Searching for Peace in New Places

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Merkle suggests four contexts in which Christians need to do the moral work of peacemaking: the church, groups of identification, the postmodern situation, and the positional church.

We attribute the complexity of establishing peace to the interlocking webs of influence, institutions, and relationships of security, economy, and cultural diversity that make up our world today. However, in this article I wish to explore that this complexity is not just “out there” but is part of the life of each Christian and each minister in the church. Postmodern life plunges us into new forms of social living. These new forms shift what Charles Taylor calls our “social imaginaries,” or how we imagine our social existence (Taylor, 25). This article will suggest that such shifts call us to redefine and refocus how we imagine our moral commitment to peace and how we understand the multiple contexts for doing so.

People today find addressing social issues like peace difficult because they distrust both the information they receive regarding the world and the leaders who provide it. Few people believe that world leaders really mean what they say. On a less global level, people of good will often feel this same loss of clarity regarding what it means to “do the truth.” Before the complexity of modern living, the questions of how to be faithful and how to establish credibility before the multiple expectations of modern society are taunted by a feeling there is really nothing that can be done. This attitude gives rise to a decision not to address problems beyond the routines of the expected. Since the truth is one of the important

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pillars of peace (*Pacem in Terris*), it is important to explore how to strengthen in our lives both the doing and the establishing of truth, as both are necessary to build peace today.

**Shift in Sense of Belonging**

Charles Taylor suggests the one characteristic of modern times is a “loss of embeddedness” (Taylor, 49). Embeddedness refers to the context in which we imagine ourselves and come to a sense of personal identity, in other words, how we see the whole in which we live. In former times, the rule of family and community seemed the only guarantee of survival in a world where poverty and insecurity were not far from their door. Thus, they formed clear boundaries of our social identity. Today this is no longer true in the same manner as in previous periods of history.

To get in touch with the context that marks our embeddedness, we need to ask ourselves a few simple questions. Can I imagine myself outside of a particular context? When I ask, “How would I be different if I grew up in context B, married X, or joined Z?” and come up blank, I sense the formative influence of my own contextual reality and its role in my self-identity. Today, however, embeddedness in a life context is more fluid than in the past. The modern person might ask: Should I emigrate? Should I convert? Should I leave this relationship or set of commitments? Modern self-definition appears to rely less on traditional ways of understanding vocation, citizenship, work and life’s meaning, and more and more on the individual self (Fowler).

A sense of embeddedness or belonging in the world affects moral commitment because it affects our sense of life’s meaning. We understand moral problems like those concerning the free market economy, security, war on terrorism, militarism, or natural resources in light of our understanding of the meaning of the world and essential relationships in it. Constitutive to an ethical framework is what the problem means and what meanings underlie the problem and constitute it. Is this acceptable or unacceptable behavior? Is this an abuse? Are we responsible for this situation?

Cultures once provided men and women with a type of moral horizon based on a narrative of the shape and meaning of the cosmos and social and human life within it. However, today our sense of embeddedness in a social world and a cosmos has shrunk. As we become more unclear as to how we belong to the world, our sense of shared meanings in the world are also more confused. Instead of finding ourselves in a world of set meanings and perimeters as our forbearers in which to interpret the world around us, we find ourselves having to create a world in which to belong (Mercier, 52). Increasingly, responsibility falls to individual choice, not just for action, but also even for the construction of a world of meaning.
The possibility of public moral discourse in this situation of a loss of embeddedness is a challenge. In face of the lack of some moral horizon that makes conversation possible, the search for common ground can seem elusive. The number of variables in public discussion that arise from different starting points, values, and interests offered as ground for understanding the issue, can make discussion seem meaningless. The lack of civility in public discourse further contributes to the sense of futility surrounding public conversation. Trivialization, condemnation, and personal attacks have become effective tools in gaining an upper hand in debate, regardless of their effect on clouding the real issues at hand (Carter). It is not difficult to see why there is a feeling that a public sense of truth has been eroded.

A result of this situation is ethical solutions often limited to a procedural question. In the absence of a shared sense of purpose and direction in the world, one that puts goods in some priority or order, all that is left to measure whether an action is moral or not is whether certain procedures were followed. Was this fair? The good life can be reduced to the belief one should pursue one’s chosen goals without resort to immoral means and nothing more (Mercier, 49). When there is a lack of shared boundaries sufficiently defined, real differences about values cannot be addressed. In the absence of such language, complaints about process can be the only defensible objection. Deeper questions, as to whether this should be pursued at all, are not raised. When conversations are left to selection of moral means alone, more substantial questions such as for whom and what are we responsible are left unanswered.

