

WAR AND PEACE INTRODUCTION

We all know that *War and Peace* is the title of a novel written by **Leo Tolstoy**. It is less well known that Tolstoy was a Christian who believed that his Christianity required him to be a pacifist. He greatly influenced **Gandhi**. Reading Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* helped to convince Gandhi to avoid violence and espouse nonviolent resistance, a debt Gandhi acknowledged in his autobiography, calling Tolstoy "the greatest apostle of non-violence that the present age has produced".

Do Humanists also have to be pacifists like Gandhi or Tolstoy? That's a key question that Oisín Carey will be addressing in a workshop this afternoon. We are freethinkers, and Tolstoy defined freethinkers as "those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common but it is essential for right thinking". That means we should approach our theme with an open mind and be prepared to change or at least modify some of our prejudices and assumptions.

"Freethinker" is two words joined together. We are 'free' in the sense that we think for ourselves and don't rely on 'authority'. Our opinions are our own and no one else's. As the **Buddha** advises, we doubt everything and find our own light. Inevitably that means that we will disagree on many things. Yet, if we are members of Humanist organisations, how do we arrive at policies that members will accept?

That's indeed a difficult question. But here's where the thinker in freethinker comes in. If we want to achieve a consensus, then there is no alternative to constantly thinking, discussing and debating issues and events in the world around us. We do not want to escape from religious indoctrination, only to fall into a lazy desire to let other freethinkers do our thinking for us. Or even slide into a kind of Humanist dictatorship, however benevolent. We cannot insist on our own right to freedom of opinion while wanting to deny that same right to other humanists. This is the Humanist equivalent of the illiberalism of some liberals. So there is no alternative to free and open discussion and debate.

Nor should we be fooled into thinking that discussing ideas is a waste of time. The German poet **Heinrich Heine** wrote: “Note this, you proud men of action, you are nothing but the unconscious tools of the men of thought, who in humble stillness have often drawn up your most definite plans of action”. **H.G. Wells** wrote that “human history is, in essence, a history of ideas”. **Keynes** suggested that the world is ruled by little else than the ideas of economists and political philosophers.

The great humanists in history have indeed generally been men of ideas rather than men of action. But that does not mean that we have no influence. We can affect policy if we pass on the Humanist tradition and propagate the Humanist vision. We should always bear in mind that ideas take time to sink in and many thinkers are initially ridiculed before eventually being revered or, as **Gandhi** put it: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you; then they fight you; then you win”. Or as **Victor Hugo** wrote: “No army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time has come”.

A problem with thinking about War and Peace, though, is the monumental cultural imbalance between the two. It’s all stacked against peace and heavily in favour of war. Go into any library or bookshop and you will see shelf upon shelf on military history: ‘History of the Peloponnesian War’; ‘The Campaigns of Alexander’, ‘The Roman Army’; ‘A History of the Crusades’; ‘A Bridge Too Far’. War after war, battle after battle, air warfare, naval warfare, guerrilla warfare, etc. There may be several editions of **Sun Tzu’s** *The Art of War*, **Machiavelli’s** *The Prince* and **Clausewitz’s** *On War*. But there will probably be none of **Erasmus’s** essay on *The Complaint of Peace* or **Kant’s** essay *Toward Perpetual Peace*. Western culture is sickeningly saturated with the spectacle of violence and war – books, magazines, video games, war films, the news. According to one recent survey, the average American child has observed 18,000 killings before graduating high school. Indeed every other American movie seems to be about war: if it’s not the Second World War, it’s the Vietnam war; if it’s not the Vietnam war, it’s the Iraq War. If it’s not the ‘war’ on crime, it’s the war on terror, or it’s the war against alien invaders. War, war, and yet more war.

Why is this? We know that it is boys and young men who play with toy guns and who particularly enjoy violent entertainment, especially those who have a relatively high level of aggression and a need for physical arousal. There is also the element of male bonding. Boys often use violent entertainment to demonstrate to their peers that they are man enough to take it. They have to prove that they are calm and collected in the face of terror, while girls must demonstrate their sensitivity by being disturbed or disgusted by the violence. This afternoon Sile Headen will lead a workshop on the question whether women can teach men the road to peace.

More generally, **Thomas Hardy** wryly noted that “war makes rattling good history but peace is poor reading”. In his *Study of History*, **Arnold Toynbee** noted: “wars are exhilarating when fought elsewhere and by other people. Perhaps they are most exhilarating of all when over and done with; and historians of all civilizations had traditionally regarded them as the most interesting topic in their field”. War is indeed a glamorous topic. It is the deadliest of sins and unfortunately sin fascinates while good deeds bore.

