Don't miss the chance to build a better world

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50 YEARS AGO

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Since World War II, it appears to me that humanity has failed, and "we" (the Allies) have "won" (i.e., crushed our World War II enemies). The "we" of the second clause could now be experiencing a semicentennial celebration of unalloyed self-congratulation were it not for the awkward fact that "we" are also in the first clause.

To help us temper with humility and penitence our gratitude to God for the collapse of Nazi Germany's "Thousand-Year Reich" and Imperial Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," I propose a few questions to help us Christians as Christians to be more thoughtful about this 50th anniversary year. Such thoughtfulness can help us avoid missing today's opportunities to work with all human beings of good will toward a better world.

1. **Can we build a better world even though we are flawed, defective, damaged, sinful human beings?** I remember hearing that rhetoric after World War I when I was in a modernist church. Converted to fundamentalism in the early 1930s, I changed the word "build" to the word "receive": a better world is what God wants to give us as we pray the Lord's Prayer, not something we can achieve. Before World War II I became, and to this day remain, a liberal evangelical: "Pray as though everything depends on God, work as though everything depends on you" — no excuse for being either utopian or cynical.

2. **Was the Cold War avoidable?** Afraid not. Russo-Marxist expansionism had to burn itself out. The containment policy was an opportunity we did not miss.

3. **What 1946 hopes have not been fulfilled?**

■ That the United Nations would be more successful as a war-depressant. But even so, it has defused a multitude of near-war conflicts.

■ That the world would achieve universal disarmament. With my Niebuhrian "Christian realism," I was never big on this hope; but that my country is the world's Number One arms supplier is a burden on my heart.

■ That the world would take to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights more than it has.

■ That conscience, governments, and wealth would address the globe's economic inequities and trade-impedences. The world failed to develop the necessary world laws with teeth.

■ That the Wilsonian "national sovereignty" doctrine would dissolve empires without reenergizing tribalism. The old empires were dissolved, but at the cost of releasing the old tribal animosities and hopes. The doctrine needs a radical overhaul.

■ That humanity would cooperate in the protection of the biosphere and the equitable use of its resources. National sovereignty, communist expansionism, and capitalist greed dashed this dream.

4. **Did the religions miss the opportunity to develop a common agenda for a better world?** Yes. The hard work of the question — How can the religions together be good news for humanity? — remains to be done.

As I write, Rose Kennedy's funeral cortege is about to leave the Kennedy Compound near my home. Soon after her son, the President, was assassinated, she was able to say, "Birds sing after a storm. God wants us to be happy." Whatever opportunities have been missed since World War II, we Christians have no excuse to be glum and depressed and every incentive to be joyful and hopeful.

During 1995, United Church News is running a series of articles to help UCC members reflect on the end of World War II and the kind of world we have achieved in the 50 years since then. Willis Elliott is biblical scholar in residence at the Craigville (Mass.) Conference Center and professor at large of New York Theological Seminary in New York City.