³ These conditions include issues like daily violence, drugs and poverty. The reality of these conditions during times of peace and war mean many African-Americans never experience what some call peace.

King and Vietnam

During the Vietnam conflict King made the connection between the absurdity of fighting a foreign war while poor black and whites suffered. King claims:

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King questioned the wisdom of getting involved in a foreign conflict on multiple levels. First, King was concerned that those asked to fight for America were the very individuals adversely affected by American policy decisions.⁵ Second, King was concerned about the use of resources going into the war effort that could be used to help rebuild the infrastructures of those suffering in this country.⁶ Third, King understood the hypocrisy of some Americans calling for African-Americans to stop rioting in cities over injustices, but supporting violence overseas to achieve justice.⁷

What King outlines for us is another form of just-war theory that would be better entitled unjust-war theory. Our reasons for going to war may be unjust if we are advocating another country do what we are unwilling to do in our own context. I am not suggesting there is never a justification for war or that the United States should ignore injustices occurring in other countries. The United States, however, needs to re-evaluate what it means by peace and not assume the absence of war means a peaceful existence for all Americans.

Shalom

If America's understanding of peace is inadequate, then what is an alternative? The Hebrew notion of shalom is one possibility. Shalom means peace, but not in the passive sense of no existing conflicts. Shalom means peace in an active sense that advocates for the well-being of all people. I am suggesting that America needs to understand peace in the latter manner and not the former. An active peace that promotes the well-being of people means America understands it must make a commitment to eradicating the injustices in its own context.

Two theological ideas can help move America in the direction of an active peace. First, we need to challenge our personal concepts of the image of God. One of the reasons it is easy to be comfortable with a passive peace is we see God in our own image and not the image of those suffering. King's "unjust-war theory" pushes us to see God's image in those who are suffering and not to just focus on our own image which only serves our goals. Second, we must practically love our neighbors in this country. King pushes us to be good stewards of available resources that can be used to re-build inadequate infrastructures.

I believe, thinking from a black theological perspective, that framing the question in terms of the absence of war means peace is problematic. The challenge for America is what do we mean by peace? If it is simply a passive peace that means the absence of war, then really there is no peace. An active peace advocating for the well-being of all people moves America in the right direction because it challenges us to remember those suffering in times of war or peace.

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In the United States there are periods when the country is not at war, and many whites probably believe during these times the country is at peace. For many African-Americans historically, however, even during the times when there is an absence of war, an absence of peace still exists. The threat of harm is an on-going reality for many African-Americans during so called peaceful interludes.

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The Contradiction of the American Promise

The contradictions African-Americans face in the United States are well documented. Historically within the military, one such contradiction was the segregation of troops during World War II. Although African-Americans fought for their country and died for their country, they did not enjoy the same rights as their white counterparts. The Tuskegee Airmen is just one example of African-Americans who trained separately and fought for their country.

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The contradiction between what America promises and what it practices has been an on-going dilemma for African-Americans. Theologically one way to express this contradiction is the call to justice within the prophetic tradition when Israel went astray. Israel often claimed one thing based upon its covenant with God, but practiced another. This is one of the reasons Martin Luther King, Jr. why often pointed out the theological contradiction of the American ideal. King stated:

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one hand we have proudly professed the principles of democracy, and on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles.¹

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The contradictions experienced by many African-Americans culminated in over twenty race riots between 1960 and 2005. These riots point toward the uneasy existence experienced by many African-Americans during the past forty years. Two of the worst riots were Watts in 1965 and Detroit in 1967. In both situations an infantry division was called in to keep the “peace.” These two riots resulted in over seventy people killed and hundreds injured. Many underlying reasons were given for the riots, including rage, disappointment, and the lack of economic means. Many African-Americans were frustrated with the status quo and the lack of progress on race matters.

Adding fuel to the fire for many blacks was the willingness of many whites to get involved in conflicts like Vietnam, but their (whites) unwillingness to address racial injustices in their own backyard. The status quo continued to be maintained in the United States even as America sought to change the circumstances of others in foreign lands. This is not a critique against challenging injustices wherever they occur, but it is to point out the hypocrisy experienced by blacks in the United States. The contradictions of segregation and the lack of economic opportunity were creating an uneasy existence for many African-Americans. In biblical language, many African-Americans felt like they were already barred from the Garden of Eden and had to watch while some whites wallowed there in peace.

Although progress has occurred in the past forty years, America still remains just an incident away from another race riot.² The failure to address the deeper issues of racism embedded in American society during times of war or peace continues to create an uneasy tension for many African-Americans in this country. During times of war, like the present Iraq conflict, the unjust existence remains for many African-Americans, but is subsumed under the banner of “patriotism.” By patriotism, I do not mean supporting the troops during conflicts, but the more insidious notion of a blind allegiance to American imperialism.

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This article is part of a project on "The Theology of War and Peace". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofwarandpeace.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at mupwj@mupwj.org

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⁶ *Ibid.*

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This article is part of a project on "The Theology of War and Peace". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofwarandpeace.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at mupwj@mupwj.org

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