

Honouring Our Heritage: Peace Theology

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NPMC – Nov. 12, 2023, Peace Sunday

Hymns: VT 797 – We Are People of God’s Peace; 803 – We Shall Overcome

Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSVUE):

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come / the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains

and shall be raised above the hills;

all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,

to the house of the God of Jacob,

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction

and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations

and shall arbitrate for many peoples;

they shall beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation;

neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵ O house of Jacob, / come, let us walk / in the light of the LORD!

Matthew 5:1-11 (NRSVUE): When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We’ve come to the one time of year when I contact the administrators at my kids’ school. I usually try not to bother them, as I know they’re busy, but at this time of year, I have some specific questions about the Remembrance Day assembly. What will be discussed there? What is the overall message that the kids will be given? Is it a

message about war as a tragedy that we hope will never again require the ultimate sacrifices of those who served? Or is it linked to an unequivocal support for the violence of war, which glorifies violence? One principal certainly took the former approach, even playing Bob Dylan's anti-war song "Blowin' in the Wind" during the assembly, which includes the line, "How many times must the cannonballs fly / Before they're forever banned?" But the past few years, the message has been less peace-oriented, so my kids are excused to the library, sitting this one out. We talk at home about why, about what it means to be a Mennonite pacifist, a conscientious objector. I found out several years ago that Kris's great-grandfather was a C.O. in Russia already, joining the forestry service rather than fighting. Alongside our family C.O.'s in Canada, and my brother-in-law, who was miraculously spared military service in his home country of Colombia, we have C.O.'s in our family from three different countries – Russia, Canada, Colombia. This is a family history I'm proudly teaching to my kids, as I hand them their Mennonite Central Committee "To Remember Is to Work for Peace" buttons to wear.

For generations, over several centuries, this was the content of the Mennonite peace position, the standard interpretation of those famous passages from Isaiah: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares / and their spears into pruning hooks; / nation shall not lift up sword against nation; / neither shall they learn war any more." And of course from the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Though thousands of years old, this image of beating an instrument of violence and death into something with which to nourish life remains as poignant as ever, and Christian activist Shane Claiborne has done something very similar recently, turning guns into spades and other gardening tools.¹ This is a call to turn from destructiveness to peacebuilding, for the sake of becoming "children of God," meaning those who resemble God, the God of Life, the Prince of Peace. But notice how active these images are – one is of metalsmithing the instruments of death into farming implements, the other is of making peace in a prophetic sense of advocating for the marginalized, sometimes at great cost. A simple "no" to military service doesn't quite seem like the same thing – and over the years, the

¹ See <https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/23/beating-guns-into-garden-tools-an-interview-with-christian-activist-shane-claiborne/>

Mennonite church has come to a similar conclusion (in part, this was the lesson of World War II and those who chose to enlist – that we need to take responsibility for the well-being of our neighbours, not just our own).

I was just at the MCC Saskatchewan Peace Conference last weekend, and keynote speaker Esther Epp-Tiessen talked about how the understanding of peace has evolved and broadened over the course of MCC's 100-year history. MCC began in the 1920s with providing emergency relief to Mennonites and others in Ukraine, and then the 1940s saw peace primarily as supporting C.O.'s. By the 1960s, however, peace became about much broader social issues than just military service. It was recognized that things like poverty, incarceration, capital punishment, and injustices against Indigenous neighbours create a different – but no less destructive – kind of violence than war. Peacemakers also need to address these issues. In the 1970s, this took the form of a much more active MCC presence in advocating to political leaders and those creating policy. The 80s and 90s saw a greater awareness of gender-based violence as a major peace issue, as well as the need to address inequities in our justice system through restorative justice. And since the turn of the millennium, MCC Canada's work involves everything from interfaith partnerships, trauma healing, Indigenous-settler relationships, international law and human rights work. This has become much more complex than a simple "no" to military service! As Esther pointed out, the peace theology of the Sermon on the Mount contains "aspects of saying no and aspects of saying yes."² It requires something of us.

I have been reading Sofia Samatar's memoir, *The White Mosque*, which contains her reflections about Mennonite identity as she went on the "Great Trek" tour, tracing the Mennonite journey through central Asia to present-day Uzbekistan. Samatar's experience was all the more powerful because her own identity bridges these two worlds: her mother is a Swiss-Mennonite American and her father's family Somali Muslims (he converted to the Mennonite faith and moved to the U.S.).³ In part because of this dual Muslim-Mennonite heritage ("Mo-Mennonite"), Samatar is able to cut

² Esther Epp-Tiessen, "Theological Grounding," Speech at Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan's 5th Annual Peace Conference, "Peace By Peace: International and Local Peacebuilding," Wildwood Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, SK, Nov. 4, 2023.

³ Sofia Samatar, *The White Mosque: A Memoir* (New York: Catapult, 2022), 9. Cf. 133ff.

through some of the assumptions and harmful stereotypes that crop up on this journey through Asia, including the Islamophobic trope of the “violent Muslims” whom the Mennonites must have “modernized” when they arrived, bringing with them technologies like the camera and sewing machines.⁴ When another tourist shouts to their group that the Muslims must have been hostile to the Mennonites, Samatar counters, “Quite the opposite!...They were very hospitable!”⁵ In reframing this history in terms of Muslim hospitality, Samatar invites us to question some of our assumptions that we have all the answers and others are the “receivers” of what we have to give. And this extends to peace theology and practice as well. Samatar speaks of assumptions that Somalis have “failed...to absorb the Mennonite ‘lesson’ of peace” – when all along there are very similar Muslim traditions of peace from which Mennonites could learn!⁶ Samatar gives us a lot of food for thought as we continue to expand our understanding of what peace means. What are ways we can turn the peace lens inward, to our own communities and even our own ways of thinking about ourselves as peacebuilders? How can we become conscientious objectors not only to war, but to all that takes away from God’s *shalom* – the wholeness, healing, and thriving of all of God’s people and all of creation? May the God of Peace guide us as we continue to do our part, however small, for peace. AMEN

⁴ Samatar, 137, 75.

⁵ Samatar, 125.

⁶ Samatar, 133-34.