

"JUST PEACE THEOLOGY" & HOW TO PRAY FOR "THE GULF"

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Tomorrow is the cardinal two-man U.S.-Iraq Geneva conversation, "cardinal" in the literal sense that a history-weighty door will turn on it. Ignorant though I am of what the best outcome may be, I pray for it.

But my prayer is not ignorant. No, it's based on profound knowing, knowing in whose Hands are the issues & consequences. Yes, it is only faith-knowledge. But no other kind of knowledge of time & the future is available to humanity. And praying without ceasing unceasingly reminds me of this sobering, this ideology-undermining, fact about the human condition.

OCCASION: Sunday a source-unidentified bulletin stuffer read "A Just Peach Church Acts on These Beliefs:," & on the other side a "Litany" which was used in our worship. Upon later inquiry I ascertained that the UCC Office of Church in Society (OCIS) produced the piece, which promotes OCIS' "Just Peace Theology," a phrase twice used on the "Beliefs" side. The UCC promotes this particular political theology with fundamentalist zeal, & OCIS doesn't blink at asking us pewsitters to pray it in a litany--at which I gulp without swallowing. I'm sympathetic with the national office's project of offering some guidance to the churches as to how to pray for "the Gulf," & with the inherent difficulty of the project in the light of the small print at the beginning of this Thinksheet. But I must demur at some aspects of the project's product.

1 I can't figure out whether to be for peace or for war, but I'm for shalom. I conclude that only war will take out Saddam's nuclear potential, so I'm pro-war; but violence is the most miserable way to settle things, so I'm anti-war. But I'm unambivalently pro-shalom. This Litany makes one unreferenced reference to Jesus, whom it calls "the Prince of Peace," thus creating the impression that OCIS knows which side Jesus is on in the Gulf. But Is.9.6 says "the Prince of Shalom," who is also (in its series of titles) "God Gibbor (mighty, brave, victorious, including military connotations)": shalom does not have "war" as its antonym, as does the English word "peace." The shalom-process may, & in OT often does, include war. The lexical problem here begins with NT εἰρήνη *eire·ne·*, which indeed has war as its normal antonym, though NT's use of the word is heavily infilled with OT Hebrew "shalom."

I'm not just playing around with biblical words. I'm challenging the very use of "peace" in "Just Peace Theology." The word "peace" itself constitutes propaganda against war. Wassamatta with that? Well, war has often corrected peacetime horrors, just as "peace" (in the Greek & English sense, the cessation of war) has often put an end to wartime horrors. Militarists are pro-war, pacifists are pro-peace, & the Bible is pro-shalom. I go with the Bible, not with OCIS' official UCC political theology. "Blessed are the shalommakers," & (L.19.42, which "Beliefs" quotes with "peace") "Would that you knew the things that make for shalom."

English has acquired the Persian word "shah" & is adopting the Hebrew word "shalom." Are we coming to "the Shah of Shalom"? At least this phrase suggests how beguiling, & misleading, is the hallowed phrase "the Prince of Peace." (Our "King of Kings" is a translation of the Persian "Shahnshah," an elative intensive.)

2 "A just peace" is a latterday trope of Jn. Foster Dulles' 1945 "a just and lasting peace." Dulles was drawing a double contrast. WWI ended with an unjust "peace" that by 1939 had proved unlasting. Dulles was of right heart & prophecy. The defeated after WWII were treated more justly, & the combatants have not fought one another these more than 45 years. But in the phrase "Just Peace Theology," the abstract noun governs the compound adjective, idealizing "justice" & "peace," whereas Dulles contextualized them. The effect is that such theologians carp at current & proposed approximations of justice & sniff at war & threats thereto. The stuff may sound good to some ears in church, but it makes mere skypiloting copy in the media (such as the UCC national office's WASHINGTON POST ad advising Bush: "no war").