Religion, and Christianity itself, has provided some alternative to this state of affairs by offering narratives of meanings regarding the self, others, and the world. Yet, the postmodern criticism of the patriarchal, colonizing, racially segregated, and militaristic tendencies of Christianity also raises questions in the minds of believers as to the role of religious belief in forming human identity. Can Christianity challenge and counter the modern cultural practices of racism and militarism, or has it been too assimilated into this same culture (Weaver)?

J. Mathew Ashley also points out that the believer today faces problems that were not shared by previous generations. In our modern world, a radical pluralism feeds the privatization of spirituality, which disconnects it from social and institutional contexts (Ashley, 63). Ashley’s observation is captured in the modern
comment, “I am not religious, but I am a deeply spiritual person.” Does this popular cultural stance and religious move away from the institution free a person from the pitfalls of association with the hypocritical, patriarchal, colonizing, racially segregated, and militaristic tendencies they might be trying to avoid? Likely, the answer is no. Rather, it might actually provide a further wedge between the person and any shared and transformative horizon of meaning beyond that of the dead end of consumer culture (Miller). The move away from institution is not a move to a culture-free zone, but to a different climate of pseudo-embeddedness.

Vincent Miller argues that consumer society can become the real context of one’s embeddedness. It actually shapes people to approach religious beliefs as if they were consumer commodities. The result is when members of consumer cultures embrace religious traditions they encounter them in commodified, fragmented form. Beliefs, symbols, and practices appear abstracted from their connections to one another. Religious ideas can be consumed in “spiritual” practice without any connection to the communal and integral religious practice they are meant to represent. They lose their capacity to convey the alternative logics and desires of the Gospel, which can provide a horizon of moral meaning and draw believers’ lives away from conformity with the status quo. The Gospel in turn fails to create a community of contrast to society. Miller charges that religious belief is always in danger of being reduced to a “decorative veneer of meaning” over the emptiness of everyday life as it is already spelled out in advanced capitalist societies (Miller, 225).

Today traditional boundaries of identity, once set by family and community, are overshadowed by a culture of radical pluralism where most institutions of late modern capitalism are being rethought, including that of the significance of the church to one’s life of faith. When we apply this situation to the search for peace, we have to ask how the ordinary institutions in which we participate foster the search for peace today. Without this link to our daily lives and to our faith, the search for peace seems to belong only to those who can give pragmatic and expert answers to questions of national security.
devoid of any recourse to Gospel values. On the other extreme, without proper connection to the significance of our investment in the concrete institutions of our lives to the search for peace today, we can easily slip into a new type of fideism regarding our role in establishing peace in this world. Some may elevate decisions in political matters to matters of faith based on biblical premises alone. However, faith manipulated “for peace” results in its own lack of truth. Dissenters or those who support the war can be made to feel guilty, issues of power can be ignored, conditions can be destroyed where alternatives can be discussed in the church, Gospel peace can be reduced to one solution, party, or process (Verstraeten, 168).

In the second part of this essay I argue that building credibility in the institutions in which we live not only counters the lack of embeddedness we experience in the world today, but also fosters the conditions where distrust on the road to peace can be overcome. Facing the challenges of life and ministry in this new context reframes the question Pilate asked Jesus, “What is the truth?” and asks how we build and do the truth in our lives today.

The Road to Peace: Four Stopping Points

Today the Christian life is lived in a pluralistic situation where different contexts of belonging give rise to different moral challenges. In the next section of this article, I explore this idea. While it is characteristic of modern life to exist in a postmodern situation where there is an erosion of comprehensive systems of meaning, we still live today in contexts of belonging. We still seek to gather out of the fragments of modern life the sustenance of a network of belonging, belief, and practice that comprise a faithful life. The construction of such a life, not only for us, but also for others, serves as an analogy for the practice of peace today. In our battle for peace, we seek not just democratic structures across the world, as if the creation of such structures alone will save us from global destruction. Rather, we seek to create in our relationships all the things that prevent crisis among peoples in whatever context we are living and working. The moral journey toward peace is only made for most of us in these real contexts of our lives.