But the truth of war is not glorious. That is, as **Wilfred Owen** suggested, the old lie expressed by **Horace**: “Dulce et decorum est, Pro patria mori” – it is sweet and right to die for one’s country. As **Bertrand Russell** commented: “patriots always talk of dying for their country and never of killing for their country”. The American civil war general **William Sherman** summed up the reality: “I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell”. **President Eisenhower**, who had been the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe in World War Two, agreed. He said: “I hate war as only a soldier who has lived in it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity”. The bloodiness and awfulness of war is now a truism

This hatred of war has been shared by Humanists throughout history. It doesn’t mean that they have all been absolute pacifists. Let’s take 4 examples. **Confucius** believed that an army was needed for defensive purposes. Yet in the *Analects* we read about how to treat neighbouring barbarians: “if distant people do not submit, then cultivate benevolent virtue so as to attract them and then give them security”.

The great Roman humanist **Cicero** argued that there are few acceptable reasons for war because human nature and human reason biased a society against war. He did, however, argue that in some exceptional circumstances, a war might be necessary, provided that there is a just cause, a formal declaration and just conduct in war. Cicero may thus be as the founder of the Just War tradition, which David will be addressing next.

The Renaissance Humanist **Erasmus** was an absolute pacifist. War, he suggested, was ‘unnatural’: animals did not make war on one another. ‘Whoever heard of a hundred thousand animals rushing together to butcher each other, as men do everywhere?’ War was rather a mask behind which governments could extend their powers over their subjects, since ‘once war has been declared, then all the affairs of the State are at the mercy of the appetites of a few’. Of war in general he wrote: “There is nothing more unnaturally wicked, more productive of misery, more extensively destructive, more obstinate in mischief, more unworthy of man, as formed by nature, much more of man professing *Christianity*. Yet, wonderful to relate! war is undertaken, and cruelly, savagely conducted, not only by unbelievers, but by Christians”.

The fourth example is **Bertrand Russell**, who campaigned against the First World War. His opposition led him to be sent to prison for six months. However, he supported the war against Nazi Germany. In an essay on *The Future of Pacifism* (1943) he identified his position as ‘relative political pacifism’. When nuclear weapons were developed he became one of the earliest supporters of CND. In 1961, as an old man of 89, he led a mass sit-in in Trafalgar Square for which he received another prison sentence.

In our attitude to war, we could talk about a moral continuum with perhaps 5 identifiable points along it.

1. Warism or Militarism, a belief in war and a liking for war. Chris Kyle, the subject of Clint Eastwood’s record grossing war film *American Sniper*, said that he loved killing bad guys, and “I wish I’d killed more”.
2. We move along to ‘War Realism’, a belief that war is justified when it serves the national interest. The interests of other states may be entirely irrelevant.
3. ‘Just Warism’, a sort of middle ground between the two absolutes.

4. Relativistic or pragmatic pacifism, which maintains that only in a few exceptional circumstances is war justified .
5. Absolute pacifism which argues that war is never permissible. Humanists generally occupy one of the last 3 points on this continuum.

But what do we actually mean by war? It is not easy to define because the nature of violent conflict has changed dramatically in recent times. **Rousseau** argued that it was “a relation, not between man and man, but between state and state”. **Clausewitz**, who also implied that it only involves states, defined it as ‘an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will’, and also as ‘the continuation of politics by other means’. Of course, if war is only between states, then hostilities on the part of a non-state group against a state would not be a war. The IRA campaign after 1969 would not constitute a war under this definition. Nor would it constitute a war if war has to be declared by a sovereign body or if we assume that a minimum number of more than 1000 people are killed in a year. The IRA campaign would in these cases be terrorism or large-scale gangsterism. But what about a ‘civil war’ between groups within a country? A more flexible modern definition would accept that war is a state of armed conflict between different countries OR different groups within a country. In this case the IRA campaign could be designated as a war. No doubt we shall hear about this in Ruth Dudley Edward’s talk later this morning.

The causes of war also pose problems. Economic competition for resources, imperial ambitions, disputes over borders, aggressive alliances, nationalism, clashes of ideologies and religion may all play a part. It is said that without religion, there would have been no Crusades, no Spanish Inquisition, no holocaust, no 9/11 attacks, no Israeli-Palestinian conflict, no Troubles in Northern Ireland, no violent disputes over words in holy texts – even no Islamic State. But, according to **Karen Armstrong** in her recent book *Fields of Blood*, of the thousands of major conflicts in recorded history, it is doubtful if 10% could be ostensibly classified as having been fought over religion. Certainly religion has often been used as a cover and motivator of other forces. An Islamic caliphate, for example, is as much an Imperial Empire as it is a religious one. But when nationalism and religion are mixed together, a particularly lethal cocktail is often the deadly result.

