

# THE HABERDASHERS' GOLDEN LECTURE 2005

## RELIGION CAUSES PEACE

by

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My lecture is entitled Religion Causes Peace and I am aware that even to state the title is immediately to provoke controversy. I hope, however, that the 17<sup>th</sup> century benefactor of this Golden Lecture, William Jones, would approve. He asked that the Haberdashers Company appoint 'a learned and faithful preacher' and, while he might be surprised to find a Roman Catholic monk fulfilling that description, the spirit of the times in which we live might have persuaded him to accept a Popish preacher. He would surely have been impressed that the heir to the throne of Henry VIII postponed his wedding in order to attend the Pope's funeral. Indeed, it has proved prophetic of the Master Haberdasher, Anthony Miller, to invite a Catholic to give the lecture at just the moment when all the eyes of the world have been on Rome. And the new Pope's choice of name is not only a great joy to every Benedictine but also very relevant to my topic, as I will explain later. I thank the Haberdashers most sincerely for the honour of giving this Lecture.

Religion Causes Peace. If I had called this lecture 'Religion Causes Wars' it would have been a far less controversial title, so I want to begin by examining the commonly held view that religion is a major cause of wars.

In examining this view, we are lucky in having to hand a recent piece of research sponsored by the BBC. In February 2004, BBC TV broadcast a programme entitled 'What the world thinks of God'. As part of their research, they commissioned Bradford University's Peace Studies Dept to carry out an audit of wars over the last 100 years, with specific reference to the role of religion in causing those wars. Looking back at history, they analysed the actual mechanism by which religion might cause war and found several possible mechanisms:

- Religion can be used to mobilise ordinary people to go to war
- There can be attacks in the war on religious targets, on holy places
- Religious conversion of the enemy can be a war aim
- Strong support of war can come from religious leaders

As an example, we find most of these causes are present in the medieval Crusades, where ordinary people were promised salvation if they fought the infidel, while religious leaders supported the war and wanted to destroy Muslim holy places and convert the enemy.

The researchers then analysed the 32 wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their conclusions were that out of these 32 wars, 18 had absolutely no religious element, 11 had a small religious element and three had a significant religious

element. Of those three with a significant religious element, none was a total religious war such as the Christian Crusades and even combined they caused a very small number of casualties when compared to the two great World Wars of the century. Their conclusions were:

1. There have been few genuinely religious wars in the last 100 years. The Israel/Arab wars were wars of nationalism and liberation of territory, as were the Irish Civil War and subsequent troubles. The point to note here is that these so-called religious wars are about the desire for a Zionist state and an Irish Republic opposed by those who want a Palestinian state and a British Ireland. Political justice is the core issue and religion is an identifier of the two sides rather than the cause of the political problem. Religious leaders have a vital role to play in bringing peace but Zionism and Irish Republicanism are secular political philosophies not religious doctrines.
2. The current campaign being waged by Arab terror groups is largely about political order in the Arab countries, especially the presence of US forces there. It is not about religious conversion. Some terrorists use the language of religion, but, in contrast to the Crusades, this use of religious language to justify terrorism is wholly disowned by all mainstream religious leaders.
3. Political leaders use differences in confessional faith as a way of sewing hatred and mobilising support for political wars, and it is mainly in this way that religion becomes a factor in war.
4. We need to go back to the wars of Arab expansion, the Crusades and the Reformation Wars for genuine wars of religion. Some internal wars in the last 100 years have been more closely tied to religious identity, such as Hindu/Muslim clashes in Gujarat India. But even these have political explanations.

Furthermore, if we take the big five interconnected barbarities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, none has any strong connection with religion. These are: WW1; the Russian Civil War; Stalin's Soviet Union; WW2, and here we need to note that the target of the Holocaust was a religious group, Jewish people, but their attackers were irreligious Nazis; Chinese Civil War and Mao's regime. These five killed 75% of all casualties of war in 20<sup>th</sup> century, they killed 150 million people. None of them is attributable to religion. The recent conflicts where religion has played a significant role have been: the Taleban war of liberation against the Russians in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda's terror war against the US and, possibly, the American led invasion of Iraq. Put together, these three wars have killed 1% of the number of people killed by secular war in modern times. And almost all that 1% died in the Taleban war of liberation.

So an academic study proves clearly that religion is not a major reason for war in modern times. But the two great moments of religious conflict in Europe, the Crusades and the Reformation, have cast a long shadow over the popular mind, so that even though there have been no truly religious wars for many centuries, even intelligent commentators still insist that religion causes wars.

