

# 'The world would have peace if only...'

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“... If only we could do away with the religions. ... If only we could do away with the ethnicities. ... If only human beings would let reason prevail over feelings....” If only people would stop coming up with simplistic ‘if only’s.’

Without falling into the suicidal trap of cynicism, we can agree with the chancellor of Sweden, who wrote in a 1648 letter to his son, “Behold, my son, with what little wisdom the world is ruled.”

But that very year, two advances in political wisdom were made. Ending the Thirty Years’ War, the European powers agreed that each nation should be free of foreign efforts to impose religion and that each nation should have a privileged, official religion determined by its ruler, a policy which found historical precedent in the compromises between the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the German Protestant princes in the 1500s.

And at the beginning of the English Civil War, the right of the privileged, official religion to persecute other religions was seriously curtailed. The final advance in church/state relations came 143 years later: The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution freed religion from governmental favoritism of one over another and from government interference with the “free exercise” of religion.

## Prostituting religion

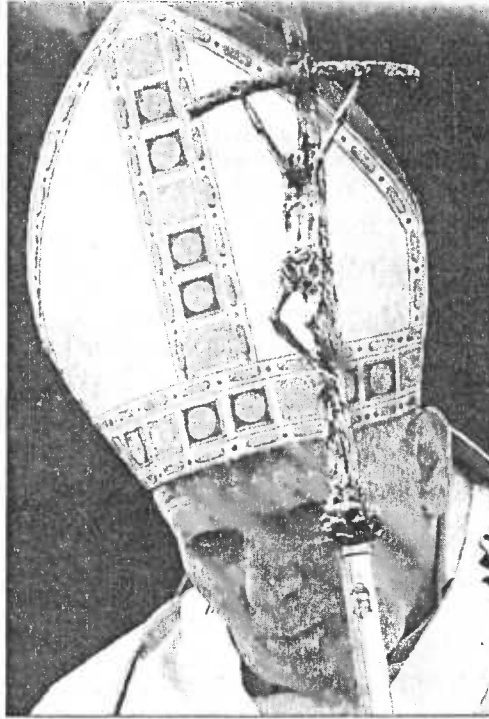
Of course, the wisdom of 1791 America has not prevented demagogues from prostituting religion for their own purposes – as is seen today in the Balkans, Iraq, the Sudan and several other countries.

Neither religion nor ethnicity is safe from this foul manipulation. And neither is to be blamed when violence ensues, although sometimes religious fanaticism fans the flames of a fire religion did not start. Sometimes, ethnicity is guilty of the same excess.

If you’re in a mood to get mad, just think of all the horrors perpetrated on your ancestors by other people’s ancestors. Then count the ways your parents and you have been victimized, abused and put upon by “them.” It won’t take long to get blood in your eye. All human beings, collectively and individually, have painful memories we may choose to let stir our soul and set our course to violence, destruction and despair.

Or, instead of wallowing in painful memories, you are free to meditate on those hopeful memories of your heritage. And you are free to use them as building blocks for a better future for yourself, your own, and the

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POPE JOHN PAUL II

the pope in some ways has it easy. No foreign power threatens his land (the Vatican City State) and he has no rivals who by violence or vote challenge his sovereignty over his land. Nor for many generations has any pope laid any claim of sovereignty over any other land.

When the Lateran Pact was being negotiated in the 1920s, Mussolini offered the pope a much larger territory on the western side of the Tiber River, stretching from today’s Vatican down to Trastevere. The Church declined the offer, since it was not interested in governing neighborhoods, only in securing a small geographical parcel where it could freely carry out its ecclesial mission. Because of this wise decision, today the Vatican is at peace with itself and the world (at least territorially).

## A thorny process

No other ruler on earth has the luxury of that peace. In democracies, politicians have to get elected, a thorny process with moral ambiguities. Other forms of government, as Churchill said, are even worse.

Borders? Except for a few natural boundaries – oceans, rivers, mountains – they’ve been only as firm as those who live inside of them are militarily strong. Some borders themselves blend into historically disputed territories, such as the whole Israel/Palestine situation or Kashmir. Some boundaries have never been totally drawn, e.g. Ethiopia and Eritrea, while others were artificially drawn by colonial powers with no regard to the people they were dividing or lumping together.

Sovereignty? Unfortunately, historically

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often in a violent manner (e.g., the Balkans).

Besides conflicts over political power and territory, often within a country there are struggles as cultures of different characteristics (race, tribe, socioeconomic class, religion) clash violently. The term “Kulturkampf” comes from the cultural struggle that German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had with the minority Roman Catholic Church.