The Church

Robert Schreiter reminds us that one characteristic of our modern world is an uneasy coexistence of the premodern, modern, and the postmodern. This is true also in the church (Schreiter, 191). A premodern culture stresses the primacy of the traditional over the rational and the collective over the individual. It offers a type of sacred canopy that provides a depth dimension to other sectors of society. A modern mentality, reflected in the reforms of Vatican II, stresses the individual, human rights, and the positive dimensions of rational progress. A postmodern climate questions the pitfalls of the modern mentality. It challenges all unitary
visions and draws attention to the violence, ecological disaster, and human misery that have evolved from the so-called emancipation of the individual in the modern era. In some places, the postmodern climate reasserts selectively aspects of the premodern Christian tradition. The result is phenomena like the Radical Orthodoxy movement and in a broader context the rise of fundamentalism. The premodern, modern, and postmodern mentalities in the church have their own vision of the “good life” and what its means to be faithful. Each brings a value and a weakness to the table of living today.

The clash of these three ecclesial cultures also reframes the practice of keeping the peace and the challenge to do the truth across the church today. The conflict of values and interests that illustrates the limitations of a sinful world mark ecclesial culture as well as the society as a whole. For instance, a crisis of truth has certainly emerged in the church through the sexual abuse scandal. This has affected not only the people involved but has made the credibility of all ministers in the church more difficult to establish. The search for peace begins above all in the church itself. It must be a community of contrast where the ingredients of peace and reconciliation in the wider society are to be practiced and learned. The challenge of peace to the church exists not abstractly, but in face of the actual climate that frames ministry and life in the church today. We understand the struggle of all humankind because we are part of it.

The church faces the problems of any community in global society today—however, with resources unique to its identity. Its sacramental vision shapes a liturgical community that can recognize the world as it is, both fully redeemed and incomplete and affected by sin. Christians in the eucharistic assembly find their identity now as continuing the “passage” from death to life. A sacramental vision fosters a new sense of embeddedness, a sense of meaning of a socially engaged life and mission lived in the context of God’s graciousness. Christians cannot evade confrontation with the pre-given presence within and outside the church of violent people and mechanisms of suppression. They must face the presence of their loved ones in armed conflict, the reality of weapon systems, and the aggression of terrorism. However, they can also locate the meaning of these realities within the wider vision of fostering the “soft” political realities of community, equity, participation—all those things that promote the humanization and pacification of the political reality.
of their community. A sacramental vision can foster ethical pursuit of justice in face of these realities within the scope of finding God in all things.

Groups of Identification

A major element of change in the church in the post-Vatican II era is the presence of small-group life. Small-group life has enabled people to reflect on their personal identity in a climate of the loss of embeddedness and to give voice to expressions of Christian identity based on new starting points of social location. Today, one’s position in society marked by race, class, and gender has become a door to consideration of one’s relationship with God. Small-group settings foster awareness that, while sharing a common identity and dignity, people also have personal and unique experiences of God, self, and world conditioned by their social place. Across the church itself Vatican II recognized that it was not just Western and Eastern, but also Asian, Latin American, and African. Social groups like the poor, women, blacks, Hispanics, and indigenous peoples give voice to concerns that can only be spoken by them and no longer are to be voiced “for them” by others.

In many ways, these new forms of articulation of identity and new calls for social “listening” and commitment within the church are positive groupings whose mirrors across the globe are often not as positive. One important feature of global politics today is that state and nation are at each other’s throats. Brutal separatisms, micro-identities that have become political projects within the nation-state, and new “nation-hoods” forming across existing state boundaries threaten peace. Sentiments such as language, skin color, neighborhood, kinship—whose greatest force is the ability to ignite intimacy into a political state and transform the local into a place of identity—have now through media and communications become global (Appadurai). Tension between what is particular and what is universal among peoples is mounting. In the era of displacement and migration in which we are living, we struggle to clarify real or imagined affinities and differences with others with whom we share life. It challenges those who live and work within the church to foster peace through the exercise of true multicultural ministry and living that recognizes and celebrates uniqueness and yet moves people in practical ways to...
overcome the rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups that breed violence (Carter). The church as an international organization has a unique role to play in this global disjuncture today. The fundamental Christian value of peace, if it is not to remain abstract, has to be imbedded in such a social and political reality, which is often characterized by new forms of power and violence (Verstraeten, 183).