3 A JPT (Just Peace Theology) belief is "PEACE IS POSSIBLE. A Just Peace is a basic gift of God and is the force and vision moving human history." The Ghost Dance Amerinds at Wounded Knee thought peace was possible & would come as their ritual called forth a whites-bashing messiah, & there they died: not the whites but the Amerinds. Many Jews have thought that a gentiles-bashing messiah would show up, but history is heavy with Jews-bashing gentiles. In Christianity, the Messiah-Christ-Jesus includes the crucifixional theme of being bashed & the Second Coming enemies-bashing theme. JPT does not incorporate this Jewish-&-Christian tradition

in its "Peace is possible." Its answer is rulers who can "imagine peaceful change" & "the meaning of a baby, born in a manger." In a quasiMarxian way it sees "a force and vision moving human history" & in this way views a just peace as "a basic gift of God." I, too, pray for a sanctified compassionate intelligent imagination in the world's rulers. But my biblical faith grants me two blessings not found in JPT's sanguine & pale eschatology: (1) A hardheaded skepticism as to how far the sinful soul-&-society can get toward shalom without the regenerating touch of grace; & (2) A sense of the impermanence of our species, the fragility of "history" as well as of the individual, conjoint with the conviction that God will (1) intervene to interdict all evil & sin & (2) so transform "all things" that no good that has ever been will ever be lost. (Of the latter direct divine event, the Bible has many rousing & blissful metaphors, some of them taken up into Christian liturgy--such as "Christ is risen! Christ is here! Christ will come again!")

JPT's stuffer condemns Bush for relying on "horses" & "chariots" (Is.31.1) by threatening Saddam, & prides itself on "opening up many other possibilities." But other possibilities was what the U.S. ambassador was preaching to Saddam, who thus became convinced that he could grab Kuwait with impunity. JPT of a sort was "the dominant theology in Washington," & it failed abysmally.

4 "War can and must be eliminated, through international structures of friendship, justice and common security from violence." The secular humanist vision lacks blood & bone & a biblical base, but it reappears feebly in each generation. The stuffer oddly uses Is.43.19 ("I am doing a new thing") apropos of "the U.N....setting up sanctions," but not of the U.N. threatening war after Jan.15. "PEACE REQUIRES INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURES." Yes, but hohum, who doesn't think so?

5 "PEACE REQUIRES PATIENCE....War is never justified until all alternative means for resolving a conflict have been exhausted." Hohum again: who doesn't think so? In his Jan.5 address to his generals, Saddam made it clear that he does, & that he's doing all he possibly can to preserve the present peace (of course without giving up what he calls his 19th state, viz Kuwait). Bush + the U.N. believe that Jan.15 is the practicable end of patience, Saddam having finessed the sanctions to the degree that he could hold out till the alliance fell apart. If Saddam is right, & Baker & Aziz only stiffarm each other tomorrow, then "all alternative means for resolving" the conflict will have been "exhausted," & this belief of JPT will have been (theoretically) satisfied. But don't count on the JP theologians' coming out for war!

6 "PEACE REQUIRES PEACEMAKERS." The stuffer, without naming him, badmouths vonClausewitz for "war is an extension of diplomacy by other means." That old chestnut has a burry shell but expresses a profound & manifold truth. It does not rule out what I applaud, "unexpected initiatives of friendship to transform situations" (such as the December FOR trip to Iraq to deliver \$ ½ million medicinals). Hardheaded calculations & warmhearted interventions are, in JPT, falsely made into mutual exclusions, an instance of JPT's black-&-white thinking. Then this: "When we are so close to disaster, and so close to a Just Peace solution to this crisis, the Just Peace Church must act." I agree with the apodosis, but neither element of the protasis makes sense: (1) What does "close to disaster" mean? It would be disastrous if Saddam is allowed to continue his nuclear program, but that's not JPT's reference. (2) And who says we are "so close to a Just Peace solution"? Nobody I know.

7 The stuffer's Litany begins, "Let us give thanks for those places where justice and peace exist, and for those persons who still contend for them." Wholeheartedly I pray the second clause, but would like a list of the places the first clause refers to. Places where at the moment there's no war? There are such places. Places where there's no injustice? I know of no such place.

8 "Let us intercede for the conversion of those who deny...[justice and peace], and for the vindication of those to whom they are denied." Again, I like the second clause; but the first's use of "conversion" reminds me that the stuffer nowhere mentions Christian conversion....."For those denied a cultural identity and a land to call their own." But the Palestinians have their cultural identity & can have a land to call their own any time they give up the dream of being a militarily armed state.