In a speech to the Prussian Diet in 1862, he said, “The great questions of our time are not decided by speeches and majority decisions...but by iron and blood.” Iron and blood was the approach which Bismarck took in his Kulturkampf, and it is one which is still employed today by many countries.

In light of the above, “peace” has meant the abnormal and temporary condition between wars: peace as a mere absence of violent hostilities. But peace need not be – as that of Versailles was – a prelude to war. Instead, it can be a period which causes the threat of war to diminish, if it is a peace based on justice.

## A more just world

After World War II, the United States worked to build a more just world in Western Europe via the Marshall Plan, which led to the threat of a war in that formerly violent zone of the world diminishing to practically nil.

However, the rest of the world is often beset by war or the threat of war, due to the lack of economic and social justice. Pope Paul VI, during the height of the Cold War, understood what the world needed when he said, “If you want peace, work for justice.”

Slowly, painfully, humanity is learning what Jesus called “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:41). Along with the Bible, let us neither be utopian nor cynical, but realistic. Yes, peace is improbable, but it is possible. And because it is possible, it’s mandatory for people of good will to fight for it with weapons not of war.

Humanity needs new eyes for the new millennium, new eyes to take another look at the human past. John Paul II is taking another look at Jan Hus, the Bohemian reformer, whom the Council of Constance condemned to death in 1415. In that professor-preacher-politician, all the powers and hopes of his people had converged. A precursor of renewal and democracy, a man of true vision, Hus should be moved out of the Bad Guys column of history into the Vision of Greatness column.

## ‘Genetic fallacy’

And those who commit the “genetic fallacy” by judging the present in religion and ethnicity only from the point of view of the flawed past need new eyes to see the potential for truly human hope in today’s ethnic and religious diversities and convergences.

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world.

**'Vision of greatness'**

Professor Alfred North Whitehead said, "The heart of education is the habitual vision of greatness." When we think of Hitler, we have a vision of smallness – a man who shrank his people. But some people, by their very living, ennoble humanity; and to think often of them expands our hearts, minds and lives.

John Paul II is that kind of human being. His sorrows for the past sins of his heritage is just a part of his universal benevolence, which does not compromise but is implicit in his classical Christian commitment. He models for us how to become free of the past and to use its hopeful memories for the benefit of today and tomorrow. He practices his Lord's radical love: "Love your enemies" and, in your eyes, you have none.

But compared with other political leaders,

most countries have not followed the American ideal of government "of the people, by the people, for the people" (Lincoln at Gettysburg). Our own John Adams, when drafting the Massachusetts Constitution, called for "a government of laws, and not of men."

Adams and Lincoln could agree that we must be governed by a rule of law if the people are truly to be the sovereigns, avoiding tyranny. However, most countries (or more accurately, their leaders) have found it difficult to live out the American ideal of a heterogeneous people governing themselves. Many lands have representative government, but it is only representative of a certain dominant group, based in an ethnicity or religion or both.

**Cultural struggles**

When something causes a flow of population over borders into these states, the question of whose right is it to rule is reopened,

The reality is that on this shrinking globe, we humans are learning how to maintain our ethnic, religious and national identities without an animosity towards "them".

We are even beginning to learn that human rights means that anybody's needs and pains are everybody's needs and pains.

Our particular stories necessarily divide us, as family stories do. But under God on this fragile planet we have a common human story, and we are slowly learning to tell it better, through the aid of repentance, forgiveness, gratitude, hope and joy.

Those who wish to work for true peace today must respond as Jesus did – suffering for others, nor causing others to suffer. The more leaders and citizens can do this, the more we will all live in peace.

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When at a recent meeting of our CCT Religion Advisory Panel I suggested a piece against the smug despisers of religion & ethnicity vis-a-vis war/peace, Father Wilson said "I'd like to do that with you." Said I, "I'll write it if you'll rewrite it."....I wrote it with the joint authorship in mind, using the present Pope as an example of those who "ennoble humanity"; the priest added a few nice things about some other popes; & the editor heightened the papal flavor by choosing a photo of Jn. Paul II: I didn't mean the article to be *that* papal!....Not dropping anything of mine, the priest added a few Catholic-historical details....Dick had only one objection to my piece: I referred to Jan Hus as "martyred" & agreed to his substitution "condemned to death": Catholic language uses "martyr" in the passive voice (martyred Catholics) but not in the active voice (the Catholic Church martyring)....In the penultimate ¶, I speak both of "a **common human story**" which needs better telling, & of "our **particular stories**," of which the best (I usually add, but not here) is the Christian gospel. Not just the best, but the true, best illumining all the others.

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