So in the West, we have the perception that Muslims actually have a doctrine of waging war called Jihad. There is a Muslim doctrine of Jihad, but it means the spiritual struggle to be a good Muslim which can involve a physical struggle and self-defence; it is not a requirement to attack other religions; indeed, the Prophet requires that the religions of the Book (Judaism and Christianity) are respected. So we see that distortions are used by the powerful to harness the energy of their followers. The reality is that, in the modern world, it is governments, and not religions, that cause wars. So I now turn to examine what is the role of religion as regards war in the modern context.

At a philosophical level, the main religious traditions have little truck with war or violence. All advocate peace as the norm and see genuine spirituality as involving a disavowal of violence. Most religious traditions regard war as a failure to achieve genuine spirituality and impose special constraints on the conduct of war when it does occur. These religious restraints in war are the basis of the Geneva conventions.

In reality, what has this religious opposition to war meant?

Firstly, it has meant a refusal by religious leaders to support wars waged by governments or guerrillas. In this regard, the Catholic Church is an outstanding modern example. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Popes have refused to take sides in wars, a stand that has led two Popes to be vilified. Firstly, Benedict XV was Pope during WW1 and promoted eight peace initiatives, the result being the anger of both sides who insisted that their cause was just and that he should support them. The choice of the name Benedict XVIth by our new Pope is a clear reference back to his reconciling predecessor. And during WW2, Pius XII lost his popular reputation because he refused to back the allies against Hitler. Furthermore, the late Pope John Paul condemned not only the recent invasion of Iraq but also the invasion of Afghanistan and even the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. The consistent voice of Popes in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has been for peace with a dogged refusal to allow politicians of any kind to brow beat them into declaring support for war, even when popular opinion supported a war.

But religion has not only refused to back war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has also been instrumental in bringing peace to communities ravaged by war. There are abundant examples of active peacemaking by the leaders of all religions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 'Religions for Peace' is an international organisation founded in 1970. It is chaired by Prince El-Hassan bin Talal of Jordan and its board comprises Muftis and Cardinals, Swamis and Rabbis, Buddhist Abbots and Protestant Pastors. It currently has field offices all round the world. Throughout the former Yugoslavia 'Religions for Peace' has interreligious teams helping to rebuild communities by bringing together local religious leaders. In West Africa, they have set up Interreligious Councils which are now negotiating with rebel groups to free child soldiers. 'Religions for Peace' is just one example of many organisations where senior religious leaders are building peace.

For me, one of the most remarkable examples of religion causing peace is the community of lay people based in Italy called the Community of St Egidio. This lay community was founded in 1968 and now has 50,000 members

around the world. In 1990, they hosted the first face to face meeting between the government of Mozambique and the Renamo rebels who had locked the country into a deadly civil war throughout the 1980's. By 1992 they had brokered a complete Peace Agreement and brought the civil war to an end. Religion causes peace.

As a final example, I offer Pope John Paul II's historic World Day of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi in 1986. He was the first Pope to visit a mosque and the first Pope to visit a synagogue. He invited leaders of all the world's religions to spend a day together in prayer for peace and in so doing these leaders witnessed powerfully to peace as a core value in religion. Let that day of prayer shared by all the worlds religions be a symbol of the fact that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century religion causes peace.

I conclude with a reflection on the nature of peace. The doctrine of the Catholic Church defines peace as 'not simply the absence of war; it is the fruit of justice'. A peaceful society is a just society. Thus providing adequate resources for education, housing and health care are vital ways in which people build peace; these physical resources are now mainly provided by modern social systems but religions still play a vital role when social systems fail. While these physical resources are a necessary part of peace, they are not sufficient. There is a need for metaphysical resources to build peace and religion can provide the metaphysical resource needed for peace in unique way. This resource is the religious doctrine of hope. 'The future of humanity, the Church declares, lies in the hands of those able to pass onto future generations reasons for living and hoping.' Reasons for living and hoping. That is the most precious gift we can bequeath to the future.

Reasons for living and hoping are the heart of true religion and the greatest gift that religion gives to humanity. Terrorism is fed by despair and war is sustained by fear. Religion offers hope against despair and love that casts out fear. If we want to build peace then we will stop using religion as a scapegoat for war and start promoting religion as the royal road to peace. We will want children and adults to learn about religion. To study religion enables people to consider that there are truths about life that are beyond us, that are sacred and that come from God. Above all, religion promotes virtue as a non-negotiable given, as given as maths and science. We could insist that pupils study the lives of saints not as examples of good citizenship but as examples of virtue and holiness. Indeed, holiness is our best guarantee of peace. No holy person of any religion would commit a terrorist act. Inner, personal peace is the foundation of world peace. Peaceful and holy individuals are the building blocks of a peaceful society. Of course our children need to learn science and reason, but the only way to stop violent religious fanaticism is to teach true religion: namely, the love of virtue, the quest for holiness and the belief that virtue and holiness are possible. True religion does not cause wars; it is our best guarantee against war. In the modern world, religion does not cause wars, religion causes peace.