**The Postmodern Situation**

Of all the contexts of modern living, the postmodern situation is most clearly identified by a lack of structures and supports. Modern society affords people more opportunities than ever to live as an isolate. Sociologically, the individual is left to his or her own resources, without pressure from groups or other societal expectations (Douglas). Morally, the postmodern situation is best typified by the loss of embeddedness, a situation where the individual is left not only to take responsibility for his or her life, but also to define the goals, practices, and rules of modern living. Spiritually, there are few supports or symbols to reinforce the religious dimension of one’s life or social activity. One is in a totally secularist atmosphere. This society is likely the most common for many first-world Catholics and many of its ministers. The question of the church can fall into silence or a sense of unreality as one lives in a culture where one’s interactions are devoid of religious symbolism or interpretation.

What potentials does this situation offer for the building of peace? On a positive note, the situation is so lacking in structures that members are free to build new communities creatively from below. They can cross boundaries, foster international coalitions, and use the benefits of our electronic age to participate in new networks to engage in holistic regeneration of ecology, society, and spirituality in our world today. The postmodern situation also calls for new links to be forged between the mystical and the political. It is penetrated by the ministry of spiritual direction that fosters a mystical “sight” that is socially significant. Rahner once speculated that the future church, which could no longer rely on the cultural supports Western society once provided, would be in fact one where the mystical experience of faith would be predominant (Rahner). To live faithfully in the postmodern situation requires a more individuated spiritual life. This counters the alternate response to postmodern living, a cultural desolation where drifting and lack of supports leave people without scaffolding for religious encounter or community life. Such isolation breeds the violence that is the antithesis of peace.

**The Positional Church**

Today, Christians are not the only people at the table with values in society. Rather, there exists a plurality of competing values in political society. Strong feelings about society and its direction need expression today. Christians form and join movements in society to express their feelings about what is right and wrong
with this world. They create “working actions,” to bring results in the political process. We think today of the significance of the peace movement in the global consciousness regarding the effectiveness of war. We observe the mounting concern over democratic decision-making, privacy of citizens, respect for processes in legislation, due process for detainees, and other forms of human rights, which retain their validity even under the tensions of “war.” Religious freedom serves a climate of peace and civility in our country when resistance to wrong, as well as love of neighbor, is its expression (Carter, 261). The church is called at these times to act collectively because of the inevitability of power and the inseparable links between Christian conviction and political responsibility. Ethics without politics is just as perilous as politics without ethics (Verstraeten, 182).

The church recognizes also that the prophetic tradition affirms sign action as ethically justified when an action that is result oriented has become impossible. These sign actions are of utmost importance in witnessing to hope for and the necessity of change, especially when nothing else can be done. Willingness to take on the burden of these actions points to the Christian quality of political action, in its willingness to bear the Cross. The abandonment of such use of political power by the church can result in surrendering society and often its weaker members to the advantage of the strong (Verstraeten, 183). The abandonment of disengagement is violence and contradicts the Gospel call to take responsibility for our neighbor.

However, this prophetic countercultural ministry of the church also has a shadow. At times it is directed toward its own when members disagree on strategy, not principle. Religion can also be a poor participant in public debate when it is intolerant of disagreement, is unwilling to take steps toward a solution, and slips into the human problem of just wanting to win at any cost (Carter, 253). The church contributes to the public realm the retrieval of a moral world within which reasoning and action find their place. However, it loses credibility when it is not open to the rational debate and rich life of moral reasoning for which the Spirit is no substitute. When the church can move beyond its own tendencies to fundamentalism and sectarianism to respond to the moral emptiness and isolation of contemporary culture, it supports the human community on the road to peace and confirms the world of purpose and truth for which society longs.
While these four ways do not exhaust the way we as Christians and ministers foster peace, they illustrate that the praxis of our lives is relevant to the global problems that face our world. By creating the conditions of possibility where people’s sense of the meaning and shape of the world is confirmed by connection and community, we call each other to live in the quality of relationship of which peace is a mark. The daily responsibility, accountability, and credibility of such relationships is our building of a peaceful world and will contribute to the sense of truth that people long for today amid the ambiguities of our society.

References