Irish history has been deeply infused with the myth of redemptive violence. This is the notion that violence in the service of the nation, whether an Irish nation or a British nation, is necessary to bring order out of chaos. “Bloodshed”, said Pearse, “is a cleansing and satisfying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood”. Pearse was thinking specifically of republican violence, but his message could equally have been addressed to loyalists, for they too were prepared to make a blood sacrifice for ‘God and Ulster’. **Conor Cruise O’Brien** called it a ‘sacral nationalism’.

Do we have to accept that war is natural, a product of our biology as aggressive, territorial animals? In *Leviathan* **Hobbes** referred to a state of nature in which there is ‘war of every man against every man’. **Freud** argued that aggression and strife are endemic features of the human condition. The ex-Archbishop of Canterbury **Rowan Williams** took this view in a recent *New Statesman* review of two new books on violence. Culturalists, on the other hand, seek to explain war’s causation in terms of culture. **Margaret Mead** argued in a 1940 essay that war is only an invention – not a biological necessity. It is like writing or cooking. The biological theory is contradicted by the simple fact that not all societies wage war. We could back her up by pointing out that the last time Sweden formally fought a war was 200 years ago and the last time the Swiss Army fought was in 1847 during a short civil war. For an invention to become obsolete, Mead argued, “people must recognize the defects of the old invention, and someone must make a new one.” She added that “to invent new forms of behaviour which will make war obsolete, it is a first requirement to believe that such an invention is possible.”

The first step is to realise that peace is not merely dialectically the opposite of war. This is just a negative peace. Positive peace is the presence of conditions necessary to ensure peace prevails so that we can thrive and fulfil our potential. This means that although killing is obviously violent, so too is starvation, discrimination, threats and emotional abuse. Eleanor Roosevelt said that “it isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it”. In other words, paciFISM is not passiVISM.

We do have the inventions and tools to create peace. They include legal structures, the democratic will of the people, and ideas. Here I want to return to Kant, who was a humanist in the sense that he rejected all the so-called ‘proofs’ of the existence of a god and based his ethic on the secular values of reason, respect and compassion. As far as institutions are concerned, we need to put greater trust in international law and international organisations. These vital institutions include the United Nations, proposed by Kant (who talked of a ‘league of peace’), the International Criminal Court and the European Union. But these organisations must be effectively used and not ignored, and here the western powers, especially America, are not blameless. The ICC is a significant step forward in establishing the principle that dictators have no immunity for genocide and war crimes, and it must be fully supported by the international community.

The European Union has played a major part in keeping western Europe peaceful for the last 70 years and was deservedly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. The greater economic growth of these countries in the EU and trade between them has helped to prevent war, exactly as Kant predicted in *Toward Perpetual Peace*. The Union’s membership requirements have also helped to push Eastern European states towards democracy. Again, Kant's idea was that a majority of the people would never vote to go to war, unless purely in self-defense. Therefore, if all nations were republics governed by the will of the people rather than by the whims of autocrats, it would end war, because there would be no aggressors. There is definite evidence to prove Kant’s point. Democracies rarely fight one another. In 1971 the UN listed 30 democracies. Today there are 123 democracies in a world of 193 countries.

It was also the democratic will of the people that led to the largely peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union and the abandonment of apartheid, two of the biggest happy ‘surprises’ of modern times. In particular, the Soviet regime’s monopoly on all the instruments of force seemed to render it invulnerable. Experts repeatedly told us that those in power would never peacefully relinquish their hold on these societies. But **Gorbachev**, **De Klerk** and others like them did and they set optimistic precedents for the future.

Just as important as the structures of peace are the mindsets of those who go to war. This means tackling the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, exploitation and religious or political animosities. Religious leaders in particular must stop preaching hatred or myths of redemptive violence. They must focus less on dogma and more on love, kindness and humility.

We must also abandon the obsolete concepts of nationalism and sovereignty. States must be prepared, wrote Kant, to give up some of their lawless freedom and adjust themselves to the constraints of international law. He was well aware of what he called the ‘crooked timber of humanity’, but he believed that it was no pipe dream to seek peace. It was possible if we set our minds to it. Note that his essay was entitled TOWARD Perpetual Peace. He wrote: “For peace to reign on earth, humans must evolve into new beings who have learned to see the whole first.” We need to see how everything and everyone is connected in the world. Kant talked of creating a law of world citizenship or ‘cosmopolitan right’ consisting in conditions of ‘universal hospitality’. Cameron’s government, complaining of swarms of migrants, please note.

As **Albert Camus** said, “peace is the only battle worth waging”.